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Author(s): Martens, Elmer A.

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THE SHAPE OF AN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY FOR A POST MODERN CULTURE

Elmer A. Martens

The topic assumes that the formulation of an Old Testament theology is not a once-for all project, nor a static discipline. The topic also assumes a shift in the cultural paradigm from the modern to the postmodern, and anticipates comments about the future shape of biblical theology. While vigorously disclaiming predictive abilities, I will nevertheless offer conjectures.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: NOT A STATIC DISCIPLINE

A Model of Interpretation

In defense of new approaches to biblical theology, and Old Testament theology in particular, several observations are apropos. First, theology is a model. Theology is not, like the Bible, an unchangeable given. Theology represents human understanding of what the Bible declares. The temptation is to think that our model of interpretation is synonymous with the source, the Bible. While theologians aspire to full accuracy, we must readily admit that understandings change as greater insight comes. So while we might want to equate a theological statement, especially one

In retirement from full time teaching at Menonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Dr. Martens continues to teach on two or three continents, write prolifically, preach at every opportunity and nurture the faith of three generations of Christian leaders. He makes his home in Fresno, California.

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within our system, with the Bible, we would be advised to take a less arrogant position and remember that theology is a human construct of what the Bible teaches. This construct, or model, is subject to change for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the agenda of the culture.

A Reflection of Changing Cultural Agenda

So a second reason for a non-static discipline is that cultural agendas have shifted in the course of the last two hundred years. In 1787 Philipp Gabler delivered a lecture which is credited, rightly or wrongly, with launching the discipline of biblical theology (cf. reprint in Ollenburger, 492-502). He held that dogmatic/systematic theology had become encrusted with problematic traditions. What was needed was a look at the sources. Gabler stood within the Enlightenment, a time of great enthusiasms for human rational capabilities. His proposal was for scholars to examine single text units and then to compare these with other text units. In this way there would be established a "true" theology, namely a theology that accurately reflected Scripture. But that was only the first stage, for it did not follow that such a theology was necessarily to be believed. In a second stage the results of the first stage would be subjected to rational sifting in order to establish a "pure" theology, a set of beliefs that could be universally believed, for part of the ethos of the age was preoccupation with philosophy.

A century later matters stood quite differently. Not philosophy but history was the pre-occupation. The shift is traced by Ollenburger ("From Timeless Ideas"). J.C.K. von Hoffmann of the Erlangen school in the 1840s championed a theology built around history, a special kind of history known as Heilsgeschichte. The challenge was formidable: how did one move from history to theology? Still, a preference for the category of history, however, has been a marked feature of many biblical theologies in the evangelical branch of scholarship, as well as in the mid-twentieth century in the so-called Biblical Theology movement.

To fast forward to a shift in the twentieth century, we meet W. Eichrodt. This European theologian profiled a theology built from a different agenda: to inquire after the essence of a religion. It was an agenda that was compatible with the emergence of the Neo-orthodox movement, of which Karl Barth was a major spokesperson. In religious studies, if not more generally, fascination with historical sequences led to inquiry about history's inner dynamic. Eichrodt's answer concerning Israelite faith, for example, was that covenant was the key concept by which to understand its document, the Hebrew Scriptures.

If at the end of the twentieth century we perceive a shift of paradigms, it should not be so surprising that the shape of a biblical theology has come up for review. It is not that biblical scholars pander to the fad of the age. The-

ologians are not to be understood as being "in a constant catch-up process, trying to keep pace with each new ripple of the ideological river" (Oden, 1990: 32). Rather, my point is that biblical scholars cannot ignore cultural contexts. Currently that context is defined as post-modernism.

