

# The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline

by **Geerhardus Vos** (1862-1949)

The following essay was Vos' Inaugural address as Professor of Biblical Theology in Princeton Theological Seminary, delivered in the First Presbyterian Church of Princeton on May 8, 1894. It was originally published by Anson D. F. Randolph & Co. (New York, 1894), 40 pp., but is now in the public domain and may be freely copied and distributed. This electronic edition was scanned and edited by Shane Rosenthal for *Reformation Ink*.

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MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

It is with no little hesitation that I enter upon the work to which you have called me and to-day more formally introduced me. In reaching the conclusion that it was my duty to accept the call with which you had honored me, I was keenly alive to the incongruity of my name being associated in the remotest manner with the names of those illustrious men through whom God has glorified Himself in this institution. Some of those at whose feet I used to sit while a student here, are fallen asleep; a smaller number remain until now. The memory of the former as well as the presence of the latter make me realize my weakness even more profoundly than the inherent difficulty of the duties I shall have to discharge. While, however, on the one hand, there is something in these associations that might well fill me with misgivings at this moment, I shall not endeavor to conceal that on the other hand they are to me a source of inspiration. In view of my own insufficiency I rejoice all the more in having behind and around me this cloud of witnesses. I am thoroughly convinced that in no other place or environment could the sacred influences of the past be brought to bear upon me with a purer and mightier impulse to strengthen and inspire me than here. The pledge to which I have just subscribed is itself a symbol of this continuity between the past and the future; and I feel that it will act upon me, not merely by outward restraint, but with an inwardly constraining power, being a privilege as well as an obligation.

Although not a new study, yet Biblical Theology is a new chair, in this Seminary; and this fact has determined the choice of the subject on which I purpose to address you. Under ordinary circumstances, the treatment of some special subject of investigation would have been more appropriate, and perhaps more interesting to you, than a discussion of general principles. But Biblical Theology being a recent arrival in the Seminary curriculum and having been entrusted to my special care and keeping, I consider it my duty to introduce to you this branch of theological science, and to describe, in general terms at least, its nature and the manner in which I hope to teach it.

This is all the more necessary because of the wide divergence of opinion in various quarters concerning the standing of this newest accession to the circle of sacred studies. Some have lauded her to the skies as the ideal of scientific theology, in such extravagant terms as to reflect seriously upon the character of her sisters of greater age and longer standing. Others look upon

the new-comer with suspicion, or even openly dispute her right to a place in the theological family. We certainly owe it to her and to ourselves to form a well-grounded and intelligent judgment on this question. I hope that what I shall say will in some degree shed light on the points at issue, and enable you to judge impartially and in accordance with the facts of the case.

### **The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline**

Every discussion of what is to be understood by Biblical Theology ought to proceed from a clear understanding of what Theology is in general. Etymology, in many cases a safer guide than a priori constructions, tells us that Theology is knowledge concerning God, and this primitive definition is fully supported by encyclopedic principles. Only when making Theology knowledge concerning God do we have the right to call it a separate science. Sciences are not formed at haphazard, but according to an objective principle of division. As in general science is bound by its object and must let itself be shaped by reality; so likewise the classification of sciences, the relation of the various members in the body of universal knowledge, has to follow the great lines by which God has mapped out the immense field of the universe. The title of a certain amount of knowledge to be called a separate science depends on its reference to such a separate and specific object as is marked off by these God-drawn lines of distinction. We speak of a science of Biology, because God has made the phenomena of life distinct from those of inorganic being. Now, from this point of view we must say that no science has a clearer title to separate existence than Theology. Between God as the Creator and all other things as created the distinction is absolute. There is not another such gulf within the universe. God, as distinct from the creature, is the only legitimate object of Theology.

It will be seen, however, on a moment's reflection, that Theology is not merely distinguished from the other sciences by its object, but that it also sustains an altogether unique relation to this object, for which no strict analogy can be found elsewhere. In all the other sciences man is the one who of himself takes the first step in approaching the objective world, in subjecting it to his scrutiny, in compelling it to submit to his experiments — in a word, man is the one who proceeds actively to make nature reveal her facts and her laws. In Theology this relation between the subject and object is reversed. Here it is God who takes the first step to approach man for the purpose of disclosing His nature, nay, who creates man in order that He may have a finite mind able to receive the knowledge of His infinite perfections. In Theology the object, far from being passive, by the act of creation first posits the subject over against itself, and then as the living God proceeds to impart to this subject that to which of itself it would have no access. For "the things of God none knoweth, save the Spirit of God." Strictly speaking, therefore, we should say that not God in and for Himself, but God in so far as He has revealed Himself, is the object of Theology.

Though applying to Theology in the abstract and under all circumstances, this unique character has been emphasized by the entrance of sin into the human race. In his sinful condition, while retaining some knowledge of God, man for all pure and adequate information in divine things is absolutely dependent on that new self-disclosure of God which we call supernatural revelation. By the new birth and the illumination of the mind darkened through sin, a new subject is created. By the objective self-manifestation of God as the Redeemer, a new order of things is called into being. And by the depositing of the truth concerning this new order of things in the Holy Scriptures, the human mind is enabled to obtain that new knowledge which is but the reflection in the regenerate consciousness of an objective world of divine acts and words.

This being so, it follows immediately that the beginning of our Theology consists in the appropriation of that supernatural process by which God has made Himself the object of our knowledge. We are not left to our own choice here, as to where we shall begin our theological study. The very nature of Theology requires us to begin with those branches which relate to the revelation-basis of our science. Our attitude from the outset must be a dependent and receptive one. To let the image of God's self-revelation in the Scriptures mirror itself as fully and clearly as possible in his mind, is the first and most important duty of every theologian. And it is in accordance with this principle that, in the development of scientific theology through the ages, a group of studies have gradually been separated from the rest and begun to form a smaller organism among themselves, inasmuch as the receptive attitude of the theological consciousness toward the source of revelation was the common idea underlying and controlling them. This group is usually designated by the name of Exegetical Theology. Its formation was not a matter of mere accident, nor the result of definite agreement among theologians; the immanent law of the development of the science, as rooted in its origin, has brought it about in a natural manner.

