Gospel centred hermeneutics: foundations of evangelical biblical interpretation

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GOSPEL-CENTRED HERMENEUTICS

Biblical-theological foundations and principles

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. (Heb. 1:1–2)

Thus the biblical author poses the question for us of the relationship of the Testaments: how does the word of Christ relate to that of the prophets and, in broader terms, is the New Testament continuous or discontinuous with the Old? The history of biblical theology as a modern discipline, not to mention the history of its antecedents, shows that the question of the relationship between the two Testaments is of enduring importance and concern. H. G. Reventlow saw it as one of the key problems in twentieth-century biblical theology.¹ I believe it remains a problem to this day. I am also convinced that the nature of the unity of the Bible is the key to biblical theology and vital to biblical interpretation.

Christian theism, biblical theology and evangelical hermeneutics all presuppose that the Bible, notwithstanding its great diversity, displays a

perceptible unity. However, the majority of biblical theologies written in the last century and a half have been theologies of either the Old Testament or the New Testament. There has been a tendency to treat the two Testaments as if they were independent of each other. This is more true of Old Testament theologies than of New, since the latter have to take into account the conviction common to all the New Testament authors that their message has its roots in the Old Testament. All the books of the New Testament, with the possible exception of 2 John and 3 John, contain direct references and allusions to the Old Testament that presuppose some kind of continuity between the Testaments. Yet the tendency in post-Enlightenment times has been to stress the disunity of the Testaments and to discount any meaningful and organic unity.

A number of Old Testament theologians have attempted to address the matter in a theoretical way. For example, G. von Rad has a considerable section at the end of volume 2 of his *Old Testament Theology* that deals with the Old Testament and the New. He gives a detailed exposition of a typological understanding of the unity of the Bible in a way that is strangely remote from the main work. T. C. Vriezen devotes the first two chapters of his work to his concern for the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, but it is not altogether obvious how this presupposition has affected his treatment of the Old Testament itself. W. Eichrodt states in the opening chapter of his *Theology of the Old Testament* that Old Testament religion must be seen as completed in Christ. But in the two volumes of this work there is little that overtly follows this principle through. G. A. F. Knight states that his purpose is to discover what the Old Testament has to say to the twentieth century in the light of the Christian revelation as a whole. Despite the title of his work, one of the crucial questions of continuity, that of Israel and the church, is relegated to a short appendix.

Some see the Old Testament as providing authentic revelation and theology independently of the New Testament. The resistance to a Christological and thus New Testament-based interpretation of the Old Testament can be seen in the more extreme approaches to the diversity of Scripture. Postmodernist trends not only follow modernism in denying transcendence, but refuse to

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allow any concept of a metanarrative, a comprehensive story and picture of reality in a word from God, which can unite the two Testaments into one meaningful canon of revelation. The notion that there is no transcendent authority or objective truth challenges the very basis upon which a comprehensive biblical theology has been built from biblical times.

We can see, then, something of a continuum of approaches to the relationship of the Testaments that plays a significant role in the history of biblical interpretation. This continuum remains today because of the tenacity of the orthodox adherence to historic Christianity that finds itself in substantial conflict with both modernism and postmodernism. First, in the early church we see attempts to understand the essential unity of the Bible from the epicentre of the person and work of Jesus Christ. These early Christological interpretations of the Old Testament were driven partly by the apologetic needs to counter Judaism by asserting that the Old Testament belonged first and foremost to the church, and partly by the need to understand the Old Testament presuppositions of the apostolic doctrine. Early Christian apologetics also needed to oppose Gnosticism by showing the unity of the Testaments, and at the same time to refute the Judaizers in the church by stressing the distinctions between the Testaments. Medieval Catholicism and Reformation Protestantism were both heirs to the Christological approach.

Second, with the Enlightenment and the advent of humanistic presuppositions in biblical and historical studies, there was a loosening of the theological ties between the Old and New Testaments. As theological concerns gave way to the study of the history of religion, the religion of Israel became a matter for historical investigation virtually independent of the religion of Jesus and the early church. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the development of the parallel disciplines of Old Testament theology and New Testament theology. Some Old Testament theologies were produced from within the framework of certain Christian assumptions about the relationship of the Testaments, but with the clear aim of understanding what the Old Testament is saying in its own right. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it must never be seen as the whole story.

Third, the postmodern age of religious pluralism encourages not so much the rejection of any connection between the Testaments, but a sense that one can either pursue or ignore the relationship. However, the task of writing Old Testament theologies continues to be undertaken by those who have some allegiance to the New Testament as well. It seems to us Christians remarkable that Jewish writers show little interest in writing theologies of the Hebrew Scriptures, a fact which reinforces the conviction that the very
nature of the Christian gospel, in the context of the theology of the New Testament, provides the major impetus for pursuing Old Testament theology.6

Unity and diversity in the history of interpretation

Long before the dogmatic theology of the early church had formulated ways of talking about the reality of the incarnation and the God/Man, these issues were surfacing in the handling of Scripture. The relationship of the one and the many is integral to the theology within the Old Testament. The apostolic understanding of Jesus and the incarnational mystery involved an assessment that required a both-and rather than an either-or approach. Later the church cemented this perspective in the doctrine of the incarnation, and particularly in the formula of Chalcedon in AD 451.7 The doctrine of the Trinity provides the paradigm of both-and in the question of the one and the many. Amongst more orthodox Christians the Hellenistic Gnostic heritage was to be found in the recourse to allegory as a means of relating the Old to the New Testament. Whereas Marcion had rejected the Old Testament as irrelevant, the allegorists treated it as a kind of Judaic overlay that hid from view the true spiritual meaning drawn from the New Testament and, subsequently, from ecclesiastical dogma. While Marcion completely separated the Old from the New, the allegorists used a Hellenistic sleight of hand that effectively removed all differences and fused the two. Either way, the solution was in the direction of


7. Chalcedon produced a formula for expressing the relationship of the divine and human natures of Christ. In effect it said that Jesus was both fully God and fully man; there is unity between the two natures, but no fusion; there is distinction, but no separation. This formula has been under attack from a number of quarters, but has staunch defenders in the conservative camp: Klaas Runia, The Present-day Christological Debate (Leicester: IVP, 1984); Gerald Bray, 'Can We Dispense With Chalcedon?', Themelios, Jan. 1978, and Creeds, Councils and Christ (Leicester: IVP, 1984); Norman Geisler, 'Current Chalcedonian Christological Challenges', ERT 12/4 (1988); R. J. Rushdoony, The One and the Many (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn, 1978), pp. 161-164.
an *either-or* approach. By contrast, typology as a method of relating the Testaments underlined the perspective of both their unity and their diversity. Medieval interpretation maintained the struggle to understand the relationship without abandoning the historical meaning of the Old Testament, but the allegorical prevailed as the major way of dealing with the Christian meaning of the Old Testament. This ongoing docetic tendency not only had ramifications for understanding the relationship of the Testaments, but also tended to the dehistoricizing of the gospel event.

One of the gains of the Reformation was the recovery of a more consistently Christological understanding of the relationship between the Testaments. Not only do the Old Testament Scriptures truly testify to Jesus (John 5:39), but this unity exists in tension with the real diversity within and between the Testaments. The *unity-distinction* structure formulated at Chalcedon can be applied to the word of God inscripturate in the same way as to the Word incarnate. Luther saw the question of the two Testaments as that of the relationship of law and grace. He went a long way towards removing the absolute divide between the Old and the New, because he recognized that there was law and promise (i.e. gospel) in both Testaments. However, he continued to stress the predominance of law in the Old and of grace in the New.