A Reflection of Social Location

In addition to theology as a model, and the impact of cultural ethos, a third observation that makes palatable this notion of altering shapes for a biblical theology is the recognition of the importance of social location. For much of the two hundred years of enlightenment history, there has existed the myth of scholarly objectivity. Historians, for example, were thought to be capable of writing a history that presented the data without subjective intrusion. Scientists especially were champions of the importance and possibility of objectivity. Theology was a subject less amenable to objectivity, but even there it was thought attainable. Currently there is great skepticism about the possibility of objectivity, certainly in the field of history, but also in the field of science. The same is true of theology. Liberation theologians have made apparent the ways in which Scripture has been interpreted by the dominant culture. That is to say, social location has influenced Scriptural interpretation. Christian scholars in the Western world function with a linear intellectual approach, one that is largely conceptual. Christian scholars from Asia, on the other hand, inquire about theology's mystical dimension. Questions posed by Latin Americans or Asians are putting a saner and perhaps humbler cast on traditional Western biblical theologies. The contours of a biblical theology, it will have to be admitted, even if grudgingly, are affected by the theologian's place in the global society. It matters as to outcome whether the theologian is from the dominant or the suppressed class, whether male or female, Western, Oriental or Third World.

Given an understanding about theology as a model of presenting biblical truth rather than a system of fault-proof propositions, and given the recognition of the press of cultural ethos on interpretation which, together with other considerations, make objectivity elusive, it should be clear that the shape of the theological enterprise and hence its "product" is subject to change. Biblical theology requires restatement. Such an assertion needs to be counter-weighted, however, with the affirmation that the Scripture remains the unalterable source and adjudicator of all attempts at Christian theology including biblical theology.

THE POSTMODERN CONTEXT

The present culture has been described as postmodern. This is hardly the place to be expansive about the controversial claim that the world has cultur-

ally entered a post-modern phase. (For a broad view of eras in cultural history see Caleb Rosado, 1988). If it has been problematic to define modernism, it is more problematic to identify the features of post-modernism, partly because transitions can well be characterized by something of the old along with something of the new. Just what these old and new elements might be is not a matter of consensus.

Shift Away From Rationalism

But certain components of post modernism are frequently mentioned by analysts (cf. Grenz, 1996) . One of these is a shift away from the emphasis on rationalism characteristic of the Enlightenment, an era extending according to Grenz (p. 60) from the Peace of Westphalia (1648) to the publication of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1789). Modernity, both an extension of the Enlightenment but with its own characteristics, has been described neatly, even if simplistically, as dated between the Fall of the Bastille (1789) and the Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) (Oden 1995:20). The scientific revolution may be said to have sprung out of the belief that one could analyze cause and effects and develop solutions. Humanity was not nearly so much at the mercy of super-human forces as had been earlier believed. A strong optimism about the future of civilization was grounded in a Hegelian philosophy which engendered belief in progress. But the bubble of optimism has been pricked by world wars in this century, and by conundrums about the basic structure of reality. Einstein's theory of relativity, quantum physics and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle have turned science on its head, and with it the intellectual underpinnings of Western thought.

Pluralism and Diversity

A second feature of the post modern mind set is a heightened awareness of pluralism, namely an acknowledgment of the diversity of beliefs, theories, ethics, and ethnicity. Grenz (p. 20) goes as far as to say, "The central hallmark of post modern cultural expression is pluralism." This recognition of pluralism, while not new, is in its new shape, a function of a shrinking world, but also of a despair over the collapse of objectivity. Theoretically one might have vaguely acknowledged the existence of ethnic groups other than one's own, or the wide diversity of cultural values, or the presence of religions different from those espoused in the immediate community. But plurality cannot now be treated in the abstract. Those "others" have taken on human faces, since people of other ethnicities and other religious beliefs often live next door. North American religious life, once more or less homogeneous, is not so now. Moslem mosques and Buddhist temples exist alongside churches in our metropolitan landscapes. So the word on the lips

of cultural analysts is pluralism. Don Carson, for example, expounds on empirical, cherished, and philosophical pluralism (pp. 13-22) and sorts out the issues for Christians in religious pluralism.

