

The Definition, Structure, and Center of Biblical Theology

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ABSTRACT

This essay defines biblical theology as the task of understanding the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors. If we are seeking the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors, the best way to pursue that perspective is to move book by book through the canon of Scripture, establishing a central idea on which all the biblical authors agree aids us in discerning their perspective.

INTRODUCTION¹

This essay will explore the rationale for my book, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology*. The book's introductory chapter ad-

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented to the Biblical Theology section at the National Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on November 15, 2012. Over a decade later, I revisit and update it here as it continues to communicate my approach to doing biblical theology.

dresses choices I made,² and this piece adds to what I say there by discussing (1) the connection between what I understand biblical theology to be, (2) the thesis that biblical theology has a center, and (3) the book-by-book structure. Andreas J. Köstenberger has noted that in the field of biblical theology, “The need remains for definitional clarity and methodological vigilance. . .”³ In this essay I am pursuing definitional clarity and teasing out how our definitions inform our methodologies.

The thesis of this essay is that elucidating the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors comprises the task of biblical theology, and from this naturally flows the attempt to show the unity of the Bible by demonstrating that the biblical authors agree with each other as to the center of biblical theology. The Spirit’s inspiration of these ensures their agreement with one another, including their agreement on the center of biblical theology. The most straightforward way to get at the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors is to move author by author, book by book, corpus by corpus, across the canon. Having considered the definition, structure, and center of biblical theology, I will conclude with some thoughts on what this task requires and what we do with our conclusions.

DEFINITION: WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?

In his book, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, Graeme Goldsworthy offers several statements under the heading “Tentative steps towards a definition of biblical theology.”⁴ He writes,

Let us begin with a broadly consensual definition of biblical theology as the discipline that seeks to understand the theological message, or messages, communicated through the variety of literary phenomena within the various books of the Bible (39).

² James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 37–65.

³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Present and Future of Biblical Theology,” *Themelios* 37, no. 3 (2012): 462.

⁴ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012), 38–42, because the quotations that follow above will refer to this section, I will put the page number on which they appear in parens after each quote.

Biblical theology happens when we engage part or all of the biblical text and endeavor to lay bare the theological content that is there” (39).

Biblical theology is concerned with the structures of revelation and with the ways in which the unity of the biblical canon can be described (40).

The nature of the gospel is such that it establishes Jesus Christ at the centre of the biblical message. Biblical theology, then, is the study of how every text in the Bible relates to Jesus and his gospel. . . . Biblical theology is Christological, for its subject matter is the whole Bible as God’s testimony to Christ. It is therefore, from start to finish, a study of Christ (40).

Much of Goldsworthy’s book then defends a schematic approach to salvation history that divides the epochs of the OT’s story from Creation to Abraham, from Abraham to David, then looks at prophetic eschatology before considering NT fulfillment.

With all respect for and appreciation of Goldsworthy, acknowledging that schemas like the one he defends are useful to help us think of the Bible’s story in broad terms, the definition of biblical theology can be sharpened significantly. Köstenberger is correct: “the question of definition of biblical theology requires urgent reassessment.”⁵ My preferred definition of biblical theology is in print in a few places, which I gather together here. This is not every comment I have made on this topic.⁶ I quote these because they complement one another, bring out various nuances, and add layers of meaning. Andrew Shead’s observation justifies the recitation of these quotations. He writes that there is “a general lack of agreement in the academic community as to how biblical theology ought to be defined.”⁷

In *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, I say this:

5 Köstenberger, “The Present and Future of Biblical Theology,” 459.

6 See also James M. Hamilton Jr., “A Biblical Theology of Motherhood,” *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 2, no. 2 (2012): 6.

7 Andrew G. Shead, *A Mouth Full of Fire: The Word of God in the Words of Jeremiah*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012), 23.

We can think of the practice of biblical theology in two ways. On the one hand, we have the practice of the believing community across the ages. On the other hand, we have a label that describes an academic discipline. Regarding the first, I would argue that biblical theology is as old as Moses. That is, Moses presented a biblical-theological interpretation of the traditions he received regarding Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau The biblical authors use biblical theology to interpret the Scriptures available to them and the events they experienced. For the believing community, the goal of biblical theology is simply to learn this practice of interpretation from the biblical authors so that we can interpret the Bible and life in this world the way they did (41–42).

