

QUESTION 1

What Do We Mean by “Biblical Theology”?

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Biblical theology is a slippery term that people define in many ways. Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett present and illustrate five types of biblical theology:¹

1. historical description (e.g., James Barr)
2. history of redemption (e.g., D. A. Carson)
3. worldview-story (e.g., N. T. Wright)
4. canonical approach (e.g., Brevard Childs)
5. theological construction (e.g., Francis Watson)

People do biblical theology in different ways.² The type of biblical theology that we are advocating in this book blends types 2, 3, and 4—as do exegetes such as Geerhardus Vos, D. A. Carson, G. K. Beale, Stephen G. Dempster, T. D. Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, James M. Hamilton Jr., Peter J. Gentry, and Stephen J. Wellum. Redemptive history *is* a worldview story, and we analyze that story by studying the literary features of the unified canon.³

1. See also Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 231–35; and Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

2. See Question 10 below.

3. We are not convinced that Klink and Lockett rightly present five distinct types of biblical theology. Types 1 and 5 are not properly biblical theology, and types 2–4 belong together. Further, Klink and Lockett do not fairly critique D. A. Carson. See also Darian Lockett, “Limitations of a Purely Salvation-Historical Approach to Biblical Theology,” *HBT* 39, no. 2 (2017): 211–31. For a critique of Klink and Lockett (as well as Lockett’s article), see

Here’s how we understand biblical theology:

- *Shorter definition:* Biblical theology studies how the whole Bible progresses, integrates, and climaxes in Christ.
- *Longer definition:* Biblical theology is a way of analyzing and synthesizing the Bible that makes organic, salvation-historical connections with the whole canon on its own terms, especially regarding how the Old and New Testaments progress, integrate, and climax in Christ.

Let’s begin by focusing on four aspects of the longer definition.

Biblical Theology Makes Organic Connections

When you hear the word *organic*, you might think of food that is healthy and expensive. That’s not what we’re trying to connote when we say “organic.” *Organic* relates to how elements harmoniously grow together as parts of a whole.

Think of an apple tree. It starts out as a seed that sprouts and slowly grows into a mature tree that bears apples. The tree has several parts: roots, trunk, branches, leaves, apples. And it’s all one tree.

Many themes in the Bible are like that. They start off early in the Bible’s storyline as a seed. Then they sprout and slowly grow into a mature tree that bears fruit. Biblical theology studies and synthesizes that growth. It traces that growth by making organic connections, by showing how the parts relate to the whole.

Biblical Theology Makes Salvation-Historical Connections

Salvation history refers to the Bible’s redemptive storyline. That storyline moves from creation to the fall to redemption to consummation. God has a multistage plan to save his people from their sins. This is the history of redemption, the story of salvation. It’s a true story. It’s real history. And biblical theology connects key people and events within it. Biblical theology focuses on the turning points in the Bible’s storyline.

There are several overlapping ways to make organic, salvation-historical connections:

1. Trace a theme’s salvation-historical progression. For example, trace the theme of *serpent* from Genesis to Revelation.⁴

D. A. Carson, “New Covenant Theology and Biblical Theology,” in *God’s Glory Revealed in Christ: Essays on Biblical Theology in Honor of Thomas R. Schreiner*, eds. Denny Burk, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Brian Vickers (Nashville: B&H, 2019), 17–31.

4. See Question 23 below.

2. Consider continuity and discontinuity between the covenants. For example, compare and contrast how OT Israel related to the Mosaic law versus how Christians should today.⁵
3. Track promise and fulfillment. For example, work through the fulfillment language (πληρώω, *plēroō*, “fulfill”) in the Gospel of Matthew, and connect it to the OT.⁶
4. Trace type and antitype. Typology analyzes how NT persons, events, and institutions (i.e., antitypes) fulfill OT persons, events, and institutions (i.e., types) by repeating the OT situations at a deeper, climactic level in salvation history. For example, in John 6:32–33 Jesus fulfills God’s giving manna in the OT by repeating that event at a deeper, climactic level in the history of salvation.⁷
5. Think through how the New Testament uses the Old. Why do NT authors quote or allude to specific OT passages in the way they do?⁸

Those are ways to make organic, salvation-historical connections. That’s what biblical theology is all about.