Perspectivalism

Another characteristic of post modernism is captured in the word “relativity” as opposed to “absolute.” Although it is too simplistic to think that Einstein’s theory of relativity is responsible for a culture-wide appropriation of values as relative, the two are at least indirectly linked. In an earlier world view certain truths were held to be absolute: for instance, flow of time was a constant; but modern physics has shown everyone that such a notion must be qualified. Or to move from physics to religion, it was thought that there were theological or philosophical absolutes even though thinkers disagreed as to which these were. Matters stand differently now, as Grenz (163) explains: “Post modern thinkers have given up the search for universal ultimate truth because they are convinced that there is nothing more to find than a host of conflicting interpretations or an infinity of linguistically created worlds.” Each, it is said, has an angle of vision, and while some perspectives may be more compelling than others, no one viewpoint is to be privileged over another, at least not in the sense of being absolute truth. Post modernism has embraced perspectivalism.

Destabilization

In addition to these dimensions of the post modern mind — loss of faith in reason, pluralism, and relativism—one could mention features such as urbanism, secularism, moral malaise and rootlessness, all of which have a bearing on a theological enterprise. In philosophy the question of how one comes to know, has become, some would say, “super urgent.” “The fundamental characteristic of the new post modern era is epistemological relativism” (Burnham x). If reason has its limitations for helping us to know, should more attention be given to experience or intuition? How can one really know anything? These questions indicate something of the destabilization that increasingly marks modern culture. Post modernism is marked by a giant restlessness, even anxiety, due in part to the perception that longstanding foundations are giving way.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY ENCOUNTERS POST-MODERNISM

A biblical theologian could be pessimistic about the current mood. That pessimism could be compounded inasmuch as the discipline, apparently never at rest about methodology and purpose, continues currently in a mode of self-examination as the titles of recent books testify: *The Task of Old Testa-*

ment Theology and Biblical Theology: Problems and Perspectives. But the reasons for optimism are greater than the reasons for pessimism. It may well be that a post-modern challenge will serve as a jolt for the discipline to face outward rather than inward. Besides, engagement with post modernism opens several new possibilities.

Reaching for Narrative

First, one of these newer possibilities relates to post modernism's skepticism about reason as the arbiter in seeking for knowledge. Eichrodt's Old Testament theology, for example, with its attempt to distill rationally the essence of the O.T. faith, had its appeal in a modernist generation. But readers of the 21st century are not as likely to be enamored with either the agenda or the approach which smacks too much of reason, intellectualism and the abstract. Post modern readers are more attentive to story than to argument. In their view narratives, more than argument, legitimate a community (Grenz, 44).

Even though there is some disillusion with metanarrative, the openness to story by post moderns should be of interest to the biblical theologian. The Bible tells the grandest of stories, after all, and so Biblical Theology can take up the challenge. That challenge is more than to relate a story; it is to relearn the Scriptural language, as George Lindbeck notes. I agree with Lindbeck (55) that "Relearning the language of Zion is imperative whatever the cultural future of the church." Certain problems remain, however, as Leo Perdue (1994) reminds us. Biblical theologians have in the past argued about how story can yield theology. That argument may now heat up; but what should not be missed in any future biblical theology is the pervasiveness of narrative.

An emphasis on narrative will explore in greater detail matters such as metaphor, intertextuality, characterization and repetition. To be sure, there will be some resemblances to earlier salvation histories, but less attention will likely be given to their referentiality and more to literary niceties as a way of uncovering the theological components. One can conjecture that there is not likely to be a keen interest in whether Old Testament theology has a center. That way of formulating the agenda will be considered too academic. But since story has greater open-endedness than does didactic material, talk of a multi-perspectival approach (Poythress) or a multiplex approach (Hasel, 139-49) will likely get an appreciative hearing.

Already it has been suggested that a theology best emerges from close attention to texts, especially to the redaction process and the theology discernible in the literary seams (Sailhamer). It would be skewed to abandon theological attention to events and concentrate alone on the text, but a more pronounced literary reading, as contrasted with a referential historical read-

ing, may well be necessary as a way of addressing the post modern generation. Those sensitive to the post modern ethos will almost certainly be more inclined to emphasize the multi-functional possibilities of the discipline. Whatever the shape of a biblical theology turns out to be in a post-modern time, it is less likely to be driven by rationalistic-oriented, academically-inclined conceptualization than by experiential and pragmatic considerations. Such a shift in the shape of biblical theology will be deplored by some as yielding to alien forces, and welcomed by others as giving an academic discipline relevance. Almost certainly a cultural shift, with post modernism now posing fresh challenges, will serve to tease new insights from the enduring Word. Though anxiety as a response to the new paradigms is understandable, excitement about moving beyond the strict parameters dictated by rationalism is legitimate.