In classifications of this kind general terms are apt to acquire more or less indefinite meanings. They tend to become formulas used for the purpose of indicating that certain studies belong together from a practical point of view or according to a methodological principle. In many cases it would be fanciful to seek any other than a practical justification for grouping certain branches together. So it is clear on the surface that much is subsumed under the department of Exegetical Theology, which bears only a very remote and indirect relation to its central idea. There are subservient and preparatory studies lying in the periphery and but loosely connected with the organic center. Nevertheless, if Exegetical Theology is to be more than a conglomerate of heterogeneous studies, having no other than a practical unity, we must expect that at its highest point of development it will appear to embody one of the necessary forms of the essential idea of all Theology, and will unfold itself as knowledge concerning God in the strict sense of the term. The science in which this actually happens will be the heart of the organism of Exegetical Theology.

Exegetical Theology deals with God under the aspect of Revealer of Himself and Author of the Scriptures. It is naturally divided into two parts, of which the one treats of the formation of the Scriptures, the other of the actual revelation of God lying back of this process. We further observe that the formation of the Scriptures serves no other purpose than to perpetuate and transmit the record of God's self-disclosure to the human race as a whole. Compared with revelation proper, the formation of the Scriptures appears as a means to an end. Bibliology with all its adjuncts, therefore, is not the center of Exegetical Theology, but is logically subordinated to the other division, which treats of revelation proper. Or, formulating it from the human point of view, all our investigations as to the origin of the Scriptures, their collection into a Canon, their original text, as well as the exegetical researches by which the contents of the Biblical writings are inductively ascertained, ultimately serve the one purpose of teaching us what God has revealed concerning Himself. None of these studies find their aim in themselves, but all have their value determined and their place assigned by the one central study to which they are leading up and in which they find their culminating point. This central study that gives most adequate and natural expression to the idea of Exegetical Theology is Biblical Theology.

In general, then, Biblical Theology is that part of Exegetical Theology which deals with the revelation of God. It makes use of all the results that have been obtained by all the preceding

studies in this department. Still, we must endeavor to determine more precisely in what sense this general definition is to be understood. For it might be said of Systematic Theology, nay of the whole of Theology, with equal truth, that it deals with supernatural revelation. The specific character of Biblical Theology lies in this, that it discusses both the form and contents of revelation from the point of view of the revealing activity of God Himself. In other words, it deals with revelation in the active sense, as an act of God, and tries to understand and trace and describe this act, so far as this is possible to man and does not elude our finite observation. In Biblical Theology both the form and contents of revelation are considered as parts and products of a divine work. In Systematic Theology these same contents of revelation appear, but not under the aspect of the stages of a divine work; rather as the material for a human work of classifying and systematizing according to logical principles. Biblical Theology applies no other method of grouping and arranging these contents than is given in the divine economy of revelation itself.

From this it follows that, in order to obtain a more definite conception of Biblical Theology, we must try to gather the general features of God's revealing work. Here, as in other cases, the organism of a science can be conceived and described only by anticipating its results. The following statements, accordingly, are not to be considered in the light of an a priori construction, but simply formulate what the study of Biblical Theology itself has taught us.

The first feature characteristic of supernatural revelation is its historical progress. God has not communicated to us the knowledge of the truth as it appears in the calm light of eternity to His own timeless vision. He has not given it in the form of abstract propositions logically correlated and systematized. The simple fact that it is the task of Systematic Theology to reproduce revealed truth in such form, shows that it does not possess this form from the beginning. The self-revelation of God is a work covering ages, proceeding in a sequence of revealing words and acts, appearing in a long perspective of time. The truth comes in the form of growing truth, not truth at rest. No doubt the explanation of this fact is partly to be sought in the finiteness of the human understanding. Even that part of the knowledge of God which has been revealed to us is so overwhelmingly great and so far transcends our human capacities, is such a flood of light, that it had, as it were, gradually to be let in upon us, ray after ray, and not the full radiancy at once. By imparting the elements of the knowledge of Himself in a divinely arranged sequence God has pointed out to us the way in which we might gradually grasp and truly know Him. This becomes still more evident, if we remember that this revelation is intended for all ages and nations and classes and conditions of men, and therefore must adapt itself to the most various characters and temperaments by which it is to be assimilated.

We feel, however, that this explanation, however plausible in itself, is but a partial one, and can never completely satisfy. The deeper ground for the historic character of revelation cannot lie in the limitations of the human subject, but must be sought in the nature of revelation itself. Revelation is not an isolated act of God, existing without connection with the other divine acts of supernatural character. It constitutes a part of that great process of the new creation through which the present universe as an organic whole shall be redeemed from the consequences of sin and restored to its ideal state, which it had originally in the intention of God. Now, this new creation, in the objective, universal sense, is not something completed by a single act all at once, but is a history with its own law of organic development. It could not be otherwise, inasmuch as at every point it proceeds on the basis of and in contact with the natural development of this world and of the human race, and, the latter being in the form of history, the former must

necessarily assume that form likewise. It is simply owing to our habit of unduly separating revelation from this comprehensive background of the total redeeming work of God, that we fail to appreciate its historic, progressive nature. We conceive of it as a series of communications of abstract truth forming a body by itself, and are at a loss to see why this truth should be parcelled out to man little by little and not given in its completeness at once. As soon as we realize that revelation is at almost every point interwoven with and conditioned by the redeeming activity of God in its wider sense, and together with the latter connected with the natural development of the present world, its historic character becomes perfectly intelligible and ceases to cause surprise.