What are some significant themes that biblical theology should trace from Genesis to Revelation? The editors of the *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible* had to think through that question carefully when they designed that resource.⁹ The study Bible’s main distinctive is that it focuses on biblical theology, not only in the notes but in a section of essays at the back of the study Bible. The editors decided to include short biblical-theological essays for twenty-five themes:

1. The glory of God
2. Creation
3. Sin
4. Covenant
5. Law
6. Temple
7. Priest
8. Sacrifice

5. See Questions 6, 25, and 26.

6. See Question 7.

7. See Questions 8, 27, 29, 32, and 33.

8. See Questions 9 and 31–35.

9. D. A. Carson, ed., *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018). D. A. Carson is the general editor; associate editors are Douglas J. Moo, T. D. Alexander, and Richard S. Hess; and Andrew David Naselli is the assistant editor.

9. Exile and exodus
10. The kingdom of God
11. Sonship
12. The city of God
13. Prophets and prophecy
14. Death and resurrection
15. People of God
16. Wisdom
17. Holiness
18. Justice
19. Wrath
20. Love and grace
21. The gospel
22. Worship
23. Mission
24. Shalom
25. The consummation

It’s relatively straightforward to study these typological trajectories straight through the canon, but it gets more complicated when you analyze and synthesize how so many of these themes interweave with each other. They are like interconnecting ligaments and tendons that tie the whole Bible together.

Biblical Theology Analyzes and Synthesizes the Whole Canon

You can do biblical theology in many different ways. In addition to the ways above (i.e., the five overlapping ways to make organic, salvation-historical connections), three other ways are noteworthy:

1. Focus on a single book. You could focus on how a single book contributes to whole-Bible biblical theology, or you could focus on how a single theme in one book relates to that theme in the rest of the Bible. For example, focus on seed in Genesis, righteousness in Romans, or wisdom in 1 Corinthians.
2. Focus on a corpus—that is, the collected writings by a single author. For example, focus on love in John’s writings (the Gospel of John, 1–3 John, and Revelation) or faith in Paul’s thirteen letters. Even a casual Bible reader notices that John says things differently from Paul or Peter. Their emphases differ from and complement one another.
3. Focus on one of the Testaments. For example, focus on kingdom in the NT. If you focus almost exclusively on just one Testament, then that’s

called *Old Testament theology* or *New Testament theology*. Those are subsets of whole-Bible biblical theology.

When we refer to *biblical theology*, we mean *whole-Bible* biblical theology. It includes the three approaches above, but it does not stop there. It studies these particular portions *in light of the whole Bible* because biblical theology analyzes and synthesizes the whole canon. (The canon is the collection of sixty-six books that the church recognizes as belonging to the Bible.)

This presupposes, of course, that the entire Bible is God-breathed and therefore unified and reliable. And it requires that you read the Bible as progressive revelation: God progressively revealed the Bible throughout history, so later revelation builds on earlier revelation.

In 2010 one of us interviewed Steve Dempster regarding his excellent book *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*.¹⁰ Here is how Dempster replied to the question, “Methodologically, what role does the NT play in your OT theology?”

This is a good question. I try to bracket it out as much as possible, but of course it is there always in my consciousness. Nevertheless, I think it is important to argue with Brevard Childs that the Old Testament must have its own discrete witness. That is why, for example, I use the structure of the Hebrew Bible in my Old Testament theology. In my theology this distinctive structure is an important part of the argument. . . .

To answer the question in another way, I think that if I didn’t try to bracket the New Testament out as much as possible, I am sure I wouldn’t have stressed the importance of land in my study, which does not seem to be important—at least on the surface—in the New Testament.

