

CHRIST
OF THE
CONSUMMATION

A NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

VOLUME I
THE TESTIMONY
of the
FOUR GOSPELS

O. PALMER ROBERTSON


P U B L I S H I N G
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To my English family,
with great appreciation for the graceful way
in which you have welcomed this American
into the Reilly clan.

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FOREWORD

If theology is disciplined discourse about God, one might suppose that biblical theology is that disciplined discourse about God whose substance is grounded in the Bible. Indeed, a minority of theologians today use the term *biblical theology* in exactly that way. On this view, *systematic theology* and *biblical theology* refer to the same thing, but the latter label is a little more specific than the former in identifying the corpus in which both are grounded.

In confessional circles today, however, dominant usage runs along slightly different lines. Systematic theology, as its name suggests, is organized along thematic, topical, atemporal, and logical lines—it is *systematic*. When written down, it has chapters that talk about God, sin, creation, Christ’s person and work, and so forth. This is not to suggest that the systematician overlooks transparent differences between the Testaments, or the contribution made by the diversity of literary genres that the biblical authors deploy, or the power of biblical rhetoric, or the handling of earlier biblical writers by later biblical writers, or the complexity of what goes into faithful exegesis and interpretation. But it is to suggest that the organizing principles of systematic theology are dominantly logical and atemporal. The point is proved by scanning the table of contents of virtually every work on systematic theology. By contrast, biblical theology is grounded in the observation that the Bible itself displays the historic progression of redemptive history. Thus, when written down, biblical theology includes the element of time: *When* does the tri-unity of God get introduced into the Bible’s story line, and by what means? What does Amos, in his own time and place, contribute to what the Bible says about sin? How does the theme of the temple develop across the unfolding history of redemption? The presentation, of course, must wrestle with literary genre, hermeneutics, and topical synthesis, but at its heart it is constrained by temporal ordering in a way and to a degree that

systematic theology is not. To put the matter a bit differently, the discipline of systematic theology tends to be constrained by the atemporal shape of theology, while the discipline of biblical theology is constrained by the temporal demands of history.

Sad to say, very few systematicians today engage with biblical theologians, and biblical theologians commonly return the compliment. Instead of seeing complementary disciplines, each of the two sides tends to see the other as at least mischievous, if not hermeneutically malevolent. The two disciplines started to come apart in about 1800, when the first Old Testament and New Testament theologies were published (as opposed to what we might call whole-Bible theologies). This often led to a focus on smaller and smaller parts: e.g., the theology of the Pentateuch, or Pauline theology, or Johannine theology. These developments produced some significant gains. Scholars became a little more attentive to the nuances of what a particular biblical book or corpus was actually saying. But the loss was significant, too, and was ultimately soul-destroying: many lost the ability to integrate the parts of biblical theology, to reflect on the wholeness of the “whole counsel of God.”

Many efforts were made to address the problem. For example, scores of New Testament theologies were penned, with separate chapters devoted to, say, the theology of Paul, the theology of the Synoptic Gospels, and so forth. Relatively little thought and space were devoted to how to link those chapters together. The *ordering* of those chapters was often determined by the scholar’s perception of the order in which the biblical corpora had been written: thus Paul is before Matthew, and John comes last.

Standing athwart these developments was the contribution of Geerhardus Vos. His *Biblical Theology*, published in 1948, was shaped not only by his grasp of the temporal-dependence biblical theology, but by his insistence that the temporal line should be determined by the progress of the revelatory events of redemptive history, not by the perceived date of when a book had been written. To provide a trivial analogy: When he wrote his great history of World War II, William Shirer showed himself to be a fine historian who was careful with his voluminous sources—sources that were carefully culled in the years immediately after the war. Nevertheless, he sounds a bit different from later historians who wrote their histories after the Korean War, Vietnam, the Cold War, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Many of the later historical judgments differed from those of Shirer, not least because they were the product of the mind of a historian who lived through things that Shirer never experienced. *But I cannot too strongly insist that both Shirer and the later writers wrote about World War II, not about the history of the*

second half of the twentieth century. No one could re-create that history from historical writings that claim to disclose what happened half a century earlier. In the same way, Mark's Gospel may well have been written several decades before John's Gospel, and with care one can cautiously delineate something of the context in which each evangelist lived. *Yet they were writing not to delineate their own contexts, but to talk about Jesus.* The insight of Vos was that proper biblical theology should be anchored in the historic development of redemptive history—or, more precisely, in the historic progression of the revelation process.

Many have overlooked this emphasis in Vos. Part of the reason is that Vos never fully unpacked what this meant for his reading of the New Testament. O. Palmer Robertson has set himself the task of filling in this lacuna. Having worked hard to trace the revelation process in the Old Testament, he now sets out to do something similar for the New. This is the first volume of a projected multivolume contribution. I like it enormously. At last, a biblical theologian who simultaneously loves systematic theology and clearly sees the wisdom and insight of Vos's approach.

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A FURTHER WORD

This is an important book for more than one reason.

First is the understanding of biblical theology that Dr. Robertson represents. Among the multiple and often substantially divergent views abroad today, he is committed to advancing the redemptive-historical approach of Geerhardus Vos. His concern is not only to preserve an awareness of Vos's own work in biblical theology or (what Vos deemed a more suitable designation) "History of Special Revelation," but also to build and expand on that legacy as he does in this volume.

While there is more than one acceptable way of doing biblical theology, it is fair to observe that a redemptive-historical approach, like that of Vos followed by Robertson, enjoys an explicit biblical warrant that sets it apart from others. That warrant is found in the opening words of the epistle to the Hebrews:¹

God, having spoken formerly to the fathers by the prophets at many times and in various ways, has in these last days spoken to us in the Son. (Heb. 1:1–2a, my translation)

This introductory statement, umbrella-like, expresses a fundamental overall perspective on what the writer says in the rest of the document. At the same time, it is also fairly read for the sweeping and fundamental outlook it provides on God's entire special or saving self-revelation (in distinction from his general revelation in the creation and special revelation before the fall). Concerning that self-revelation, four interrelated factors are present in this statement, either explicitly or implicitly, in the light of the rest of Scripture.

1. The following observations adapt material from my forthcoming *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

First, revelation is plainly in view as a *historical process*. These verses bring into view a long history, the history of redemption in its once-for-all accomplishment (in distinction from its ongoing application). This history begins with the fall and, as it unfolds, largely incorporates the history of Israel, God's old covenant people, until it reaches its completion in the person and work of Christ, his incarnate Son. The God-breathed documents of Scripture—each originating at a different time over the course of this history—provide a sufficient and the only infallible record of this history.

Second, this history of revelation is marked by *diversity*; diversity shapes its unfolding. That diversity is highlighted by the two phrases “at many times” and “in various ways.” Each of these phrases translates one of two Greek words, adverbs, accented by their placement together at the beginning of the statement in the Greek text. Close to each other in meaning, they likely differ in that the first (πολυμερῶς) indicates multiple portions or times, the other (πολυτρόπως) different ways or modes.