In this great redeeming process two stages are to be distinguished. First come those acts of God which have a universal and objective significance, being aimed at the production of an organic center for the new order of things. After this had been accomplished, there follows a second stage during which this objective redemption is subjectively applied to individuals. In both the stages the supernatural element is present, though in the former, owing to its objective character, it appears more distinctly than in the latter. The whole series of redeeming acts, culminating in the incarnation and atoning work of the Mediator and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, bears the signature of the miraculous on its very face. But the supernatural, though not objectively controllable, is none the less present during the later stage in each case where an individual soul is regenerated. Revelation as such, however, is not co-extensive with this whole process in both its stages. Its history is limited to the former half, that is, it accompanies in its progress the gradual unfolding of the central and objective salvation of God, and no sooner is the latter accomplished than revelation also has run its course and its voice ceases to speak. The reason for this is obvious. The revelation of God being not subjective and individual in its nature, but objective and addressed to the human race as a whole, it is but natural that this revelation should be embedded in the channels of the great objective history of redemption and extend no further than this. In point of fact, we see that, when the finished salvation worked out among Israel is stripped of its particularistic form to extend to all nations, at the same moment the completed oracles of God are given to the human race as a whole to be henceforth subjectively studied and appropriated. It is as unreasonable to expect revelations after the close of the Apostolic age as it would be to think that the great saving facts of that period can be indefinitely increased and repeated.

Even this, however, is not sufficient to show the historic character of revelation in its full extent. Up to this point we have only seen how the disclosure of truth in general follows the course of the history of redemption. We now must add that in not a few cases revelation is identified with history. Besides making use of words, God has also employed acts to reveal great principles of truth. It is not so much the prophetic visions or miracles in the narrower sense that we think of in this connection. We refer more specially to those great, supernatural, history-making acts of which we have examples in the redemption of the covenant-people from Egypt, or in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. In these cases the history itself forms a part of revelation. There is a self-disclosure of God in such acts. They would speak even if left to speak for themselves. Forming part of history, these revealing acts necessarily assume historical relations among themselves, and succeed one another according to a well-defined principle of historical sequence. Furthermore, we observe that this system of revelation-acts is not interpolated into the larger system of biblical history after a fanciful and mechanical fashion. The relation between the two systems is vital and organic. These miraculous interferences of God to which we ascribe a revealing character, furnish the great joints and ligaments by which the whole framework of

sacred history is held together, and its entire structure determined. God's saving deeds mark the critical epochs of history, and as such, have continued to shape its course for centuries after their occurrence.

Of course we should never forget that, wherever revelation and the redemptive acts of God coincide, the latter frequently have an ulterior purpose extending beyond the sphere of revelation. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ were acts not exclusively intended to reveal something to man, but primarily intended to serve some definite purpose in reference to God. In so far as they satisfied the divine justice it would be inaccurate to view them under the aspect of revelation primarily or exclusively. Nevertheless, the revealing element is essential even in their case, the two ends of satisfaction and of revelation being combined into one. And in the second place, we must remember that the revealing acts of God never appear separated from His verbal communications of truth. Word and act always accompany each other, and in their interdependence strikingly illustrate our former statement, to the effect that revelation is organically connected with the introduction of a new order of things into this sinful world. Revelation is the light of this new world which God has called into being. The light needs the reality and the reality needs the light to produce the vision of the beautiful creation of His grace. To apply the Kantian phraseology to a higher subject, without God's acts the words would be empty, without His words the acts would be blind.

A second ground for the historic character of revelation may be found in its eminently practical aspect. The knowledge of God communicated by it is nowhere for a purely intellectual purpose. From beginning to end it is a knowledge intended to enter into the actual life of man, to be worked out by him in all its practical bearings. The Shemitic, and in particular the Biblical, conception of knowledge is distinguished from the Greek, more intellectualistic idea, by the prominence of this practical element. To know, in the Shemitic sense, is to have the consciousness of the reality and the properties of something interwoven with one's life through the closest intercourse and communion attainable. Now in this manner God has interwoven the supernaturally communicated knowledge of Himself with the historic life of the chosen race, so as to secure for it a practical form from the beginning. Revelation is connected throughout with the fate of Israel. Its disclosures arise from the necessities of that nation, and are adjusted to its capacities. It is such a living historical thing that it has shaped the very life of this nation into the midst of which it descended. The importance of this aspect of revelation has found its clearest expression in the idea of the covenant as the form of God's progressive self-communication to Israel. God has not revealed Himself in a school, but in the covenant; and the covenant as a communion of life is all-comprehensive, embracing all the conditions and interests of those contracting it. There is a knowledge and an imparting of knowledge here, but in a most practical way and not merely by theoretical instruction.

If in the foregoing we have correctly described the most general character of revelation, we may enlarge our definition of Biblical Theology by saying that it is that part of Exegetical Theology which deals with the revelation of God in its historic continuity. We must now advance beyond this and inquire more particularly in what specific type of history God has chosen to embody His revelation. The idea of historic development is not sufficiently definite of itself to explain the manner in which divine truth has been progressively revealed. It is not until we ascribe to this progress an organic character that the full significance of the historic principle springs into view.

The truth of revelation, if it is to retain its divine and -absolute character at all, must be perfect from the beginning. Biblical Theology deals with it as a product of a supernatural divine activity, and is therefore bound by its own principle to maintain the perfection of revealed truth in all its stages. When, nevertheless, Biblical Theology also undertakes to show how the truth has been gradually set forth in greater fullness and clearness, these two facts can be reconciled in no other way than by assuming that the advance in revelation resembles the organic process, through which out of the perfect germ the perfect plant and flower and fruit are successively produced.

