

The Hasel-Kaiser and Evangelical Discussions on the Search for a Center or *Mitte* to Biblical Theology

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It is a privilege to contribute this essay on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Dr. Gerhard Hasel's sad and untimely death (1935-1994) in an automobile accident in 1994. He was a leader in the field of Biblical Theology and a real friend to me personally, as I profited from my numerous interchanges with him. For example, he kindly invited me to teach one of his Biblical Theology classes at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan and I reciprocated by inviting him at that time to teach my Biblical Theology class at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. The students at both schools loved this living dialogue between both of us and freely entered into the question and answer session as they watched the expressions on each of our faces in response to questions they knew were sure to arouse some controversy between the two of us, despite the rather large areas of agreement we shared in Biblical studies.

One of the areas of Biblical Theology where we had some of our strongest disagreements, however, was in the area of what, if anything, constituted the center (German *Mitte*) of Biblical Theology. In fact, Gerhard clearly announced the following response in answer to that inquiry:

The question whether the OT has something that can be considered its center (German *Mitte*) is of considerable importance for its understanding and for doing OT theology. The matter of the center

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plays an important and at times even decisive role for presentations of OT theology.¹

Despite this significant acknowledgment of the importance of this issue of the unity of the Bible and Biblical Theology, he preferred to speak of a multiplex approach for doing Biblical Theology, for to his way of thinking, limiting the contents of the whole Old Testament to the single idea of a center was inadequate as a method of structuring the entirety of Biblical Theology. Here is how he put it:

[the multiplex approach] avoids the pitfalls of structuring a theology of the OT by means of a center, theme, key concept, or focal point but allows for the various motifs, themes, and concepts to emerge in all their variety and richness without elevating any of these longitudinal perspectives into a single structuring concept, whether it be communion, covenant, promise, kingdom of God, or something else. The multiplex approach allows aside from this and in the first instance that the theologies of the various OT books and blocks of writings emerge and stand next to each other in all their variety and richness.²

Gerhard did not go on to identify what he felt those pitfalls were exactly. One could see how a “pitfall” would emerge, however, if it involved importing a concept from *outside* (*ab extra*) to act as the center for all of Scripture. But what if such a “center” presented itself from *within* the body of Scriptural text itself? What if that internal concept showed how cohesive and unified the plan of a single mind and purpose, *viz.*, that from God himself, was as it embraced the entire multiplexity of issues into one coordinated whole and developing a unified plan to the entire corpus of Scripture? Nevertheless, even Gerhard could not remain entirely comfortable with this multiplex solution, for on the very next page in his *Basic Issues* book he showed some sympathy for the concept of a unifying center. He taught:

The final aim of the canonical approach to Old Testament theology is to penetrate through the various theologies of the individual books and

¹ Gerhard Hasel. *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 4th edition, Revised and Expanded (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 139.

² *Ibid.*, 113.

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groups of writings and the various longitudinal themes to the dynamic unity that binds all theologies and themes together.³

Precisely so! Thus, in spite of the fine set of cautions that Professor Hasel raised, we are never told just how the various theologies of the various Biblical books stand next to each other or form one cohesive whole. Indeed, he does recognize that the mere identification of the several longitudinal themes by themselves is not the totality of the task of the work of the Biblical theologian. But then what would such a quest, as he had otherwise conceived of it, result in?

What is most regrettable, of course, is the fact that Gerhard never got a chance to produce his own complete Biblical Theology which would have demonstrated just how he would illustrate and employ such a coordination of the multiplex themes with all of their variegated variety. Fortunately, there was an article he wrote, which was published posthumously, but even in this article he focused more on some of the cautions he had raised in his earlier works⁴ than he did on setting forth a how a complete Biblical Theology using his method would work. Nevertheless, he did survey a wide range of suggestions for a center to the theology of the Bible, but he found that the very fact that there were so many suggestions showed that there was little or just plain no consensus on any one theme for the center. Such a quest was beyond the boundaries of good Old Testament scholarship he concluded, to our disappointment. Nevertheless, he did add that if one was to respect the integrity of the contribution of each of the Biblical books, a multiplex approach for a center had to be central to this quest. In addition to all of this, Gerhard was worried that any attempt to identify a center would have the effect of excluding some significant Biblical materials and would have resulted in a canon within a canon. This, of course, is where we tended to disagree, for it would not be necessary for God himself to omit part of his own teaching if along with that teaching he still had charted a clear course that marked his goal, purpose and plan in its entirety! But before I restate my case for such a center, what

³ Ibid., 114.

