

The Necessity of Biblical Theology
(How to Interpret Scripture)
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The storyline of Scripture

Geerhardus Vos, the father of Reformed biblical theology, said biblical theology is the study of the progressive unfolding of the revelation of God in its unity and multiformity finding its consummation in the new covenant. Biblical theology seeks to follow the contours and shape of biblical revelation so as to reproduce as far possible the features of the progressive activity of God's gracious self-disclosure.

As we read Scripture we must recognize three key elements:

1. Revelation involves historical progression. Scripture comes to us as God's story. God's redemption does not happen all at once, but through various nations, means, historical events, and people his purposes and plans are revealed. As God reveals himself through various epochs (e.g., creation, fall, redemption, new creation) we find them all pointing to and finding their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Thus, everything we read in Scripture is meant to serve this purpose. Any event, history, story, person, nation, must first and foremost be understood as it fits within and moves toward and aids God's redemptive purposes. The task of biblical theology is to understand this organic or progressive movement in Scripture. What we mean by organic is that the movement of Scripture is related and not arbitrary. Scripture has a purpose; it is not a loose collection of random sayings or teachings, thus, we should not treat the bible as textbook. Though the bible does not speak on every issue, we must work from the Scriptural framework and be very careful to recognize the redemptive nature of Scripture that is first and foremost in our interpretation. This is the work of biblical theology moving to systematic theology (both are descriptive and prescriptive).

2. Revelation comes to us in various literary genres that must be taken seriously. Within the Scriptures there is a multiformity. What this means is that Scripture does not come to us in one form, but in many forms. The dual authorship of Scripture teaches us that God used various people to record the Scriptures, who used their abilities and literary styles (e.g., Luke 1:1-4). Thus, we must recognize that Scripture comes to us in narrative, poetry, prophetic, letter, etc. If Scripture comes to us in this fashion, then we must work hard at reading it as literary critics (in the good sense). We must understand symbols, types, promise-fulfillment, the movement from lesser to greater, and shadow to substance.

3. Revelation comes to us in God's mighty deeds and his interpretation of those deeds. God reveals himself in mighty acts (e.g., Exodus event) and then gives the interpretation of those acts. In the NT we find the gospel involves the recitation of God's acts in history. The focal point of the NT is the fulfillment of the events and words of the OT in Christ Jesus (Luke 24:13ff, 36ff;). The NT proclaims that what God promised in the OT has now come to fulfillment in Jesus. The entire Bible is the record of God's mighty acts and explanation of those acts. We see that the OT is the predictive word, the Gospels give the account of the redemptive-revelatory act, and the rest of the NT supplies the final interpretation. Thus, we must take seriously the way Scripture works

and interprets itself. This coincides with the previous point: we must recognize type-antitype, promise-fulfillment, lesser to greater, and shadow to substance movement in Scripture. At the end of the day the entire warp and woof of the Bible is eschatological and Christocentric in nature. What is meant here is that the Bible is moving toward an intended end (eschatology) with an intended purpose (Christ). History is always linear in its movement, thus, the Bible is too. The Bible is not a cookbook or encyclopedia, but a religious book. It is not where I find the recipe to fit any particular theory or need, nor is it an encyclopedia where I find summary statements on various issues that we may like, but it is a religious book—describing God's mighty acts and his interpretation of those acts. Biblical theology is prescriptive already, not just merely descriptive. In other words, it confronts us and is intended to be believed as it is, so as to rule our lives and direct to God's saving work in Christ. To think God's thought after him is to understand and articulate biblical theology.

Reading scripture

Our reading and interpretation of Scripture must reflect what Scripture is. As we have already mentioned Scripture is progressive (eschatological) and Christocentric. In our reading of Scripture three horizons are essential to our hermeneutics, otherwise we will misread it.

1. Textual horizon: This speaks to the grammatical-historical work we do in the text. It speaks of the nuts and bolts exegesis of word study, genre analysis, grammar, etc.

2. Epochal horizon: Here we ask, "where are we in the biblical story?" In other words, where are we in redemptive history, what is the significance, and what has been revealed so far. Thus, we must understand and think as the people did at that particular epoch. Epochal divisions can be the OT / NT, pre-fall, post-fall, patriarchs, old covenant, nation, exile, post-exile, cross, post-resurrection, formation of the church, etc.