And later:

Biblical theology seeks to explain the worldview behind the statements we now find in the Bible. Biblical theology attempts to elucidate the metanarrative embraced by the biblical authors. I am arguing in this book not only that the biblical authors were consistent with one another in terms of their mutual adoption of an overarching explanation of the world, but also that this story of the whole world, which the biblical authors all believed, has a theological center (355).

In an essay on “Biblical Theology and Preaching,” I write:

When we do biblical theology we are trying to lay hold of the perspective from which the biblical authors have interpreted earlier biblical texts and from which they write. We are looking for the matrix of assumptions and conclusions that necessitate the statements made by the biblical authors. We are trying to get at the world view that gives rise to the assertions the biblical authors make. The only access we have to their beliefs and assumptions is what they actually wrote, so biblical theology seeks to understand the literary features that the biblical authors used to: (1) structure their message, (2) connect it to earlier Biblical passages, (3) locate it in the grand story, and thus (4) encourage their audience by showing them God’s

glory in his displays of justice, all of which highlight his mercy and love for his people. Biblical theology is the attempt to understand the Bible in its own terms.⁸

The title question *What Is Biblical Theology?* Receives my following attempt at an answer:

What is biblical theology?

The phrase biblical theology is used here to refer to the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors.

What is an “interpretive perspective”?

It’s the framework of assumptions and presuppositions, associations and identifications, truths and symbols that are taken for granted as an author or speaker describes the world and the events that take place in it.

What do the biblical authors use this perspective to interpret?

First, the biblical authors have interpreted earlier Scripture, or in the case of the very first author on record (Moses), accounts of God’s words and deeds that were passed down to him.

Second, they interpreted world history from creation to consummation.

And third, they interpreted the events and statements that they describe—Moses didn’t recount *everything* that Balaam said and did in the instances presented in Numbers 22–24. Moses selected what he wanted, arranged it with care, and presented the true story. The presentation of Balaam’s oracles Moses gives us in the book

⁸ James M. Hamilton Jr., “Biblical Theology and Preaching,” in *Text-Driven Preaching: God’s Word at the Heart of Every Sermon*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David L. Allen, and Ned L. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2010), 199–200.

of Numbers is already an interpretation of them, and because I believe that Moses was inspired by the Holy Spirit, I hold that his interpretation makes his account of the Balaam oracles *more* true, not less. More true because the way Moses selected, arranged, and presented (i.e., interpreted) enables his audience to see more clearly how what Balaam said and did fits into the true story of the world Moses tells in the Pentateuch.

To summarize, by the phrase *biblical theology* I mean to refer to the interpretive perspective reflected in the way the biblical authors have presented their understanding of earlier Scripture, redemptive history, and the events they are describing, recounting, celebrating, or addressing in narratives, poems, proverbs, letters, and apocalypses.⁹

These quotations represent different ways of saying the same thing: that biblical theology is the attempt to trace the contours of the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors.

I am not alone in approaching biblical theology this way. In his classic essay, “Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?” G. K. Beale speaks of the “unparalleled redemptive-historical perspective on the Old Testament in relation to their own situation” that Jesus and his apostles had. Beale also refers to the “assumptions of the New Testament writers;” and he describes “a framework of five hermeneutical and theological presuppositions.”¹⁰ Moreover, in seeking *the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors*, I see myself pursuing the same thing Andreas J. Köstenberger is after when he writes, “the goal of biblical theology, as mentioned, must continue to be accurately perceiving the convictions of the OT and NT writers.”¹¹

This way of approaching biblical theology necessarily focuses our attention on the inspired human authors of the Bible and what they intended to

9 James M. Hamilton Jr., *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 15–16.

10 G. K. Beale, “Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? An Examination of the Presuppositions of Jesus’ and the Apostles’ Exegetical Method,” in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 391–92.