⁴ Gerhard F. Hasel, "Proposals for a Canonical Biblical Theology," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 34.1 (1996): 23-33.

modifications or criticisms, in the views of someone like myself, must be made over the case made for the multiplex approach?

Critiques of a Multiplex Approach

The key question that must be put to those evangelicals, who like Gerhard reject an organizing center for a Biblical Theology (and their number among conservative scholars is quite large indeed), must be this simple question: What then gives the Bible its unity and wholeness to its message? If we contend, as some do, for a discipline called “Biblical Theology” (in the singular number), as opposed to a renamed discipline entitled “Biblical Theologies” (the plural number), this must imply that there is some way in which all the material is organized around some central principle, theme, purpose, idea, or person. If we assert that there is some type of unity to the word of God, as most evangelicals eventually do in one way or another, then what will serve as that integrating and unifying plan and structure for the whole canon of Scripture? Will there not need to be some kind of overarching unifying structure that not only will link the individual books, but also one that will link the two testaments as well? What will show that it is but one book with a single plan or goal and purpose even though it is spread out of some 1400 years in three languages with some 40 writers from three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe?

To be more specific, how are we to look at the Old Testament? Do we see a continuity linking the Old Testament promises and fulfillments in the New Testament? How shall we read the Old Testament if it is isolated from the New Testament? Should we read the Abrahamic narratives without regard to the Apostle Paul? And if we introduced Paul into the discussion of these patriarchal narratives as a new way of looking at these narratives, would we be misrepresenting them and misleading God’s people? Did Jesus’ coming change what was represented in the Old Testament stories into a more spiritual, allegorical or mystic meaning of the text that ended the divine promises to a rebellious Israel and now made them over to the Church? Did the various books and writers of Scripture have any kind of organizing mind, plan, purpose and goal within them that each writer knew by virtue of revelation from God the Father?

As far back as the middle of the twentieth century, H. H. Rowley had already addressed this problem in his 1953 book *The Unity of the Bible*:

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There is no automatic spiritual growth of mankind, and the Bible nowhere tells the story of such growth. It records how men of God, acting under a direction which they believed to be of God, mediated ideas and principles to men. It does not tell how men by the exercise of their minds wrested the secret of life and the universe from a reluctant Unknown, but how God laid hold of them and revealed himself through them. If there is any truth in this, then a unity of the Bible is to be expected. If God was revealing Himself, then there should be some unity about the revelation, since it was the same Being who was being revealed.⁵

Surely the words of our Lord Jesus to the Samaritan woman must shape the “theological heart of the Bible”⁶ when he told her that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:23). Even though the discipline of Biblical Theology is in the best position to track such a development through the Biblical text, the irony is that in most of the early practitioners of Biblical Theology, the emphasis was dominated by the study of the multiple themes of Scripture with presuppositions that were antithetical to the possibility of viewing it as a unified whole.⁷ For in the eyes of the greater number of teachers and scholars, the Bible’s diversity was too prominent a feature in the Bible to allow for the possibility of a unified whole. That emphasis has carried on from the height of the Biblical Theology Movement in the 1950s and 70s up to our own day!

Accordingly, few, if any evangelicals, want to argue that the Bible does not have something of an overall unity. Few would totally disallow a case for any form of unity or organizational structure to the whole corpus of Scripture! Indeed, would not disallowing such a supposition against a general unity of the Bible seriously affect the argument for the presence of the divine mind, purpose, and plan of a God for order and forethought throughout the whole of Scripture? Surely, God had not left the materials of revelation to be scattered over the pages of Scripture in

⁵ H. H. Rowley. *The Unity of the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 8.

⁶ A phrase borrowed from Elmer Martens, “Tackling Old Testament Theology,” *JETS* 20 (1977): 123.

⁷ This is similar to the observation made by Mark R. Saucy, “Israel as a Necessary Theme in Biblical Theology,” in *The People, The Land, and the Future of Israel: Israel and the Jewish People in the Plan of God*, Eds. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 170.

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some haphazardly or disorganized way despite the multiplicity of themes and emphases. Instead, Scripture would imitate the same orderliness and purpose that was endemic to the very nature of the character and person of God himself.

