

Biblical Theology

Old and New Testaments

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PREFACE

In the words of Thomas Aquinas, *Theology a Deo docetur, Deum docet, ad Deum ducit*.¹ After suffering much from the anti-intellectual and anti-doctrinal temper of our times, Theology is perhaps in somewhat better repute now than during the early years of the present century. This change of attitude is to be welcomed, even though it must be confessed that even in conservative Protestant circles Theology is still far from receiving the attention and respect which, as the knowledge of God, it ought to have.

The present volume is entitled *Biblical Theology – Old and New Testaments*. The term 'Biblical Theology' is really unsatisfactory because of its liability to misconstruction. All truly Christian Theology must be *Biblical Theology* – for apart from General Revelation the Scriptures constitute the sole material with which the science of Theology can deal. A more suitable name would be 'History of Special Revelation', which precisely describes the subject matter of this discipline. Names, however, become fixed by long usage, and the term 'Biblical Theology', in spite of its ambiguity, can hardly be abandoned now.

Biblical Theology occupies a position between Exegesis and Systematic Theology in the encyclopaedia of theological disciplines. It differs from Systematic Theology, not in being more Biblical, or adhering more closely to the truths of the Scriptures, but in that its principle of organizing the Biblical material is historical rather than logical. Whereas Systematic Theology takes the Bible as a completed whole and endeavours to exhibit its total teaching in an orderly, systematic form, Biblical Theology deals with the material from the historical standpoint, seeking to exhibit the organic growth or development of the truths of Special Revelation from the primitive

¹ 'Is taught by God, teaches God, leads to God.'

Preface

pre-redemptive Special Revelation given in Eden to the close of the New Testament canon.

The material presented in this volume has previously been issued at various theological institutions in mimeographed form. It is a matter of satisfaction to me that it is being made available to the public in a suitable permanent printed form by the Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. The editing of the material for the press has been done by my son, the Rev. Johannes G. Vos, who studied this work as a student at Princeton Theological Seminary and is in hearty agreement with the theological viewpoint of the book. It is my hope that this volume may help many ministers and theological students to attain a deeper appreciation of the wonders of the Special Revelation of our God.

Grand Rapids, Michigan
1 September 1948

GEBERHARDUS VOS

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This new printing, entirely reset in 1975, differs from the original publication only in the introduction of subheadings, the division of the text into shorter paragraphs, and the use of a new scheme for transliteration of the Hebrew words. The content of the book remains entirely the same as in earlier printings.

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The Old Testament

PART ONE

THE MOSAIC EPOCH OF REVELATION

ONE: INTRODUCTION: THE NATURE AND METHOD OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The best approach towards understanding the nature of Biblical Theology and the place belonging to it in the circle of theological disciplines lies through a definition of Theology in general. According to its etymology, Theology is *the science concerning God*. Other definitions either are misleading, or, when closely examined, are found to lead to the same result. As a frequent instance, the definition of Theology as 'the science of religion' may be examined. If in this definition 'religion' be understood subjectively, as meaning the sum-total of religious phenomena or experiences in man, then it is already included in that part of the science of anthropology which deals with the psychical life of man. It deals with man, not with God. If, on the other hand, religion be understood objectively, as the religion which is normal and of obligation for man because prescribed by God, then the further question must arise, why God demands precisely this and no other religion; and the answer to this can be found only in the nature and will of God; therefore ultimately, in thus dealing with religion, we shall find ourselves dealing with God.

From the definition of Theology as the science concerning God follows the necessity of its being based on revelation. In scientifically dealing with impersonal objects we ourselves take the first step; they are passive, we are active; we handle them, examine them, experiment with them. But in regard to a spiritual, personal being this is different. Only in so far as such a being chooses to open up itself can we come to know it. All spiritual life is by its very nature a hidden life, a life shut up in itself. Such a life we can know only through revelation. If this be true as between man and man, how much more must it be so as between God and man. The principle involved has been strikingly formulated by Paul: 'For who among men knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of the man which is in him? even so the things of God none knoweth, save the Spirit of God' [1 Cor. 2.11]. The inward

hidden content of God's mind can become the possession of man only through a voluntary disclosure on God's part. God must come to us before we can go to Him. But God is not a personal spiritual being *in general*. He is a Being infinitely exalted above our highest conception. Suppose it were possible for one human spirit to penetrate directly into another human spirit: it would still be impossible for the spirit of man to penetrate into the Spirit of God. This emphasizes the necessity of God's opening up to us the mystery of His nature before we can acquire any knowledge concerning Him. Indeed, we can go one step farther still. In all scientific study we exist alongside of the objects which we investigate. But in Theology the relation is reversed. Originally God alone existed. He was known to Himself alone, and had first to call into being a creature before any extraneous knowledge with regard to Him became possible. Creation therefore was the first step in the production of extra-divine knowledge.

