

© Matthias Media (The Briefing #277; www.matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing). Used with permission.

Old Testament lecturer Andrew Shead reflects on how we hold the Bible together as a whole, in the light of an important new dictionary on the subject.

Many Briefing readers will be familiar with biblical theology through the writings of Graeme Goldsworthy (e.g. *Gospel and Kingdom*). The beauty of Graeme's work in this area is its simplicity and powerful flexibility. A 'big picture' of the single story of Scripture such as he sketches is essential for those readers who take seriously the Bible's claim to be the word of God – a single message, not disparate words – through which we come into a saving relationship with him.

However, a 'big picture' can be a dangerous thing if we simply paint it over the text in front of us and so obscure the individuality of each part of God's word. It is possible to apply the dictum 'every part of Scripture is about Jesus' so broadly that we actually misrepresent Scripture, and make it say what we already 'knew' it would say before we started reading it. In his book *Fundamentalism*, James Barr accuses evangelicals of committing the very sin of which they accuse liberal scholars, namely, of giving a human construction more authority than Scripture. He is referring to a 'dogma' or 'doctrine' such as can be found in evangelical statements of faith. If a passage agrees with such dogma, says Barr, it will be taken literally; if it does not, it will be read figuratively or in such a way that it is brought into line with 'official policy'. We ought to feel the weight of this criticism when we do biblical theology. Indeed, we must always be open to the possibility that careful study of an individual passage in its immediate context might throw out such a challenge to our 'big picture' that we will be forced to modify it. This is a scary thought. But if we really trust Scripture as the inspired word of God then we will be confident to listen carefully to its voice without being like those irritating listeners who cut people off mid-word and finish the sentence themselves.

Biblical Theology 'from the bottom up'

If the use of a 'big picture' to interpret the various parts of Scripture were all there was to biblical theology, then it would be a dangerous tool. But there is more to biblical theology than that. So far I have been describing what can be called biblical theology 'from the top down' (that is, starting with the 'big picture'). But 'top down' analysis cannot be carried out validly in any discipline without corresponding 'bottom up' work. And this is where the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (NDBT) comes into its own.¹ It contains 500 pages of detailed biblical theology 'from the bottom up', which alone would make this one of the most important works on biblical theology to appear since *Gospel and Kingdom*. By the way, I have chosen Graeme Goldsworthy as my champion of 'top down' biblical theology because he would be the first to point out that his edifice must rest on exegetical foundations. This is no lip service: he (together with Don Carson) served as a consulting editor to NDBT.

Biblical theology 'from the bottom up' consists of the careful exegesis of individual passages and themes in their immediate contexts, followed by the tracking of these themes through the Bible from beginning to end. The question we ask as we do this is, "how does this theme develop and

grow as it is taken up by later writers?" We are interested, among other things, in what is known as 'inner-biblical exegesis' – that is, the way in which later biblical authors exegete earlier ones. Obvious examples of this are found in the use of the Old Testament by New Testament authors, but the Old Testament itself is full of similar exegesis. In Rikki Watt's article in the NBDT on the Exodus, for example, he shows how this defining event is reappropriated by the former prophets, the latter prophets and the Psalms, so creating a trajectory of interpretation that fills every sentence of the Gospels with extraordinary richness. This is what he has to say about Mark: (p484, Bible references omitted):

In this new Exodus, Jesus, Israel's bridegroom, delivers his people, leads his 'blind' followers along the way, and arrives in Jerusalem. His exorcisms fulfil Yahweh's promise to bind the strong man (here the demons, not Babylon, are the oppressors), and after defeating the sea he drowns the enemy host. Isaiah's new Exodus expectations are fulfilled in the miraculous feedings, the healings of the blind, deaf, dumb and lame, the forgiveness of sins and the reversal of the defilement and death of daughter Israel.

How this long history of interpretation enriches our appreciation of the ministry of Jesus! It also provides one small piece of evidence in agreement with the large trajectories mapped out in the Goldsworthian 'big picture' of biblical theology.

The NDBT is divided into three sections: (1) twelve general articles on biblical theology and related issues (110 pages); (2) a brief article on every corpus and individual book in the Bible (247 pages); and (3) articles exploring the biblical theology of about 150 biblical words and themes (495 pages). The contributors are evangelical scholars, mostly from the UK and the USA, but most parts of the world are represented, from Japan to France, Hungary to Australia. My first complaint is that there is no way of finding out which article(s) a particular author wrote short of looking at the end of each article in the book.

The first section deals with issues directly related to biblical theology, including its history, its relationship to systematic theology and preaching, the relationship of Old and New Testaments, as well as essays on Canon, Scripture, biblical history, hermeneutics and so on. There is much excellent material to be found here, enough for a whole course on biblical theology. Once beyond this section, however, the problems begin.

What is Biblical Theology?