Although the knowledge of God has received material increase through the ages, this increase nowhere shows the features of external accretion, but throughout appears as an internal expansion, an organic unfolding from within. The elements of truth, far from being mechanically added one to the other in lifeless succession, are seen to grow out of each other, each richer and fuller disclosure of the knowledge of God having been prepared for by what preceded, and being in its turn preparatory for what follows. That this is actually so, follows from the soteriological purpose which revelation in the first instance is intended to serve. At all times, from the very first to the last, revealed truth has been kept in close contact with the wants and emergencies of the living generation. And these human needs, notwithstanding all variations of outward circumstance, being essentially the same in all periods, it follows that the heart of divine truth, that by which men live, must have been present from the outset, and that each subsequent increase consisted in the unfolding of what was germinally contained in the beginning of revelation. The Gospel of Paradise is such a germ in which the Gospel of Paul is potentially present; and the Gospel of Abraham, of Moses, of David, of Isaiah and Jeremiah, are all expansions of this original message of salvation, each pointing forward to the next stage of growth, and bringing the Gospel idea one step nearer to its full realization. In this Gospel of Paradise we already discern the essential features of a covenant-relation, though the formal notion of a covenant does not attach to it. And in the covenant-promises given to Abraham these very features reappear, assume greater distinctness, and are seen to grow together, to crystallize as it were, into the formal covenant. From this time onward the expansive character of the covenant-idea shows itself. The covenant of Abraham contains the promise of the Sinaitic covenant; the latter again, from its very nature, gives rise to prophecy; and prophecy guards the covenant of Sinai from assuming a fixed, unalterable form, the prophetic word being a creative word under the influence of which the spiritual, universal germs of the covenant are quickened and a new, higher

order of things is organically developed from the Mosaic theocracy, that new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke, and which our Saviour brought to light by the shedding of His blood. So dispensation grows out of dispensation and the newest is but the fully expanded flower of the oldest.

The same principle may also be established more objectively, if we consider the specific manner in which God realizes the renewal of this sinful cosmos in accordance with His original purpose. The renewal is not brought about by mechanically changing one part after the other. God's method is much rather that of creating within the organism of the present world the center of the world of redemption, and then organically building up the new order of things around this center. Hence from the beginning all redeeming acts of God aim at the creation and introduction of this new organic principle, which is none other than Christ. All Old Testament redemption is but the saving activity of God working toward the realization of this goal, the great supernatural prelude

to the Incarnation and the Atonement. And Christ having appeared as the head of the new humanity and having accomplished His atoning work, the further renewal of the cosmos is effected through an organic extension of His power in ever widening circles. In this sense the Apostle speaks of the fashioning anew of the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of the glory of Christ, saying that this will happen "according to the working whereby He is able to subject even all things unto Himself" (Phil. 3:21). If, then, this supernatural process of transformation proceeds on organic principles, and if, as we have shown, revelation is but the light accompanying it in its course, the reflection of its divine realities in the sphere of knowledge, we cannot escape from the conclusion that revelation itself must exhibit a similar organic progress. In point of fact, we find that the actual working of Old Testament redemption toward the coming of Christ in the flesh, and the advance of revealed knowledge concerning Christ, keep equal pace everywhere. The various stages in the gradual concentration of Messianic prophecy, as when the human nature of our Saviour is successively designated as the seed of the woman, the seed of Abraham, the seed of Judah, the seed of David, His figure assuming more distinct features at each narrowing of the circle-what are they but disclosures of the divine counsel corresponding in each case to new realities and new conditions created by His redeeming power? And as in the history of redemption there are critical stages in which the great acts of God as it were accumulate, so we find that at such junctures the process of revelation is correspondingly accelerated, and that a few years show, perhaps, more rapid growth and greater expansion than centuries that lie between. For, although the development of the root may be slow and the stem and leaves may grow almost imperceptibly, there comes a time when the bud emerges in a day and the flower expands in an hour to our wondering sight. 1 Such epochs of quickened revelation were the times of Abraham, of Moses, of David, and especially the days of the Son of Man.

This progress, moreover, increases in rapidity the nearer revelation approaches to its final goal. What rich developments, what wealth of blossoming and fruitage are compressed within the narrow limits of that period-no more than one lifetime-that is covered by the New Testament! In this, indeed, we have the most striking proof of the organic nature of the progress of revelation. Every organic development serves to embody an idea; and as soon as this idea has found full and adequate expression, the organism receives the stamp of perfection and develops no further. Because the New Testament times brought the final realization of the divine counsel of redemption as to its objective and central facts, therefore New Testament revelation brought the full-grown Word of God, in which the new-born world, which is complete in Christ, mirrors itself. In this final stage of revelation the

deepest depths of eternity are opened up to the eye of Apostle and Seer. Hence, the frequent recurrence of the expression, "before the foundation of the world." We feel at every point that the last veil is drawn aside and that we stand face to face with the disclosure of the great mystery which was hidden in the divine purpose through the ages. All salvation, all truth in regard to man, has its eternal foundation in the triune God Himself. It is this triune God who here reveals Himself as the everlasting reality, from whom all truth proceeds, whom all truth reflects, be it the little streamlet of Paradise or the broad river of the New Testament losing itself again in the ocean of eternity. After this nothing higher can come. All the separate lines along which through the ages revelation was carried, have converged and met at a single point. The seed of the woman and the Angel of Jehovah are become one in the Incarnate Word. And as Christ is

glorified once for all, so from the crowning glory and perfection of His revelation in the New Testament nothing can be taken away; nor can anything be added thereunto.

There is one more feature of the organic character of revelation which I must briefly allude to. Historic progress is not the only means used by God to disclose the full contents of His eternal Word. Side by side with it we witness a striking multiformity of teaching employed for the same purpose. All along the historic stem of revelation, branches are seen to shoot forth, frequently more than one at a time, each of which helps to realize the complete idea of the truth for its own part and after its own peculiar manner. The legal, the prophetic, the poetic elements in the Old Testament are clearly-distinct types of revelation, and in the New Testament we have something corresponding to these in the Gospels, the Epistles, the Apocalypse. Further, within the limits of these great divisions there are numerous minor variations, closely associated with the peculiarities of individual character. Isaiah and Jeremiah are distinct, and so are John and Paul. And this differentiation rather increases than decreases with the progress of sacred history. It is greater in the New Testament than in the Old. The laying of the historic basis for Israel's covenant-life has been recorded by one author, Moses; the historic basis of the New Testament dispensation we know from the fourfold version of the Gospels. The remainder of the New Testament writings are in the form of letters, in which naturally the personal element predominates. The more fully the light shone upon the realization of the whole counsel of God and disclosed its wide extent, the more necessary it became to expound it in all its bearings, to view it at different angles, thus to bring out what Paul calls the much-variegated, the manifold, wisdom of God. For, God having chosen to reveal the truth through human instruments, it follows that these instruments must be both numerous and of varied adaptation to the common end. Individual coloring, therefore, and a peculiar manner of representation are not only not detrimental to a full statement of the truth, but directly subservient to it. God's method of revelation includes the very shaping and chiselling of individualities for His own objective ends. To put it concretely: we must not conceive of it as if God found Paul "readymade," as it were, and in using Paul as an organ of revelation, had to put up with the fact that the dialectic mind of Paul reflected the truth in a dialectic, dogmatic form to the detriment of the truth. The facts are these: the truth having inherently, besides other aspects, a dialectic and dogmatic side, and God intending to give this side full expression, chose Paul from the womb, molded his character, and gave him such a training that the truth revealed through him necessarily bore the dogmatic and dialectic impress of His mind. The divine objectivity and the human individuality here do not collide, nor exclude each other, because the man Paul, with his whole character, his gifts, and his training, is subsumed under the divine plan. The human is but the glass through which the divine light is reflected, and all the sides and angles into which the glass has been cut serve no other purpose than to distribute to us the truth in all the riches of its prismatic colors.