Gerhard's legitimate concerns over whether the declaration of some overarching unity to the Bible would possibly lead to the exclusion of some texts of Scripture, or that it might develop a canon within a canon, is one that all Biblical scholars should be concerned about and therefore agree on. Gerhard's concern for retaining the integrity of each Biblical witness is certainly to be applauded. As opposed to some aspects of this concern, however, we would express our concern over those who seem to rush to obtain an incorrect Christological re-interpretation or representation for every Old Testament text by incorrectly using a New Testament as the basis for re-establishing a new meaning for what it thought the Old Testament had originally meant to say. Each Old Testament text, however, must first be allowed to say what the author, who stood in the counsel of God, obtained, as we must remind ourselves over and over again, from the Lord who gave us his revelation, rather than our intrusively and arbitrarily projecting a "Jesus-only" message from every text in the earlier part of the canon. Not every Old Testament text is about Jesus! Some of those texts were meant to reprove, rebuke and to teach!

Others, such as Charles Scobie, agreed with Gerhard Hasel in proposing a Multi-thematic Approach that identifies longitudinal themes, motifs, and concepts.⁸ But Scobie likewise failed to show how his organization of this multitrack approach to Scripture resulted in any clear epochs or broadly synchronic structures which showed a progressive development of any alleged structure or epochs in a plan of God. What was missing was any treatment of the various epochs of Biblical revelation that showed how the various corpora were diachronically integrated and resulted in clearly identifiable stages in the promise and propose of God. The "Promise-plan of God" showed the best prospect for being the basis for detecting how this salvation from the Jews could become a coherent whole in the discipline of Biblical Theology.

⁸ Charles H. H. Scobie. *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

How the Unity of the Bible is Built Around the Promise-Plan of God

From one end of the Biblical story to the other, Scripture reveals that the Living God uniquely called the world into being by the word of his mouth and then he called the Jewish people to be his chosen instruments to bring the good news about God's redemption to the world. This message of creation and salvation he purposely located on the land bridge that Israel formed geographically between the continents of Africa, Europe and Asia as the setting and the place where he would position his people Israel both in history and in the end day. The choice was solely one that the Living God made—there were no meritorious works or reasons for such a choice other than his own graciousness and mercy. That divine decision also continues to remain firm, especially despite Israel's apostasy and downright faithless treachery, which might otherwise have signaled a renunciation of one or more of those divine choices. In fact, the nations of the world would themselves already benefit from the divine work of creation, would further benefit from God's choice of Abraham and his line, for Abraham and his descendants were the ones God had designated to be the channel through whom all the nations would be blessed with the good news of the gospel (Gen 12:3; Gal 3:8).

Paul himself announced that this word given to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 was nothing less the "gospel" itself, God's "good news" (Gal 3:8). Moreover, Abraham was the first one to be evangelized by his exercise of faith and trust in this coming "Man of Promise" (Gen 15:6; Gal 3:8), when he was promised that one of his own "seed" would embody the substance of God's plan and he himself would be the object of faith in that "good news."

The continuity of this message of creation and the message of the promise of the "Seed" throughout the whole Bible was the real key to the question of unity, for Jesus did not signal a sudden metamorphosis of the text from something old to something new; instead, he claimed that the meaning the text had seminally back in the time of the patriarchs, and for all those who followed them, was the identical basis for any and all who would subsequently be justified by faith. Yeshua (Jesus) was the One whom the prophets would later on point to as the sole object of their faith.

Paul's interpretation of this text was not a new signal for the New Testament community to assign a change or an alternate meaning to what

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had been claimed by each writer of the Old Testament. The use of the Old Testament text by the new converts, all the way up to the time of Christ and the apostles, and on into our own day, was consistently the same and it matched just how the writers of the older testament had expressed it. The Bible had only one perception of reality; it represented a single conceptual understanding of the God, in whose current and ultimate rule and reign over everything, and in his promise of salvation to all who trusted him, would embody one continuous plan for all mortals. The promise involved representing a wide variety of diversity of the doctrines taught, but that did not deter this divine plan from making the main thing the main thing in the plan of God—the promise of God about his coming Messiah who would rule and reign and save all who trusted him.