Welcoming Select Conversation Partners

Secondly, in an era of pluralism a biblical theology, while it will compete with more numerous voices, also has a better chance of being heard. The reason for this new hearing lies in the propensity of post moderns to be connoisseur of available ideas. A shift to post modernism need not be roundly decried. Rather than silence spokespersons for the Christian faith, as modernism was wont to do, post modernism theoretically welcomes all opinions to the table. Christians may be chagrined by pluralism; alternatively they can enter more aggressively into the market place of ideas.

Here a caveat is in order. The stance with which a Christian comes to the discussion, while not adverse to dialogue, is not one in which engagement in dialogue is for the purpose of establishing the truth. As evangelicals we hold that the truth has been revealed in Jesus, as well as in Scripture. (See Carson, chap. 4: "Has God Spoken? The Authority of Revelation"). While post modernism has the positive effect of giving a wider hearing to various voices, it also poses the pitfall of neutralizing views that hold out for absolutes.

Still, one concrete possibility of a new openness could be that Biblical Theology, a distinctly Christian undertaking, would be in a favored position around this table to engage specific groups as conversation partners. Jewish scholars, in particular, might well become the conversation partners for an Old Testament theology. Dialogue around the table will be selective. It is not likely, since biblical theology operates within the covers of the Bible, that biblical theologians will engage Buddhist or Islamic Scriptures. That dialogue takes place in other arenas, specifically systematic theology and the history and philosophy of religions. But matters are much different between Christians and Jews for the obvious reason that both claim the O.T. as Scripture.

For reasons detailed by Jews themselves, (e.g., J. Levenson), Jews have not been keen on the subject of biblical theology. But in recent years changes have occurred. Since biblical theology is exegesis on the macro scale, what will be at stake is the comparison of larger syntheses as contrasted with arguments on isolated individual texts. Synthesizing the Old Testament will be the point at issue. For good or ill, the concern to forge a connection between the Old and New Testaments will likely be bracketed, at least momentarily. Still, Christians have much to gain from this dialogue. Some neglected themes, such as cultic ritual, will likely receive more attention. Excessive claims by Christian theologians may well be challenged. While reciprocity in the exchange of ideas is helpful in itself, a greater tolerance between Jews and Christians as persons could be a laudable side effect.

Stretching Toward a Panbiblical Theology

Thirdly, the relativism and fragmentation characteristic of post modernism represents a challenge to biblical theology on several fronts. Apologetics, the defense of the Christian faith, has not been within the mandate of a biblical theology, nor should it be. But biblical theology can hardly ignore the relativistic approach which marks post modernism. The contours of a biblical theology may not change as much as the weight given to certain components. For instance, in a homogeneous culture the biblical claims of monotheism were noted, but since this belief was generally accepted, it was not stressed. These claims for monotheism need now to be meticulously explored, if not directly for the purpose of engaging other faiths, then at least for the purpose of clarification as a preparation for such engagement.

Moreover, biblical theology, itself fragmented into two divisions, Old Testament theology and New Testament theology, needs to overcome that division. In the beginning—that is, with the start of the discipline biblical theology commonly attributed to J. Philipp Gabler—it was not so. It was with G.L. Bauer in 1796 that the first biblical theology treating only the Old Testament appeared. In the twentieth century, there were dozens of single testament theologies, but as Reumann (1991, p. 5) has stated, one could count the comprehensive theologies, those that included both the Old and the New testaments, on two hands. Perhaps in an earlier period one could afford the luxury of theologies that treated the single testaments, but now the shape of a biblical theology must be “panbiblical” to use Knierim’s term (p. 485). As a matter of principle, Robert Hubbard can state, “It [O.T. theology] must contribute to the larger subject of “biblical theology,” the theology that comprises both testaments” (37). The ethos of post modernism gives a particular urgency to that principle.

