

Nuances in Public Theology

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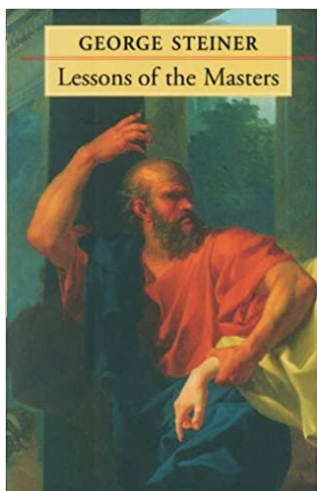
A distinctive of good scholarship is that it attends to the nuances of life and our world. As we host public lectures and make them available in written and recorded versions we have thus called this series of lectures and recordings *Nuances in Public Theology*.

Biblical Theology and Christian Scholarship

Craig G. Bartholomew

INTRODUCTION

George Steiner movingly describes his experience of his doctoral seminar in Geneva which continued more or less unbroken for twenty-five years: “Those Thursday mornings were as near as an ordinary, secular spirit can come to Pentecost.”¹ How much more ought this to be true of Christian scholarship. Christian scholarship is scholarship drenched in the Spirit, and therefore in Christ, what we might call



Pentecostal scholarship! The Spirit loves to witness to Christ, to open us up to the huge reality of God come to us in Jesus.

When I speak here of Christ I speak of the one from whom, through whom, and to whom are ALL things. And when I speak of truth I refer not just to “spiritual” truth but the truth which is Christ and thus the truth about the world. In John’s Gospel the Spirit is the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of Christ. As Lesslie Newbigin comments “The life of God given to men in Jesus – in his life, death, and resurrection and in the coming of

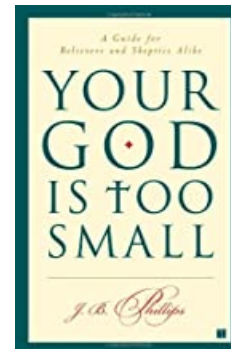
the Spirit – is at the same time *understanding how things truly are*. It is participation in the truth. These things cannot be separated.”² “[U]nderstanding how things truly are” is not a bad definition of the goal of Christian scholarship. How might we go about producing such work?

¹ George Steiner, *Lessons of the Masters* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 19.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 3. Emphasis added.

SCRIPTURE

An indispensable way is by attending to the Bible. However, we will need to revisit what the Bible is and what it does. Modernity privatised religion, and too often Evangelicals have followed suit – David Lyon points out that Evangelicals are good at adapting! — and ended up with *a privatised Bible*. It will be hard for us to see how such a Bible relates to rigorous scholarship in the various disciplines. Brevard Childs, by contrast, describes the Christ event as an explosion of good news, **a bomb** if you like, casting its light over the whole creation, including scholarship. If we fail to resonate with that then it is likely that, as J.B. Phillips wrote, *Your God is Too Small*.



THE CLUE

Newbigin wrote that Christ is the clue to all that is. Not that we have all the answers, but we have the indispensable clue without which the answers cannot be found. This is an insight akin to that of Old Testament wisdom literature: the fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge (Proverbs 1:7). Reverence for YHWH is this beginning in two ways: it is the starting point, and it is the foundation. As Gerhard von Rad pointed out Israel and the Old Testament provided us with a unique *epistemology*.³ A BIG word. I define “epistemology” simply as how to go about knowing something so that you can trust the results of the knowing process. In any discipline, in any research project, in any class, there is always an epistemology at work. No one signs up for a course or embarks on a research project assuming that the goal is falsehood and untruth. Alas, professors and students are often unaware of the epistemology at work in the class or project, but one is always present. Here we encounter a major element that should be present in Christian scholarship: *consciousness of the epistemology at work in our research and scholarship*. Lack of

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*. Translated by James D. Martin. (London: SCM, 1972).

awareness will not mean there is no epistemology; it will simply mean we have adopted one unconsciously. Newbigin would encourage us to let our epistemology emerge out of that indispensable clue which is Christ.