11 Köstenberger, “The Present and Future of Biblical Theology,” 462.

communicate. It focuses more on what can be seen in the work of individual books or authors and less on a final schematic product of the whole canon, or of the Old or New Testament. It is possible that someone like Ezra, someone at the end of the progress of OT revelation who was inspired by the Spirit, could have arranged the books of the Old Testament into the canonical shape of the tripartite Hebrew Bible such that the whole is communicating a unified message,¹² and perhaps something similar happened with the books of the New Testament.¹³ Since we cannot, however, be certain that one person was behind the collection and arrangement of the whole of either the OT or the NT into their final canonical form, in considering these possibilities we must recognize that we are taking a step away from what we can be sure that *individual human biblical authors intended to communicate* toward interpreting what we perceive the divine author to have intended through the final form of the OT, the NT, or the whole Bible.

Let the strong connection between the intent of the inspired human authors and this definition of biblical theology be noted. By seeking to understand the interpretive grid that the biblical authors employed, we are seeking to be more precise in our understanding of what they intended to communicate. This way of doing biblical theology homes in on what the biblical authors were trying to get across first, rather than skipping to what the divine author intended to communicate without reference to what the human authors understood.

Claims about what individual biblical authors intended to communicate in their writings are easier to test, evaluate, and verify, as we attend to the literary devices they employed and earlier Scriptures that would have informed their thinking. By contrast, claims about themes that we see across authors in the final form of the canon necessarily move us toward systematic theology (not that this is a bad thing), unless we are able to demonstrate that the themes a later biblical author has picked up and developed are indeed themes he learned from an earlier biblical author, in which case our claims remain

12 For an argument that something like this happened, see David Noel Freedman, *The Unity of the Hebrew Bible* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991). See also James M. Hamilton Jr., "Canonical Biblical Theology," in *God's Glory Revealed in Christ: Essays in Honor of Tom Schreiner*, ed. Denny Burk, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Brian J. Vickers (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2019), 59–73.

13 The foundations for such a proposal are laid in David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

rooted in the interpretive perspective of a particular biblical author rather than the final form of the whole canon.

From these statements, it is obvious that there is an intrinsic connection between seeking the perspective of a particular biblical author and the need to study the whole of what that author has written. More can be said, however, on the relationship between the definition of biblical theology and the choice of how to structure a foray into the realm.

DEFINITION AND STRUCTURE

Perhaps this is a good time for me to say that my journey in biblical theology has been inescapably personal. I am into biblical theology because I want to understand the Bible. I want to understand the Bible because I want to know God. I am not out to defend a particular system, such as dispensationalism or covenant theology, nor am I championing a teacher or tribe, such as Calvinism or Barthianism or Carsonism or Schreinerian biblical theology. I want to know God, and I want to understand the Bible.

So, the path I am advocating here is the path that has most appealed to me as I have sought the Lord in the Scriptures. I only say this to acknowledge that my preferences and background have influenced the choices I have made. I am not advocating what I have preferred and found to be exciting because I think that I am any kind of standard or that everyone needs to do this exactly as I have. To be clear, I am not saying that those who prefer doing biblical theology in other ways are wrong, simply that I have chosen what I have preferred, and I have gravitated toward what I have found most stimulating and exciting.

Exegesis of isolated texts cannot arrive at the fullness of meaning a biblical author intends, any more than studying one passage of the *Aeneid* would lead us to the whole of what Virgil intended to say. Just as Virgil is assuming the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and a host of related poetry and mythology, just as he is summarizing, interpreting, and developing that tradition, so later biblical authors are assuming what earlier biblical authors have written.

Why have I chosen the book-by-book structure rather than a salvation-his-

torical or thematic structure? I have hinted at how it fits with how I have defined biblical theology and will return to this below, but I feel compelled first to speak to the personal factors in this choice.

