

## **"The Nature and Aims of Biblical Theology"**

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Biblical theology is a comparatively recent arrival in the theological family. In view of this, it can create little surprise that a wide divergence of opinion prevails in regard to the place she ought to occupy and the rights to be accorded to her, or even in regard to the question whether she can claim any rights or place at all. Many look upon the newcomer with suspicion, while others run into the opposite extreme of paying her such exclusive honor and attention as to treat her older sisters with unmerited coldness and neglect.

The question whether there is need for a new theological discipline of this general character can best be answered by asking ourselves whether a well-defined field of theological knowledge exists for whose exploration hitherto recognized departments do not make adequate provision, and which is of sufficient importance to deserve not only incidental, but separate and detailed treatment. It can be shown, we think, that this latter question permits of an affirmative answer. Among the fundamental subjects which lie at the basis of our entire Christian system, there is scarcely one that has received such scant notice as the great subject of supernatural revelation in its historic aspect. From an apologetic and philosophical standpoint much has been done for it; but historically considered, it still awaits the first turning of the sod. Back of the formation of the Scriptures as a whole, back of the writing of the single books of Scripture, lies the great process of the supernatural self-disclosure of God in history by word and act. Surely it cannot be superfluous to ascertain its laws, to observe its methods, to trace the mutual adjustment of its various stages, to watch the ripening of its purposes—in a word, to investigate its philosophy, so far as this is possible to the human mind. But this is precisely what Biblical theology sets out to do. Whatever may be thought of the manner in which the task has been hitherto performed, the legitimacy of the undertaking will not be denied by any one who is a firm believer in the supernatural.

It might be said, however, that adequate provision is made, or can be made, for all this in the already existing and generally recognized theological disciplines. Systematic theology deals with the revelation of God. But systematic theology deals with it not as a process of divine activity in history; here revelation appears as a finished product, to be logically apprehended and systematized. With more show of reason, sacred history might be expected to take charge of the subject, inasmuch as it describes the unfolding of the plan of redemption in the life of the chosen

people, in which, of course, revelation played a most prominent part. Still it is obvious that even thus but very partial justice could be done to so fundamental and complicated a problem. In sacred history revelation appears as one of the factors which have exercised a determining influence; that is to say, it does not form the center of the discussion. Sacred history deals with the redemptive realities created by the supernatural activity of God. Biblical theology deals with the redemptive knowledge communicated in order to interpret these realities. From this it follows, that while the two are intimately associated, yet they are logically distinct. The one moves in the sphere of being, the other in the sphere of truth.

In order to obtain a more definite conception of Biblical theology we must ascertain the general features of God's revealing work. The first of these is its historical progress. The self-revelation of God is a work covering ages. In the abstract, it is quite conceivable that the entire context of revealed truth should have been communicated at once. That God has not done this may be in part explained from the finiteness of the human understanding. There exist, however, much deeper reasons for it in the nature of revelation itself. Revelation is not an isolated act of God. It constitutes a part of the formation of the new world of redemption, and this new world does not come into being suddenly and all at once, but is realized in a long historical process. This could not be otherwise, since at every point its formation proceeds on the basis of, and in contact with, the natural development of this world in the form of history. It is simply owing to our habit of unduly separating revelation from this comprehensive background of the total redeeming work of God that we fail to appreciate its historic, progressive nature. From the dependence of revelation on redemption, we can also explain why the history of the former had to come to a close when redemption, in the objective sense, had been completed. Revelation is designed to prepare, to accompany, and to interpret the great objective redemptive acts of God, such as the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection. It is not intended to follow the subjective appropriation of redemption in its further course. To expect revelations after the close of the apostolic age would be as unreasonable as to think that the great saving facts of that period can be increased or repeated.

A further ground for the historic character of revelation may be found in its eminently practical aspect. The knowledge of God communicated by it is nowhere for a purely intellectual purpose. From beginning to end it is intended to enter into the actual life of man. Hence God has interwoven his revelation with the historic life of the chosen race, so as to secure for it a practical form in all its parts. This principle has found its clearest expression in the idea of the covenant

as the form of God's self-revelation to Israel. The covenant is an all-comprehensive communion of life, in which every self-disclosure is made subservient to a practical end.

The historic progress thus ascribed to supernatural revelation may be more closely defined as a species of organic development. Although the knowledge of God has received material increase through the ages, this increase nowhere shows the features of external accretion, but appears throughout as an organic unfolding from within. The elements of truth are seen to grow out of each other. The gospel of paradise is a germ in which the gospel of Paul is potentially present. Dispensation grows out of dispensation, and the newest is but the fully expanded flower of the oldest. The result of this organic character of revelation we witness, in its progressive delivery, an ever-increasing multiformity. In the Old Testament already, and still more in the New, there are clearly-distinct types of teaching. Further, there are numerous other variations closely associated with the peculiarities of individual character in the organs of revelation. This individual coloring is not only not detrimental to a full statement of the truth, but directly subservient to it, because God's method includes the very shaping and chiseling of individualities for his own ends. The human is but a glass through which the divine light is reflected, and all the sides and angles into which the glass has been cut serve no other purpose than to distribute to us the truth in all the riches of its prismatic colors.