John Calvin significantly places the discussion of the relationship of the Testaments in the wider context of the revelation of the Redeemer. Book 2 of the *Institutes* is entitled *The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers Under the Law, and Then to Us in the Gospel*. In this section, Calvin first deals with the effects of the fall of the human race into sin and the need for divine grace. Chapter 7 is headed ‘The Law was Given, not to Restrain the Folk of the Old Covenant under Itself, but to Foster Hope of Salvation in Christ until His Coming’. In this Calvin includes both the moral and the ceremonial law. The law was the means of revealing Christ to Israel, even though it was only as by a shadow. Calvin’s emphasis may be said to point to the essential unity of the Testaments, while in no way ignoring the differences. Two chapters (*Institutes* 2.10 and 11) are given over respectively to the unity of the Old and the New Testaments, and the differences between the two. It is here that Calvin expounds his influential view of the unity of the covenants, although he never arrives at the position of the seventeenth-century covenant theologians.

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8. Allegory effectively eliminated any distinction between the Testaments by recasting the Old completely in terms of the New. It was docetic in that it removed the real humanity and earthiness of the Old Testament.
Unity and diversity in recent biblical theology

The relationship of the Testaments, then, is one specific aspect of the broader question of the unity and diversity of Scripture and overlaps with the matter of the New Testament use of the Old. Against the background of the history of the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, which is essentially the question of the relationship of the Testaments, we can look at some of the more recent attempts to formulate this focal point in the matter of the nature of the Bible's unity and diversity. Any attempt to categorize the various approaches suggested by modern biblical theologians will need to recognize that different emphases are just that—emphases, not mutually exclusive perspectives.

On the subject of the canon of Scripture, it will suffice here to mention the conclusions reached by Roger Beckwith that Jesus and the primitive Christian church did not dissent from their Jewish contemporaries over what books constituted the authoritative canon of the Hebrew Scriptures. That being the case, and given the eventual acceptance of a body of literature to make up a New Testament canon, the question arises as to how these two were first perceived as comprising one canon of Christian Scripture. That is the historical question of the canon. The biblical-theological question concerns the internal theological evidence for the canonical status of the two Testaments.

The superiority of the Old Testament

D. L. Baker and H. G. Reventlow have both drawn attention to the idea expressed by some scholars that the Old Testament has priority or superiority over the New. It must be recognized that the examples given are not of Jewish theologians who reject altogether the authority of Jesus and the New Testament. Rather they are theologians who acknowledge the importance of the New Testament and claim adherence to the Christian faith. The best example of this position is A. A. van Ruler. He adopts a salvation history

approach which sees the Old Testament not only as the antecedent to the New, but also as maintaining its own integrity, especially in setting out the message of the kingdom of God. In a sense the gospel fulfills the promises of the Old Testament, but at the same time it regresses from the fullness of the Old Testament message. Thus we are apparently left with the position that the Old Testament is the canon of Scripture, and the New Testament is explanatory glossary. The reasons for my rejection of this position will become clear when I deal with typology.

**The superiority of the New Testament**

The most extreme example of this emphasis is, of course, the rejection of the Old Testament by such Gnostics as Marcion. Marcionite tendencies in more recent times are seen in the *deutsche Christen* and the Nazis, whose anti-Semitism was expressed in the rejection of the Judaic Scriptures. There is also an incipient form of Marcionism that occurs by default in the church and in individual Christian piety. Preachers and lay people alike find the Old Testament problematical, and the consequent neglect results in a canon within the canon heavily weighted in favour of the New Testament. In theory, people will maintain that the whole Bible is equally the word of God, but in practice the difficulties of dealing consistently with the Old Testament can lead to its eclipse or to some intuitive approach to Christianizing it.

The Lutheran dialectic of law and gospel failed to remove a medieval tendency to impose a hermeneutical divide between the Testaments. Rudolf Bultmann's existential approach led him to emphasize this hermeneutical gap to the point where he took the significance of the Old Testament to be a negative one. Bultmann rejects the old liberal notion of the development of religion as the basis for understanding the relationship of the Testaments. This was a view that leaves the Old Testament behind as outmoded by the purer development of New Testament religion. But, Bultmann asserts:

> [F]aith requires the backward glance onto Old Testament history as a history of failure, and so of promise, in order to know that the situation of the justified man arises only on the basis of this miscarriage. Thus faith, to be a really justifying faith, must constantly contain within itself the way of the law as something which has been overcome.


It was necessary to be under the law in order to understand the grace of the gospel. Bultmann preferred to ask the question of how the Old Testament presents an understanding of human existence. He concluded that it shows the demand of God, not in an exclusive way, but really nevertheless. This understanding of the demand, in Old Testament terms of the law, is necessary if we are to understand the New Testament’s view of grace in the gospel. So Bultmann emphasizes the discontinuity of the Testaments.

**The equality of the Testaments**

David Baker gives a number of examples of this position, but concentrates on that of Wilhelm Vischer, who has invited, unfairly in my view, rather strident criticisms of his position. In his unfinished work *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ*, he assesses the complementarity of the Testaments thus: 'The Old Testament tells us what the Christ is; the New, who he is'. Or again, 'In their preaching of Jesus the Messiah the apostles in no way desire to declare anything else than that which is written in the Old Testament'. The continuity element is emphasized by Vischer: 'The New Testament asserts that God’s deed in Jesus Christ is not merely one but rather the decisive event for the history of Israel'. Vischer employs a quite restrained form of typology, and that only after rather rigorous investigation of the Old Testament text.

**Thematic polarities between the Testaments**

A number of thematic approaches to the question have been proposed which highlight the nature of the problem in defining the extent of both continuity and discontinuity between the Testaments. None can be seen as a total solution, or as exclusive of all other proposals. Each involves a polarity and certain tensions that cannot be resolved by demolishing one or other pole. Once again, the Christological and trinitarian realities are helpful in warning against facile either-or solutions. But proposing that we maintain the both-and tension

18. ibid., p. 11.
does not solve for us the exact make-up of the tensions. These have to be assessed according to their distinct characteristics.

Salvation history and eschatological consummation

Oscar Cullmann sees salvation history focusing on Jesus, and includes in it the eschatological tension. It could certainly be argued that salvation history, as a Christian approach to the appropriation of the Old Testament, is found in the words of Peter (Acts 2:16–36), Stephen (Acts 7:2–56) and Paul (Acts 13:16–41). Each of these has a sense of the continuity from the redemptive-historical events of the Old Testament to Jesus of Nazareth, so that Jesus is claimed to be the crowning saving act of God. In the nineteenth century J. C. K. von Hofmann was a key proponent of the idea of salvation history. This emphasis was seen as one implication of the Reformation’s retrieval of the historical sense of the Old Testament.

Not all salvation history approaches have such a strong sense of continuity. G. von Rad stresses more of the discontinuity within the Old Testament, so that there is a gap between what can be said to have actually happened and what Israel came to confess. The Old Testament consists of a developed tradition of saving history and the record of Israel’s response to that saving history. The processes of reinterpretation, which took place in the Old Testament, continue in the New Testament’s appropriation of the Old. This approach raises important questions about the actual historicity of the salvation history story. In what sense has God acted in history if the events that are said to evidence this action cannot be taken as historical?