I love the Bible and want to understand it. It is far easier for me to track with the interpretive moves a biblical theologian is making if he is moving book-by-book. I find these discussions easier to follow and easier to check against the biblical text. I can read the biblical-theological discussion with an open Bible, and I do not have to be constantly moving from one cross reference to another as might be required in a cross-sectional thematic discussion. In addition, with a book-by-book approach, the interpretive claims being made have the benefit of being set within the context of the argument the biblical author is making, which makes those claims easier to test against the text. I don't have to say to myself, "Well, when I have a chance to read the whole context of that proof-text that has just been cited, I'll be able to evaluate that claim." As I describe in the suggested strategy for reading my own book,¹⁴ I have enjoyed taking "guided tours" of the Bible with book-by-book biblical theologies of the Old and New Testaments. My own book was written in the hope that people would read it that way, reading my discussion of Genesis, for instance, along with their own daily Bible reading of Genesis.¹⁵

The structure of a book like Scobie's *The Ways of our God*¹⁶ does not permit this kind of side-by-side working straight through the Bible with the help of the book on biblical theology. A major factor in my choice to move book by book was, in fact, my reading of Scobie's massive whole-Bible theology. I found that as I worked carefully through that book, it was difficult to make mental associations between biblical texts and the points Scobie made, that is, to tie the insights I was finding in Scobie's work to particular texts, because he was moving thematically rather than textually. That particular book has almost no index, so if I do happen to remember a point that he made, how do I find it? The index is little help, and because I was not able to tie his points to particular biblical authors or books, I cannot remember, for instance, that he

¹⁴ Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 29–30.

¹⁵ See the Bible Reading Plan that goes through *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment* with the Bible in a year: <https://jimhamilton.info/2014/12/03/read-the-bible/#:~:text=Is%20there%20any%20book%20more,Read%20the%20Bible.>

¹⁶ Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

had a really helpful comment on that question in Joshua, nor can I go to the section where he discusses Joshua and quickly find the point I remembered. Because of the structure he chose, a helpful comment he made on something in Romans or Revelation could be anywhere in the thousand pages. Good luck finding it.

So, in my own reading of biblical theology, I have found it far easier to remember things presented in the book-by-book structure, far easier to find those things I have remembered, and naturally they are then far easier to locate for future citation in my own writing. I almost never quote Scobie, not because I did not learn from reading his book, but because what I learned is not associated with particular biblical texts in discussions that are easy to go back to when I want to find that quote.

For these reasons I prefer book-by-book structures to more thematic approaches, and related concerns led me away from salvation-historical and other approaches to structuring biblical-theological discussions. I want to understand the whole Bible, every book, not just the chronology of the events, the broad redemptive historical schema, or the backbone of the metanarrative (though I love *Kingdom through Covenant!*¹⁷).

One of the reasons people ask whether a biblical theologian has accounted for the Wisdom Literature is because that material is not event oriented and is easily overlooked when someone is moving chronologically across salvation history. Why should event oriented literature be privileged over wisdom literature that is not narrating events? Why should one vertebra in the backbone be analyzed rather than another? Obviously any approach is going to have to be selective, for no one wants to read a biblical-theology that amounts to a verse-by-verse commentary on the whole Bible. Impractical. So, the kind of selectivity that seemed least worst to me was the book-by-book kind.

The reasons I prefer the book-by-book approach to salvation-historical approaches are also connected to the way I have come to understand what bibli-

¹⁷ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

cal theology is, that is, the definition of biblical theology I have come to prefer. Here again, I find this definition—the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors—superior because it is easier to understand, easier to remember, and easier to distinguish from systematic theology.

If we are seeking to understand the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors, the salvation-historical paradigm we are concerned to discuss is the one that they themselves assume as they write, the one we can discern from what they say. This is the meta-narrative I am trying to trace out as I move book-by-book through the canon, trying to follow how their statements reflect this big story. The biblical authors do seem to assume an over-arching story with a beginning, a conflict, rising action toward resolution (the cross), followed by ongoing conflict leading to an endpoint or goal. This typologically understood meta-narrative assumed by the biblical authors, however, differs somewhat from both salvation-historical approaches to biblical theology and the approach to historical writing that characterizes what contemporary historians often do. This is not to say that thematic and chronological approaches have no place, nor is it to say that they are not helpful for establishing the contours of the Bible's big story and the Bible's big ideas. I am simply saying that the concerns I have articulated led me to choose the book-by-book structure in *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*.¹⁸

A focus on the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors calls us to examine how later authors have developed the statements and perspectives of earlier biblical authors.¹⁹ This leads naturally to a book-by-book progression through the Scriptures, which in turn provides us with a more verifiable way of moving across the unfolding panorama of progressive revelation. As we move we want to see how the biblical authors themselves understood salvation history.

