

## What is Biblical Theology?

By [Dr. James M. Hamilton Jr.](#)

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 that Moses gives us in the book 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 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.

The previous sentence mentions various kinds of literature. The Bible is a book, and the men who wrote the sixty-six books that make up the Bible were engaged authors. That means we have to think about literature as we think about interpreting the Bible. A short guide like this cannot exhaust these topics, but it can point to the path and offer some thoughts on how to stay on it. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. The study of biblical theology is like a quest to become someone who can pull down strongholds with weapons mighty to God.

For the quest to succeed we must learn to destroy arguments and lofty opinions raised against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:3-5). Welcome to this entry point on the path toward becoming a biblical theologian. With the Lord's help, the quest will take you into another world, the thought-world that *is* biblical theology.

Here at the outset, let me say what biblical theology is not – in my opinion, anyway. Some use the phrase *biblical theology* to mean something other than what I have hinted at above. Though we're using the same phrase, we are coming at the subject very differently. By *biblical theology* I do not mean "my theology is more biblical than yours." Nor do I refer to that stick some biblicists keep at hand for whopping the unsuspecting systematic theologian who happens along (I once heard a biblical scholar declare, "Systematic theology is bad; biblical theology is good").

After the Enlightenment, certain ways of thinking about the world fell out of fashion in the academy. Particularly, the Bible's. Heretics who styled themselves as courageous free thinkers chucked ideas that had prevailed among students of the Bible – biblical ideas about God's sovereignty, the inspiration of Scripture, and the coherence and unity of the Bible's message.

The story the Bible tells was rejected, and an alternative was put in its place. The evidence for this alternative narrative exists in the "scholarly" imagination. This alternative narrative has its own time line, its own authors, and its own account of what really went down: evolutionary development, competing ideologies, the documentary hypothesis, and so forth. On this reading, what the biblical texts say and the story the Bible tells is mere propaganda.

We have seen a world of responses to the influence of the (so-called) Enlightenment on biblical interpretation. One might say the responses have ranged from pole to pole.

At the South Pole the liberal response to the Enlightenment was to develop the academic discipline of biblical theology as a way to sift the wheat from the chaff. Liberal academics sought to discern which parts of the Bible's theology remained relevant and which parts no longer were. Someone doing biblical theology in this way today might employ the method to argue that the Bible endorses same-sex marriage and denounces the use of fossil fuel. If the text as a whole is not authoritative, it easily conforms to our agenda.

From the North Pole, the conservative response to the Enlightenment at many points sought to use biblical theology to reassert the unity of the Bible. In an effort to establish common ground and persuade skeptics, conservatives (at least for the sake of argument) conceded the chucked ideas. They were trying to prove the Bible's coherence to those who thought its unity had been shattered, so they resorted to methods and assumptions developed by and approved in the

unbelieving guild. These methods and assumptions naturally placed limits on what the Bible could say.

There is of course a vast terrain between these two poles, plenty of room for a variety of “biblical theological” programs. You might have a scholar trained at the South Pole (in a liberal environment) who critiques the excesses of “Antarctica” (the left) from a biblical theological perspective. Conservatives get really excited about these types. Or you might have scholar trained on the North Pole denying the existence of true north. These scholars find themselves the darlings of post-evangelical publishers.

The thing to note about these poles is that they’re on the same planet. That is, the biblical theologians going about their work these ways, whether starting from North Pole or South, are all living in the same world, breathing the same air, sharing the same assumptions. But what if biblical theology is a bridge going somewhere else? What if it’s a way to get out of one world into another?

This book is not trying to be a compass you can use to go north or south. It’s trying to help you find treasure in the trash. The way of thinking modeled and taught by the Bible’s authors was scrapped, but when we pull these ideas out of the garbage, we find them worth more than the million-dollar painting *Tres Personajes* that Elizabeth Gibson found in the trash on the street in New York City.

Our aim is to trace out the contours of the network of assumptions reflected in the writings of the biblical authors. If we can see what the biblical authors assumed about story, symbol, and church, we will glimpse the world as they saw it. To catch a glimpse of the world as they saw it is to see the real world.

I hasten to add that the Holy Spirit inspired the biblical authors. That gave them a level of certainty about their interpretive conclusions that we cannot have about ours because the Holy Spirit does not inspire us and guarantee our inerrancy. If he did, our books would be added to the canon of Scripture, which is not happening. Still, we’re called to follow the apostles as they followed Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1), and part of doing that means learning to interpret Scripture, redemptive history, and the events that happen to us the way biblical authors did, even if absolute certainty eludes us.