Cullmann examines the polarity of salvation history and eschatology. Implicit in the whole notion of God acting in history is the goal towards which such history moves. History, to be saving history, must involve eschatology. But eschatology is the end of history as well as its goal. The continuity relationship of the Testaments is usually conceived in terms of some kind of eschatological resolution being arrived at in and through Jesus Christ.

Type and antitype

The approach of salvation history is closely related to the revived interest in typology as a way of understanding the inner theological structures of the Bible. The connection was recognized by von Hofmann in his study in

21. Ibid., pp. 28–64.
hermeneutics. The history recorded in the Old Testament is the history of salvation as it proceeds towards its full realization. Hence the things recorded therein are to be interpreted teleologically — that is, as purposeful and directed to the final goal. They are thus shaped by the nature of the goal, while being modified by their respective place in history. The typological principles von Hofmann applied, then, included this sense of the unity of salvation history, and the interpretation of individual events as part of the whole history.

In broad terms, typology rests on the recognition that the way God spoke and acted in the Old Testament was preparatory and anticipatory of the definitive word and act of God in Christ. Thus von Rad is able to acknowledge on the basis of typology, 'One must therefore . . . really speak of a witness of the Old Testament to Christ.' Type and antitype express this organic relationship between the events of the Old that pattern and foreshadow their fulfilment in the New. The heart of the antitype in the New Testament is the person and work of Jesus Christ, and especially the resurrection. Thus both Peter and Paul can assert that Old Testament prophecy about Israel and its king is fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:29–36; 13:30–33).

Promise and fulfilment
Salvation history and typology are also connected with the thematic polarity of promise and fulfilment. There are many variations on this theme, but essentially it goes beyond the recognition of fulfilment of promise or prophecy within the history of the Old Testament, and extends it to the notion of a definitive fulfilment in the New. One implication of this is that the Old Testament is incomplete as to the working out of God’s purposes and thus cannot be fully understood apart from the fulfilment in the New Testament. The two Testaments are interdependent, in that the New must complete the Old, but the New also needs the Old to show what it is that is being fulfilled.

Sensus literalis and sensus plenior
A variation on the notion of typology, first advanced by Roman Catholic scholars, is the idea of a literal sense (sensus literalis) of the Old Testament and

23. Ibid., p. 145.
its fuller sense (*sensus plenior*) that is mainly worked out in the New Testament. But in Roman Catholic exegesis the *sensus plenior* may be derived from later church tradition. The *sensus plenior* of an Old Testament text, or indeed of the whole Old Testament, cannot be found by exegesis of the texts themselves. Exegesis aims at understanding what was intended by the author, the *sensus literalis*. But there is a deeper meaning in the mind of the divine Author that emerges in further revelation, usually the New Testament. This approach may be seen to embrace the matter of typology, but addresses the question of how a text may have more than one meaning.

**Old covenants and new covenant**

Covenant, or federal, theologians have been mainly heirs of the Calvinist Reformation. Their emphasis on the continuity of the Testaments contrasts with the Lutheran tendency to discontinuity. The Westminster Confession provides a classic expression of this view. Some modern biblical theologians have seen the idea of the covenant as a unifying principle or centre of biblical theology. Thus the one covenant that has a variety of expressions begins with Noah, although Westminster theology conceives of a covenant of works with Adam (Westminster Confession of Faith, ch. VII). The covenant is then given to Abraham, to Israel at Sinai, and then to the Davidic royal line. The prophets conceive of a new covenant that will rectify the failures of Israel to be faithful to the original covenant. The New Testament declares that the new covenant is established in Jesus, who stands as the representative head of a new Israel, and who by his resurrection demonstrates his acceptance with the Father. The series of covenant expressions point to a single covenant that is fulfilled in the gospel event.

**Law and gospel**

The tendency to discontinuity that the law-gospel polarity fosters has been mentioned above. It could be said to extend back to Paul and his apparent ambivalence about the law. Part of the problem lies in trying to understand the different ways in which the word 'law' is used in the New Testament. An extreme form of discontinuity is found in modern dispensationalism (at least in its earlier expressions), where the dispensation of law is completely separated from the dispensation of grace. In this view, the present age of the gospel is regarded as a parenthesis which was unseen by Old Testament prophecy. This view involves an extremely literal understanding of prophetic fulfilment and finds the continuity in what is yet to happen by way of fulfilment, rather than in what has already happened in Christ.
Israel and the church

Is the church the new Israel, and if so, in what sense? In one view, the church virtually takes over all the roles of Israel as the saved people of God. This is the predominant view in Reformed theology. By contrast, dispensationalists, because of their prophetic literalism, see only discontinuity in that they expect the future fulfilment of the hopes of Israel for national restoration and salvation. The eschaton for Israel is thus quite distinct from that of the church. A third view takes the Old Testament ideas of the ingathering of the Gentiles to the restored Israel as worked out in that the gospel is to the Jew first (Rom. 1:16). The church then consists of the restored or spiritual Israel (Christian Jews) plus the converted Gentiles who are privileged to share in Israel's blessings.25 This preserves the structure of the covenant promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:3).

The typology debate: the basis and nature of typology

It is clear that the New Testament refuses to abandon the Old Testament. If all the Old Testament references and allusions were removed from the New Testament, it would not make much sense. Counts vary, but one estimate is that there are some 1,500 citations and allusions to the Old Testament in the New Testament. The New Testament may occasionally appear to use Jewish methods of exegesis, such as pesher or midrash, but it has to be said that it uses its own unique approach to the Old Testament. The most significant departure from Jewish exegesis is seen in Jesus' application of the Old Testament to himself and the claims in the New Testament that the events surrounding Jesus are actually fulfils of the Old Testament.

Jesus views his own authority as having divine origin, yet he never opposes this authority to that of the Old Testament Scriptures. He frequently endorses the latter. He treats the Old Testament narrative as records of fact. His arguments from the Old Testament are authoritatively final: 'Scripture cannot be broken' (John 10:35). He criticizes the Jewish leaders for their neglect of Scripture, while he himself submits to it. The Old Testament was integral to his whole understanding of himself and his mission. Jesus' use of the Old

Testament displays an originality that is not always appreciated by his contemporaries. The way he and his apostles use the Old Testament forms the theological substructure of the New Testament canon, and thus points us to the nature of the unity of Scripture. It is this comprehensive use of the Old Testament as referring ultimately to Jesus that constitutes typology.

We cannot overestimate the importance of the question of typology for hermeneutics. Any kind of canonical approach presupposes a unity to the Bible that establishes the primary context from within which every text is interpreted. The relationship of the Testaments is integral to the formulation of biblical theology that, in turn, is fundamental for the establishment of Christian doctrine. A second consideration is that the New Testament provides the only evidence we have for the hermeneutical procedures of Jesus and the apostles. It is not only the attitude of Jesus to the Old Testament as his authoritative Scripture that concerns us, but also the way he employed it as the Scripture that he himself fulfilled. Studies on the use and interpretation of the Old Testament in the New Testament are thus of great importance to us.