Third and climactic is the reference to the *Son*. Christ is in view as both the end point and the final goal of the history of revelation and the integrating focus of the diversity involved (cf., e.g., 2 Cor. 1:20). Moreover, this fulfillment is true in an absolute, not merely relative or limited, sense, for the Son is nothing less than God's “last days” speaking, his eschatological Word. God's revelation in his Son—in his incarnate person and work, both his deed-revelation and his Word-revelation—has a finality that cannot be superseded or surpassed. Christ consummates as he closes the history of special redemptive revelation.

This final, last-days speech in the Son, the “great salvation . . . declared at first by the Lord,” includes its accompanying revelatory attestation “by those who heard” (Heb. 2:3). This attestation is plausibly understood as the ear (and eye) witness of the apostles. It is the witness authorized by Christ himself (e.g., Acts 1:8; cf. vv. 2, 21–22), such that their words and those of others associated with them in the foundational period of the church (cf. Eph. 2:20) are his very own words (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:36–37; 1 Thess. 2:13), with the emergence of the New Testament canon the eventual result.

Finally, the *human activity* that in large part constitutes the diversity accented by the writer is integral to the history of revelation. How the writer understands this activity should not be missed or misconstrued. “God has spoken” is the all-controlling nuclear assertion of Hebrews 1:1–2a. He is the sole subject of both verbs that refer to speaking (the participle [v. 1] and main verb [v. 2]); everything else is subordinate not only syntactically but also

semantically. The human activity in view—i.e., “by the prophets”²—is no more than instrumental. That activity (oral and written) is neither independent of nor in tension with God’s speaking. Rather, God utilizes various human instruments so that their subserving speaking is his; their words are to be received as ultimately his, entirely truthful and finally authoritative.

All told, then, Hebrews 1:1-2 shows that special revelation after the fall—with Scripture its God-breathed record—is as a whole properly labeled “redemptive-historical” (or “salvation-historical”) as a basic defining characteristic. As God’s Word, the Bible documents the completed and unified historical process of God’s saving self-revelation that is shaped throughout by diverse means, including multiple human agents, and at every point is focused on, as it culminates in, the unique once-for-all work of his incarnate Son.

Accordingly, sound interpretation of Scripture requires dealing with each of the various documents by taking into account its distinctive place and content within the context of the flow of redemptive history. Such interpretation entails giving attention to what distinguishes the contributions of each of the multiple human authors, while doing that without compromising or eclipsing the unity and entire truthfulness that Scripture in its manifold diversity embodies.

In his day, Vos undertook this requisite attention to the redemptive-historical substance of biblical revelation and did so in such an unprecedented way that he is justly regarded as the father of subsequent biblical theology committed to the Bible as God’s Word. He set a model for others to follow, as Robertson does in this volume.

The (Greek) adverbs in Hebrews 1:1, accenting diversity, refer specifically to special revelation under the old covenant (“to the fathers by the prophets”). But diversity—multiple authors and different literary genres—is no less a mark of the revelatory attestation of God’s last-days speech in the Son, as a glance at the composition of the New Testament shows.

Here the further and specific importance of this volume comes into view: the groundbreaking contribution Robertson makes by providing a comprehensive redemptive-historical approach to the biblical theology of the four Gospels (his Analytical Outline provides a bird’s-eye view).

Vos’s own work on the theology of the Gospels, as profound and insightful as it is, is only partial, consisting of a relatively brief discussion in his *Biblical*

2. For the writer, this reference to the prophets is synecdochic for other instances of human instrumentality employed throughout the history of revelation; cf. the parallel statements (with the same verb denoting speaking) referring to angels (Heb. 2:2) and Moses (3:5).

Theology and numerous articles. He did not provide a single in-depth overall treatment.

What should such an extensive treatment, following Vos's redemptive-historical lead, look like? In this volume Robertson shows us, in an exemplary fashion, one that sets a high standard. His overall structure in first presenting the common, concordant witness of the four Gospels to the ministry of Jesus and then, in that light, discussing the distinctive, complementing contribution of each Evangelist is a model for what a biblical theology of the Gospels, true to their ultimate divine author, should be.

Readers will find to their great profit that Robertson treats them to a full display of the manifold riches of God's last-days redemptive-revelatory speech in his Son as presented by the four Gospels in the unified diversity of their testimony.

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PREFACE

Prolific have been the New Testament biblical theologies from the nineteenth and into the twenty-first centuries.¹ Before the call went out from J. P. Gabler in 1787, the idea of treating the theology of Scripture from a historical rather than a systematic perspective was not extensively realized. Gabler's concept came with a freshness that stimulated new perspectives on the truths of the Bible. His approach was somewhat out of line with a true treatment of God's inerrant Word, due to his imbibing the rationalistic principles that permeated the thought patterns of his day. Yet his work sparked a zealous flame that continues until today, almost 250 years later.

Geerhardus Vos may be regarded as the "father" of evangelical treatments of Scripture from a biblical-theological perspective. Vos served for thirty-nine years (1893–1932) as the (one and only) professor to fill the Chair of Biblical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary.² His *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, first published in 1948, defined and simultaneously exemplified the nature, method, and substance of biblical theology from an evangelical perspective.

1. A partial listing of more recent New Testament theologies from an evangelical perspective: Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948); Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959); George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Donald A. Hagner, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1994); Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1981); Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004); I. Howard Marshall, *A Concise New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008); Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); J. Julius Scott Jr., *New Testament Theology: A New Study of the Thematic Structure of the New Testament* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008); G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

2. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), xi.

But surprisingly, it seems that no one since Vos has attempted to complete what he began in terms of New Testament biblical theology. Many have followed in his train by exploring historical progression of Old Testament biblical theology. But no one seems to have noticed his design for a New Testament biblical theology. Yet Vos spells out quite clearly his concept of biblical theology as dealing with “the *process* of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible”³ as a study of the “*historic progressiveness of the revelation-process*.”⁴ Using the imagery of a symphony, Vos describes the “voices accompanying Jesus’ Nativity,” the preaching of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, and his temptation as “preludes” that anticipate the “overture” embodied in the revelation mediated by Christ and his apostles.⁵ Following this basic scheme of historical progression in new covenant revelation, Vos presents his New Testament biblical theology by beginning with the earliest revelational moments and then moves through the successive phases of redemptive revelation in the new covenant era. The chapters on the New Testament in his *Biblical Theology* naturally follow this redemptive-historical order:

- Revelation Connected with the Nativity
- Revelation Connected with John the Baptist
- Revelation in the Probation [Temptation] of Jesus
- The Revelation of Jesus’ Public Ministry

Clearly, Vos arranges his New Testament biblical theology according to the historical ordering of revelation throughout the new covenant era. First comes the revelation communicated by the angelic messengers in connection with the incarnation and birth of Jesus. Then distinctive revelation comes through the instrumentality of John the Baptist, the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. Next the historic moment of Jesus’ temptation by the devil provides a unique opportunity for the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God. Passing this probation opens the door for him to enter into his public ministry, in which his words and his works reveal the true nature of himself and the kingdom that he has come to inaugurate.

