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Guidelines and Challenges for New Testament Biblical Theology*

Massimo Grilli

A Foreword

It has been rightly said that New Testament biblical theology (but also that of the OT) is one and multiple, in the sense that it can be presented in many forms. I have chosen to frame my reflection on the NT within a broader hermeneutical context, which concerns both a theoretical reflection on biblical theology (BT) *per se* and a reading of NT theology in dialogue with the OT.

For this reason, I have divided my lecture into two sections. In the first I will highlight some fundamental aspects of the situation in which BT finds itself today (that of both the OT and the NT). In the second I will propose a methodological category for responding to the current challenges.

You will notice language and some expressions that are sometimes selective and provocative, but it is only a matter of practical selections that aim to produce a certain effect. I would ask you, therefore, to take them with this intention.

1 Biblical Theology in Today's Cultural Context

Centuries have passed since that day in 1787 on which Johann Philip Gabler gave his famous, critical lecture on the relation between biblical theology and dogmatic theology¹. As he began it, he expressed the wish that BT, faced with the mutability of the human sciences that saturate dogmatics, be able to remain always true to itself, insofar as it “deals only with those things which holy

* Translated by Kevin Zilverberg from the Italian original “Orientamenti e sfide nella teologia biblica del Nuovo Testamento”.

¹ *De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus*. For translation into English cf. SANDYS-WUNSCH – ELDREDGE, J. P. Gabler and the Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology, 144.

men perceived about matters pertinent to religion, and is not made to accommodate our point of view”².

In fact, BT – even if on a different plane than dogmatics – cannot not confront the cultural demands of the day. One understands this from the history of the discipline called BT.

The Enlightenment-era challenge that marked BT in the eighteenth century was followed by a positivist vision. On the one hand this brought BT back into the stream of history (Cullmann, Jeremias, etc.), and on the other – as a sort of retaliation – it produced a biblical theological movement of separation and alternation between history and faith (Bultmann and the school founded by him). This dual track, at once historical critical as well as kerygmatic and existential, dominated part of the nineteenth century and almost the whole twentieth century. It produced undeniable achievements but also dangerous and deviant excesses.

*Hence the question: where are we now? And what does the future hold in store for us? To understand where NT biblical theology is going (but perhaps the discussion should be extended to every sector of BT) today it is necessary, in my opinion, to return to the final decades of the century just drawn to a close. In the 70s-80s of the previous century a major structural and cultural change occurred, which concerns society, but also concerns one’s anthropological and biblical theological vision. The most fitting metaphor to describe this change is perhaps that which we find at the end of the novel *The Name of the Rose*, by Umberto Eco, which appears precisely in the 80s. The friar William and the novice Adso, after intrigues of various sort, suspicions and homicides, are finally about to arrive at the discovery of the mystery that is hidden in the monastery where they have been living for some time. Just then the old monk Jorge causes a fire that no one will be able to extinguish and that will engulf the whole abbey in flames. Adso and his novice master leave the monastery in a pile of rubble... The monastery, symbol of ultimate and metaphysical truth, image of cultural and theological solidity ... crumbles³.*

During those same years in which Umberto Eco’s novel appeared, the French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard (1925 – 1998), in a study on *The Postmodern Condition*⁴ describes the present era as a time characterized by the

² SANDYS-WUNSCH – ELDREDGE, *Gabler and the Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology*, 144.

³ ECO, *The Name of the Rose*.

⁴ LYOTARD, *La Condition postmoderne*.

dissolution of metaphysical, ideological and religious principles that had marked the modern era. In short, what perishes is confidence in systems of thought from sure and undisputed knowledge, confidence in dogmatic, immutable laws (even the economic sort).

Zygmunt Bauman⁵ coined a supremely apropos expression to describe the philosophical and cultural situation in which we are living: *liquid society*, an appropriate metaphor that presents our fragmented and fluctuating world, in opposition to the universally recognized value systems that, conversely, characterized the 1900s, with its ideologies, national parties and inalienable moral principles. Enlightenment, historicism, Marxism, liberalism... all the systems of thought that impose a definitive vision of reality or certain and undisputed knowledge, immutable laws of thought and market... are all collapsing (if they have not already collapsed), and the very dogmatic strength of faith dissolves. Obviously, I am not making a value judgment but describing a worldview that is marking exegesis and theology.