In some cases growth in the organism of revelation is closely dependent on this variety in the type of teaching. There are instances in which two or more forms of the one truth have been brought to light simultaneously, each of which exercised a deepening and enlarging influence upon the others. The Gospel of John contains revelations contemporaneous with those of the Synoptists, so that chronologically we can distribute its material over the pages of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Nevertheless, taken as a whole and in its unity, the Gospel of John represents a fuller and wider self-revelation of Christ than the Synoptists; and not only so, but it also represents a type of revelation which presupposes the facts and teachings of the other Gospels, and is, in point of order, subsequent to them. The same thing might be said of Isaiah in its

relation to Micah. So the variety itself contributes to the progress of revelation. Even in these cases of contemporaneous development along distinct lines and in independent directions, there is a mysterious force at work, which makes "the several parts grow out of and into each other with mutual support, so that the whole body is fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part."

We may now perhaps attempt to frame a complete definition of our science. The preceding remarks have shown that the divine work of revelation did not proceed contrary to all law, but after a well-defined organic principle. Wherever there is a group of facts sufficiently distinct from their environment, and determined by some law of orderly sequence, we are justified in making these facts the object of scientific discussion. Far from there being in the conception of Biblical Theology anything at variance with the idea of Theology as based on the revealed knowledge of God, we have found that the latter even directly postulates the former. Biblical Theology, rightly defined, is nothing else than the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity.

It must be admitted, however, that not everything passing under the name of Biblical Theology satisfies the requirements of this definition. From the end of the preceding century, when our science first appears as distinct from Dogmatic Theology, until now, she has stood under the spell of un-Biblical principles. Her very birth took place under an evil star. It was the spirit of Rationalism which first led to distinguishing in the contents of the Scriptures between what was purely human, individual, local, temporal-in a word, conditioned by the subjectivity of the writers-and what was eternally valid, divine truth. The latter, of course, was identified with the teachings of the shallow Rationalism of that period. Thus, Biblical Theology, which can only rest on the basis of revelation, began with a denial of this basis; and a science, whose task it is to set forth the historic principles of revelation, was trained up in a school notorious for its lack of historic sense. For to this type of Rationalism history, as such, is the realm of the contingent, the relative, the arbitrary, whilst only the deliverances of pure reason possess the predicate of absoluteness and universal validity. In this Biblical Theology of Rationalism, therefore, the historical principle merely served to eliminate or neutralize the revelationprinciple. And since that time all the philosophical tendencies that have influenced Theology in general have also left their impress upon Biblical Theology in particular. It is not necessary for our present purpose to trace the various lines and currents of this complicated history; the less so since there can be no doubt but that they are rapidly merging into the great stream of Evolutionistic Philosophy, which, whatever truth there may be in its application to certain groups of phenomena, yet, as a general theory of the universe, is the most direct antithesis to the fundamental principles of revelation and Christianity.

That the influence of this philosophy, as it expresses and in turn molds the spirit of the age, is perceptible in the field of Theology everywhere, no careful observer of recent events will deny. But Biblical Theology is, perhaps, more than any other branch of theological study affected by it, because its principle of historic progress in revelation seems to present certain analogies with the evolutionary scheme, and to offer exceptional opportunities for applying the latter, without departing too far from the real contents of Scripture. This analogy, of course, is merely formal, and from a material point of view there is a world-wide difference between that philosophy of history which the Bible itself outlines, and which alone Biblical Theology, if it wishes to remain Biblical, has a right to adopt, and, on the other hand, the so-called facts of the Bible pressed into

the evolutionary formulas. It is especially in two respects that the principles of this philosophy have worked a radical departure from the right treatment of our science as it is prescribed by both the supernatural character of Christianity and the nature of Theology. In the first place, evolution is bent upon showing that the process of development is everywhere from the lower and imperfect to the higher and relatively more perfect forms, from impure beginnings through a gradual purification to some ideal end. So in regard to the knowledge of God, whose growth we observe in the Biblical writings, evolution cannot rest until it shall have traced its gradual advance from sensual, physical conceptions to ethical and spiritual ideas, from Animism and Polytheism to Monolatry and Monotheism. But this of necessity rules out the revelation-factor from Biblical Theology. Revelation as an act of God, theistically conceived of, can in no wise be associated with anything imperfect or impure or below the standard of absolute truth. However much Christian people may blind themselves to the fact, the outcome will show, as it does already show, that the principles of supernatural redemption and natural evolution are mutually exclusive. Hence, even now, those who accept the evolutionary construction of Biblical history, either openly and without reserve renounce the idea of supernatural revelation, or strip it of its objectivity so as to make it less antagonistic to that of natural development. In the same degree, however, that the latter is done, revelation loses its distinctively theistic character and begins to assume more and more the features of a Pantheistic process, that is, it ceases to be revelation in the commonly accepted sense of the term.

