

[MJTM 13 (2011–2012)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

James K. Mead. *Biblical Theology: Issues, Methods and Themes*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007. 327 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0664229726.

This book is proof positive of the resurgence and vitality of biblical theology in the church and academy. To adapt a saying from Mark Twain, the spate of books and studies on biblical theology in the last twenty years shows that the reports of its death in the last century were greatly exaggerated. The main purpose of the book is to advance the current discussion by increasing the number of participants in the discipline, “widening the circle of interest and inviting a new generation to share in the journey” (p. vii). The book is laid out clearly, with an initial chapter wrestling with the definition of biblical theology, followed by a chapter treating the history of the movement. A trio of chapters discuss the various issues, methodologies, and themes arising from the discipline. A final chapter describes the prospects of the movement for biblical interpretation in the future.

In the first chapter, Mead adopts as a working definition that biblical theology is “what the Bible says about God and God’s relation to all creation, especially to humankind” (p. 2). But having said this, he argues that the definition is presented with many challenges, since to speak of “what the Bible is all about” is problematic. There are different forms of the Bible (e.g., MT versus LXX) and some scholars are convinced that the Bible contains many theologies. Consequently, it is difficult to speak of one comprehensive theology of the Bible. This is complicated by the further challenge of the different social, religious, and cultural locations of biblical scholars, which affects their biblical study. Exacerbating the situation is the disagreement between various scholars over the discipline itself, some arguing that

biblical theology refers to the theology of the Bible itself (descriptive), and others stressing the biblical nature of contemporary theologies (“our theology is biblical-normative”).

The next chapter describes the history of the discipline, departing from the usual treatments as it begins with the process of theologizing within the biblical materials themselves. A number of cogent examples are provided: the Israelite credo is interpreted variously in different parts of the canon, while the Pentateuch develops the promises of the fathers, and the Pauline letters search the Old Testament for evidence of Jesus’ death and resurrection (pp. 15–16). Following from this is a more or less standard account of the development of the discipline, in which G. T. Zacharie receives his due as a major influence on J. P. Gabler, who is widely regarded as the father of biblical theology. Both of these scholars sought to distinguish the true permanent theology of the Bible from its historically conditioned character (exegesis) and its doctrinal appropriation by the church (systematic theology). Mead charts the ebb and flow of biblical theology up to the present, giving attention to the various factors that have shaped it—history of religions, the stress on history and the collapse of the same, and the rise of canonical criticism.

The third chapter provides a helpful survey of the important issues raised by biblical theology in terms of its scope, task, and contextual influences. A survey of the various challenges that the scope plays in the discipline deals with the relationship between the testaments, the exact content (biblical versus extra-biblical literature), and the question of unity and diversity. The task deals with issues relating to methodologies that various scholars use for their study in the discipline and the resulting relationship between biblical theology and other theological disciplines. Finally, contextual influences involve philosophical outlooks such as postmodernism, community outlooks such as feminism and Judaism, and post-colonialism. I found this way of organization particularly helpful and fair. The author is careful to present an unbiased description of the issues raised by biblical theology.

The next topic deals insightfully with biblical theological methods that focus on theological content (whether systematic, cross-sectional, thematic, narrative), the shape of the biblical

witness (tradition history, canon formation, testimony), and the perspectives of the reader (existential, experiential, social). The vast amount of data is divided into useful categories. Real issues are dealt with as to whether external structures applied to the biblical content distort the text by highlighting some aspects and neglecting others. Charles Scobie's recent attempt to overcome these problems by stressing a multi-plex thematic approach in his massive study shows the enormous nature of the task, as its one thousand pages attest (C. H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). The section on the shape of the biblical witness discusses the various approaches associated with tradition history, such as the salvation historical approach. Supposedly, with this method, nothing is needed to bridge the gap between the New Testament and the Old Testament because one canon flows naturally into the other, since the Old Testament canon was not closed when the New Testament began. Such a view is fundamentally at odds with the canonical view in which the Old Testament has its own integrity and was clearly closed before the New Testament era. As for the perspectives of the readers, human experience becomes the main point of organization for the biblical content, whether that experience is existential (Bultmann, pp. 151–56), feminist (Trible, pp. 157–58), or socio-communal (Esler, pp. 164–66).