Still a further reason for the necessity of revelation preceding all satisfactory acquaintance with God is drawn from the abnormal state in which man exists through sin. Sin has deranged the original relation between God and man. It has produced a separation where previously perfect communion prevailed. From the nature of the case every step towards rectifying this abnormality must spring from God's sovereign initiative. This particular aspect, therefore, of the indispensableness of revelation stands or falls with the recognition of the fact of sin.

DIVISION OF THEOLOGY INTO FOUR GREAT DEPARTMENTS

The usual treatment of Theology distinguishes four departments, which are named Exegetical Theology, Historical Theology, Systematic Theology and Practical Theology. The point to be observed for our present purpose is the position given Exegetical Theology as the first among these four. This precedence is due to the instinctive recognition that at the beginning of all Theology lies a passive, receptive attitude on the part of the one who engages in its study. The assumption of such an attitude is characteristic of all truly exegetical pursuit. It is eminently a process in which God speaks and man listens. Exegetical Theology, however, should not be regarded as confined to Exegesis. The former is a larger whole of which the latter is indeed an important part, but after all only a part. Exegetical Theology in the wider sense comprises the following disciplines:

- (a) the study of the actual content of Holy Scripture;
- (b) the inquiry into the origin of the several Biblical writings, including

the identity of the writers, the time and occasion of composition, dependence on possible sources, etc. This is called *Introduction*, and may be regarded as a further carrying out of the process of Exegesis proper;

(c) the putting of the question of how these several writings came to be collected into the unity of a Bible or book; this part of the process bears the technical name of *Canonicity*;

(d) the study of the actual self-disclosures of God in time and space which lie back of even the first committal to writing of any Biblical document, and which for a long time continued to run alongside of the inscripturation of revealed material; this last-named procedure is called the study of *Biblical Theology*.

The order in which the four steps are here named is, of course, the order in which they present themselves successively to the investigating mind of man. When looking at the process from the point of view of the divine activity the order requires to be reversed, the sequence here being

(a) the divine self-revelation;

(b) the committal to writing of the revelation-product;

(c) the gathering of the several writings thus produced into the unity of a collection;

(d) the production and guidance of the study of the content of the Biblical writings.

DEFINITION OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.

In the above definition the term 'revelation' is taken as a noun of action. Biblical Theology deals with revelation as a divine activity, not as the finished product of that activity. Its nature and method of procedure will therefore naturally have to keep in close touch with, and so far as possible reproduce, the features of the divine work itself. The main features of the latter are the following:

[1] *The historic progressiveness of the revelation-process*

It has not completed itself in one exhaustive act, but unfolded itself in a long series of successive acts. In the abstract, it might conceivably have been otherwise. But as a matter of fact this could not be, because revelation does not stand alone by itself, but is (so far as Special Revelation is concerned) inseparably attached to another activity of God, which we call *Redemption*. Now redemption could not be otherwise than historically successive, because it addresses itself to

the generations of mankind coming into existence in the course of history. Revelation is the interpretation of redemption; it must, therefore, unfold itself in instalments as redemption does. And yet it is also obvious that the two processes are not entirely co-extensive, for revelation comes to a close at a point where redemption still continues. In order to understand this, we must take into account an important distinction within the sphere of redemption itself. Redemption is partly objective and central, partly subjective and individual. By the former we designate those redeeming acts of God, which take place on behalf of, but outside of, the human person. By the latter we designate those acts of God which enter into the human subject. We call the objective acts central, because, happening in the centre of the circle of redemption, they concern all alike, and are not in need of, or capable of, repetition. Such objective-central acts are the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection of Christ. The acts in the subjective sphere are called individual, because they are repeated in each individual separately. Such subjective-individual acts are regeneration, justification, conversion, sanctification, glorification. Now revelation accompanies the process of objective-central redemption only, and this explains why redemption extends further than revelation. To insist upon its accompanying subjective-individual redemption would imply that it dealt with questions of private, personal concern, instead of with the common concerns of the world of redemption collectively. Still this does not mean that the believer cannot, for his subjective experience, receive enlightenment from the source of revelation in the Bible, for we must remember that continually, alongside the objective process, there was going on the work of subjective application, and that much of this is reflected in the Scriptures. Subjective-individual redemption did not first begin when objective-central redemption ceased; it existed alongside of it from the beginning.

There lies only one epoch in the future when we may expect objective-central redemption to be resumed, viz., at the Second Coming of Christ. At that time there will take place great redemptive acts concerning the world and the people of God collectively. These will add to the volume of truth which we now possess.

[2] *The actual embodiment of revelation in history*

The process of revelation is not only concomitant with history, but it becomes incarnate in history. The facts of history themselves acquire a revealing significance. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are examples of this. We must place act-revelation by the side of