In the second place, the philosophy of evolution has corrupted Theology by introducing its leaven of metaphysical Agnosticism. Inasmuch as only the phenomenal world can become an object of knowledge to us and not the mysterious reality hidden behind the phenomena, and inasmuch as Theology in the old, traditional sense pretended to deal with such meta-physical realities as God and heaven and immortality, it follows that Theology must either be entirely abolished, or must submit to such a reconstruction as will enable her to retain a place among the phenomenalistic sciences. The former would be the more consistent and scientific, but the latter is usually preferred; because it is difficult at one stroke to set aside a thing so firmly rooted in the past. Theology, therefore, is now defined as the science of religion, and that, too, in the sense chiefly of a phenomenology of religion, in which by far the greater part of the investigation is devoted to the superficial external side of religion and the heart of the matter receives scant treatment. Applied to Biblical Theology, this principle involves that no longer the historic progress of the supernatural revelation of God, but the development of the religion recorded in the Biblical writings, shall become the object of our science. Theology having become the science of religion, Biblical Theology must needs become the history of one, be it the greatest, of all religions, the history of the religion of Israel and of primitive Christianity.

How far this evil has penetrated may be inferred from the fact that there is scarcely a book on Biblical Theology in existence in which this conception of the object of our science is not met with, and in which it does not very largely determine the point of view. It has even vitiated so excellent a work in many respects as Oehler's Old Testament Theology. Of course, there are many degrees in the thoroughness with which this subjectivizing principle is carried through and applied. Between those who are just beginning to descend the ladder and those who have reached its lowest step, there is a very appreciable difference.

First, there are those who think that, though God has supernaturally revealed Himself in words and acts, nevertheless this revelation pure and simple, cannot be for us an object of scientific

discussion, except in so far as it has blended with and produced its effect upon the religious consciousness of the people to whom it was given; and that, consequently, we must posit as the object of Biblical Theology the religion of the Bible, and can hope at the utmost to reason back from this religion as the result, to revelation as the cause that has produced it. To this we would answer, that there is no reason to make Biblical Theology, so conceived, a separate science. The investigation of the religion of Israel as a subjective phenomenon, together with the objective factors called in to explain it, belongs nowhere else than in the department of Biblical History. Furthermore, we believe that the Bible itself has recorded for us the interaction of the objective and the subjective factors in sacred history in such a manner that their joint product is nowhere made the central thought of its teaching, but much rather we are invited everywhere to fix our gaze on the objective self-revelation of God, and only in the second place to observe the subjective reflex of this divine activity in the religious consciousness of the people.

Others are more reserved in their recognition of the supernatural. They would confine the revelation of God to acts, and derive all the doctrinal contents of the Bible from the source of human reflection upon these divine acts. In this manner a compromise is obtained, whereby both the objectivity of revelation and the subjective development of Biblical teaching can be affirmed. This view is unsatisfactory, because it loses sight of the analogy between divine revelation and the ordinary way in which man communicates his thoughts. To man, made in the image of God, speech is the highest instrument of revealing Himself, and it would be strange if God in His self-disclosure entirely dispensed with the use of this instrument. Nor does this view leave any place for prophecy. The prophetic word is frequently a divine word preceding the divine act. Although, as we have seen, the progress of revelation is clearly conditioned by the actual realization of God's plan of redemption, yet this by no means implies that the saving deeds of God always necessarily go before, and the revelations which cast light on them always follow. In many cases the revealing word comes as an anticipation of the approaching events, as a flash of lightning preceding the thunder of God's judgments. As Amos strikingly expresses it: "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets" (3:7).

The supernatural factor, however, is reduced to still smaller proportions and entirely deprived of its objectivity by a third group of writers on Biblical Theology. According to these, supernatural revelation does not involve the communication of divine thoughts to man in any direct manner either by words or by actions. Revelation consists in this, that the divine Spirit, by an unconscious process, stirs the depths of man's heart so as to cause the springing up therein afterward of certain religious thoughts and feelings, which are as truly human as they are a revelation of God, and are, therefore, only relatively true. It is owing to the influence of the Ritschlian or Neo-Kantian school of Theology that this view has gained new prevalence of late. The people of Israel are held to have possessed a creative religious genius, just as the Greek nation was endowed with a creative genius in the sphere of art. And, although the productions of this genius are ascribed to the impulse of the divine Spirit, yet this Spirit and His working are represented in such a manner that their distinction from the natural processes of the human mind becomes a mere assumption, exercising no influence whatever on the interpretation of the phenomenal side of Israel's religion. Writers of this class deal as freely with the facts and teachings of the Bible as the most extreme anti-supernaturalists. But with their evolutionistic treatment of the phenomena they combine the hypothesis of this mystical influence of the Spirit, which they are pleased to call revelation. It is needless to say that revelation of this kind must remain forever inaccessible to objective proof or verification. Whatever can pretend to be

scientific in this theory lacks all rapport with the idea of the Supernatural, and whatever there lingers in it of diluted Supernaturalism lacks all scientific character.

I have endeavored to sketch with a few strokes those principles and tendencies by which the study of Biblical Theology is almost exclusively controlled at the present time, because they seem to me to indicate the points which ought to receive special emphasis in the construction of our science on a truly Scriptural and theological basis. The first of these is the objective character of revelation. Biblical Theology must insist upon claiming for its object not the thoughts and reflections and speculations of man, but the oracles of God. Whosoever weakens or subjectivizes this fundamental idea of revelation, strikes a blow at the very heart of Theology and Supernatural Christianity, nay, of Theism itself. Every type of Biblical Theology bent upon ignoring or minimizing this supreme, central idea, is a most dangerous product. It is an indisputable fact that all modern views of revelation which are deficient in recognizing its objective character, fit far better into a pantheistic than into a theistic theory of the universe. If God be the unconscious background of the world, it is altogether natural that His truth and light should in a mysterious manner loom up from the unexplorable regions that underlie human consciousness, that in His very act of revealing Himself He should be conditioned and entangled and obstructed by man. If, on the other hand, God be conscious and personal, the inference is that in His self-disclosure He will assert and maintain His personality, so as to place His divine thoughts before us with the stamp of divinity upon them, in a truly objective manner. By making revelation, both as to its form and contents, a special object of study, Biblical Theology may be expected to contribute something toward upholding this important conception in its true objectivity, toward more sharply defining it and guarding it from confusion with all heterogeneous ideas.