To urge a panbiblical theology seems to contradict the previous observa-

tion that conversation with Jews will limit the discussion to the Old Testament. Both moves will be necessary. Old Testament theologians have reason to converse with Jewish scholars. At the same time, the presentation of results should be in the context of a panbiblical theology.

The reasons for such a panbiblical structure for biblical theology are several. Ideally and conceptually it is now time to transcend the two testaments after so many years of specialized treatment. If separation of the two testaments was helpful in order to make for specialization, the time has come to return to a more wholistic theological reading of the entire Bible. A pastoral approach to the subject also calls for a panbiblical treatment. Preaching of the Scriptures is influenced by an underlying biblical theology whether formulated formally or held more amorphously. Often the theological configuration lying back of preaching is fragmentary. For an audience already pulled theologically in many directions and in other ways fragmented in their understanding of the Christian faith, a more comprehensive approach is imperative.

Furthermore, apologetically it is advisable to present a wholistic and comprehensive statement. In an arena where major religions of the world compete to secure the allegiances of populations, one only gives a confusing and partial message by treating the testaments separately. The Christian gospel, though it may distinguish between pre-Christ and post-Christ Scripture, is nevertheless one gospel. The same God offering the same salvation calling for the same subjective response with similar eschatological orientation is presented in both testaments. More needs to be made of the theological continuities and the integrating factors apparent in the two testaments in a time when some cohesion can help prevent further splintering.

Addressing the Epistemological Question

Finally, how do epistemological concerns which are critical in the shift from modernity to post modernity —and philosophical stances in general— make their impact on biblical theology? Traditionally biblical theology has made the claim, though certainly disputed, that biblical theology is independent of philosophy. It is the task of biblical theology, some would say, to present the biblical data in biblical categories influenced as little as possible by philosophical systems. Systematic theology, it was readily acknowledged, leaned heavily, often unknowingly, on philosophical assumptions. But biblical theology, it was maintained, was not beholden to any philosophy. In addition, writers have recently pointed to the importance of the social location for those doing biblical theology. A white, middle-class male scholar will construct biblical theology quite differently than will a scholar who is female or whose origin is in a third world country. If one cannot escape

philosophical presuppositions which are often influenced by social location, then it is incumbent for a theologian as a minimum to be self-conscious about philosophical determinants affecting theological constructs.

To date minimal attention has been given to the bearing of philosophical convictions on the biblical theology enterprise. To formulate biblical theologies embracing the two testaments and also to process a philosophical orientation becomes a daunting task in this age given to specialization. But perhaps some accommodation would be in order. Might a biblical theology, given the press of the epistemological question, at least discuss the epistemological presuppositions which obtain in the biblical text itself?

In sum, whatever else biblical theologians are committed to do, several additional items should claim their attention, if they are to engage post modernism. Biblical theologians should lean away from a too rationalistic approach in which theological concepts are the stuff of theology, but should consider the narrative of a God engaged with people and the natural world as the locus for their theology. This shift is dictated in part because of the collapse of the belief in reason as the ultimate conduit to knowledge. Biblical theologians should, in the spirit of pluralism, welcome conversation with Jewish scholars. Moreover, a future biblical theology is likely to be shaped by an ethos of relativism. Therefore biblical theologians should be more self-conscious about truth claims and show how these are established. A case in point would be the claim that the one true God is the God of Israel. On the other hand, biblical theology should strive to be a panbiblical theology. This shift is urged in part to counter the fragmentation characteristic of post modernism. Finally, while not driven by philosophical concerns, biblical theologians should not exempt themselves entirely from discussion of some philosophical considerations, especially epistemology. Above all, a Christian scholar proceeds in the firm assurance that the Spirit of God will wonderfully direct his own through the maze we call post modernity.

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