

DABNEY CENTER

Fall '03

Biblical Theology

Lecture #1: Story Theology and a Theology of Story

What is Biblical Theology? How does it compare to other ways of doing theology, such as Systematic Theology?

Geerhardus Vos: Biblical Theology draws a line, Systematic Theology draws a circle. That is to say, Biblical Theology is diachronic, Systematic Theology is synchronic. Diachronic reading looks at the Bible “through time.” It treats the Bible as a book with a history. It was revealed and written over time, not all at once. The historical context is of supreme importance in interpreting a text. The dominant question is, “Where am I on God’s timeline as I read this passage?” Synchronic reading treats the Bible as a finished product, as a coherent unified whole. In a sense, the Bible becomes a book of “timeless truths.” Cotext becomes the key to interpretation. “What other texts speak to this particular topic?” becomes the driving question. Whereas a diachronic reading of Scripture reads the New Testament in light of the Old, a synchronic reading looks at the Old in light of the New. Diachronic treats the Old Testament as a *pre*-Christian book that prepares the way for the coming of the Messiah. Synchronic reading treats the Old Testament as a fully Christian book, moving from fulfillment in Jesus back to the promises of the Old Covenant. Diachronic reading is concerned with what a text meant in its original historical context (human author and audience), whereas synchronic reading is concerned with what a text means in light of the canon as a whole. Neither of these approaches is fully satisfactory, though both shed light on important aspects of the biblical revelation.

Jim Jordan: Biblical Theology must be distinguished from Ecclesiastical Theology. In Biblical Theology, we study how God presents himself and his actions in the text of Scripture. It deals with matters internal to the Bible itself, treating the Bible as its own “narrative world.” According to Jordan, Biblical Theology includes Covenant Theology, Literary Theology, Typology, and Ritual Theology. Ecclesiastical Theology looks at how the church applies the Bible to the world outside the text of Scripture. Jordan subdivides Ecclesiastical Theology into Historical Theology, Systematic/Topical Theology, Philosophical Theology, and Liturgical Theology. (I would add Apologetical Theology.) This is a helpful scheme.

But the most important task before us is not to define what Biblical Theology *is*. Rather it is to actually *do* Biblical Theology in service of the church.

Essentially, Biblical Theology is Story Theology. The Bible tells a story. Biblical Theology seeks to understand that story on its own terms. Biblical Theology looks at what the Bible actually says and how it says it. It looks at patterns/types within Scripture, literary features, symbols, and so forth. Biblical Theology is closely related to, if not inclusive of, biblical hermeneutics.

Before examining the nature of the biblical story itself, we need to examine what we mean by “story.” What does it mean to say the Bible is a storybook? How do stories work? How do they shape us? How do they form communities?

Every identifiable civilization in history has been held together by some overarching story (or metanarrative). We see with the ancient Hebrews. Israel understood herself in terms of several basic narratives – the creation account, the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, the call of Abraham, the exodus, and so forth. Ancient Greek culture was formed, first by the stories of Homer and Hesiod, and later by the stories of the philosophers. Augustine shaped medieval Christendom by re-telling the world’s story in *The City of God*. In the modern West, the Augustinian story has been challenged and effectively replaced by the stories of Locke, Darwin, Marx, and Freud.

Foundational stories allow us to interpret and organize our experience, both corporately and individually. These basic stories define our past and provide a grid for mapping out future courses of action. Shared stories create social cohesion and give rise to community. Stories also embody an ethic, a praxis, a particular way of “being in the world.” The question “Who am I?” is essentially the question, “What’s my story?” As images of the story-creating, story-telling God, we inevitably give our life experiences narrative shape.

The gospel (enacted in the liturgy and proclaimed in preaching) transforms our natural Adamic identity by telling us a different story about the world and ourselves. The Bible uses stories to expose sin, encourage faith, and build community among the covenant people. We learn that the story of Israel and Jesus is now the church’s story.

Biblical Theology requires us to learn to read the biblical narrative *from within*. We are *insiders* to the story of Scripture. It’s *our* story. We have to learn to read the Bible canonically. We have to allow the Word to absorb the world rather than allowing the world to absorb the Word. We have to take Scripture’s outlook as normative rather than imposing another worldview on our reading of Scripture. We must learn to read the Bible organically, in terms of itself.

Reading the Bible organically means reading it intertextually and typologically. Intertextual reading listens for echoes of and allusions to other passages within the canon, using Scripture interpret Scripture. Typological reading looks for repeating patterns within the unfolding storyline of Scripture. Biblical typology is focused on *totus Christus* – the whole Christ, head and body, Jesus and the church. Typology means reading the Bible on its own terms, as a revelation of the suffering and glory of Christ (Lk. 24). As we move from type(s) to antitype, there is both correspondence and escalation.