And there Vos stops. He had previously included the ministry of the apostles in his analysis of the historical progression of New Testament biblical theology. Over the years he provided a number of specialized arti-

3. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 13 (emphasis added).

4. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 14.

5. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 326.

cles dealing with various aspects of the revelation that came through the apostles.⁶ But he never completed the unfolding of the historical process of revelation mediated through the apostles in his treatment of New Testament biblical theology.

One may speculate why Vos did not proceed to include a treatment of the historical progression of the revelation that came through the apostles. The shortness of the hundred-year period of new covenant revelation in comparison with the thousands of years of old covenant revelation he himself noted. But this disparity did not appear as an insurmountable problem to Vos. His response to this time distinction was to point to the ongoing inclusion beyond Christ and his apostles of all time and eternity as an integral part of the new covenant era.⁷ While this enlarged perspective on the extent of the age of the new covenant does not directly address the challenge of the compactness of the era of new covenant revelation, it does provide a wholesome perspective when the span of old covenant and new covenant epochs is compared.

But many questions may be legitimately asked: Is it actually possible to uncover a progression of revelation across the few years of the apostolic age? What newness in terms of progressive revelation may be found in the theology of the various Gospel writers? What distinctive contribution to new covenant biblical theology emerges in the preaching of the apostles as found in the book of Acts? Does a historical progression of revelation exist in the various writings of the apostle Paul? How is the epistle to the Hebrews to be viewed in terms of the progression of new covenant revelation? What is the distinctive place of the epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude? What unique message in terms of the progression of revelation emerges in the book of Revelation?

The present study could not possibly provide satisfactory answers to all these questions. But it may be able to give basic responses to many of these questions, which in turn may stimulate fresh perspectives on the glorious process of the unfolding of new covenant revelation. Vos himself describes

6. A collection of Vos's writings that explore various aspects of the revelation that came through the apostles may be seen in Gaffin, *Shorter Writings of Vos*. Sample titles of these articles: "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit"; "The Priesthood of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews"; "The Pauline Conception of Reconciliation"; "The Second Coming of Our Lord and the Millennium." Note also Vos's *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus: The Modern Debate about the Messianic Consciousness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954); *The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958); and *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961). But these works are not carefully worked into his presentation of the progress of revelation in the New Testament.

7. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 325.

the “desirable fruit of the study of Biblical Theology” as “the new life and freshness which it gives to the old truth, showing it in all its historic vividness and reality.”⁸ May the Lord of the covenants new and old continue to pour out his illuminating Spirit on the unsearchable riches of his Word to his own glorification.

8. Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in Gaffin, *Shorter Writings of Vos*, 23. These quotations are taken from the inaugural address of Vos as professor of biblical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary on May 8, 1894.

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To God be the glory.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ESV	English Standard Version
INE	Isaiah's New Exodus
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
par.	Parallel Gospel accounts
RSV	Revised Standard Version

INTRODUCTION

Jesus the Promised Christ of the Scriptures

The end of redemptive revelations under the old covenant in approximately 400 B.C. left many promises, prophecies, and predictions unfulfilled. Particularly with respect to expectations regarding the Messiah and his coming kingdom, the age of the old covenant prophets concluded without any semblance of proper realization of the promises that had been made on behalf of the Covenant Lord of creation and redemption. No king descended from Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Jesse, and David reigned on the throne of Israel. No singular Suffering Servant had arisen who would bear in himself the blameworthiness of sins deserving divine retribution. No glory greater than Solomon's had filled the reconstructed temple. Nations to the ends of the earth had not willingly submitted themselves to Messiah's righteous rule. The created order of sun, moon, stars, earth, and its creatures had not experienced radical renewal by removal of the curse, and the graves of Israel and the nations remained full.

The remnant of Israelites living in the land of promise with these large messianic expectations at the time of Jesus' coming consisted almost altogether of descendants from the tribe of Judah. Their tribal presence in the land was essential for the realization of messianic promises, since the ancient prophecy of Jacob the patriarch had declared:

The scepter will not depart
from *Judah*,
nor the ruler's staff
from between his feet,
until he comes
to whom it belongs,
and the obedience of the nations
is his. (Gen. 49:10)

These descendants of Judah's tribe were consistently designated in the original languages of both the Old Testament and the New from the time of Israel's exile as "Judeans." By their deportation under the Assyrians in 722 B.C., the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom lost their tribal identity except for a few scattered individuals. The Babylonians then carried the nation of Judah into exile in 586 B.C. Since only the tribe of Judah survived these exiles, surviving Israelites were called "Judeans." These descendants of the tribe of Judah returned to the land after the seventy years of their exile.

From the earliest English translations of the Bible, the Hebrew and Greek terms that would be transliterated as "Judean" have been translated as "Jew."¹ This representation of the word has prevailed in essentially all English translations. Yet throughout the original Scriptures, the term is more precisely transliterated as "Judean" rather than "Jew."

One might wonder what difference it might have made in terms of the ongoing perspective of the English-speaking world if the Israelite community had been perceived as "Judeans," survivors of Israel's exile and trophies of God's grace, rather than being principally perceived as "Jews," members of a race of people distinct from other nations of the world. But in accommodation to the long history of the term "Jew" as it has consistently appeared in English translations of the Bible, the current volume will represent the Hebrew and Greek terms as "Jew." At the same time, it is hoped that whenever the reader sees the term "Jew," he will ultimately think of this people's ongoing role in redemptive history as the "Judeans" who were survivors of Israel's exile and special trophies of God's grace.

The second large grouping of people living in the days of Jesus has also received a distinctive designation in English translations of the Bible. They have been called "Gentiles." But the biblical terms in both the Old Testament

1. The word translated from the Old Testament into English as "Jew" is *yehudi* (יְהוּדִי; "Judean"), which occurs primarily in Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Zechariah. In the Greek New Testament, the designation is always "Judean" or "Judeans" (Ἰουδαῖος, Ἰουδαῖοι; "Judean," "Judeans"), never "Jew" or "Jews." The author of the article on Ἰουδαῖος in the principal Greek lexicon of the New Testament has offered his judgment that the word "Jew" should never have appeared in English translations of the New Testament. F. W. Danker, W. Bauer, and W. F. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). A response to this perspective may be found in Vern Poythress, "How Have Inclusiveness and Tolerance Affected the Bauer-Danker Greek Lexicon of the New Testament (BDAG)?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46, no. 4 (2003): 577–88. Poythress argues that Danker has imported particular judgments about politics into his treatment and has mixed them with descriptions of lexical meaning. For further consideration, see O. Palmer Robertson, "Israel and the Nations in God's Covenants," in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 508–14.