The various approaches to typology show an interest in some kind of recurring pattern or patterns within Scripture. There is a wide divergence of opinions as to how this patterning occurs in the Bible and how the principle of typological interpretation can be employed in the practicalities of bringing the text to the modern hearer. Reventlow distinguishes two main approaches to typology. The first focuses on the correspondence of facts, persons and events as they occur in both Testaments. An example is found in E. Jacob, who specifies three ways in which the type may relate to Christ as the antitype: (i) a relation of similarity, (ii) a relation of opposition (Adam-Christ), and (iii) a relation of progress. It should be pointed out that the relation of opposition actually involves similarity. Adam and Christ, in one sense opposites, are both federal heads of the human race. The dissimilarity is that which makes typology a necessary structure, in that the type fails to be the full reality. Leonhard Goppelt focuses on the way the New Testament understands itself in relation to the Old Testament. His aim is to show the importance of the Old Testament for the church.

These discussions often tend to highlight the explicit examples. There are obvious typological interpretations in the New Testament, but are we confined

27. ibid., pp. 18–24.
to the texts that are specifically raised in the New Testament? John Currid summarizes a number of views of typology by specifying four essentials for its identification: (i) typology must be grounded in history; (ii) there must be notable historical and theological resemblance between the type and antitype; (iii) the antitype must intensify the type — that is, it must be more theologically significant than the type; and (iv) there must be evidence of the divine intention for the type to represent the antitype. David Baker's approach includes an examination of the Greek words (typos and its cognates) as they are used in the New Testament. The use of the term has focused on prefiguration and correspondence. Baker recognizes that typology exists within the Old Testament, and thus we are not dependent on those passages in the New Testament that involve typos terminology. I suggest that what we need to do, however, is to try to uncover the principles at work which enable the biblical authors to make the identifications we refer to as typological.

The second approach posited by Reventlow is typology as a method of salvation history hermeneutics. Typology seems to be a fairly natural corollary to salvation history. Thus 'typology is a means of discovering structural analogies between the saving events attested by both Testaments which bridge the gap produced by our loss of a direct relationship in faith to the events of the Old Testament.' It is with this approach that the views of Gabriel Hebert and Donald Robinson have been influential in my own thinking about biblical theology. The essence of this position is that the structure of revelation involves three major stages.

- First, God's kingdom is revealed in Israel's history up to David and Solomon.
- Second, God's kingdom is revealed in prophetic eschatology. This recapitulates the first stage as that which shapes the future.

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32. ibid., p. 23.
Third, God’s kingdom is revealed in the fulfilment of the Old Testament expectations in Christ.

If this scheme is valid, it means that the correspondence is not primarily of facts, persons and events, but of the entire epochs or stages within salvation history. It is because of this ‘macro-analogy’ that the facts, persons and events do correspond. This correspondence is not necessarily explicitly stated in the text, but it can nevertheless be determined on the basis of theological equivalence. Thus we can say that any person, fact, or event in the Old Testament is a type of Christ to the degree that its theological function foreshadows that of Christ.

The question of the principles that enable Paul, for example, to designate certain Old Testament events as *typikos* needs to be opened up. Many Christians are nervous about the idea of typology, because it is often confused with allegory and other kinds of fanciful spiritualizing interpretation. Some evangelical scholars seem to be wary of attempts to find unifying themes, theological centres and overall structures in Scripture. Maybe the excesses of some other evangelical interpreters have prompted an overly cautious approach.

**Jesus and reality**

Typology, broadly understood, illustrates the way dogmatic or doctrinal formulations inform the method of biblical theology. It is of first importance to recognize that the biblical story embraces *all of* reality, namely God and the realm of creation. While it focuses on only certain aspects of reality, the whole is represented either directly or indirectly. The created realm is in turn shown to have its pinnacle in the human race. Only human beings are described as

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34. Some literalists have an aversion to spiritualizing, but it is clear that there is a real sense in which the New Testament spiritualizes the Old.
35. My one concern with the excellent analysis proposed by Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), is that his proposal of some eight ways of linking the Old and New Testaments can give the impression that these are largely unconnected approaches which must be chosen to suit the particular instances under review. A brief comparison of Greidanus’s view and mine is given by David Peterson, *Christ and His People in the Book of Isaiah* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), pp. 13–19.
created in the image of God and as having dominion over creation. The whole biblical story focuses on the way that mankind's relationship to God affects the rest of the created realm. It does not simply refer to sun, moon and stars as created by God, but goes further to say that they are under the control of God and their destiny is tied up with that of humans. When Adam and Eve sinned, the entire universe fell with them (Gen. 3:17-19; Rom. 8:18-23). Redemption has its goal in a new race of humans and a new creation. Sin fractured all relationships except those within the Trinity. Redemption in Jesus Christ puts the universe back together again as a new creation. How is this achieved? The gospel shows us that it is done in a way that involves the promise of new things (the bulk of the Old Testament), the representative restored reality in the actual person of Christ, and the summing up of all things in Christ in the consummation.

To put it another way, Jesus is God incarnate — that is, he is fully God and fully human. But to be human is to be made from the created dust of the earth while being given life by the breath of God. In the God/Man we thus have all of reality present in a representative way that involves no dislocation of relationships. Jesus is thus the representative new creation. If reality consists of God-Humanity-Universe, Jesus is the perfect representative of all three dimensions in which all relate perfectly. Christology in the New Testament shows Jesus to be the comprehensive expression of reality in the purpose of God. The notion of the cosmic Christ rightly applies to the incarnate Son because he is representative reality.

The centrality of Christ for understanding the Bible and, for that matter, the whole of reality can be seen in many parts in the New Testament. A few key passages illustrate what I mean:

- Acts 13:32-33: the bodily resurrection of Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises, which include those relating to the renewal of all things.
- Romans 8:19-23: the work of Christ affects the redemption of the whole of creation.
- 1 Corinthians 1 - 2: Christ in his gospel is the wisdom of God, which links him to the Old Testament perspective on God's wisdom as the principle of order in creation.
- 2 Corinthians 1:20: all God's promises, which must include those of a new creation, are affirmed in Christ.

36. By 'Universe' I mean everything in creation that is not human.
• 2 Corinthians 5:17: Christ is the locus of the new creation.37
• Ephesians 1:10: God's plan is, in the fullness of time, to sum up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. As with Galatians 4:4, the fullness of time is the time of the gospel event. Thus the incarnation is the summing-up event.
• Ephesians 2:13–22: Christ as the new temple fulfils all the expectations of the new temple in the Old Testament, which is closely related to the renewal of the earth; the restored temple in Ezekiel 40–47 is the centre of the new Eden.
• Colossians 1:15–20: Christ is the reason for the creation and is the firstborn of all creation. All things hold together in him. He reconciles the whole of the created order to God.
• Colossians 2:2–3: Christ contains all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
• 1 Peter 3:1–13: Christians wait for the new heavens and the new earth to be revealed at the coming of Christ.
• Revelation 21–22: the goal of the biblical story is the new heavens and the new earth; the final rule of God and his Christ.

The dimensions of reality in the biblical revelation

Thus it can be seen that Jesus gathers up in his being all the dimensions of reality, in that he is God, he is humanity and he is created order. Furthermore, he gathers up in his being and doing all the dimensions of redemptive history in the Old Testament, including the negatives of sin and rebellion.38 Even those areas that biblical theologians have found difficult to incorporate into a theological unity, such as the wisdom literature, are subsumed under the comprehensive role of Jesus as the new creation, the representative restored reality.