In addition to it being more verifiable, I prefer a book-by-book, corpus-by-corpus structure because it is more practical for both those who write

¹⁸ My book, *What Is Biblical Theology?* moves more thematically, and the children's book *The Bible's Big Story: Biblical Theology for Kids* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2013) moves across the big events of the Bible's story.

¹⁹ For an excellent methodological discussion of this, see Thomas John Sculthorpe, "He Makes Her Desert Like the Garden of YHWH: A Typological Understanding of the Birth of Isaac as Resurrection from Death" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisville, KY, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024).

on biblical theology and those who read and seek to learn from the discipline. For writers, it provides a natural structure within which testable, refutable claims can be made, evaluated, accepted, or rejected. For readers, rather than the reader's memory being lost in the maze of a biblical theology structured along the lines of the one written by Scobie, the reader can more naturally hang biblical-theological insights on the hooks of the biblical passages under discussion, and when he wants to find those statements later, the book-by-book structure has organized the hooks.

When I originally wrote the piece you are reading thirteen years ago, I thought that perhaps as I aged and matured, and as the years afforded me opportunity to study more closely more of the texts of the Bible, coming to studied positions on interpretive cruxes, I would find it easier both to read and to write more thematic excursions in biblical theology. That has not turned out to be the case. My memory is no better now than it used to be, maybe worse, and I have continued to profit from and prefer the organizational help of the book-by-book structure.

DEFINITION AND CENTER

As with the structure of biblical theology, my journey on the center of biblical theology has been inescapably personal. Paul's spirit was provoked within him as he saw Athens full of idols and no one honoring God as God and giving thanks to him (Acts 17:16). As I began to read on biblical theology, I could not understand why discussions of the center of Pauline, OT, or NT Theology lacked what I thought was obvious: the glory of God. Things are not now what they were then, but before Tom Schreiner's Pauline and NT Theologies appeared, the glory of God went un-discussed in summaries of proposed centers of biblical theology.²⁰ As I looked into the issue, I saw that proposed centers were typically critiqued for being either too broad or too narrow. I didn't think the glory of God would be too narrow, though it could be too broad. Further thought on the issue led to the conclusion that the manifestation of

20 See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001); and Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); and for a review of proposed centers, see James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment: The Centre of Biblical Theology?," *Tyndale Bulletin* 57 (2006): 57–84.

God's glory in everything from creation to redemption to consummation ultimately existed for God to build a great foundation of justice on which he would set up a soaring tower of mercy (cf. e.g., Exod 34:6–7; Rom 9:22–23).

Enough personal testimony. What of the connection between the definition of biblical theology, the structure of biblical theology, and the center of biblical theology? How best to determine the contours of the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors? In terms of structure, we can move book-by-book to look carefully at what the authors actually say and how they say it to determine the big story they believe with its matrix of presuppositions and beliefs. How do we begin to trace the contours of this big story with its attendant assumptions? Why not start with what they all agree is ultimate? Why not ask whether there is some dominant idea that explains everything? This is what I am trying to do as I posit that God's glory in salvation through judgment is the center of biblical theology.

For those who have not read my book, and for those who may have been lost in the welter of words across 640 pages, here's the argument: God's revelation of himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6–7 shaped how Moses understood God's purposes. In that passage, Exodus 34:6–7, Yahweh proclaims his own name, which is to say he declares his own glory and defines himself, and he identifies himself as a God who shows mercy but who does not clear the guilty. In other words, when Yahweh declares his name to Moses, causing his goodness to pass before him, showing him his glory, he points to his ability to forgive sin and punish transgression. He points to his justice and his mercy, and the way God accomplishes the display of his justice and mercy is by saving through judgment.²¹

As the first biblical author, Moses's interpretive perspective—with this massive understanding of God's commitment to making known his name, showing his glory, and upholding his goodness in justice and mercy—had a shaping impact on every biblical author who followed Moses. Every biblical author learned from Moses where the world came from, what's wrong with it, who

21 Both R. W. L. Moberly, "How May We Speak of God? A Reconsideration of the Nature of Biblical Theology," *Tyndale Bulletin* 53 (2002): 177–202; and Hermann Spieckermann, "God's Steadfast Love: Towards a New Conception of Old Testament Theology," *Biblica* 81 (2000): 305–27 stimulated my thinking as these conclusions were formulated.