and the New (גוֹיִם, ἔθνη; *goyim, ethnei*) may be more appropriately rendered as “peoples” or “nations.” Inconsistency in rendering this definitive term in the English Bible appears in the New Testament scriptural quotation from the Old Testament that identifies the principal area of Jesus’ ministry. Most English translations render the phrase “Galilee of the *nations*” in the Old Testament (Isa. 9:1 ESV, KJV, NAB [8:23], NIV [2011]). But then in the New Testament quotation of this same phrase, all the various consulted translations read “Galilee of the *Gentiles*” (Matt. 4:15 ESV, KJV, NAB, NIV [2011]). The translation “nations” provides a positive dimension in underscoring the expansive perspective of the Christian gospel. The root concept in the Bible refers to all the various nations of the world, frequently treated as the distinctive objects of God’s saving grace. God’s first covenantal word to Abraham expresses this expansive perspective: “In you all the *peoples of the earth* will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3; cf. Gal. 3:8). All the nations of the world are recipients of the offer of God’s grace. “Go and make disciples of *all the Gentiles*” simply cannot capture the outward thrust of the new covenant gospel. But “Therefore go and make disciples of *all nations*” (Matt. 28:19) summarizes the purpose of the suffering Savior’s sacrifice and the risen Savior’s expectation.²

At the moment of Jesus’ entering the realm of redemptive history, God’s people and the hurting world needed no further promises or predictions. All the words necessary for a total reconstruction and rejuvenation of a corrupted creation had been spoken, even recorded as a written testimony for future generations.

The one thing lacking was *fulfillment*. When would the promised Messiah and his consummate kingdom come? When would the sin of the people be totally removed? When would the exile of God’s people come to a satisfactory end? When would the scattered tribes be regathered, and when would Mount Zion be lifted up so that all nations would ascend to its heights where they could join in the worship of the one and only God?

Nothing between the time of Israel’s modest restoration to its land under the decree of Cyrus king of Medo-Persia in 537 B.C. and the rule of the Caesars in the time of Jesus could be regarded as even remotely realizing the promises of the prophets. The revolt of the Maccabees set a pattern of emphasizing Jewish nationalism and exclusivism that could not by any stretch of the imagination correspond to the prophetic expectation of the restored kingdom with its universally inclusivistic dimensions. Far from

2. For further exploration of the translation “nations” or “peoples” rather than “Gentiles,” see Robertson, “Israel and the Nations in God’s Covenants,” 514–18.

extending an open invitation for the nations to join with them in the kingdom of their Messiah, the revolt of the Maccabees drove the deepest wedge between Israel and the nations, ending with the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem. The establishment of a supposed high priest as the Maccabean Messiah could hardly fulfill the expectations of a descendant from David as promised by Isaiah, or of a priestly descendant crowned king in accordance with the anticipations of Zechariah (Isa. 11:1–12; Zech. 6:9–15).

But most obviously, nothing of the “supernatural” characterized the various experiences of the Israelite nation in the period from Cyrus to Caesar. The very fact of supernatural predictions of the future in connection with messianic anticipations begged for something supernatural as a corresponding fulfillment. The communication of the Lord’s word through divinely inspired dreams and visions, the appearance of angelic messengers to the prophets, the capacity to predict future events of both short-term and long-term character spoke of supernatural activity. But the struggles of the Maccabees against Roman secular domination, the sharp defining of lines that divided Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and zealots within Judaism against one another, the refusal of the Jews to even speak with neighboring Samaritans clearly manifested naturalistic as over against supernatural religious and political perspectives.

So now what? Should there be forever a propagation of this nationalistic, secularistic separation of the Israelite people from the other nations of the world? What, then, would become of the promises and predictions of the prophets concerning the worldwide inclusivism of a faith that professed a single Creator and Covenant Lord? Certainly this exclusivistic religious expression would not be worthy of international subscription and participation. By its own self-definition, the vast world of international peoples had been excluded from the heart of Israel’s religious life.

These were the circumstances into which the true Christ, the Messiah of the prophets, was to come. He must embody all that the prophets promised. Consider, then, the “good news,” the “gospel,” the *euaggelion*, that focuses on Jesus as the Christ, the promised Messiah, of God’s people. View him from the perspective of the historical unfolding of the witness preserved in the new covenant writings by contemporary eyewitnesses of his sufferings and glory.

Particularly with reference to the testimony of the writers of the four Gospels regarding the person and work of Jesus, their role as “*eyewitnesses*” should function as a key concept in any analysis of the biblical material. As has been well said:

For the Christian faith this Jesus, the earthly Jesus as we can know him, is the Jesus of the canonical Gospels, Jesus as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recount and portray him. . . . I suggest that we need to recover the sense in which the Gospels are testimony. This does not mean that they are testimony *rather than* history. It means that the kind of historiography they are is testimony.³

Anticipating conclusions that will be subsequently developed, the eyewitness perspective of the four Gospel records needs to be fully appreciated. Matthew was one of the twelve original disciples, summoned personally by Jesus at an early point in his ministry (Matt. 9:9–13). John, the author of the final Gospel, was the “beloved disciple,” one of the inner circle of three who knew Jesus most intimately. He was with Jesus from the beginning (Mark 1:19) and offers his personal testimony as an *eyewitness* of the piercing of Jesus’ side at the crucifixion (John 19:35). He opens his first letter to the churches by attesting to “what we have *heard*, what we have *seen with our eyes*, what we have *looked at* and *touched* with our hands, concerning the Word of Life” (1 John 1:1 NASB; cf. v. 3). He was there with Jesus throughout the whole of his public ministry up to the moment of his standing beneath Jesus during his crucifixion, and he was the first of the apostles to visit the empty tomb. He saw with his own eyes the abandoned linen wrappings in the tomb, and the facecloth neatly rolled up in a separate place by itself. “He *saw* and believed” (John 20:8). The most ancient traditions present Mark as a reporter of Peter’s teaching on the life and ministry of Jesus, so that his Gospel may be regarded as a record of Peter’s *eyewitness* reports. In Peter’s final letter to the churches, he underscores the fact that he and the others with him were “*eyewitnesses* of his majesty” who “*ourselves heard*” the utterance of God the Father from heaven that declared Jesus to be his beloved Son (2 Peter 1:16–18). Dr. Luke, though not himself an eyewitness, pointedly affirms that his Gospel was based altogether on reports from *eyewitnesses* who were with Jesus “from the beginning” and whose testimony he had carefully investigated (Luke 1:2–3).

Step back for a moment and fully comprehend the eyewitness character of the testimony about Jesus in the four Gospels. These reports are not traditions handed down across decades, being shaped and remolded by a string of unknown, unknowable, faceless “redactors” who shaped and reshaped the image of Jesus according to the ever-changing exigencies of

3. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 2, 5 (emphasis added).

the day. No, these Gospel writers were men who had known Jesus “from the beginning” as eyewitnesses. Without that qualification, they could not even be considered for membership among the original apostolic band of twelve (Acts 1:21–22).

One further element should be considered for a full appreciation of the testimony of the four Gospels. On the night before his crucifixion, in anticipation of his imminent departure from this world, Jesus promised that the Father and he would send the Spirit (John 14:26; 16:7, 13). Among the benefits of the Spirit would be his enabling the apostles to remember correctly all the things that Jesus had said and done. This power of accurate recall granted by the Spirit would provide the guarantee that what the disciples wrote about Jesus’ life and ministry would be altogether true. Not only the record of Jesus’ words and deeds but their significance would all be in accord with God’s redemptive purposes across the ages. Because of this preserving work of the Spirit, the truth of the testimony remains a certain reality.