In those very years of the 70s-80s, in fact, the historical critical method is fiercely disputed, which had dominated the exegetical field for more than a hundred years, and the new literary methods emerge, where narrative, semiotic and rhetorical demands, together with many hermeneutical perspectives, become a varied and articulate reference mosaic. The Pontifical Biblical Commission's document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), for better or worse, is at once the fruit of and witness to this structural change of an anthropological, sociological and theological nature. Other methods and approaches take their place alongside a method (obviously, the historical critical one) that had reigned unchallenged, and sometimes they even supplant it.

I do not want to be misunderstood: this multiplicity is obviously positive because it is free from the theological and cultural monopoly of past centuries, opening new and fertile spaces. Nevertheless, in my opinion, in all this there lurk some risks. Take, for example, the sectorization of knowledge and the continuous process, without reference points, by which knowledge is rendered precarious. The Commission's same document lacks a general reflection of a philosophical and theological nature, which perhaps would have been useful to render the multiplicity of methods and approaches more accessible.

Another underlying element in the present exegetical and theological panorama (and not just in the sectarian movements in vogue nowadays) is that of

⁵ BAUMAN, *Liquid Modernity*.

absolutizing the emotive element, something cast aside, or rather forgotten, by the historical critical method. The involvement of emotionality has the obvious advantage of introducing an important human component into the hermeneutic process, but with the corresponding danger of selfie culture, where the absolutization of the subject that does theology risks penalizing the objective component. Absolutization of emotionality in theology, quite evident in fundamentalist denominations, must constitute intellectual suicide. The absolutization of one's own point of view, with declared or concealed closure to or ignorance of other perspectives, leads to the absolutization of the fragment and to ignorance of the complexity of theological experience.

Obviously the analysis of the present situation that I have attempted to put forth is partial and, to a certain extent, a working analysis for the second, more propositional section of my lecture. I want to say that we are still in a fluctuating phase, with consequences still wholly to be comprehended, and yet we are not dispensed from the task of trying to catch a glimpse of the way that lies before us as scholars of BT.

2 A Proposal for Biblical Theology of *the One and the Other Testament*

Here, then, is the perspective that, in my opinion, should today inform BT, both at the level of speculation and at the operative level. I expound it with a formula that for a long time I have been applying to the relation between the two Testaments, but that today I would like to utilize to describe the comprehension of BT in its entirety. It is a matter of the "dialogic charter". Dialogic, in the sense of *dia – logos*, that is an open, dynamic relationship, among (*dia*) words (*logos*), voices, subjects and themes that enter the scene with their own specific identities and – here is the point! – must enter into relation.

This means that to establish unity among various authors or among different books or among differing theological visions of the Bible remains a necessity, but this biblical theological unity must not be sought at the level of universal systems, systematized and/or metaphysical, but rather at the level of a polyphony of voices and of instruments that interact with one another. Therefore, in my opinion, it is in the interaction that a BT is constructed (in this morning's 2nd session a doctor or doctoral student of BT will show us this interactive dynamic concretely). To formulate it in the negative I would say that "biblical theology" cannot be defined as a mishmash where authors or texts are

cast into the ring in an undifferentiated and undistinguished amalgam. To put it positively, I will now attempt to present some levels at which – in my opinion – “the dialogic structure” of BT of *the One and the Other Testament* ought to be fulfilled.

1. *The dialogic charter must be implemented first of all at the level of the practitioner of BT.* For too long it has been thought that the task of interpretation pertains to exegetes, while to theologians pertains the task of receiving the results of biblical scholars’ research and constructing upon them the theological system. This is not only impossible, but it is deviant, because reciprocity or (if you prefer) circularity is a fundamental component of interpretation of the text and concerns both the exegete and the theologian. Biblical theology supposes at once an exegete who is also a theologian or, if you wish, a theologian who is also an exegete. Here I borrow Paul Beauchamp’s words:

It could be the exegete who does biblical theology or the theologian who masters exegesis (it depends greatly on a person’s disposition), [but] [o]ne can no longer be told: “Take note, check whether the terms of this biblical assertion are accurate, and then interpret it”. This must no longer happen... it is still practiced, but among younger scholars the attitude is remarkably strong that a biblical theology is necessary and that someone, at once an exegete and a theologian, must take care of this “baby”, if it is possible.⁶

A new charter is necessary in terms of dialogue among philosophers, anthropologists, exegetes and theologians. If an individual were able to gather and meet all these demands it would be perfect, but in nearly the entirety of cases it is not possible. It is necessary that philosophers, theologians and exegetes, instead of fighting as they maintain exclusivity in their own disciplines, enter into dialogue. It seems to me that at present the temptation of an understanding of Scripture according to a dogmatic model has been overcome, but with Angelo Bertuletti I would say that “theology is still in search of a theory able to let the theological quality of exegesis persist...”⁷. Dialogue, therefore, is absolutely necessary.