God is, and how God defined himself. Every biblical author also heard significant statements from Moses about how he would save Israel through judgment. In short, God is clearly central to every biblical author, and with the phrase “God’s glory in salvation through judgment,” I am merely attempting to focus in on the innermost heart of the centrality of God.²²

Believe it or not, some are not as convinced as I am about the centrality of God’s glory in salvation through judgment. I am under no illusions about my ability to convince everyone, nor do I think that what I say here will necessarily change anyone’s mind. Nevertheless, I would offer some thoughts in response to a few reviews. I am grateful for each review that has appeared.²³ I don’t want to respond tit for tat to particular statements but in general to several kinds of responses. I am not responding to everything, just those things I want to address.

Objections have tended to gather around two issues. One is the place of the Wisdom literature, a.k.a. the Writings, and the other is the somewhat elastic way that I use the phrase “salvation through judgment.”

The reference to the Writings in the above paragraph sets up an important point, which is that “wisdom literature” is a genre label imposed on these books rather than one that arises naturally from within them. I find Will Kynes’s argument that this label has died and should be buried convincing.²⁴ In addition, raising questions about whether the wisdom literature has been adequately incorporated has become somewhat clichéd. It’s now a standard question that initiates in the biblical theological discussion, bandied about along the lines of the way baseball talent scouts ask how a young hitter does against the curveball: “can he hit a curve?” (If asked whether I can hit a curve, I want to say: put me in the batter’s box and let’s see. Throw me your best

22 At a formative stage in my theological development, the summer I got married (1998), I read and was profoundly shaped by John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

23 Stephen Dempster, “God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology,” *9Marks Journal*, February 2011, 42–48; Preston M. Sprinkle, “God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54 (2011): 827–29; Eugene H. Merrill, “God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (2011): 478–79; William R. Osborne, “God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology,” *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 10 (2011): 211–14; Igal German, “God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology,” *Themelios* 36 (2011): 67–68; in addition to these reviews, some comments about my book were made in Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Editorial,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55 (2012): 1–5.

24 Will Kynes, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”: The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

pitch and we'll see if I can hit it—and if I miss it, let's see if you can throw three of them for strikes or will you eventually have to throw me something straight?!).

Now it is one thing if someone has not addressed the wisdom literature because they have structured their attempt at biblical theology on thematic or diachronic grounds. In that case, raising the question of the wisdom literature makes a good point. Because I go book-by-book, discussion of the books that have been labeled “wisdom literature” is included,²⁵ so the questions raised on this issue are little more than questions until interlocutors actually dispute the arguments I am making, which some have taken steps in the direction of doing.²⁶

Rather than rehash what is in my book, let me bring my definition of biblical theology to bear on the question of the relationship between the OT Writings (wisdom literature) and the center of biblical theology. I am after the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors, and one of my presuppositions is that later biblical authors are aware of and shaped by earlier biblical writings. I am convinced that this conclusion is abundantly demonstrable.

This means, for instance, that as Solomon wrote Proverbs, he assumed and everywhere reflected not only texts like Deuteronomy 6, where fathers are called to teach Torah to their sons, and Deuteronomy 17, where the king is to be a man of the Torah,²⁷ but also Genesis 12:1–3, the paradigmatic blessing of Abraham. Proverbs is pervasively concerned with the land, seed, and blessing promised to Abraham and his seed. Thus “the upright will inhabit the land . . . but the wicked will be cut off from the land” (Prov 2:21–22). Thus, “The LORD’s curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous” (Prov 3:33). And thus, “Her children rise up and call her blessed” (Prov 31:28).²⁸

25 I tried to proportion my discussion according to the amount of space given these books in the Bible itself. For the chapter on the Writings, see *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 271–353.

26 Danny Pierce, “God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: Review, Part 2,” Boston Bible Geeks, June 14, 2012, <https://bostonbiblegeeks.wordpress.com/2012/06/14/gods-glory-in-salvation-through-judgment-review-part-2/>.