The second point to be emphasized in our treatment of Biblical Theology is that the historical character of the truth is not in any way antithetical to, but throughout subordinated to, its revealed character. Scriptural truth is not absolute, notwithstanding its historic setting; but the historic setting has been employed by God for the very purpose of revealing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It is not the duty of Biblical Theology to seek first the historic features of the Scriptural ideas, and to think that the absolute character of the truth as revealed of God is something secondary to be added thereunto. The reality of revelation should be the supreme factor by which the historic factor is kept under control. With the greatest variety of historical aspects, there can, nevertheless, be no inconsistencies or contradictions in the Word of God. The student of Biblical Theology is not to hunt for little systems in the Bible that shall be mutually exclusive, or to boast of his skill in detecting such as a mark of high scholarship. What has been remarked above, in regard to the Place of individuality in the plan of revelation, may be applied with equal justice to the historic phases through which the progressive delivery of the truth has passed. God has done for the historic unfolding of His word as a whole what He has done for the reproduction of its specific types and aspects through the forming and training of individuals. As He knew Jeremiah and Paul from the womb, so He knew Israel and prepared Israel for its task. The history of this nation is not a common history; it is sacred history in the highest sense of having been specially designed by God to become the human receptacle for the truth from above.

In the third place, Biblical Theology should plant itself squarely upon the truthfulness of the Scriptures as a whole. Revelation proper announces and records the saving deeds of God, but a mere announcement and record is not sufficient to furnish a complete history of redemption, to

produce a living image of the new order of things as it is gradually called into existence. No true history can be made by a mere chronicling of events. Only by placing the bare record of the facts in the light of the principles which shape them, and the inner nexus which holds them together, is the work of the chronicler transformed into history. For this reason God has not given us His own interpretation of the great realities of redemption in the form of a chronicle, but in the form of the historical organism of the inspired Scriptures. The direct revelations of God form by far the smaller part of the contents of the Bible. These are but the scattered diamonds woven into the garment of the truth. This garment itself is identical with the Scriptural contents as a whole. And as a whole it has been prepared by the hand of God. The Bible contains, besides the simple record of direct revelations, the further interpretation of these immediate disclosures of God by inspired prophets and apostles. Above all, it contains, if I may so call it, a divine philosophy of the history of redemption and of revelation in general outlines. And whosoever is convinced in his heart of the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures and reads his Bible as the Word of God, cannot, as a student of Biblical Theology, allow himself to reject this divine philosophy and substitute for it another of his own making. Our Theology will be Biblical in the full sense, only when it not merely derives its material from the Bible, but also accepts at the hands of the Bible the order in which this material is to be grouped and located. I for one am not ashamed to say that the teachings of Paul concerning the historic organism of the Old Testament economy possess for me greater authority than the reconstructions of the same by modern scholars, however great their learning and critical acumen.

Finally, in designating our science as Biblical Theology, we should not fail to enter a protest against the wrong inferences that may be easily drawn from the use of this name. The name retains somewhat of the flavor of the Rationalism which first adopted it. It almost unavoidably creates an impression as if in the Bible we had the beginning of the process that later gave us the works of Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. Hence some do not hesitate to define Biblical Theology as the History of Dogmatics for Biblical times. To us this sounds as strange and illogical as if one should compare the stars of the firmament and their history with the work and history of astronomy. As the heavens contain the material for astronomy and the crust of the earth for geology, so the mighty creation of the Word of God furnishes the material for Theology in this scientific sense, but is no Theology. It is something infinitely higher than Theology, a world of spiritual realities, into which all true theologians are led by the Spirit of the living God. Only if we take the term Theology in its more primitive and simple meaning, as the practical, historic knowledge of God imparted by revelation and deposited in the Bible, can we justify the use of the now commonly accepted name of our science. As for the scientific elaboration of this God-given material, this must be held to lie beyond the Biblical period. It could only spring up after revelation and the formation of the Scriptures had been completed. The utmost that can be conceded would be that in the Apostolic teaching of the New Testament the first signs of the beginning of this process are discernible. But even that which the Apostles teach is in no sense primarily to be viewed under the aspect of Theology. It is the inspired Word of God before all other things. No theologian would dare say of his work what Paul said to the Galatians: "But though we or an angel from heaven preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema" (1:8). 2

In the foregoing I have endeavored to describe to you the nature and functions of Biblical Theology as a member in the organism of our scientific knowledge of God. I have not forgotten, however, that you have called me to teach this science for the eminently practical purpose of

training young men for the ministry of the Gospel. Consequently, I shall not have acquitted myself of my task on this occasion unless you will permit me to point out briefly what are the advantages to be expected from the pursuit of this study in a more practical way.

First of all, Biblical Theology exhibits to the student of the Word the organic structure of the truth therein contained, and its organic growth as the result of revelation. It shows to him that in the Bible there is an organization finer, more complicated, more exquisite than even the texture of muscles and nerves and brain in the human body; that its various parts are interwoven and correlated in the most subtle manner, each sensitive to the impressions received from all the others, perfect in itself, and yet dependent upon the rest, while in them and through them all throbs as a unifying principle the Spirit of God's living truth. If anything, then, this is adapted to convince the student that what the Bible places before him is not the chance product of the several human minds that have been engaged in its composition, but the workmanship of none other than God Himself. The organic structure of the truth and the organic development of revelation as portrayed in the Bible bear exactly the same relation to Supernaturalism that the argument from design in nature bears to Theism. Both arguments proceed on precisely analogous lines. If the history of revelation actually is the organic history, full of evidences of design, which the Bible makes it out to be, then it must have been shaped in an altogether unique fashion by the revealing activity of God.