2. *A second level at which the dialogic aspect of doing BT must be expressed is the methodological one.* In past centuries (from Gabler on) BT took one-way streets while searching for its own identity, whether in the historical religious vein (Wrede), or the kerygmatic existential one (Bultmann) or in the

⁶ BEAUCHAMP, *Il libro e l'uomo*, 45-46.

⁷ BERTULETTI, *Esegesi biblica e teologia sistematica*, 133.

historical positivist one (Jeremias)... Currently BT has set out on a literary, synchronic and canonical path, with some undoubted advantages, but also with a certain unilaterality that to me seems at least as risky as the absolutism of the historical critical method was in the past. Today I see the recurrent danger of a structuralism that absolutizes the textual, literary and canonical world, without taking account any more of the historical aspect.

So, to speak of the dialogic aspect at the methodological level means to place the literary world, the historical world and the reader's world in relation. In a word, one must recognize that Revelation occurred within a story (*una storia*), that this story became a text as it took on literary forms of various genres, and that this attested revelation has the aim of putting author(s) and reader(s) in communication and communion in order to insert these readers into God's truth. We must not forget any of these various levels; we must rather try to make them dialogue without stifling the various approaches in the name of a superior axiom. This risk of flattening is the one, in my opinion, that Childs's BT runs. Perhaps the accusation against him of "canonical fundamentalism" is too radical to be true, and yet Childs levels every type of difference when treating various BT themes (and, therefore, in the sixth part of his voluminous work)⁸. He seems more worried about dogmatic theological demands than about a critical approach. The polymorphous quality of BT is repudiated to a certain extent, and a sort of *deus ex machina* function is conferred on the "canonical" requirement. This theology reassures us, if that is what we want, but also impoverishes.

3. A third level of dialogue for BT of *the One and the Other Testament* is that which concerns the various theologies present in a particular corpus. Whoever opens the First and New Testaments immediately realizes that he stands before a variety of traditions, assemblages, literary forms, but also diversified and even contrasting theologies. In the very same book or in a corpus we find a multiplicity of voices that includes not only different documents, doublets, contradictions, but also a polyphony of tones, motives, contrasts... Within the NT, for example, texts that accentuate the faith as the way of salvation contrast synoptic texts that present works as the ultimate requirement of faith. It would be simplistic to think that the final redactors did not notice these tensions that are even within a corpus and, sometimes, within the same book. I'm thinking for instance of Jesus' command given to the disciples in the Gospel of Matthew to evangelize *only the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (Mt 10:5b-6) and then, in

⁸ CHILDS, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament*.

contrast, the sending *to all the nations* (Mt 28:18-20). Cardinal Kasper has written that the biblical witness resists “a systematic reduction to a single meaning”⁹. If BT wishes to speak of the quest for unity then it must be underscored that it is a matter of complex, not systematic, unity. So, the task of BT is not properly that of exhausting oneself in comprehending a certain word or theological demand, but neither is it that of levelling every tension. Biblical theology’s task is the understanding of the whole: an organic understanding that does not resign itself to incompatibility, but that knows, nevertheless, how to integrate difference into a dia-logic whole.

In Zenger’s wake, one could even say it thus: the fact that all the biblical traditions, including those of the NT, refer to the one God, creator of the world and Father of Jesus Christ, constitutes a datum loaded with tension. It is a datum that provokes (within Judaism, within Christianity, and within the Judeo-Christian relationship) a conflict over the truth about God, a conflict that finds a synthesis only when one lets oneself engage in the passionate dialogue to which the diverse biblical voices lead. The early Church could choose from among the diverse books of the First Testament: to take some of them and leave others; or it could have corrected them. The choice to take all the books of the Hebrew canon, the choice to place the NT writings after those of the First one... this cannot be irrelevant for the comprehension of biblical Truth. The canonization of multiple voices of the Bible is the canonization of the intrabiblical dialogue on the truth about God. The interpreter cannot prescind from this polyphony, and the multiplicity of voices requires of the interpreter a quest for the Truth that, in my opinion, can only be grasped via a dialogic reading.