Alongside this power of remembrance granted by the Spirit sent by Jesus and the Father is the illuminating work of the Spirit in the hearts and minds of believers (John 14:16–17). Not merely as a subjective experience of the individual, but as divine Spirit testifying to human spirit, the truth of the Gospel testimony is confirmed throughout the ever-enlarging community of disciples across the ages.⁴ Even until today, the Spirit continues to confirm in human spirits the truth of the everlasting gospel. Beginning with the central truths of the testimony concerning the person and work of Jesus the Christ, but then expanding to embrace the individual parts as well as the wholeness of the gospel witness in both its form and content, the regenerate person as an individual as well as in community experiences the confirmation of the truth as it is in Jesus. The eyewitness character of the Gospel records contributes significantly to their believability. But the enlightening work of the promised Holy Spirit is essential to a person’s full acceptance of this Spirit-inspired testimony.

In considering this composite testimony of the New Testament documents, several successive phases of the revelation of Jesus as the promised Messiah emerge. These key phases of intensifying revelation along with growing awareness that Jesus was the Christ include the angelic annunciations; John the Baptist as forerunner to the Christ; Jesus’ revealing himself as the incarnate

4. See in particular the insightful treatment of Abraham Kuyper, “*Testimonium Spiritus Sancti*, or the Witness of the Holy Spirit,” in *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 553–63.

Christ; the Gospel theologians; the inauguration of the age of the Spirit; the speeches of the apostles; the divinely inspired writings of Paul; the original apostolic witness of James, Peter, John, and Jude; the epistle to the Hebrews; and the book of Revelation.

This current presentation of Jesus as the promised Messiah will attempt to capture something of the original historical process in which the realities of fulfillment dawned on the newly forming Christian church as recorded in the documents of the New Testament. Throughout this period, fresh divine revelations guided the new covenant people into an ever fuller comprehension of the fact that Jesus is Lord and Christ. In reliving this gradually unfolding revelational process, the truth that Jesus is the Christ may become a focal factor for the whole of life even in this modern age.

The Nature, Method, and Distinctives of New Testament Biblical Theology

By the very nature of the case, New Testament biblical theology deals with the whole of the revelational truth found in the documents of the New Testament. This material has been approached in basically three ways.

Optional Approaches to New Testament Biblical Theology

The Topical or Thematic Approach

In this method, a set of topics, generally but not always derived from the discipline of systematic theology, becomes the basis for the examination and organization of the materials of the New Testament. Typically, subjects treated include, among others, God, man, sin, salvation, the Christian life, the church, and eschatology.⁵

The Biblical-Book Approach

In this method, the various authors or books of the New Testament are treated in sequence, generally following a chronological order, or as the books are arranged in the New Testament.⁶

5. See the work of Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981). Guthrie combines his topical approach with a historically progressive perspective by tracing the topics through the various stages of New Testament unfolding. Cf. also Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

6. Cf. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Donald A. Hagner, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1994); I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004); Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986). Morris combines elements of chronology with authorship and topic.

The Redemptive-Historical Approach

Following this method, the effort is made to reconstruct the progress of redemptive history and revelation through the various periods of the New Testament era.⁷

Though various New Testament theologies will generally fall under one of these three categories, something of a mixture or blending of approaches is inevitable. Each of these three approaches has its own strengths and weaknesses.

The present study will follow the redemptive-historical method. This decision is made on the basis of the following considerations: (1) This approach captures something of the vitality of God's new covenant as it enters human history. Rather than dealing with topics primarily derived from systematic theology, a redemptive-historical perspective recaptures the vitality and excitement associated with the inbreaking of God's climactic actions and words in the redemption of his people. (2) This approach underscores the fact that redemption from sin and its consequences is an event of reality rather than simply a doctrine to be understood. Perceiving the objective reality of the accomplishment of redemption in time and history should have the effect of strengthening the faith and understanding of God's people. (3) This approach best suits the fulfillment role of new covenant history when perceived as the climactic realization of the long history of God's redemptive activity under the old covenant that eventually leads to new covenant fulfillment.

The challenge of this progressive arrangement becomes obvious when the time frame of revelation in the Old Testament is compared to the time frame of the revelation of New Testament fulfillments. A time span of fifteen hundred years stretches between God's redemptive dealings with Abraham and the restoration of God's people in the days of Malachi. But in the case of the New Testament, the maximum lapse of time between the annunciations at the birth of Jesus and the revelations to the apostle John on the isle of Patmos would be less than a hundred years. The progression of revelation in the old covenant may be compared to a sunrise in which the night's darkness yields gradually to the increasing light of the rising sun. First there is the gentle illumination of the distant eastern skyline. Then the increasing beauty of multicolored sunrise defines the next phase of the progression. Finally, the full manifestation of light from the noonday

7. Radically different results following this method may be seen by comparing two classic works: Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), and Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1955).

sun brightens the sky. But tracing the unfolding of New Testament biblical theology is like attempting to capture the progress of illumination emitted from an unexpected bolt of lightning. The progress of revelation comes so quickly that its phases of newness run into one another.

To alleviate the quantitative difference between the extended period for the development of Old Testament biblical theology in contrast with the abbreviated time span of the New Testament, one approach has regarded the point from the appearance of Jesus through future eternity as the period embraced by the new covenant.⁸ It still remains, however, that the historical period for the actual accomplishment of redemption and the transmission of related revelations is a very short period compared to the generations and ages that constitute the extended era of the Old Testament.

So the challenges associated with a redemptive-historical approach to New Testament biblical theology are very real. Yet the insights gained into the consummate realities of God's redemptive purposes may prove to be worth the effort.

Distinctives of the Current Study

Having made this determination regarding the method to be followed, this New Testament biblical theology will focus on three distinctives.

Retracing the Historical Progression across the Various Phases of New Covenant Revelation as the Organizing Principle

Neither following the biblical-book method nor tracing selected topics across the span of the New Testament will capture with the same vividness the actual unfolding of God's climactic fulfillment of his promises regarding the restoration of all things.⁹ Rather than requiring each time

8. Says Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 325: "Looking at it in too mechanical a manner, one might place the thousands of years of the OT over against the scarce one hundred years of the life of Jesus and the Apostles. In reality the NT Revelation, being the final one, stretches over all the extent of the order of things Christ came to inaugurate, whence also the Diatheke which it serves is called an 'eternal Diatheke' (Heb. 13:20). It is the eschatological Diatheke, and in regard to that time-comparisons are out of place."

9. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, follows this method in an admirable way, but goes only from the annunciations that herald the opening of the age of fulfillment through the revelation of Jesus' public ministry. Bultmann, in following this method, invents the myth of a "Hellenistic church" that supposedly mediated the gospel to Paul in terms of gnostic patterns. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1:67. Yet he himself admits, "There are scarcely any direct witnesses available" for this hypothetical pre-Pauline Hellenistic theology (1:64). He derives his information from "*inferences from other sources of later date*" (1:64 [emphasis original]). Yet he manages to produce over a hundred pages of this pre-Pauline theology (1:65–183), concluding with twenty pages of "gnostic motifs" (1:164–83).

phase to produce a distinctive perspective on specific preselected topics such as God, man, sin, and salvation, let each epoch present its own favored agenda. Let a sensitivity to the uniqueness of each phase define the matters to be considered, such as the special role of the supernatural at the time of the original annunciations, the call to repentance in the ministry of John the Baptist, and the confrontation with the devil and his demons in the ministry of Jesus.

In following this approach, the intent is not to introduce a topic such as the Holy Spirit, and then follow the trail of witness to the Holy Spirit in the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, Hebrews, and Revelation. Instead, the intent is to let each new phase of the revelational process speak for itself in terms of the truth to be emphasized. For instance, the “that it might be fulfilled” formula for introducing quotations from the old covenant Scriptures might be explored as a distinctive emphasis in Matthew’s Gospel, while the “I am” sayings of Jesus may be noted as playing a special role in John. Paul’s Prison Epistles may be noted for their development of the “in Christ” concept, while the idea of the church as a “people of the wilderness” in Hebrews may receive special attention. Each phase in the progression of revelation throughout the new covenant era manifests its specific contribution to the full picture of God’s redemptive purposes. By letting each new phase “speak for itself,” a freshness of discovery will enhance the appreciation and appropriation of the multifaceted truth that brings sinners altogether back to God.

The Foundational Role of the Old Covenant Scriptures

Recent studies have turned more and more to the Old Testament as the source and key to understanding New Testament biblical theology. The very title of the epoch-making work of C. H. Dodd set the stage for a fresh approach to this vital subject: *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-structure of New Testament Theology*.¹⁰ Scholarly attempts have regularly been made to analyze all the various quotations of the Old Testament in the New Testament.¹¹

10. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-structure of New Testament Theology* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1952). Dodd provides stimulation and direction for this vital subject, particularly by insisting that a quotation from the Old Testament must be considered in its fuller context and not in terms of an isolated proof text taken out of context. But his self-defined methodology places limitations on the thoroughness of his work. He determines to consider only those passages in the Old Testament that are quoted by more than one author of the New Testament.

11. Cf. the 1,200-page treatment of the subject in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

Yet a somewhat different approach to this subject may prove to be useful. Up to this point, the normal procedure has been to look at a specific quotation in the New Testament, analyze it in terms of its New Testament context, and then study it in its original Old Testament context. While this method is clearly productive, it cannot be regarded as exhausting the way in which the Old Testament placed its stamp on the various New Testament documents. Matthew, Paul, and the writer of Hebrews may have occasionally had an isolated text or phrase from the Old Testament pop into their minds as they were writing their materials. It might be imagined that they would then proceed to consider the reciprocal context of their Old Testament quotation to see that it fit appropriately into their current composition. But more likely, a writer such as the author of Hebrews had read and absorbed the Old Testament to the degree that he identified in his mind passages or entire sections that he saw as having fulfillment in the era of the new covenant. Then he would incorporate portions of these references in his current composition. Quite possibly, Paul's time in the desert after his conversion on the road to Damascus was spent reading and rereading the old covenant Scriptures in light of his fresh conviction that Jesus was indeed the Christ of the Scriptures (Gal. 1:17). Brilliant rabbi that he was, trained under Gamaliel, he must have possessed a knowledge of the Scriptures that embraced the minutest detail. But having been confronted by the living and resurrected Jesus as the Christ, he had to reevaluate the whole of the message of the Old Testament from this new perspective. Out of this context he then formulated his new covenant gospel. Even to the end of his life, Paul demonstrated himself to be not only a prisoner to Rome, but a prisoner to the Scriptures as well. "Bring the books, but most of all the parchments" were among the last of his recorded words (2 Tim. 4:13). To the end of his life, he continued to search the Scriptures of the old covenant, reorganizing his perceptions of the truth so that he could bring "captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

Learners from the Christ today must also seek the depths of the old covenant as the basis of their new covenant faith even as did Matthew, Paul, and the writer of Hebrews. Only then will it be possible to comprehend the richness of the new covenant documents.

A fuller awareness of this critical dimension of New Testament biblical theology may be achieved by considering several general statements in the New Testament regarding the permeating character of the Old Testament Scriptures for the thought patterns of the New Testament.

A number of passages in the New Testament affirm by general statements that the entirety of the Scriptures of the old covenant had the effect of shaping the theology of the new covenant era. It is not merely the theological thinking of the various New Testament writers that displays this influence. Instead, the whole of redemptive history itself takes its shape from the Scriptures. A few samples from various New Testament authors attesting this truth may be noted.

Matthew's analysis of the various phases of the life of Christ in terms of the phrase "that it might be fulfilled" (Matt. 26:56) has been regularly recognized. Jesus' infancy, his teaching ministry, his healing activity, and his betrayal unto death all occur in fulfillment of Scripture (Matt. 1:22; 2:17; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9). Climactically, summarizing statements in Matthew's Gospel indicate that everything associated with the passion of the Christ occurred in fulfillment of the old covenant Scriptures:

The Son of Man will go *just as it is written about him*. (Matt. 26:24)

Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way? (Matt. 26:53–54)

Even his betrayal and arrest fall under the category of events anticipated in the Scriptures of the old covenant. Says Jesus, "This has all taken place *that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled*" (Matt. 26:56).

These generalized statements do not allude to specific passages that anticipate the redemptive events of the life and death of Christ. Instead, they draw into consideration the whole of the old covenant Scriptures.

In similar fashion, Luke concludes his Gospel with two distinctive resurrection narratives. In both cases, all-encompassing affirmations about the role of the old covenant Scriptures in anticipating the death and resurrection of Jesus hold the prominent place. At his appearance to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the resurrected Christ declares:

"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:44–47)

The breadth of redemptive-historical elements encompassed in these two statements is quite remarkable: (1) all the various sufferings of the Christ, (2) his glorious resurrection on the third day, (3) the subsequent preaching of repentance and forgiveness, (4) the inclusion of all nations as recipients of the saving gospel, (5) beginning at Jerusalem. All these key factors of the Christian gospel are declared to find their explication in the old covenant Scriptures. In addition, all parts of the Scriptures as specified by the Jewish canon as “the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms” are declared to contain these critical elements of the new covenant gospel.

Luke’s account of the effect of the opening of the Scriptures about himself to his disciples by the resurrected Christ must be carefully noted. When the risen Lord disappeared from sight, they reflected on their experience: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road *and opened the Scriptures to us?*” (Luke 24:32). The “burning heart,” the heart elevated with wonder at God’s redemptive working in the world, is not in their minds dependent on a visible sighting of the Savior. Even while their eyes were restrained from recognizing him, their hearts overflowed with astonished amazement. What produced in them the “burning heart”? Not the recognition that the man speaking with them was the resurrected Christ. No, it was the opening of the Scriptures, the illumination of their minds concerning the mysteries of God revealed in the old covenant Scriptures—that is the thing that caused their exhilaration.