37. There is an ambiguity in the Greek here, which literally says, 'If anyone is in Christ, a new creation.' It could mean 'he is a new creation' or 'there is a new creation.' The important point is the perspective of being in Christ, and in that way being part of the new creation. The locus of the new creation is in Christ, who is in heaven. This does not contradict the subjective aspect of regeneration in the believer, but puts it in perspective. See my article, 'Regeneration', NDBT, pp. 720–723.
38. In being made sin for us and dying (2 Cor. 5:21), Jesus is the final reference point for understanding sin and judgment.
It is also clear that Jesus and the apostles regarded the whole of the Old Testament as testimony to the Christ; it is all about Jesus. Thus we conclude that there is no dimension of the Old Testament message that does not in some way foreshadow Christ. If any text is not ultimately about Christ, then what is it about? Two important qualifications must be made here. First, by 'text' we signify a meaningful portion of any given book understood as part of that book and its overall message. Simply isolating a few words or a sentence from its real and immediate context does not qualify. A text takes its meaning from its literary context and from how it contributes to the meaning of that wider context.

Second, to say that an Old Testament text is about Christ is to point to the dynamics of the canon of Scripture, not to some literalistic presupposition. There is always the element of discontinuity between the Old Testament and Christ, but there is also the element of unity. It is to the latter we refer. This raises again the issue of the relationship of the two Testaments, and of the bipolar tensions referred to above. It should be understood that, in so far as these are valid expressions of the connection between the Testaments, they are all related and coinhere. I am proposing that we can subsume them all under a concept of macro-typology that goes beyond the usually identified elements of typology explicit in the New Testament application of the Old. This macro-typology is the underlying principle of theological structure and biblical unity that makes possible all the various perspectives on the relationship of the Testaments.

A further observation can be made. Given the focus of all the creative-redemptive elements on Christ, we have to say that he defines the unity of the biblical message. The unity of the canon is a dogmatic construct stemming from Christology. Unity is a theological presupposition, not an empirically based construct. When biblical theologians think they see a real point of unrelied disunity, or cannot see the overall unity, it is a problem with the theologians, not a problem with the Bible. There will always be difficult texts that we have trouble in integrating into the unity of Scripture, and the massive diversity of the forms and messages of the different texts must never be overlooked. But to say that discerning some aspects of the unity is difficult is not to conclude that it is not there to be perceived. The theological unity will always

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39. Coinherence is a way of speaking of the inseparability of the various distinguishable dimensions. It expresses unity without fusion; distinction without separation. Another term that theologians use, especially in speaking of the relationship of the three Persons of the Trinity, is perichoresis, a Greek term which literally means 'dancing together'.
be muted to some degree, unless we begin with Christ as the unique Word and hermeneutical principle.

At the practical level of interpreting and applying the Scriptures, we are reminded that there are certain key elements easily overlooked in our zeal to arrive at 'a word of God to me now'. These are as follows.

- Jesus says the whole Old Testament, not merely a few selected texts, is about him. Many Christians want to go immediately to consider how the text is about them rather than about Christ.
- Jesus is the one mediator between God and man. He is thus the hermeneutic principle for every word from God.
- Jesus is the reason for the creation and therefore interprets the ultimate significance of every datum of reality. In other words, every datum can be related to its reason in Christ.
- Jesus alone has merited entrance into his Father's kingdom.
- We enter that kingdom by being in union, through faith, with Jesus.
- We grow in our Christian lives by being conformed more and more to the image of Jesus, not to the image of Abraham or Moses. These latter, and all the other heroes of the Bible, only have exemplary meaning for us because of their respective relationships to Christ.
- Thus the prime question to put to every text is about how it testifies to Jesus. Only then can we ask how it makes real his rule over us, and makes real his presence with us so that we are conformed more and more to his image.

These matters can only be fairly dealt with on the basis of there being a macro-typology in Scripture. To think otherwise is to suggest that Jesus got it wrong and failed to see that there are texts that do not connect with him. It is to suggest that the Spirit of God was in the business of inspiring irrelevancies. This is not to suggest some oversimplified and reductionist scheme. It is simply to say that no text in either Testament exists without some connection to Christ. We may not always be able to pin it down. We certainly may never exhaust the exegetical potential of a given text. But that the connection is there is a matter determined by the word of Christ and his apostles. Scholarly reserve and humility is one thing; loss of nerve in the implications of the New Testament’s teaching is another. The cosmic dimensions of Christology point to the fact that we cannot go beyond referring to Jesus as the interpreter of every biblical text in his being the prime goal of all texts. It means also that no datum in the universe exists in isolation from Christ and his interpretation of its ultimate meaning.
While it is not necessary that there be an explicit reference to the antitype in the New Testament, nor that there should always be a confirmation of a type in prophetic eschatology, it is possible to show that the major dimensions of biblical revelation are found in all three stages of revelation. However, it is sufficient for the theological link to be made between the Old Testament stage from creation, through Abraham and his descendants to David and Solomon, and the theological significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. In the left-hand column of the table below are listed the major events of salvation history, including creation and the fall, which occur in the Old Testament salvation history. The second column lists the way that the prophets use the categories of the first column to describe the future coming of judgment, salvation and the kingdom. The third column lists some of the ways in which Christ fulfils these categories.40

### The macro-typology of the Bible

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Testament Salvation History</th>
<th>Prophetic Eschatology</th>
<th>Fulfilment in Christ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God and his creation.</td>
<td>God will bring in a new creation</td>
<td>Jesus is God the Creator. He is the firstborn of all creation. All things were created by him, through him, in him, and for him. He is the new creation, and brings the new creation as the goal of all God's redemptive purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human beings are made from the earth; the breath of God is breathed into them.</td>
<td>God will raise a renewed people for himself and give them his Spirit.</td>
<td>Jesus is fully human, and in that sense is part of the created order. He is the perfectly Spirit-endowed human.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eden is the focus of man's dominion over the beasts and the rest of creation.</td>
<td>The kingdom will be a new Eden. The people of God will have dominion over</td>
<td>Jesus is the place where God and man meet. He has dominion as the last</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

