

Biblical Theology as Historical Description: The Perspective of James Barr

Introduction

Biblical theology as historical description represents a critical and academically rigorous approach to understanding the theological content of Scripture. Rather than interpreting biblical texts through the lens of later doctrinal developments and confessional system, this method seeks to reconstruct and explain the beliefs, themes, and religious ideologies as they were originally understood by the biblical authors and their communities. James Barr, a prominent voice in this field, emphasizes that biblical theology must be a descriptive and historical discipline, rooted in the methods of modern critical scholarship. Distinct from systematic theology, Barr's perspective prioritizes the diverse historical, cultural, and literary contexts of the biblical canon, insisting that each text be allowed to speak on its own terms.

Meaning and Definition Biblical Theology as Historical Description

Biblical theology as historical description is an academic approach that seeks to identify, reconstruct, and explain the theological ideas found in the Bible as they were understood by their original authors and audiences. This method prioritizes the historical, cultural, and literary contexts in which the biblical texts emerged, aiming to describe not prescribe their meaning. Rather than interpreting the Bible through later doctrinal frameworks, this approach allows the texts to speak within their own ancient settings.¹ Hence, Biblical theology as historical description is the scholarly discipline that reconstructs and explains the theological beliefs, themes, and religious ideologies expressed in the biblical texts, as they were understood in their original historical and cultural contexts.²

Approach, Scope and Task of Biblical Theology as Historical Description

James Barr argues that biblical theology should be understood as a historical and descriptive discipline.³ He draws a sharp distinction between biblical theology and systematic or dogmatic

¹ James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 1–5.

² Johann Philipp Gabler, “An Oration on the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Right Definition of Their Goals,” in *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 497–502.

³ Mark Elliott, review of *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*, by James Barr, *Themelios* 45, no. 1 (2020): 1–3.

theology. For Barr, biblical theology is not about formulating doctrine for the church but about describing what the biblical texts meant in their original contexts.⁴ Furthermore, he insists that biblical theology must be “opened up by the modern historico-critical method.”⁵ This means careful attention to the languages, genres, and historical settings of the biblical texts. Barr is critical of attempts to create a unified, “pan-biblical” theology that overlooks the differences between the Old and New Testaments, as well as the diversity within the biblical canon.⁶ Therefore, he emphasizes that most of the Old Testament was written between 650 and 450 BC, and that the continuity between the Old and New Testaments is not as strong as some traditions claim.⁷

Moreover, he sees biblical theology as the description of the religious ideologies that found expression in the biblical texts and were recognized to be canonical.⁸ He emphasizes that the Old Testament, in particular, is a collection of diverse theological voices shaped over centuries and reflecting a range of historical circumstances.⁹ Rather than seeking a single, unified theology, He advocates for exploring the range of themes, motifs, and concepts across different books and traditions within the Bible.¹⁰

Thus, he argues that biblical theology is fundamentally descriptive, not normative.¹¹ He is clear that biblical theology is a historical, descriptive, and critical enterprise. Its aim is not to prescribe doctrine for the present, but to describe and analyze the theological content of the Bible as it was understood in its original contexts.¹² Its goal is to articulate what the biblical texts meant in their own contexts, not to prescribe doctrine for the church today.¹³ Hence, he challenges the view that the Bible should always be read as doctrinally sound or as a direct source for Christian dogma,

⁴ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 1–5.

⁵ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 1–5.

⁶ Elliott, review of *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 2.

⁷ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 1–5.

⁸ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 1–5.

⁹ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 1–5.

¹⁰ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 1–5.

¹¹ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 1–5.

¹² Synthesis based on James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), <https://archive.org/details/conceptofbiblica0000barr>.

¹³ John Barton, “James Barr and the Future of Biblical Theology,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 70, no. 3 (2016): 245–47.

suggesting instead that the Bible should be allowed to “mean what it actually meant, not what Christian faith might like to think it meant.”¹⁴

He further emphasizes that biblical theology is not a confessional theology. Its task is not to defend or systematize Christian doctrine, but to capture the diverse theological ideas of the Bible read on its own terms.¹⁵ The Bible, in Barr’s view, belongs to the world as well as to the church, and biblical theology should not be confined to a “confessional ghetto.”¹⁶

Implications for Contemporary Study

Barr’s approach frees biblical exegesis from the constraints of doctrinal expectation, allowing the text to speak in its own voice.¹⁷ He encourages scholars to recognize the Bible as a product of the believing community, shaped by historical processes and reflecting the lived faith of ancient Israel and the early church.¹⁸ Thus, this approach, Barr believes, is essential for a responsible and historically grounded understanding of the Bible’s theological witness.¹⁵

Conclusion

In summary, for Barr, biblical theology as historical description is the critical and descriptive study of the theological ideas and religious ideologies expressed in the biblical texts, reconstructed and explained in relation to their original historical, cultural, and literary contexts, without imposing later doctrinal or confessional frameworks.¹⁹ His vision for biblical theology as historical description challenges us to approach the Bible with scholarly rigor and historical sensitivity. By distinguishing between what the text meant in its original context and what later communities have made of it, He opens up new avenues for understanding the richness and diversity of biblical theology.²⁰ Hence, a student of biblical theology should develop a balanced and methodologically sound approach to doing biblical theology.

¹⁴ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 200.

¹⁵ “James Barr and the Future of Biblical Theology,” University of Oxford, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://www.theology.ox.ac.uk/article/james-barr-and-the-future-of-biblical-theology>.

¹⁶ The British Academy, “James Barr 1924–2006,” accessed June 10, 2023, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/about-us/james-barr-1924-2006/>.

¹⁷ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 210.

¹⁸ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 215.

¹⁹ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, <https://archive.org/details/conceptofbiblica0000barr>.

²⁰ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 220.