3. Canonical horizon: This perhaps the most important of the three—this is the preaching / interpretation of the text. The canonical horizon is the continuity between the promises of God and his fulfillment of them. This is the glue that holds the diverse epochs together. The promise-fulfillment motif is key to understanding the Scriptures. Promise-fulfillment speaks of God's promising something in the past and fulfilling it in the future. This becomes the claim of the biblical authors; that as God has been faithful in the past, he will be faithful in the future. The primary way to understand promise-fulfillment is by typology. Typology is symbolism grounded in the text with a prospective reference to be fulfilled in a later epoch in biblical history (it is both necessary and essential in character). Typology involves recognizing the organic relationship between events, persons, and institutions. The early event, person, or institution is a "type" and the later is the "anti-type." The typical relationship between the first person, event, institution and second is fundamental (necessary) and essential in some way. The typological relation is central means by which particular epochal horizons are linked with later horizons in redemptive history. It links the present to the past and the future. It is found within the organic or typological structure of Scripture that God's promises are given and fulfilled. We find in Scripture a difference in quality between former acts of God and new ones (e.g., temple). In other words, the fulfillment of God's promises would be even greater than the original recipients of the original promise could have foreseen. In addition, typology allows for the promises of

God to often have two or more fulfillments, one relatively immediate and the other at some distance point in the future (e.g., prophetic literature). However, some may object to this notion of typology as allegory (fanciful interpretation). The difference is that typology is textually and historically warranted (found in the text). In other words, it takes a legitimate idea, person, event, institution in Scripture and traces its movement from promise to fulfillment, whereas allegory is not textually based, but finds some unrelated point and seeks to create an illegitimate connection (scarlet cord of Rahab).

Goldsworthy states, "The word of God came to mankind through the agency of human beings and in the midst of human history. This is overlooked in some methods of interpretation. These include the literalistic and the allegorical interpretations. The literalistic plays down the place of revelation as the interpreter of history, and the allegorical removes history as the stage for revelation. The Bible contains a structure of typology in which history is central to God's progressive revelation."

The entire notion fits with God's sovereign authority to speak and make himself known. Ultimately God makes himself known through human language, he gives meaning, substance, and definition to the Scriptures. As he has spoken through and to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and ultimately his Son, we must seek to understand their hermeneutic as we read our Bibles. This is how the Apostles preached Jesus from the OT (Acts 2, 7, 8, 13, 15, 26, and 28). (Moreover, most people only view the OT pointing to and fulfilled in Christ in those texts that speak of his atoning work on the cross, but all of Scripture points to him; e.g., Psa 40:6-8; Heb 10:5-7; Isa 8:17-18; Heb 2:13).

This demands nothing less than a "thick" reading of Scripture, rather than a "thin" reading. A thin reading is an impoverished reading of the text, that in the simplest terms fails to account for the context and nature that a text comes to the reader. A thick reading seeks to understand the text as it fits within the large context of Scripture and understand what the author (both divine and human) is doing with the text, specifically how he uses words, genres, symbols, etc. (e.g., winking an eye). A thick reading of the text seeks to understand the fuller sense (*sensus plenior*) of the text in light of God's progressive revelation consummated in Christ and recognizes that the straight forward reading or "literal" reading of the text is not always the biblical meaning. The thick reading also teaches us that we cannot simply "apply" OT texts to us without understanding them in light of the NT nor can we just "pick-up" anywhere in the Bible without understanding it in light of the whole; rather we must always interpret the text first, then apply it. The thick reading of the text understands rightly the notion of Scripture interpreting Scripture (analogy of faith or intertextuality). At the end of the day, the thick reading seeks to understand the theological or redemptive meaning of the text.

The Old Testament for Jesus and the apostles were the Scriptures and the New Testament (which is Scripture too) is nothing less than the commentary on the Old Testament. The OT does not simply provide proof texts for the coming Messiah. Its major themes point forward to Christ's coming, suffering, and glory. Israel's history (and Scriptures) find their greatest meaning, expression, and transformation in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is the hope of the OT authors that we come to learn how to appreciate the Christocentric nature of the OT as they and the apostles did (1 Pet 1:10-12; 2 Cor 1:20). Unless we understand Jesus we will never

understand our Old Testament and unless we understand the Old Testament we will never understand the glorious realities that are ours in Christ.