40. I have not included biblical references here, as they are numerous and the themes are sufficiently prominent to stand without further proof.
The macro-typology of the Bible (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Testament Salvation</th>
<th>Prophetic Eschatology</th>
<th>Fulfilment in Christ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall and judgment.</td>
<td>creation and the beasts.</td>
<td>Final judgment will come on those who do not receive the grace of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redemption; which</td>
<td>God will redeem Israel and restore creation.</td>
<td>Jesus redeems the whole of creation, not merely the souls of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>includes the following</td>
<td>A new covenant will take the place of the old.</td>
<td>Jesus is the true partner of God; the faithful Son of God, the Seed of Abraham, Son of David.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dimensions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covenant and calling.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promises of land,</td>
<td>The people of God will return to the promised land and be great. The nations will come to share in the kingdom of Zion.</td>
<td>The land is to be the new Eden, the dwelling of the people with God. Jesus is that place as well as being God and the people. He is the light to the nations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people, great name,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blessing to the nations.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captivity and release</td>
<td>The captivity will lead to a redemptive release that amounts to a second exodus.</td>
<td>Jesus comes to a race captive to sin, Satan and death. He concludes the true exodus by his death and resurrection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the exodus.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prophetic word.</td>
<td>God will raise up a new prophet.</td>
<td>Jesus is the true prophet who speaks the word of God. He is the embodiment of that word. He gives true and faithful obedience to that word.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### The macro-typology of the Bible (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Testament Salvation History</th>
<th>Prophetic Eschatology</th>
<th>Fulfilment in Christ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law structures the life of the redeemed.</td>
<td><em>The law will be written on the hearts of God's people.</em></td>
<td>Jesus fulfils the law and establishes the structure of the life of the community of the redeemed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redemptive worship, priests and tabernacle.</td>
<td><em>A new temple will be the focus of worship and fellowship with God.</em></td>
<td>Jesus fulfils the worship of Israel, above all by being the new temple, and the true priest who offers himself as the one true sacrifice for sin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry, and possession of the land.</td>
<td><em>The people of God will return from the nations to the land of promise.</em></td>
<td>Jesus gains entry through his resurrection and ascension into the inheritance of the people of God. He conquers all the powers that resist the coming of the kingdom of God. By being the place where God meets his people, he fulfils the meaning of the land.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationhood involving judges, prophets, kings, wise men.</td>
<td><em>A new nation will emerge with all the offices of rule and worship of God.</em></td>
<td>A new nation of the people of God is established in Christ. He is the true prophet, priest, king and wise man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingship and temple; Davidic throne.</td>
<td><em>There will be a new David and a new temple.</em></td>
<td>Jesus, the King and true Son of David, is also the new temple where God and mankind meet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solomon and national decline.</td>
<td><em>The Davidic line that failed under Solomon will be reinstated.</em></td>
<td>Jesus takes the consequences of all the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Testament Salvation History</td>
<td>Prophetic Eschatology</td>
<td>Fulfilment in Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>failures of his people by fulfilling in himself all that God requires of them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destruction of Israel and exile.</td>
<td>The exile into Babylon will lead to a redemptive act.</td>
<td>Jesus goes into exile for his people so that he can lead them out of captivity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prophetic ministries:</td>
<td>Prophetic ministries:</td>
<td>Jesus is the true prophet who judges the world, yet at the same time he brings the words of grace and redemption for all who put their trust in him. He defines the fulfilment of the prophetic promises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indictment, Judgment, Promises of restoration.</td>
<td>Indictment, Judgment, Promises of restoration.</td>
<td>The failures of Israel's return from exile are all dealt with in the true return of the true Israel. The consummation shows that all rebellion is finally to be dealt with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return and continued rebellion.</td>
<td>Post-exilic prophets interpret the continued rebellion of Israel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus we can say that all the texts of the Bible speak about either God, human beings, or the created order, or they speak about some combination of these. Since the fullest revelation of all these elements is to be found in Christ, we can say that all Old Testament texts in some way foreshadow or typify the solid reality revealed in Christ. The key to this comprehensive typological interpretation is not ingenuity or wild imagination, but the controlled analysis of the theological significance of the texts in the Old Testament, and the clarifying of their significance in the light of the corresponding theological function of Christ and his gospel. One important implication of this perspective is that it emphasizes that the primary application of all texts is in Christ, not in us or
something else. This is in keeping with the New Testament's teaching that our salvation involves our being conformed to the image of Christ. Homiletic applications to us and our contemporaries must be arrived at via the person and work of Christ. If the properties of the antitypes belong to us, it is only by virtue of our faith union with Christ. The pietistic tendency of many preachers and Bible readers to go straight from text to personal application is thus curtailed. Typology and, in broader terms, biblical theology are thus integral to preaching and teaching the Bible in a way that fulfils the purposes for which the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Biblical theology, with its typology, provides the context for textual exegesis and the grounds for the hermeneutic application of any biblical text to the contemporary believer.
Foundations of evangelical biblical theology

Biblical theology is one of the most important dimensions to any hermeneutical practice, yet it is probably the most neglected in all the literature on hermeneutics. This neglect is reflected in the way that biblical theology is mostly out of mind amongst Bible teachers and preachers, including evangelicals. It is difficult to explain this neglect, except to propose that common practices of devotional Bible reading and the lack of expository preaching have contributed to this malaise. In my view, hermeneutic theory and the use of the Bible in church or in private devotions that fail to understand the big picture of the biblical narrative are seriously lacking. It is also my constant experience that when Christians are introduced to this method of gaining an overview of the one great redemptive story, they respond with both enthusiasm and surprise that no one ever showed it to them before.

1. It is gratifying to note that an entire volume of the Scripture and Hermeneutics Series has been devoted to biblical theology. See Craig Bartholomew, C. Green and K. Möller (eds.), *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, SHS, vol. 1 (Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).
Biblical theology is a formal way of determining and describing the theological plan and significance of the whole Bible. How we pursue the discipline of biblical theology as evangelicals should be consistent with our doctrinal preconceptions of the nature of the Bible as the inspired and authoritative word of God. The hermeneutical spiral comes into play, in that we may find our study of the biblical text demands some modifications in the way we conceive of the characteristics of the Bible. It is not possible to do biblical theology without first having some pre-understanding of the Bible which amounts to a doctrine of Scripture, however embryonic it might be. The idea that there is a logical straight line from exegesis, through biblical theology, to systematic theology or doctrine thus needs some qualification. The impetus for both exegesis and biblical theology is our doctrinal pre-understanding. We would have no reason to pursue a biblical theology if we did not have some notion of the Bible as a book containing theology. For the evangelical, this theology is divine revelation. Enlightenment perspectives tend to reduce the theology to culturally conditioned religious ideas without any necessary correlation with the truth. Thus pre-understandings may be consistent with Christian theism, or they may be utterly opposed to it. But, from an evangelical point of view, we start with the self-authenticating Christ as he is revealed in the self-authenticating Scriptures. Consequently, biblical theology can never be merely descriptive. It is descriptive, but not merely so.

An evangelical theory of knowledge recognizes that spiritual conversion involves a radical reorientation of one's world-view. What Paul refers to in Romans 1:18 as the wicked suppression of the truth of God is reversed and the converting sinner ideally comes to re-evaluate every datum of reality in the light of the newly found orientation to the Creator and the Saviour. This, in turn, is what Paul refers to as transformation 'by the renewal of your mind' (Rom. 12:2), and is an ongoing aspect of sanctification. The same contrast between the unrenewed and the renewed is expressed in the words of Jesus recorded in John 10:26-27: 'You do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.'

This is a key aspect of the church's recognition of the canon of Scripture as the word of God. We consequently conclude from the evidence that the word of Christ, which is the true and reliable word of God, establishes the dogmatic basis for the apostolic and New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament. This recognition that Christ clothed in his gospel is the exegetical

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and hermeneutical norm of Scripture informs the way we do our biblical theology and formulate doctrine. Our presuppositions, then, are those we have examined earlier in this book. They include the authority of the Bible as the inspired word of God, and its consequent unity.

With these presuppositions to guide us, we can propose several complementary ways of doing biblical theology. For example, we may concentrate on the analytical aspects of a synchronic approach. The focus will be on some fairly narrow range of the text, or on a particular book or corpus. Some evangelical works classified as biblical theologies consist of such book-by-book studies. Others follow a narrative-based model. Some New Testament theologies examine the various corpora. Brevard Childs strives after the best of all worlds by following the narrative structure as well as dealing with literary corpora. He concludes with a series of thematic studies that straddle the entire canon of Old and New Testaments. Relatively few biblical theologies have been written to deal with the whole canon as Childs does. The recent offering by Charles H. H. Scobie is a welcome contribution to this genre.