What is biblical theology? It's odd that I should only now be asking that question – so far I have assumed that we all know what we are talking about. But argument has raged for centuries over this, and despite the careful definition in NDBT's first essay, confusion is plain in the Dictionary. Many contributors are evidently assuming a general definition like "the overall theological message of the whole Bible" (p. 1). It's hard to fault this as a definition of the expression 'biblical theology'. But it is a static definition, and just a step away from systematic theology. Brian Rosner's first essay adds the crucial sentence, "Biblical theology avoids an atemporal approach and pays close attention to the Bible's overarching 'story'" (p. 4). This is a dynamic definition, and one which centres on Jesus. Unfortunately, not enough contributors have caught the vision of the editors.

The problems begin in the second section. What is not required, in my opinion, is an 'introduction'

to a book's occasion, date, contents and theology (which one may find in any number of Bible dictionaries) – but this is too often just what NDBT provides us. However, there are many excellent contributions. 'Exodus', for example, explores the book's main theological themes in a manner constantly sensitive to its place in the larger story. The author (Peter Enns) shows how the re-use of creation language in Exodus 1–2, as well as in the account of the plagues and parting of the Red Sea, depicts the multiplication of Israel and their subsequent salvation as no less than an act of re-creation. Like Noah, the baby Moses is placed in an 'ark' which carries him to safety 'on the very water that brings destruction to others' (p. 147). (By the way: when are such connections mere speculation? When careful exegesis does not provide enough evidence to make them secure. The reader needs to be discerning, reading with Bible open. There were times, e.g. 'serpent' in the third section, when I felt that some fanciful connections were being made, but these were rare.)

The third section also contains many articles which take a static rather than a dynamic approach. Some (e.g. 'heaven', 'hell', 'guilt', 'hardening', 'idolatry') are general Bible Dictionary articles, some (e.g. 'Adam and Eve', 'grace') are systematic theologies, and some (e.g. 'creation', 'healing', 'hardening') are promising, but finally fall short of incorporating their topic into the Bible's overarching 'story'.

Having criticised, I want to finish by saying two things in defence of the Dictionary. First, it contains many excellent articles (e.g. 'holiness', 'Jerusalem', 'law', 'mission', 'regeneration', 'violence' and many others). There is no doubt that this Dictionary is worth buying. What's more, its pricing makes it a rare bargain for a major reference work for the general reader. Secondly, we need to take into account the difficulties involved in exploring new territory, which is what NDBT does.

What are the Limits of Biblical Theology?

How does one decide which words and themes to choose for a biblical-theological workout? Before beginning this article, I wrote down a list of the first words which suggested themselves to me as potentially valuable to explore. My list was: water, blood, vine, garden, city, repentance. (Why did I choose these? You will have to ask my psychoanalyst!) Every word except 'garden' was in the Dictionary, and for garden I got the consolation prize of 'EDEN, GARDEN OF, see TEMPLE'.

Yet many of the topics chosen for inclusion in NDBT do not 'develop' across Scripture in an obvious way. For example, how do you write a biblical theology of 'God'? There is, of course, a Bible-wide unfolding of knowledge about God, and some would argue that with the incarnation there was a development within God himself, but these ideas belong in other articles. The long NDBT entry on 'God' adopts a systematic framework (knowledge of God, God's names, personhood, attributes, etc.) and – despite a promising start in which insights into the knowledge of God were derived from a treatment of the temple across Scripture – ends up filling in this framework in traditional, albeit excellent, systematic fashion. There are other examples of topics which do not appear to evolve much across Scripture. 'Blood', for example, carries the same symbolic significance throughout Scripture – indeed, if it did not, much of the imagery of Christ's atonement would lose its meaning. The same might be said of words like 'guilt', 'time' or 'light'. Does this mean that we cannot write a biblical theology of these things? I suspect that the answer will vary depending on the word. For example, while I think that something could be done with

the words just mentioned, I doubt that 'gentleness' could yield much of value. But – and this is the nub – how would you know this was not a fruitful topic without trying it out?

I would hope that users of NDBT might be stimulated to attempt a bit of 'bottom-up' biblical theology for themselves, and so deepen their appreciation of the cross of Jesus.

Conclusion

The NDBT bravely pushes the limits of biblical theology 'from the bottom up'. It's just a beginning, but it's a very important beginning. Most importantly, perhaps, it places a stamp of approval on the big picture that we have been taught to use when we do 'top down' biblical theology, though without excluding the possibility that in some respects this picture may need altering. This, the controlling function of 'bottom up' biblical theology, may be the most important, but it is of necessity a negative function. By far the most exciting and helpful outcome of this dictionary is positive: good biblical theology sharpens and brightens the 'big picture' of redemptive history. Through it we enter into the experience of the sinner saved by grace. Over and again, in every variation of time and circumstance, across the spectrum of the human condition, we are made to feel and taste and smell the shame and horror of sin, to be astounded and cast down by the stupendous kindness and mercy of a God who forgives, to be horrified and elated by the route he carves between judgment and mercy. Good biblical theology should bring each of us to the foot of the cross with an ever deeper apprehension of 'how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ...that surpasses knowledge'.

References

¹ I have to confess a conflict of interest at this point, since I contributed an article to the NBDT. If this fact has coloured any of my comments, I apologise...let the reader beware!