4. *A fourth level at which the dialogic discourse ought to be carried out concerns the principal question about BT: the relation between the Old and New Testaments.* Against the latent Marcionism that still today pervades theology and catechesis, homiletics and liturgical praxis, BT must reaffirm the dialogic dimension of the two Testaments. What does this mean? How is it carried out? I would like to stake out three possible routes, summarizing that which I have had occasion to write at other times¹⁰, but simultaneously developing other aspects.

a) *Dialogic literature* demands of Christians the awareness that *the Old provides its witness qua Old and First Testament*: its own witness, even if

⁹ KASPER, *Non ho perduto nessuno*, 108.

¹⁰ GRILLI, *Quale rapporto?*; GRILLI, *Scritture*.

inserted into the context of the Christian Bible. Already some decades ago, Zenger affirmed:

The OT is *in itself* and *per se* God's word: a word neither provisional nor preliminary, but fully valid, a word that signifies *that* which it says and that *deserves* to be heard. Nor should the word be judged for that which it does *not* say: in its manifold words and figures, questions and urgings... As such it is neither "pre-Christian" nor "sub-Christian", just as it is neither "a-Christian" nor "non-Christian". An "Old Testament" word is simply "Christian"... without ceasing to be "Hebrew" because of it. On the contrary, it remains "Hebrew" from its very origins on. An "Old Testament" text is not obliged to "justify itself" with respect to the New Testament, nor must it be first "baptized" to be able to become a "God's word" for Christians.¹¹

The OT Word has its own proper dignity as God's Word, which is not conferred on it by the NT. Each of the two Testaments gives a specific witness *to the God of Jesus Christ*. This means perhaps that the point unifying the two Testaments is not Christology but theo-logy

insofar as it is a discourse about God and to God in its commitment carried out or pursued for his people Israel and for the world as his creation... From this theocentric perspective one can look at the Bible in its entirety and in its individual passages as a contextualization of "God's' word". This holds true both for the Hebrew Bible and for the Christian one.¹²

The problem is certainly complex. Many authors note that it is the NT itself that transforms the original sense of the OT, as they reinterpret it in a Christological key. Along these lines, Christian interpretation has often taken up a First Testament text without taking any account of the Hebrew reading, as if it were "simply" a Christian text. And yet, today everyone realizes – just to give an example – that the Christological interpretation (and even more so the Mariological one) of Gn 3:15 does not correspond to the truth of the text *sic et simpliciter*. By this description the definition "Protevangelium" given to the passage in question turns out to be rather ambiguous, even if it has been utilized often by the Church's tradition.

b) There is a second aspect that derives directly from that which I have just said and specifically concerns the dialogic reading of the Hebrew Bible.

¹¹ ZENGER, *Il primo Testamento*, 157.

¹² ZENGER, *Introduzione all'Antico Testamento*, 25.

I will express it with words from the superb document that the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued at end of 2015 and bears the title “*The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*” (Rom 11:29). This document attests that two ways of reading Scripture coexist, namely “the Christological exegesis of the Christians and the rabbinical exegesis of that form of Judaism that developed historically” after the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 and which led the rabbis, in the wake of the Pharisees, to establish a particular view of understanding Scripture.

But since the Christian Church and post-biblical rabbinical Judaism developed in parallel, but also in opposition and mutual ignorance, this question cannot be answered from the New Testament alone. After centuries of opposing positions it has been the duty of Jewish-Catholic dialogue to bring these two new ways of reading the Biblical writings into dialogue with one another in order to perceive the “rich complementarity” where it exists and “to help one another to mine the riches of God’s word”.¹³

This means, therefore, that to recognize that “the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion”¹⁴. Already for some years, and even before the latest ecclesial documents on the subject, those theologians more sensitive to this question were emphasizing that from the “prae-positio” of Israel’s Bible within the Christian Bible a non-Christological understanding of the OT had to follow. For them the reading that the NT authors make of the Hebrew Bible is a “further” reading of the same books. One could also say that Israel’s Scriptures (in the way that Israel understands them) have a permanent value that cannot be annulled by the successive Christian interpretation. Above all, from the time of R. Bultmann a substantial, hermeneutical devaluation of the OT has asserted itself, overvaluing the understanding of the NT in a Hellenistic key. The importance of the Hellenistic environment was accentuated as the hermeneutical key to the NT message. The overvaluing of the Hellenistic cultural environment has led to a distancing from NT roots. Today, fortunately one observes the rediscovery of Jesus’ Hebraism and the hermeneutical revaluation of the Hebrew milieu in which Jesus lived and

¹³ COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWS, *The Gifts*, n. 31 [Accessed 22-03-2019].