The evangelical interpreter cannot be satisfied with treatments of the Bible merely as literature, or as history. These usually display Ebionite tendencies that ignore the divine element of revelation and theological meaning. Of course, we do not want a docetic approach to the Bible either; one which ignores its humanity in its literature and history. While the task of biblical theology is to uncover the big picture of biblical revelation, it cannot deal with the theological message without coming to terms with the literary and historical dimensions. The question before us, then, is this: what approaches to biblical theology are consistent with evangelical presuppositions? In applying biblical theology as a hermeneutical tool, we need both synchronic analysis

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and diachronic synthesis. The former implies a careful or close reading of the text at the most fundamental level; the close exegesis of the text beginning with its most basic units. The unit should then be understood in the context of its wider unit, usually the book. The ultimate context is the canon of Scripture. The canonical perspective implies diachronic synthesis, and the integration of the parts into the whole. As with any concerns for the relationship of parts to the whole, the two aspects form a kind of dialectic process. With the Scriptures this is not a vicious cycle that has no resolution, for we are always made to return to the person and work of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit as the anchors of the process. Biblical theology is an exercise in understanding how the diversity relates to the unity of Scripture. Central to this is the relationship of the Testaments. Unity/diversity continues to be the concern of the evangelical interpreter. This is a dogmatic construct that informs the way we think about all relationships, including those of the parts to the whole within the canon of Scripture. It is a dogmatic construct drawn from the gospel itself, in that the paradigm of unity and diversity is found in the union of God and man in Christ, a union which points beyond itself to the union of three persons in the one God. 

The hermeneutical role of biblical theology

Kevin Vanhoozer states, "The rift that divides biblical studies from theology will be bridged only if we develop a theological hermeneutic – a theory of interpretation informed by Christian doctrine – and if we simultaneously recover the distinctive contribution of biblical theology to the project of biblical interpretation." Richard Muller comments, "If [biblical theology] is the most difficult step in the process of biblical interpretation, it is also the most important one for the determination of the theological implications of the biblical message." This is not the place to take up a detailed discussion of

8. The Trinity is thus the basis for the Christian formation of a general ontology or metaphysics. This is well argued by R. J. Rushdoony, *The One and the Many* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn, 1978). It was the genius of the Chalcedonian formula of unity and distinction that it provided a Christian way of speaking about the relationship of particularity to generality in all spheres of reality.

9. K. Vanhoozer, 'Exegesis and Hermeneutics', *NDBT*, pp. 52-64.

the nature of biblical theology. At the heart of it is the macro-typology that I discussed in the previous chapter. It is to be regretted that biblical theology is so little acknowledged in standard texts on hermeneutics. Yet for preachers and teachers it is probably the most significant part of the practical hermeneutical task after textual exegesis. Biblical theology is most obviously a part of the process in moving from Old Testament texts to us, but is not unimportant for dealing with the New Testament. Not all New Testament texts have the same relationship within salvation history to the modern reader. This is often ignored in preaching and teaching from the Gospels. The words of Jesus are automatically taken as words to the contemporary church and it is simply assumed that they can be applied to the contemporary church without qualification of any kind. Thus, for example, the Sermon on the Mount is treated as a Christian manifesto for all time. It is also a similar failure of those theologies that tend to ignore the unrepeatable and transitional nature of the events in Acts by regarding them as normative for all time.

Biblical theology is central to the interpretative process because, as Richard Lints so succinctly expresses it, 'Our interpretative matrix should be the interpretative matrix of the Scriptures.' It is this matrix with which biblical theology is concerned. The major hermeneutic role of biblical theology is to determine the theological meaning of the parts and the whole. It cannot do this without determining the structural matrix of revelation. It thus helps prevent the short-circuiting of texts and reminds us of the centrality of the gospel as the interpretative norm. Readers short-circuit texts when they ignore the structure of biblical revelation and treat all texts as being essentially on the same level and in the same relationship to the contemporary reader. Exemplary preaching encourages this fault. When, for example, a text about a character in 1 Samuel is immediately milked for 'what it tells us about ourselves', it ceases to be part of a structured, time-related story, the unity of which is found in the revelation of Christ. Instead, it becomes one of

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a multitude of timeless moralizings or spiritual ideas, the unity of which is found in us.

It is important to see that the analytical (synchronic) tasks should be continually related to the synthetic (diachronic) perspective. Biblical theology is truly diachronic when it looks at the way God has progressively revealed how the kingdom of Christ comes. The synthetic task can only be done by moving in both directions. We have started in the New Testament with the gospel and moved from there back into the Old Testament and forward again into the New Testament. But then we must continue to allow the various parts to interact, so that our understanding grows on all fronts. First and foremost, however, this must be an understanding of God and his Christ.

The biblical theological dimension in hermeneutics is thus the major way of addressing the question of the gap between the text and the reader. It allows the reader to find where he or she actually fits into the totality of biblical revelation. If done with care, it will then provide the valid links between the meaning of a text in its own context and its application to the modern reader.13

The offending gap is the theological distance of texts from the modern reader. But, if the gap is uniformly closed by the reader to give an undifferentiated immediacy to all texts, the result is hermeneutical chaos. Some forms of pietism and 'Spirit-driven' subjective theology result in such an approach, which lacks any differentiation of texts. The kind of piety that primarily focuses on questions concerned with what the text says about us and our Christian living lacks Christological depth. This premature desire for immediate guidance ignores the relationship of the text to Christ. If there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5), then to seek understanding of either God or man without recourse to the mediator is a procedure that is Christologically flawed. If we are truly to understand what a text says about ourselves, we must follow the biblical path that leads first to Christ, for he defines who and what we are in him.

The hermeneutical role of systematic theology

Systematic theology, or doctrine, provides the framework of conceptualized faith and belief within which each of us stands in order to come to the Bible with faith seeking understanding. Christian doctrine is the application of the

13. This is dealt with in Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).
biblical text to the contemporary life of the Christian in the community of the church and in the world. Although it does not have to be formally expressed as systematic theology, biblical truth is doctrinal and is the basis of such systematic formulations. Kevin Vanhoozer emphasizes the need for us to be clear about what we mean by doctrine. His own view is that ‘doctrine is direction for the church’s fitting participation in the ongoing drama of redemption’. 14 Any expression of the way the Bible impinges upon our understanding of God, salvation, human existence and behaviour is doctrinal. Doctrine states in explicit terms what is often implicit in the Bible. It is the crystallizing of biblical teaching about life as God’s people in the church and in the world. The contemporary church is steadily becoming post-denominational. Old denominational loyalties do not figure as largely as they once did. One advantage of this is that evangelicals feel freer now to look for a congregation where they can find good biblical teaching. One disadvantage is that it seems to correlate with a neglect of doctrine. People tend not to ask now why one should be Baptist, or Presbyterian, or Anglican, expecting answers in doctrinal terms. I believe this can be a bad thing, even though it may help to avoid senseless bickering. I am convinced that a healthy attitude to doctrine, to systematic theology, is essential to a healthy attitude to the Bible and its interpretation. 15

From history we know that the formulation of dogma was largely stimulated by the need to combat perceived error. It was recognized that this was not simply a matter of dotting the theological i’s and crossing the t’s, but was really a matter of life and death for the gospel. In much popular evangelicalism, the gospel has been submerged in a sea of subjectivism. In many churches, doctrine has a bad press and is written off as cerebral and irrelevant. 16 However, we must maintain that at the simplest level systematic theology is the topical formulation of what, on the basis of the biblical data, Christians should believe as the teaching of God’s revelation. It is systematic in that it relates the individual

15. Kevin Vanhoozer, The Drama of Doctrine (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), p. xii, argues that ‘Doctrine is a vital ingredient in the well-being of the church, a vital aid to the public witness.’
16. Vanhoozer, ibid., quotes Alan Wolf thus: ‘Evangelical churches lack doctrine because they want to attract new members. Mainline churches lack doctrine because they want to hold on to those declining numbers of members they have.’
topics to a perceived unity of truth. It involves a process of abstraction from the individual data of exegesis so that the unity underlying the diversity of texts is perceptible. Historically it has coined and appropriated technical terms which require rigorous control and clear distinctions, but which enable the theologian to discuss the abstractions with the assumption that the meaning of technical language is agreed upon. Every thinking human being engages in such activity of abstraction and coining of technical terms, even in childhood. It is the content, not the intellectual process, which makes theology distinct. For some seemingly perverse reason, Christians resist the task when it comes to biblical truth, many writing it off as arid intellectualism, while at the same time becoming experts in many other areas of concern which are just as abstract and technical but far less rewarding.