While we understand and respect why Dempster answered the question that way, we don’t think that we should do biblical theology this way *and stop there*. And Dempster agrees.¹¹

10. Andrew David Naselli, “Interview with Stephen Dempster on Old Testament Theology,” *The Gospel Coalition*, August 5, 2010, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2010/08/05/interview-with-stephen-dempster-on-old-testament-theology>; Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003).

11. Dempster wrote this to Andy Naselli: “I agree with your assessment. . . . I guess when I say that I try and bracket out the NT understanding first I am certainly not saying that I wish to stay there. I want to read a book on its own first and hear its distinctive voice. But after doing this I have a responsibility and imperative as a Christian scholar to see how this connects to the New Testament and to read the OT in light of the end” (email to Andy Naselli,

It’s valuable to think through what God’s people at any given stage of history may have thought given the revelation they had received up to that point. But we live now—at this point in salvation history. We have the whole canon. We might temporarily “bracket out” part of the canon as a thought experiment, but at the end of the day, we shouldn’t bracket out any part of it. We should read every part of it in light of the whole.¹² When we read any part of the Bible—including the OT—we must read with *Christian* eyes.¹³

So one danger is to focus on the OT in a way that brackets out the NT. But there’s an inverse danger: you can focus on the NT in a way that essentially brackets out the OT. You cannot responsibly read the NT apart from the OT. They are inseparable. As D. A. Carson puts it, “There is likely to be something distorted about a string of learned essays and monographs on, say, Paul, if those essays have been written by someone who has not bothered to study intensely Paul’s Bible.”¹⁴ The single most important literature for understanding the NT is the OT. We must not interpret the NT as though the OT doesn’t exist. If we do, we will badly misread the NT.

November 25, 2015, used with permission). To get an idea of how Dempster reads the New Testament as a key for understanding the Old Testament, see Stephen G. Dempster, “From Slight Peg to Cornerstone to Capstone: The Resurrection of Christ on ‘the Third Day’ according to the Scriptures,” *WTJ* 76, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 371–409.

12. See also Brian S. Rosner, “Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 3: “Biblical theology is principally concerned with the overall theological message of the whole Bible. It seeks to understand the parts in relation to the whole and, to achieve this, it must work with the mutual interaction of the literary, historical, and theological dimensions of the various corpora, and with the inter-relationships of these within the whole canon of Scripture.”
13. See also D. A. Carson, “Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective,” *BBR* 5 (1995): 40–41:

All Christian theologians, including those whose area of specialty is the Old Testament or some part of it, are under obligation to read the Old Testament, in certain respects, with Christian eyes. . . . I acknowledge that certain kinds of historical study of the Old Testament documents must specifically disavow later knowledge in order to ensure accurate historical and theological analysis of the people and of the documents they have left behind. At the same time, no Christian *Alttestamentler* [i.e., Old Testament scholar] has the right to leave the challenge of *biblical* study to the New Testament departments. The Gospel records insist that Jesus himself, and certainly his earliest followers after him, read the Old Testament in christological ways. Jesus berated his followers for not discerning these points themselves. The rationale for such exegesis is multifaceted and complex. But if we are *Christian* theologians, that rationale must be teased out from both ends of the canon.

14. Carson, “Current Issues in Biblical Theology,” 34.

Biblical Theology Analyzes and Synthesizes the Whole Canon on Its Own Terms

For biblical theology, the text sets the agenda. That’s why the words *on its own terms* are in the definition. This is what distinguishes biblical theology from systematic theology.¹⁵ Biblical theology prioritizes a passage’s literary context.¹⁶

For systematic theology, the text is important, but other factors often set the agenda. It might be a philosophical question (Is God inside or outside time? Do we have a free will?). Or it might be a modern-day controversial ethical issue (What forms of contraception might be acceptable options for Christians? Is *in vitro* fertilization an option for Christians?). Or it could be a pressing personal question (What must I do to be saved? Should a church baptize infants? Does an unborn infant who dies go to heaven?).