¹⁴ PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION: *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures*, n. 22 [Accessed 20-03-2019].

acted. Since the 1985 appearance of the document *On the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*, by the Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Jesus' Hebraism has increasingly constituted the hermeneutical horizon for re-reading his teaching, his stances taken, his polemics with Jewish groups...: a datum that, inexplicably, had nearly disappeared from the tradition and that must be, rather, ever more recovered. Hence, the understanding that the NT has of the Hebrew Bible is not alternative, because both readings offer an "hermeneutical perspective" that requires a dialogic relation. The challenge for BT is precisely this: to make the rabbinic reading and the Christian reading of the same Scriptures dialogue.

c) *Dialogic reading* or – to use E. Lévinas's categories – the "face-to-face", the two readings' being one in front of the other is not a *discussion* merely academic but a "theological" one in the fullest sense, because the discussion up until now has seemed to endorse the existence of two salvific paths: the Hebrew way without Christ and the Christian way with Christ. This

would in fact endanger the foundations of Christian faith. Confessing the universal and therefore also exclusive mediation of salvation through Jesus Christ belongs to the core of Christian faith. So too does the confession of the one God, the God of Israel, who through his revelation in Jesus Christ has become totally manifest as the God of all peoples...¹⁵

Confronted with this dilemma, BT itself would find itself, in a certain way, facing a dead end. The problem was highlighted already by Norbert Lohfink, who – already some twenty years ago – asked himself: has the way of salvation been forked? "One is the path which God destined for his people chosen of old, the other the path which he destined for other nations, the pagans, and which he mediated by means of the connecting link of Jewish-Christians..."¹⁶? The one is the path of the only God, the other is the path of Jesus the Messiah, son of the only God? The German exegete then continued provocatively, writing: if through Jhwh, Israel is – and remains – his beloved bride, does God want perhaps to

be polygamous? Will he have two brides? The answer to this question (rhetorically stated) cannot appear to us as it appeared to our ancestors on the portals of the gothic cathedrals: here, the proud woman, the "church," there, the collapsing, rejected woman, the "synagogue,"

¹⁵ COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWS, *The Gifts*, n. 35 [Accessed 22-03-2019].

¹⁶ LOHFINK, *The Covenant Never Revoked*, 85.

blindfolded, even though still bearing the beauty and dignity that belong to her¹⁷.

The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, in the cited document, *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*, declares on the one hand that the Church and Judaism cannot be presented as two paths of salvation insofar as the Church confesses that Jesus is the universal mediator (cf. Acts 4:12). On the other hand, it declares: “That the Jews are participants in God’s salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery”¹⁸. It continues:

Here we confront the mystery of God’s work, which is not a matter of missionary efforts to convert Jews, but rather the expectation that the Lord will bring about the hour when we will all be united, “when all peoples will call on God with one voice...”¹⁹

Can we go beyond the Commission’s affirmations for religious relations with Judaism? Perhaps we can, and I think that this is one of the most demanding tasks that stands before us, women and men of BT!

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¹⁷ LOHFINK, *The Covenant Never Revoked*, 87.

¹⁸ COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWS, *The Gifts*, n. 36 [Accessed 22-03-2019].

¹⁹ COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWS, *The Gifts*, n. 37 [Accessed 22-03-2019].

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Summary

Since its very origins “biblical theology” has known debates and divergent positions concerning its identity, and its placement among and relation to other theological disciplines. The present contribution seeks to situate the debate within today’s religious and cultural context, and it identifies in the “dialogic” character one of the more fruitful paths for facing the diverse problems that the discipline “biblical theology” continues to pose.

Keywords: biblical theology, dialogue, Old and New Testament.

Zhrnutie

Od svojho pôčiatku sa v „biblickej teológii“ viedli debaty a zastávali sa rôzne stanoviská ohľadom jej identity, jej postavenia medzi a vzťahu s ostatnými teologickými disciplínami. Tento príspevok sa snaží situovať danú debatu do náboženského a kultúrneho kontextu súčasnosti a v „dialogickom“ duchu identifikuje jednu z niekoľkých prínosných ciest ako čeliť rozličným problémom, ktoré disciplína „biblickej teológie“ neustále prekladá.

Kľúčové slová: biblická teológia, dialóg, Starý a Nový zákon.

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Obsah

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