After what has been said, it may be in order to frame a definition of Biblical theology. We have seen that the revelation of God constitutes a sphere of supernatural divine activity distinct from other spheres, determined by laws of orderly historic sequence, such as are subject to scientific theological investigation. Biblical theology, rightly defined, is nothing else than the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity.

It must be admitted, however, that not everything at present passing under the name of Biblical theology satisfies the requirements of the definition just given. The evolutionistic philosophy, which has so strongly influenced the course of theology in other departments, has affected the treatment of Biblical theology more than that of any other discipline. The reason is obvious. The principle of historic progress in revelation, on which Biblical theology rests, presents certain analogies with the principle of said philosophy. These analogies are merely formal; the development sketched in the Bible is totally different from the naturalistic evolution, by the help of which present-day philosophy seeks to explain the history of the universe. Nevertheless, the formal similarity has not unnaturally aroused suspicion against Biblical theology as such, all

the more so since, as a matter of fact, many modern theologians have applied this naturalistic principle to the explanation of the growth of Biblical truth. Thus, in harmony with the agnostic character of the philosophy of evolution, which claims that man can know phenomena only, the treatment of the science has been entirely subjectivized, so that our modern Biblical theologians professedly deal, not with the progress of supernatural revelation, in which they do no longer believe, but with the development of subjective religion in Biblical times, and devote their labors to the discovery and reproduction of a number of diminutive doctrinal systems, often contradictory among themselves, which they profess to find in the Bible. And from this it further follows that the development traced by such writers is not a development remaining in all its stages within the sphere of absolute, perfect truth, but a development largely consisting in the elimination of error. All this, however, while deeply deplorable, and imposing upon every student of Biblical theology an increased responsibility, lest by his own attitude he should give countenance to this fatal tendency, has nothing to do with the nature of the science itself. It represents a perversion and corruption of it, which should not be allowed to prejudice us against its cultivation in a proper Biblical spirit. If the objective character of revelation, its infallibility, the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures as containing its record be firmly upheld, there is no danger that anti-Christian principles will creep in to exercise their destructive influence upon the minds of our students.

Much more, however, can be said in favor of Biblical theology, as a theological discipline, than that it admits of treatment in a harmless spirit. The practical results which may be expected to follow its cultivation are by no means inconsiderable. It exhibits to the student of the word the organic structure of revealed truth. By doing this it interprets to him the meaning and relative importance of the single aspects and elements of truth. There is no better safeguard against that one-sidedness in the appreciation of truth, which is the source of all heresy, than an intelligent insight into the vital, organic relation which any one doctrine sustains to all others. Besides this, Biblical theology imparts new life and freshness to the old truth by placing it in its original historic setting. The Bible is not a handbook of dogmatics: it is a historical book full of dramatic interest. Familiarity with the history of revelation will enable the student to utilize the concrete realistic interest attaching to the truth and so to guard against a too abstract presentation of it. Still further—and this is a matter of great importance at the present day—Biblical Theology bears witness to the indispensableness of correct knowledge of the truth for every healthy religious development because it shows what infinite care God has taken to reveal truth to us. Again, Biblical theology meets the charge that the fundamental doctrines of our faith rest on

an arbitrary exposition of isolated proof-texts. That system will hold the field which can show that its doctrines grow organically on the stem of revelation, and are interwoven with its whole structure from beginning to end. This our Biblical theology should do for our dogmatics. In doing this it will also help to keep dogmatics in touch with the realities of actual revelation, so as to guard it from losing itself in fruitless speculations. Finally, the highest practical aim of Biblical theology is that it grants us a new vision of the glory of God. As eternal, he lives above the sphere of history. He is the Being, and not the becoming one. But, since for our salvation he has condescended to work and speak in the form of time, and thus to make his work and his speech partake of the peculiar glory that belongs to all organic growth, we must also seek to know him as the One that is, that was, and that is to come, in order that our theology may adequately perform its function of glorifying God in every mode of his self-revelation to us.

In the foregoing the question has not been raised in how far the name Biblical theology fits the discipline we have endeavored to describe. It cannot be denied that this name lies open to serious objection, although it may be impossible to displace it, now that it has become almost generally adopted. The appropriation of the adjective "Biblical" would seem to call in question the Biblical character of the other theological disciplines, which, from a Protestant point of view, would be tantamount to denying their right of existence altogether. If the usual division of theology into the four departments of Exegetical, Historical, Systematic, and Practical Theology is to be retained, the designation of a subdivision of one of these four by a phrase constructed on the same principle as the names of the main divisions, must inevitably lead to confusion of thought. These difficulties can all be obviated by substituting for Biblical Theology the name, "History of (Special) Revelation," which has actually been adopted by some writers.