What I’m suggesting is that the Bible teaches Christians how the Bible should be read. Studying biblical theology is the best way to learn from the Bible how to read the Bible as a Christian should. By the same token, studying the Bible is the best way to learn biblical theology.

How should a follower of Jesus read the Bible? The way Jesus did. Jesus of Nazareth did not write any of the books in the Bible, but he taught the writers of the New Testament how to interpret earlier Scripture, redemptive history, and the

events they were narrating and addressing. On the human level, Jesus learned the interpretive perspective he taught to his disciples from Moses and the Prophets.

So I'm arguing that the biblical authors operated from a shared interpretive perspective. They inhabited the same thought-world, breathed its air, and shared its assumptions. The world they lived in wasn't Darwin's. In their world we might find things for which we have no analogy and of which we have no experience. There is no analogy for the God of the Bible. He stands alone. We will experience him only if he reveals himself. In the Bible he has done just that. How do we come to know him? From his revelation of himself, from learning to read the Bible from the Bible itself. To learn to read the Bible is to learn to understand this world from the perspective of the biblical authors, which is to learn a divinely inspired perspective.

Moses learned and developed the ability to see the world this way from the accounts of God's words and deeds that he received, from his contemplation of what God had done in his own life, and from the inspiration of the Spirit of God. The biblical authors who followed Moses in the Old Testament, whether historians, prophets, psalmists, or sages, learned the interpretive perspective that Moses modeled for them and had it confirmed by other Scripture available to them. Jesus then learned to read the Bible, history, and life from Moses and the Prophets, and he taught this perspective to his followers (Luke 24). What we find in the New Testament, then, is Christ taught, Spirit-inspired biblical interpretation.

The biblical authors model a perspective for interpreting the Bible, history, and current events. Should we adopt that perspective today? Absolutely. Why? I'm convinced that the biblical authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit, that God guided them to the truth by his Spirit, and that, therefore, they got it right.

I am confident that the apostles got it right and that those who would follow Jesus (Christians!) should follow the apostles as they followed Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1). I am also confident that as we try to follow Jesus by following the apostles, we will make mistakes. The history of interpretation is full of mistakes. We see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12). But again, the fact that the Spirit is not ensuring the inerrancy of our conclusions does not mean we should adopt an *un-* or *a-*biblical perspective when reading the Bible, thinking about redemptive history, or trying to understand our own lives. It does mean that we should hold our conclusions with humility, fight that manxome foe, and allow the Bible to correct us.

At this point I hope you want more – more of the Bible, mainly, but also more information on how to understand and embrace the network of assumptions modeled by the biblical authors. As mentioned above, a short book like this is a little like standing by that path that leads to the bridge that leads to a different world. The Jabberwock and the frumious Bandersnatch prowl the path, and you

can take your chances starting from this point. I'm writing this book because I'm convinced that the world to which this path leads is worth any risk to reach.

There are more detailed descriptions of this path, even guided tours of it, but for those with an opportunity and an adventurous spirit, here's what this book has for you. The rest of it falls into three parts: the first sets out the Bible's big story, the second looks at the way the biblical authors use symbols to summarize and interpret that story, and the third considers the part the church plays in that story.

So the three parts of this book can be put into three words: *story*, *symbol*, and *church*. There's obviously more that could be said about biblical theology, but these are the three things about the path to the bridge into another world we'll focus on here: the overarching metanarrative that is the Bible's big story, the way the biblical authors use key symbols to summarize and interpret that story, and the place of the church in it.

If biblical theology is a way to get into another world, the world inhabited by the biblical authors, you have a right to understand my intentions. My hope is that you cross the bridge into their thought-world and never come back. I hope you will breathe the air of the Bible's world, recognize it as the real Narnia, and never want to leave.

If this happens, you will have come to inhabit the Bible's story. My prayer is that its symbols and patterns will shape the way you view the world, and that your understanding of the church's place in story and symbol will make you know the riches of God's inheritance in the saints (Eph, 1:18), the great power "he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead" (1:20), and the glory he displays in the church and in Christ Jesus forever (Eph. 3:21).

In brief, I hope that you will adopt the perspective of the biblical authors and that you will read the world from the Bible's perspective, rather than reading the Bible from the world's.

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