27 For the influence of Deuteronomy 6 and 17 on Proverbs, see James M. Hamilton Jr., “That the Coming Generation Might Praise the Lord,” *Journal of Family Ministry* 1 (2010): 10–17.

28 See esp. Jonathan David Akin, “A Theology of Future Hope in the Book of Proverbs” (PhD diss., Louisville, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012).

What I am saying here is that a book like Proverbs should be understood as summarizing and interpreting earlier Scripture. This holds also for Psalms, where I would argue the history of Israel is depicted in the implicit story that is told in the arrangement of the Psalter, replete with the exile and promised new-exodus and return from exile.²⁹ Similar things can be said, I think, of the way that Ecclesiastes is presented as teaching from the Son of David with, for instance, its allusions to early narratives in Genesis through the play on Abel's name in the theme word *hevel*, its teaching that all are dust and return to dust (Eccl 3:20; cf. Gen 2–3), and its meditation on how it is not good for man to be alone (Eccl 4:7–16; Gen 2:18).³⁰ In a project on the Song of Solomon, I have argued that Solomon intended his audience to discern a parallel between the impressionistic narrative that unfolds across the Song between the king and the bride in the Song and the history of Israel's relationship with Yahweh.³¹

I am aware that the Song of Songs does not directly say that what is happening in the Song is like what is happening in Hosea, where Hosea represents Yahweh and Gomer represents Israel, but this is, after all, where Solomon's interpretive perspective comes into play.³² I contend that a biblical-theological reading of the Song interprets the poem in its canonical context, seeking the meaning its author intended. We are, moreover, dealing with poetry, and poetry is by nature evocative. Solomon is assuming what we see elsewhere in the Bible: that Yahweh's covenant with Israel is a marriage and that the king of Israel represents Yahweh in a unique way. I think there are ways that Solomon identifies the king in the Song with Yahweh (see esp., Song 3:6–11), so on

29 See the discussion in *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 276–90. And see further James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms Volume I: Psalms 1–72*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2021); *Psalms Volume II: Psalms 73–150*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2021); James M. Hamilton Jr. and Matthew Damico, *Reading the Psalms as Scripture* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2024); and James M. Hamilton Jr., "David's Biblical Theology and Typology in the Psalms: Authorial Intent and Patterns of the Seed of Promise," in *The Psalms: Exploring Theological Themes*, ed. David M. Howard and Andrew J. Schmutzer (Bellingham: Lexham, 2023), 63–78.

30 For Davidic themes, see my discussion in *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 313–20; cf. also Nicholas Perrin, "Messianism in the Narrative Frame of Ecclesiastes?," *Revue Biblique* 108 (2001): 37–60; and for the influence of early passages in Genesis, see Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 278–79.

31 James M. Hamilton Jr., *Song of Songs: A Biblical-Theological, Allegorical, Christological Interpretation*, Focus on the Bible (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2015). For the argument that "the first generations of rabbinic sages, known as the Tannaim" read the book similarly, see Jonathan Kaplan, *My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of Song of Songs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), quote from p. 2.

32 Jonathan Kaplan writes, "This interpretive mode is deeply rooted in the literary traditions of ancient Israel, particularly in the biblical image of Israel as God's bride (for example, Hosea 2; Jeremiah 2–3), and undoubtedly dates to the Second Temple period." Jonathan Kaplan, "The Song of Songs from the Bible to the Mishnah," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 81 (2013 2010): 43.

biblical-theological grounds I am proposing that the Song is a summary and interpretation of the history and future of Israel. In this poetic summary and interpretation, the consummation of the king and his bride in their marriage is described in terms of the king enjoying the glories of the garden of Eden (Song 4:12–5:1). The use of such imagery is neither incidental nor haphazard.