We often have questions about an issue and then ask, “What does the Bible teach about that?” That’s a legitimate and necessary type of question. But it differs from biblical theology in that for the latter, the literary themes of the text itself are what drive the questions.¹⁷

For example, imagine taking a college course on William Shakespeare. As you read one of his plays, you would study its literary context—the role that certain passages have within the play and more broadly within all of Shakespeare’s published works. What particular themes and motifs are prominent in a particular Shakespeare play? What themes and motifs are prominent throughout his plays? You would inductively read a play, and that careful reading is what should lead you to explore themes that are significant in the play.

As you read the Bible, you inductively discover that certain literary themes are prominent. Some of those themes are ones that people typically don’t ask about when they are wondering what the whole Bible teaches about a topic. For example, people don’t generally ask what the whole Bible teaches about sonship or about exile and exodus. But those are themes we should be tracing through the Bible because (1) they are so important in passage after passage, and (2) the divine author wants us to see the interconnections.

Biblical theology is historical, organic, and inductive. Systematic theology is relatively ahistorical, universal, and deductive. See figure 1.1, which contrasts the task and nature of biblical theology with systematic theology.

15. See Question 13.

16. On literary context, see Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 323–43; Naselli, *Understand and Apply the New Testament*, 188–205.

17. We don’t mean to imply that the text *never* sets the agenda for systematic theology. It often can and should. But it often does not, and that’s fine. And that’s one way it differs from biblical theology.

	Biblical Theology	Systematic Theology
Final Authority	The Whole Bible	The Whole Bible
Task	Inductively describe what texts say in relation to the whole Bible. Explore how and what each literary genre or canonical unit distinctively communicates.	Deductively describe what the whole Bible teaches (with an objective of engaging and even confronting one’s culture). Integrate and synthesize what the Bible’s literary genres communicate.
Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical and literary • Organic • Inductive • Diachronic (traces how salvation history progresses through time) • Bridging discipline: a little further from culture and a little closer to the biblical text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively ahistorical • Relatively universal • Relatively deductive • Relatively synchronic (focuses on what is true at a point in time) • Culminating and worldview-shaping discipline: a little closer to culture and a little further from the biblical text

Fig. 1.1. Comparing Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology¹⁸

Biblical theology must analyze and synthesize the whole canon on its own terms because it prioritizes literary context—the role that a Bible passage plays in its immediate context, section, book, corpus, testament, and the whole Bible. It is the result of careful reading—interpreting text after text by analyzing what the human authors and what the divine author intended to communicate. Biblical theology is essentially whole-Bible, redemptive-historical exegesis—analyzing text after text to discern what the authors intended to communicate. Exegesis draws the meaning out of a text, and biblical theology does that for the entire unified and God-breathed Bible.

Summary

Biblical theology is a way of analyzing and synthesizing the Bible that makes organic, salvation-historical connections with the whole canon on its own terms, especially regarding how the Old and New Testaments progress, integrate, and climax in Christ.

18. See also DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament*, 397–98; and D. A. Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in Alexander and Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 89–104.

- *Organic connections* refer to how elements harmoniously grow together as parts of a whole.
- *Salvation-historical connections* refer to integrating key people and events within the Bible’s storyline.
- Whole-Bible biblical theology analyzes and synthesizes *the whole canon*.
- Biblical theology analyzes and synthesizes the whole canon *on its own terms* because it prioritizes literary context. The task and nature of biblical theology are different than systematic theology.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is one of your favorite ways of doing biblical theology? Why?
2. Do you tend to read the OT without Christian eyes? Why?
3. What is a biblical-theological theme that you would like to trace through the Bible?
4. Pick a novel you enjoy reading. How might you analyze and synthesize themes in that novel?
5. In your own words, how does biblical theology differ from systematic theology?