For this reason, every believer in Christ of every age and continent can also experience the “burning heart.” Physical sightings of the Savior are not the thing. Understanding, believing, and doing the Scriptures are everything.

The Gospel of John begins and ends by declaring this same generalized truth about the significance of the old covenant Scriptures in relation to the new covenant. As Jesus begins to summon disciples who will join him in the publication of this saving gospel, Philip declares to Nathanael, “We have found the one *Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote*” (John 1:45).

On more than one occasion, the testimony of the old covenant Scriptures concerning the resurrection from the dead of the Christ is acknowledged

in the Gospel of John. Only after Jesus was raised from the dead did the disciples “believe the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken” (John 2:22). After Jesus was glorified, the disciples finally realized “that these things had been written about him” (12:16). When receiving witness concerning the empty tomb, Peter and John run to the site. John, most likely the younger of the two, arrives first. Peter follows, but does not hesitate to rush in. Then John enters, and “he saw and believed. For not yet did they understand the Scripture that it was necessary for him to rise from the dead” (20:8b–9). Two things stand out in this passage. (1) The term “Scripture” is in the singular, suggesting that more than one portion of the old covenant Scriptures anticipated the resurrection of the Christ. This singular form for “Scripture” occurs no fewer than eleven times in the Gospel of John. It appears only three times in the other Gospels, and always with the modifier “this” Scripture (Mark 12:10; Luke 4:21; 22:37). While at times in John the singular “Scripture” refers to a specific passage of the Old Testament, the singular form also indicates that the apostle viewed the witness of the Old Testament as a unified testimony. This combined testimony provided the basis for belief in the resurrection of the Christ. (2) This statement in John 20:8b–9 also underscores the fact that if a person knows the Scripture adequately, he does not need to see the resurrected Christ in order to believe. A full knowledge of the Scriptures should prove more effective in producing faith than being an eyewitness to the resurrected Christ. For an isolated appearance could be subject to many misunderstandings and subsequent doubts. But a faith generated from the whole of the old covenant Scriptures may rise to a full comprehension of the redemptive and restorative intentions of God’s saving work as displayed across the old covenant as well as the new covenant ages.

In the preaching of Acts, the apostles discourage the people from waiting until the resurrected Christ appears to them personally before they believe. Instead, they point out that in God’s good purpose, the resurrected Jesus was seen not by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had previously designated (ἀλλὰ μάρτυσιν τοῖς προκεχειροτονημένοις ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, Acts 10:41). Literally, the text says that God “hand-picked in advance” particular people to carry the responsibility of witnessing to the reality of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Paul even lists those chosen witnesses (1 Cor. 15:5–8). Still further, the bare fact of a resurrection from the dead would have little lasting value apart from the significance assigned to it by God. As a consequence, the apostles ultimately base their case for Jesus’ resurrection on the testimony of the old covenant Scriptures. Only as the resurrected

Jesus is perceived as the promised descendant of David who now sits as the exalted Messiah at God's right hand with lordly power *in fulfillment of the Scriptures* (Acts 2:24–36) will the gospel message effectively communicate its life-transforming power. Only as it is perceived that “all the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (10:43) will his death and resurrection actually save. Only as his death and resurrection are understood as having “*fulfilled the words of the prophets*” that consummate “*all that was written about him*” and bring to realization “*what God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us*”—only then can the forgiveness of sins be effectively proclaimed through him (Acts 13:27–39).

So the testimony of the old covenant Scriptures, conjoined with the living and active working of the Holy Spirit, seals the true meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ in the hearts of all those who believe.

In view of these generalized statements about the role of the old covenant Scriptures in shaping the faith of new covenant participants, it may be assumed that the specific materials from the Old Testament quoted in the New Testament are only the tip of the iceberg. Not just the isolated texts, but the larger, deeper streams of old covenant theology form the foundation for new covenant theology.

So it's not simply a matter of analyzing the “use” of the Old Testament by the New Testament. Instead, it's coming to understand how the Old Testament in its total message *shapes* the very heart and substance of the New Testament. For the Old Testament does not serve simply as the substructure of the New Testament. Instead, the old covenant Scriptures actually define the essential nature of the New Testament's message. As a result, a full comprehension of the Old Testament's role in defining the message of the New Testament will be grasped only by the absorption of the total message of the Old Testament. To think like Paul, a person must comprehend the old covenant Scriptures as Paul did.

For many of us, it may be too late in life to achieve this level of comprehension of the Old Testament Scriptures. In a day of extreme specialization such as prevails today, the generalist can hardly find a hearing.¹² Yet perhaps those of a future generation may begin early enough to develop

12. Witness the effort of Brevard S. Childs, a recognized Old Testament scholar, to span the two Testaments in his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). The work is frequently cited in terms of its Old Testament portion. But few and far between have been the references to the New Testament portion of his work.

such a command of the whole of the Old Testament that they may be able to “think God’s thoughts after him” in a way that does full justice to the consummative role of the New Testament.

Contemporary Application of New Testament Biblical Theology: An Effort to Realize the Stated Goal of the Various Writers of the New Testament

Unending are the instances in which the writers of the New Testament apply their redemptive truths to the people of New Testament times. But an analysis of passages that expressly declare the reason why a particular portion of the new covenant documents was written may be helpful. Not in all cases, but in many portions of the New Testament the author specifically states *why* his materials were *written*. The following instances may be noted.

Two of the Gospel writers explicitly declare their reason for writing their record of the life of Jesus the Christ. Luke in the preface to his Gospel indicates that it seemed good for him to “*write an orderly account*” so that Theophilus “*may know the certainty*” of the things he has been taught (Luke 1:3c–4). Luke’s concern is to establish the objective reality of the good news about which he writes. So it is not surprising that he begins his Gospel by establishing three times over the historical moment in terms of governmental rulers. The events he records occurred “in the time of Herod king of Judea” (1:5); in the days of Caesar Augustus while Quirinius was governor of Syria (2:1–2); and “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracōnitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene” (3:1). The author of the Third Gospel clearly writes with the goal of providing a basis for the certainty of the things that his reader has been taught. In the same vein, a New Testament biblical theology should strive to provide a basis for certainty regarding the various elements of the faith.

Quite uniquely, John concludes his Gospel by stating the goal of his writing: “these are written that *you* may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing *you* may have life in his name” (John 20:31). Communicating faith and life to his readers appears as the stated purpose of John’s Gospel. With this stated purpose, it should not be surprising that the root for “to believe” occurs no fewer than ninety-eight times in John’s Gospel. In accord with this stated purpose, a New Testament biblical theology should have as one of its principal goals belief of the gospel by its readers.

In accordance with their stated purpose, these Gospels about Jesus Christ have been written that people might have a well-grounded faith in the certainty of the Christian gospel. As a consequence, whoever reads a New

Testament biblical theology based on these Gospels should ideally come to a well-established faith in Jesus as the promised Christ of the old covenant Scriptures. All those who will entrust themselves to Christ on the basis of this message will possess eternal life.