This brings me to the other objection, the one having to do with what I mean by the phrase “salvation through judgment.” The complaint is raised that I often switch between meanings of these words, so that sometimes “judgment” refers to the defeat of enemies, sometimes to human beings feeling conviction for their sin, and other times to warnings not to live a certain way—judgment pronounced on false thinking/teaching, and so forth. In response to this observation that I do move freely back and forth between these meanings, I would note two things: first, this is the way the Bible itself deals with the concepts of salvation and judgment; and second, I gave fair warning that this kind of thing was coming when I laid out the seven different ways “God’s glory in salvation through judgment” will be understood in my first chapter.³³

The Bible moves freely between different meanings of words like “judgment,” “death,” and “salvation,” so my treatment of these concepts follows the Bible’s. God tells Adam he will surely die in the day that he eats the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:17), and he surely does die, spiritually first (Gen 3) and then physically (Gen 5). Similarly, Moses says in Leviticus 18:5 that the one who does the commandments will live. I think this statement is to be read in contrast to the statements about what the Israelites are to do “lest they die” in Leviticus (e.g., Lev 15:31). So, in the first instance it means that Yahweh’s holiness will not strike them dead, but the promise of life extends beyond the physical. We could make similar observations on the way that Proverbs says that wisdom will be a “tree of life” (Prov 3:18), as though the man who finds wisdom will attain something of what it would be like to live in God’s presence in the garden of Eden. There are clearly implications for what is beyond physical life. Similarly, Psalm 1 says the man who meditates on

³³ Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 58–59. See now the excellent dissertation on how Moses typifies the conquest, the exile of Israel from the land, and the final judgment on the nations in the narratives concerning the flood and Sodom in Genesis: Dallas Reed Goebel, “From Sodom to Gehenna: The OT Typology of Sodom and Gomorrah as God’s Eschatological Judgment” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisville, KY, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2025).

the Torah will himself be like a tree, planted by streams of water, as were the trees in the garden of Eden (Gen 2:8–10; cf. Isa 58:11; Jer 31:12).

The Bible moves freely between various referents of death and judgment just as it does between the experience of the life that God blesses in the here and now—the life lived by those who know God and trust his promises and obey him because they fear him—and the promise of future salvation. Thus, Peter can speak of “a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” that will be enjoyed by those who are “obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet 1:5, 9). Believers are saved and will be saved. There is no doubt that I could have been clearer, but in speaking of these realities the way I do, I am following the example set by the biblical authors.

The suggestion that the identification of a center eliminates the need for synthesis³⁴ or closes down the possibility for exploration fails to register. The identification of the sun as the center of the solar system does not mean that there is nothing left to learn about the thing. Rather, knowing that the sun is at the center of the solar system, that the planets are in orbit around it, held in place by it, and illumined by it guides and governs our exploration and hypothesizing rather than shutting them down.

THE TASK AND OUR CONCLUSIONS

What is the task? The task of biblical theology is the task of understanding the interpretive perspective reflected in what the biblical authors have written. What does this task require? Most importantly, it requires patient meditation on the Scriptures. It requires close attention to the biblical texts in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, so that the use and reuse of the actual words and phrases of previous biblical authors can be discerned. But let me also say that biblical theology requires the ability to hold in view the broad contexts of passages. As non-native readers of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, this is often easier for us to do through a skim-glance overview of an English translation that we have worked through in conjunction with our close study of the passage in the

³⁴ Against Köstenberger, “Editorial” 3, where he asserts, “If a systematic framework is presupposed at the very outset, and the single center is found in every book of Scripture, there is no synthesis left to be done.” I would add that anyone who has read my work will see that describing it as “systematic” would be inaccurate.

original. I am convinced that some of the atomism on display among biblical scholars arises from their refusal to resort to an English text, with the result that they get lost in exegetical detail and lose sight of the context and flow of thought in the passage. Context is king, and it is far easier for our minds to hold broad swaths of our own language on screen.

What do we do with our conclusions? First, we follow Jesus, who learned the interpretive perspective modeled by Moses, the Prophets, and the Sages and Psalmists, and then taught that perspective to his disciples.³⁵ This is a process that will continue for us while we have breath, until we see him as he is (1 John 3:2). Second, we obey the command of Jesus to go and make disciples, teaching them to obey everything he commanded (Matt 28:18–20).

Biblical theology is the attempt to understand and embrace the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors. Biblical theology is for life, as we must believe what the Bible teaches if we are to be saved, and biblical theology is for discipleship, as we must believe what Jesus believed if we are to be his disciples and make disciples of others.

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35 E. Earle Ellis, "Jesus' Use of the Old Testament and the Genesis of New Testament Theology," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3 (1993): 59–75.