In the second place, Biblical Theology is suited to furnish a most effective antidote to the destructive critical views now prevailing. These modern theories, however much may be asserted to the contrary, disorganize the Scriptures. Their chief danger lies, not in affirmations concerning matters of minor importance, concerning errors in historical details, but in the most radical claims upsetting the inner organization of the whole body of truth. We have seen that the course of revelation is most closely identified with the history described in the Bible. Of this history of the Bible, this framework on which the whole structure of revelation rests, the newest criticism asserts that it is falsified and unhistorical for the greater part. All the historical writings of the Old Testament in their present state are tendency-writings. Even where they embody older and more reliable documents, the Deuteronomic and Levitical paste, applied to them in and after the exile, has obliterated the historic reality. Now, if it were known among believing Christians to what an extent these theories disorganize the Bible, their chief spell would be broken; and many would repudiate with horror what they now tolerate or view with indifference. There is no other way of showing this than by placing over against the critical theories the organic history of revelation, as the Bible itself constructs it. As soon as this is done, everybody will be able to see at a glance that the two are mutually subversive. This very thing Biblical Theology endeavors to do. It thus meets the critical assaults, not in a negative way by defending point after point of the citadel, whereby no total effect is produced and the critics are always permitted to reply that they attack merely the outworks, not the central position of the faith; but in the most positive manner, by setting forth what the principle of revelation involves according to the Bible, and how one part of it stands or falls together with all the others. The student of Biblical Theology has the satisfaction of knowing that his treatment of Biblical matters is not prescribed for him exclusively by the tactics of his enemies, and that, while most effectually defending the truth, he at the same time is building the temple of divine knowledge on the positive foundation of the faith.

In the third place, I should mention as a desirable fruit of the study of Biblical Theology, the new life and freshness which it gives to the old truth, showing it in all its historic vividness and reality with the dew of the morning of revelation upon its opening leaves. It is certainly not without significance that God has embodied the contents of revelation, not in a dogmatic system, but in a book of history, the parallel to which in dramatic interest and simple eloquence is nowhere to be found. It is this that makes the Scriptures speak and appeal to and touch the hearts and lead the minds of men captive to the truth everywhere. No one will be able to handle the Word of -God more effectually than he to whom the treasure-chambers of its historic meaning have been opened up. It is this that brings the divine truth so near to us, makes it as it were bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, that humanizes it in the same sense that the highest revelation in Christ was rendered most human by the incarnation. To this historical character of revelation we owe the fullness and variety which enable the Scriptures to mete out new treasures to all ages without becoming exhausted or even fully explored. A Biblical Theology imbued with the devout spirit of humble faith in the revealed Word of God, will enrich the student with all this wealth of living truth, making him in the highest sense a householder, bringing forth out of his treasures things new and old.

Fourthly, Biblical Theology is of the greatest importance and value for the study of Systematic Theology. It were useless to deny that it has been often cultivated in a spirit more or less hostile to the work in which Systematic Theology is engaged. The very name Biblical Theology is frequently vaunted so as to imply a protest against the alleged un-Biblical character of Dogmatics. I desire to state most emphatically here, that there is nothing in the nature and aims of Biblical Theology to justify such an implication. For anything pretending to supplant Dogmatics there is no place in the circle of Christian Theology. All attempts to show that the doctrines developed and formulated by the Church have no real foundation in the Bible, stand themselves without the pale of Theology, inasmuch as they imply that Christianity is a purely natural phenomenon, and that the Church has now for nineteen centuries been chasing her own shadow. Dogmatic Theology is, when rightly cultivated, as truly a Biblical and as truly an inductive science as its younger sister. And the latter needs a constructive principle for arranging her facts as well as the former. The only difference is, that in the one case this constructive principle is systematic and logical, whereas in the other case it is purely historical. In other words, Systematic Theology endeavors to construct a circle, Biblical Theology seeks to reproduce a line. I do not mean by the use of this figure, that within Biblical Theology there is no grouping of facts at all. The line of which I speak does not represent a monotonous recital of revelation, and does not resemble a string, even though it be conceived of as a string of pearls. The line of revelation is like the stem of those trees that grow in rings. Each successive ring has grown out of the preceding one. But out of the sap and vigor that is in this stem there springs a crown with branches and leaves and flowers and fruit. Such is the true relation between Biblical and Systematic Theology. Dogmatics is the crown which grows out of all the work that Biblical Theology can accomplish. And taught in this spirit of Christian willingness to serve, our science cannot fail to benefit Systematic Theology in more than one respect. It will proclaim the fact, too often forgotten and denied in our days, that true religion cannot dispense with a solid basis of objective knowledge of the truth. There is no better means of silencing the supercilious cant that right believing is of small importance in the matter of religion, than by showing what infinite care our Father in heaven has taken to reveal unto us, in the utmost perfection, the knowledge of what He is and does for our salvation. Biblical Theology will also demonstrate that the fundamental doctrines of our faith do not rest, as many would fain believe, on an arbitrary

exposition of some isolated proof-texts. It will not so much prove these doctrines, as it will do what is far better than proof-make them grow out organically before our eyes from the stem of revelation. Finally, it will contribute to keep Systematic Theology in living contact with that soil of divine realities from which it must draw all its strength and power to develop beyond what it has already attained.

Let us not forget, however, that as of all theology, so of Biblical Theology, the highest aim cannot lie in man, or in anything that serves the creature. Its most excellent practical use is surely this, that it grants us a new vision of the glory of Him who has made all things to the praise of His own wonderful name. As the Uncreated, the Unchangeable, Eternal God, He lives above the sphere of history. He is the Being and never the Becoming One. And, no doubt, when once this veil of time shall be drawn aside, when we shall see face to face, then also the necessity for viewing His knowledge in the glass of history will cease. But since on our behalf and for our salvation He has condescended to work and speak in the form of time, and thus to make His works and His speech partake of that peculiar glory that attaches to all organic growth, let us also seek to know Him as the One that is, that was, and that is to come, in order that no note may be lacking in that psalm of praise to be sung by the Church into which all our Theology must issue.

## Notes

1. Cf. T. D. Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*, p. 44.
2. In view of the Rationalistic associations connected with the name Biblical Theology, and in view of its being actually used for the propagation of erroneous views, the name History of Revelation would perhaps be better adapted to express the true nature of our science. This name has been lately adopted by Nosgen in his *Geschichte der Neutestamentlichen Offenbarung*.

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