A fifth chapter deals with themes of biblical theology in a helpful way, and in my estimation is the best chapter of the book, in which the author provides his own distinctive synthesis. Mead describes the many themes of Scripture under three headings: the God attested in biblical theology, living in relationship with God, and living in relationship with human beings. Under the first heading, many of the attributes of God are discussed such as unity, wisdom, righteousness, and forgiveness. Under the second title, creation and covenant, worship and life, and ceremony and sacrifice are some of the sub-themes that deal with Israel and the church. The third division describes such themes as social justice, community, and calling. One of the real strengths of this approach is a fully-orbed biblical treatment of these themes, with discussion that includes both the Old and New Testaments.

A final chapter surveys the prospect of biblical theology for the future: the author considers some of the challenges that this future faces while offering possible solutions. As for the perennial problem of definition, Mead suggests that a more comprehensive definition might bring more perspectives under its theological umbrella, since theology must not only be concerned with what the Bible says but its form of presentation, its authors and their various audiences, and the relationships between and among human beings. Mead also believes that biblical theologians would do well to appreciate the contributions of each historical era, rather than summarily dismissing them for their blind spots. This would allow for complementing and correcting when formulating a biblical theology. He also argues that the relationship between the testaments will function as the main issue in biblical theology. Important also are the contexts of the ancient world (the world of the text) and the contemporary culture (the world of the interpreter). Finally Mead puts his finger on the key thematic issue: the relationship between the unity and diversity of the biblical witness. He believes that the canon itself finally resolves the tension between unity and diversity in terms of an elusive unity: "The canon itself calls for the discernment of a theological criterion for the purpose of its own proper theological understanding" (p. 247).

I greatly appreciated the author's way of describing the issues, methods, and themes arising from the subject matter of biblical theology. His categorizations for discussing the many concepts encountered in the biblical text provide a helpful yet very large road map for the interested reader. I think that chapter five is well worth the wait. Mead's discussion of the biblical themes under his three categories is enlightening and helpful. At the same time, I think that the reader of the book would have to be a graduate student or seminarian interested in the subject to be able to read the map intelligibly up to this point, for understanding many of the issues discussed requires considerable academic background.

Early on in the book, Mead invites confusion when he seeks to distinguish biblical theology from systematic theology (p. 11). He argues that a biblical theology of justification rightly focuses

“on the biblical roots and historical development” of the concept, while systematic theology describes how the doctrine was employed in confessional documents from the Reformation to the council of Trent. It would be better to leave the latter understanding to historical theology, and leave to systematic theology the systematic arrangement of the biblical concepts dealing with justification and their interrelation to each other. Thus, in terms of an analogy, biblical theology would describe the historical evolution of the topic, while systematic theology describes an overall logical synthesis of the subject material within the biblical text.

As it is Mead’s intention to provide a more comprehensive treatment of the issues, there is no question that he has succeeded. At the same time, there is a significant amount of material omitted from the more evangelical conservative side of the theological spectrum, which has been extremely influential in terms of impacting the culture and the world. It was refreshing to see a description of Adolf Schlatter’s contribution (pp. 71–72) but Geerhardus Vos’s important role in the movement as well as that of Meredith Kline and Richard Gaffin (i.e., their training of a whole generation of pastors and teachers in a particular methodology), could have been better represented, not to mention the significant work of the Australian school pioneered by Graeme Goldsworthy. The omission of the results of an important recent conference at Wheaton College discussing biblical theology in terms of retrospect and prospect from a variety of perspectives emphasizes my point. (See Scott Hafemann and Paul House, eds., *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

While addressing the issue of the definition of biblical theology, providing one that is comprehensive enough to describe all the things that go on under the name of biblical theology is unfortunate, since some of those methodologies remain completely irreconcilable. For example, when a scholar argues that the point of departure for her theology is “not the normative authority of the biblical archetype but . . . women’s experience in the struggle for liberation” (p. 56), one wonders how important the Bible actually is if the result is predetermined by the canon of

women's experience rather than the biblical canon.

Finally, it is refreshing to see that the author comes down on the side of the importance of canon and the unity of the biblical witness. He concludes with the image of a family of writers to capture this unity: while the family members write from a variety of perspectives, they share "a common calling to give voice to God's character, words and actions as well as to the relationships humans have with this God and with one another" (p. 247). In my judgment, Mead hits the proverbial nail on the head, since the theological concept of canon assumes finally a unity to the biblical message, thereby providing the *raison d' être* for the discipline of biblical theology. It is interesting that this concept is not derived from biblical theology itself, but is fundamentally a belief that the many documents require, in the end, a transcendent explanation.

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