On some occasions, the apostle Paul specifically declares his reasons for writing letters to the various churches. To the Romans he indicates that he has written “quite boldly on some points,” to confirm the specific grace that God has given him “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the nations with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the nations might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:15–17). This indication of his reason for writing to the Romans embraces all three major sections of this letter. In the first section (Rom. 1–8), Paul sets forth the gospel of God’s grace for the Jewish remnant as well as for people from all the nations. In the second section (Rom. 9–11), Paul presents this same gospel in terms of the undulation from Israel to the nations, from the nations back to Israel, and from Israel to all the nations, until the full number of Israelites is simultaneously realized with the full number of people from all nations. In the third section (Rom. 12–16), this same theme of the gospel for Israel and the nations is presented in terms of its many practical implications, including the special glory that comes to God as a consequence of their united praise (15:5–13).

In terms of Paul’s expectations as a consequence of his writing this letter to the Romans, saving faith among Israel and the nations that brings about justification as well as sanctification of the whole life is the point. When this goal is accomplished, God will receive ever greater glory.

In terms of Paul’s purpose for writing his other epistles, each of them is filled with specific admonitions that he hopes will affect their faith and life. But one passage offers a summary of his intention for writing, which may serve as a guide for the purposes of a New Testament biblical theology:

I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.
(1 Tim. 3:14–15)

Anticipating the day in which no more living apostles will be present to give specific guidance to the churches, Paul addresses Pastor Timothy. He explains the purpose of his writing, which involves both the faith and the life of God’s people, who form the church of the living God. This church

functions as the pillar and foundation of the truth throughout this entire world. As weak and insignificant as it may appear, the church in every community and throughout the world serves as the foundation on which truth stands, and as the pillar that supports the very structures of truth. Just as two magnificent pillars upheld the glorious temple of Solomon (1 Kings 7:15–22), so the church must serve as pillar and foundation to uphold the truth of God in the new covenant temple. As the house of God, the place of his dwelling in this world, the church has the highest imaginable calling. This calling can be realized only as the church upholds every aspect of God’s truth. But it must be not only truth in terms of theological correctness. The church must also know how to conduct itself. It must embody the truth in its actions.

So these are the purposes of Paul’s letters, and these are the reasons for a New Testament biblical theology. It should be written to empower the church so that it can sustain and uphold the truth of God both by its right doctrine and by its right practice. Apart from the church’s fulfilling this vital role, no other organization can be expected to realize its proper place in God’s world, whether it be political, economic, educational, or cultural. No other organization can function as the “pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). It is indeed an awesome responsibility. By doctrine and by life, the church serves as God’s dwelling place in this world.

In terms of the General Epistles, several passages summarize the point of their writing. In each case, a practical purpose defines the reason for the writing.

The author of Hebrews declares:

The summation of the various things we are saying is this: The kind of high priest we have is one who has sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister of the Holy of Holies, and of the true tabernacle which the Lord set up, not man. (Heb. 8:1–2)

That the writer refers to his written document as something that he is “saying” rather than “writing” suits his own description of the very nature of this document. He himself describes it as a “word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22). This “speaking” aspect of the author’s “writing” conforms precisely to his analysis of the Word of God as “living,” “power-filled,” cutting with the sharpness of a double-edged sword (4:12). By this Word the Holy Spirit “speaks” through the old covenant Scriptures (1:6, 8; 2:6 [“saying”], 12, 13; 3:7; 5:6; 10:15, 17; 12:5) so that his reference to something that he is “saying” equals what he is “writing.”

In developing the practical consequences of his summation of truth about Jesus the High Priest (Heb. 8:1–2), the writer underscores the fact that this man Jesus is both Priest and King. He rules in behalf of his people as well as interceding on their behalf. As a consequence, God’s people may come boldly to the throne of grace. They may constantly draw near to the very inner sanctuary of the Lord’s Most Holy Place, and there find cleansing from sin as well as all the help they may need (4:14–16). So a New Testament biblical theology true to this reality will provide great encouragement to all of God’s people to find all their needs met as they “draw near” in worship and wonder through their priestly Messiah (4:16).

The apostle Peter summarizes his purpose for writing both his letters:

Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to transparently clear thinking.
(2 Peter 3:1)

When Peter presents “clear thinking” as the way to holy and godly living (2 Peter 3:1b), he echoes the same perspective as the apostle Paul, who promotes “truth that leads to godliness” (Titus 1:1). In Peter’s case, the apostle specifically indicates that he wrote his first letter to exhort them, and to declare that the “true grace of God” ordains suffering for a little while before their experience of eternal glory (1 Peter 5:10–12). In his second letter, he labors to establish the right view of “the last days” and the return of Christ (2 Peter: 3:3–11). His goal is that his readers “live holy and godly lives” as they look forward to the day of God (vv. 11b–12).

The apostle John indicates in his letter(s) that he is writing not a new commandment, but one that his recipients have had from the beginning (2 John 5a). That commandment is that all believers “love one another” and demonstrate their love by walking in obedience to his commands, which is the same as walking in love (vv. 5b–6). Once more it becomes clear that the goal of his writings is practically directed. Not merely doctrine but life must be the subject of a proper New Testament biblical theology.

Though he was very eager to write about their common salvation, Jude found himself compelled to appeal to them in his writing that they “contend earnestly for the faith” (Jude 3). For ungodly people have crept into their midst, “pervert[ing] the grace of our God into sensuality and deny[ing] our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (v. 4).

In the book of Revelation, the glorified Jesus commands the apostle John, “Write . . . what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later” (Rev. 1:19). Previously the voice of the Son of God has commanded that

John “write on a scroll” what he sees “and send it to the seven churches” (v. 11). Even earlier, the Lord’s angelic messenger had pronounced his special blessing on “the one who reads the words of this prophecy” and on “those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near” (v. 3). The ongoing significance of this writing is underscored by the notation that this revelation will describe both “what is now” and “what will take place later” (v. 19). In addition, as in every other case of numbers in the book of Revelation, the reference to “seven” churches removes these messages from a single application to a multiple application across the ages. Even until today, the person who reads and heeds the message of this written document of Revelation addressed to the churches is guaranteed a distinctive blessing.

The book of Revelation has been written to enable the churches across the ages, until the consummate return of Christ, to understand *what is*, as well as *what is to be*. On the basis of this perspective, all churches should receive benefit and blessing from the various messages of this document.

Summary

The new covenant documents have a united goal despite their vast diversity. They have been inscribed to establish and to maintain the well-being of churches across the ages. Both by grounding the church in “true truth” and by indicating the life that must be lived among Christ’s churches, these writings play a vital role in the extension of the kingdom and church of our Lord Jesus the Christ. As the message in its various phases and stages of the revelation gradually unfolds, the church of Christ today should be aided in realizing its grand goal in the plan and purpose of God. It is the hope that the current treatment of the new covenant documents will enhance the realization of the goals stated in the documents of the new covenant themselves.