This is not to say that the current emphasis, or concurrence of those in scholarship, is one where all are agreed on the case for the unity of the Bible; scholarship has probably sided more with the case for the diversity of Scripture, as its leading principle of our day—even among evangelicals! Gerhard Maier put it this way:

It is difficult to speak of a “center” of Scripture today, because the rubric “center of Scripture” is often separated from the “unity of Scripture.” While the two were closely identified at the time of the Reformation, the Enlightenment disentangled them. Indeed, the “center of Scripture” practically replaced the lost “unity of Scripture.”⁹

Nevertheless, it has been my habit in some 56 years of teaching Biblical Theology to follow the path laid down by Willis J. Beecher in his 1902 Stone lectures at Princeton Seminary, later repeatedly published as *The Prophets and the Promise*. Beecher defined the promise this way:

God gave a promise to Abraham, and through him to mankind; a promise eternally fulfilled and fulfilling in the history of Israel; and chiefly fulfilled in Jesus Christ, he being that which is principal in the history of Israel.¹⁰

⁹ Gerhard Maier. *Biblical Hermeneutics*. Transl. R. W. Yarbrough. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 202.

¹⁰ Willis J. Beecher. *The Prophets and the Promise*, (1905), reprint (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975), 178.

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This promise had ten distinctive features:

(1) The Promise-plan of God is found throughout the entire Scripture and not just in selected passages as is differently understood in an alternative view known as the promise-fulfillment rubric/scheme. While the Old Testament uses a constellation of words such as “oath,” “word,” or “pledge,” the New Testament settled on using “promise” in its verbal, nominal or adjectival forms in almost every New Testament book except five of the twenty-seven books.

(2) The Promise-plan of God is regarded in Scripture as a single plan even though it is repeated and unfolded through the centuries with numerous specifications and forms, but always with the same essential core. It became the content of the word given in Eve about her “Seed,” the essence of the covenant God cut with Abraham, the word God gave to David about a “house, throne and kingdom,” the promise of the Holy Spirit, the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God, the promise of Yeshua’s death, burial, and sure resurrection, and many more similar doctrines that were all embraced under the single rubric of the “Promise.”

(3) The New Testament writers consistently equate this single, definite promise (it invariably occurs with the definite article) as the one made with Abraham, when God called him to leave Ur of the Chaldeans.

(4) While the New Testament may occasionally speak of “promises,” using the plural form of the word “promise,” they do not mean thereby to weaken the case for a single, definite promise of God, but only to note that the one definite promise-plan of God has enormous number of doctrines that are justifiably attached to the plan.

(5) The New Testament writers view this promise as being composed of many specifications and doctrines that are all embraced in that one single plan.

(6) The promise made to Eve, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David is represented as being partially fulfilled in their time (for example in the exodus), but there was much yet to be realized in the distant future beyond the times of these first recipients.

(7) The New Testament writers not only declare the promise-plan of God can be seen throughout the whole Old Testament, but they adopt the Old Testament phraseology as their own way of speaking of God’s revelation to them. Hence, they talk about the “Seed,” the “people of God,” the “dynasty of David,” the “day of the Lord,” etc.

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(8) Both the Old and New Testaments teach that the promise of God is irrevocable and is operating eternally. Its hallmark was that it was to be “everlasting/eternal.”

(9) The New Testament makes a strong connection between the promise doctrine and the New Covenant that God would make with “the house of Judah and the house of Israel.” Though there never was a covenant specifically given to the Church, the Church participates in that same New Covenant when they by faith are grafted into the one olive tree, which has its roots in the promise God gave to the patriarchs, and in the trunk of the olive tree which is Israel, wherein some of the natural branches have been lopped off temporarily because of their lack of faith, but all of which can be re-grafted in once again by faith along with the wild branches of the believing Gentiles.

(10) The culmination of all these doctrinal specifications is wrapped up in the first and second coming of Jesus Christ. He is the heart and focus of this one definite plan.

Conclusion:¹¹

It is especially important to begin, then, as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman: “Salvation is from the Jews.” Even more importantly, it is of critical significance that the Gentile Church recognizes that the New Covenant was not made with the structure of the New Testament Church; we repeat, God never made a covenant with the Church. Nor did he place a condition that Israel had to fulfill in the covenant he originally made with Abraham or David in order for them to inherit the blessings of the promise except they must believe; instead, he promised the perpetuity of the contents of his covenant with “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” on into eternity. Thus, disobedient Israelites may be cast outside of his grace, but that does not mean God will forever abandon his promise to Abraham or David. God’s plan remains secure and sure for all eternity!

¹¹ See a fuller description of this argument in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Recovering the Unity of the Bible: One Continuous Story, Plan and Purpose* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

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