The relationship of biblical and systematic theology

What, then, is the process of proceeding from the text to doctrine? The answer to that question is really what biblical hermeneutics is all about. At its heart is the way we understand the theological meaning of the Bible. Most evangelicals would agree that biblical theology looks for the structure of biblical revelation so that we might enquire into the existence of a central theme or themes in the Bible, and so that we might trace the development of particular themes within the Bible. Thus biblical theology is, as Osborne suggests, 'the first step away from the exegesis of individual passages and toward the delineation of their significance for the church today'.

Under the impulses of the Enlightenment, biblical studies and theology have tended to grow apart. When considering the distinctions between biblical theology and systematics, and in trying to find their proper connection, there has been a tendency in evangelical scholarship to perceive a logical order in relationship. Thus a typical evangelical approach sees the groundwork done in exegesis of the text as a first step in


Osborne here uses 'exegesis' in its narrow sense.

18. For the purpose of this study I will be content to regard systematic theology and dogmatics as close enough to consider as identical. One distinction that could be made is that dogmatics specifically belongs to the doctrinal formulation of a particular Christian tradition (denominational). But, since systematics will usually be produced by theologians operating within a given Christian tradition, the distinction can be rather blurred.
biblical theology. Then biblical theology provides the data for the derivation of systematic or dogmatic formulations. Geerhardus Vos regarded biblical theology as a part of exegetical theology, and the order then would be thought of as exegesis of the text, leading to biblical theology, from which systematics are derived. Practically speaking, there is sound logic in this and, in general, it is the way we proceed.

The discussions among evangelical scholars concerning the relationship of biblical and systematic theology seem to have followed fairly constantly this order of *exegesis → biblical theology → systematic theology*. John Murray, in the second of his two articles on systematic theology, makes certain distinctions between the two disciplines: biblical theology deals with the history of the data of special revelation; systematic theology deals with the data of both general and special revelation, 'in its totality as a finished product'. In criticizing the non-evangelical biblical theologies of the twentieth century, Murray rightly rejects the preoccupation of G. E. Wright and others with the notion that revelation is constituted by God’s acts as distinct from God’s word. Murray, however, does not really take the discussion beyond this polemic against non-evangelical biblical theology and systematics, and he asserts that systematics is wholly dependent upon a proper attention to biblical exegesis. He maintains that systematic theology should be rooted in biblical theology, because special revelation comes to us in historical form that cannot be neglected if we are to appreciate the unity of special revelation. One role of this unified perspective of biblical theology is to prevent the wrong use of texts in supporting doctrine. So far, so good!

Richard Gaffin refers to the fatal divorce of biblical theology from dogmati, a matter that, more recently, also concerns Francis Watson. But a divorce fatal for whom? Like Murray, Gaffin majors on the undeniable point that good systematics needs good biblical exegesis. Good biblical theology is 'the basis and source of Systematics'. He also refers to the views of Vos, and

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concludes that both Vos and Murray are concerned in particular with 'the importance of biblical theology for systematics'.24 Biblical theology, then, impresses the systematologist with the historical character of revelation (not to be confused with Wright's idea of history as revelation). It is indispensable to systematics because it is 'regulative of exegesis'.25 Gaffin, then, sees that it is the task of biblical theology to minister to systematics. The fatality mentioned above seems to afflict the systematologist in so far as he attempts to theologize without good exegesis and biblical theology informing him. But we should also consider the task of systematics to minister to biblical theology.

A more recent article in this debate comes from Gerhard Hasel.26 This is a largely historical survey of the changing roles attributed to biblical theology in relation to systematics once the idea of the former as a distinct discipline was accepted. Krister Stendahl's now famous distinction between 'what it meant' (biblical theology) and 'what it means' (systematics), along with some of Stendahl's critics, comes under scrutiny. The debate has now shifted largely due to the influence of existential theologians such as Bultmann and Tillich. Whatever we may think of these radical thinkers, they point to another dimension hitherto largely ignored — the role of presuppositions or prejudice in understanding.27 Once again, in his evangelical concern that theology should be biblical, Hasel concludes with a series of propositions about the nature of biblical theology, the last four of which are instructive of his perspective on the relationship of the two disciplines. Biblical theology, he maintains, must not accept a structure imposed from systematics or external philosophical systems.28 For Hasel biblical theology is foundational for systematics. Again the order is clearly asserted: systematics is dependent on biblical theology and therefore derivative of it.

One exception to this general perspective is seen in Grant Osborne's treatment. He first states that biblical theology 'collates the partial theologies of individual passages and books into an archetypal “theology” of Israel and the

24. ibid., p. 41.
25. ibid., p. 44.
27. Prejudice, as Hans-Georg Gadamer pointed out, is not to be avoided but recognized. For him, prejudice and presupposition are the same thing, and it can be altered through the processes of the hermeneutical spiral.
28. Some earlier so-called biblical theologies were organized according to doctrinal categories.
early church'. Then, 'Systematic theology re-contextualises biblical theology to address current problems and to summarise theological truth for the current generation.'29 Again, 'Biblical theology constitutes the first step away from the exegesis of individual passages and toward the delineation of their significance for the Church today.'30 In his discussion of the relationship of the various kinds of theology, Osborne gives the main controlling function to historical theology. Although he describes exegesis, biblical theology and systematics in trialogue, it is historical theology that does the talking back to the others.31 But he moves on from there to show how he thinks biblical theology and systematics are interdependent. Osborne asserts that the order, exegesis → biblical theology → systematics, is too simple. The key point, which is rather muted, is this: 'The dogmatic pre-understanding of the biblical theologian interacts in a type of “hermeneutical circle” as each discipline informs and checks the other.'32 It is a pity that Osborne has not developed this important point, for it takes us beyond the simplistic position expressed by Murray and others in which exegesis → biblical theology → systematics is maintained.

A more recent discussion of the matter is found in contributions by Kevin Vanhoozer and Howard Marshall.33 Vanhoozer, in company with Gaffin and Watson, laments the divorce between theology and biblical studies. He begins by informing us, 'I will argue that the gulf currently separating biblical from systematic theology can be bridged by better appreciating the contribution of the diverse biblical genres, and that a focus on literary genre could do much to relieve the ills currently plaguing both their houses.'34 His concerns are important, for they warn against ignoring the function of literary genres as instruments of world-views. But his major concern is the construction of systematics. More needs to be said about the role of systematics in the construction of biblical theology.

30. ibid., p. 265.
31. ibid., p. 264.
32. ibid., p. 269.
34. Vanhoozer, 'From Canon to Concept', p. 96.