But, you might well ask, how do we do this?

THE FIELD

An answer, given in Acts 2:42, is to follow the example of the early church and to *devote ourselves to the Apostles' teaching*. Why did they do this? Because it was in and through such teaching that they found Jesus again and again. I like to think of the Bible as **the field** in which is hid the pearl of great price. The Apostles were appointed as eyewitnesses of Jesus and it is their witness that forms the basis of the New Testament. And, of course, Jesus' and their witness pushes us back into the Old Testament as that which is the Word of God and comes to fulfilment in the Christ event. Thus, if we are committed to following that clue which is Christ, then we will need to devote ourselves to the Bible. As we do so we will or should find ourselves emerging again and again into the presence of Christ, we will find ourselves in union with the one who is *the Truth*, we will find the pearl of great price.

But, how do we devote ourselves to the Bible? How do we dig in the field of the Bible so that we find the pearl, again and again? Of course, there is more than one answer to this question. For the purpose of this lecture I alert you to the challenge. The Bible – at least for Protestants and Evangelicals – is made up of sixty-six books, a veritable library that came into existence in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek over a long period of time in cultures very different to our own. Nevertheless, whenever the Bible is read – at least in our Anglican churches – we respond, “This is the Word of the Lord!” With conversion comes a deep conviction from the Spirit that Scripture is a unity and inspired so that we rightly describe it as God's fully trustworthy Word.

The question then becomes, how do we take hold of the Bible as the Word of God in its entirety, so that it takes hold of us, including our scholarship? Protestants confess *sola Scriptura*, but we often forget the equally important *tota Scriptura*. It is in its totality that the Bible is God's Word, and a verse a day without any sense of the total picture may be valuable but it is unlikely to deliver what we need for Christian scholarship.

A CATHEDRAL



A major answer is *biblical theology*. Note that “biblical theology” is a technical term and does not just refer to theology that is biblical. Although it has precedent in church history it is really only in recent centuries that biblical theology emerged as a distinct discipline within theology and biblical studies. We need to distinguish between

Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology. Systematic Theology sets out the truth of the Christian faith in systematic categories like The Doctrine of God, The Doctrine of Humankind, The Doctrine of the Church, etc. Such work is invaluable and needs to be done afresh for each generation.

Biblical Theology, by comparison, seeks to articulate the unity of the Bible through major categories *drawn from the Bible itself*. It seeks, as it were, to open up the Bible in its inner unity from the inside out. The Bible is not a theology textbook but a collection of historical narrative, laws, songs, Gospels, letters, etc. Thus biblical theology is indispensable in helping us to grasp Scripture in its totality so that it in turn grasps us in our totality, including our scholarship.

I like to think of the Bible as a grand cathedral and my images are of the one I know best, namely Gloucester Cathedral. If you look at the cathedral, clearly there are

many different entrances, some well hidden from the public. It is the same with biblical theology: there are many different, legitimate ways to do biblical theology.

THE MAIN ENTRANCE?

A question worth asking is: is there a main entrance, a place from which we are most likely to get an overview of the whole? One would be hard-pressed to argue against *God in Christ* as utterly central to the Bible. What I want you to notice is what happens if we take this seriously as the main entrance. We will soon ask the question: what was the main theme of Jesus' teaching and preaching? The answer: the kingdom of God or heaven. A further question: what exactly is the kingdom of God? N. T. Wright's answer: it is the reign of Israel's God. Inevitably we are pushed back into the Old Testament and into the grand, sweeping narrative of Scripture.

This is why many of us have drawn attention to the storied shape of the Bible as a whole, often summarised as moving from the garden to the city, or in some such abbreviation. (Please note that storied or narrative shape does NOT mean unhistorical. If God has not acted in history the whole story misfires, so that defence of the historicity of the Bible is vital.) One could call this *narrative biblical theology*. Eugene Peterson, for example, noted that the Bible has the shape of a grand, sprawling, capacious metanarrative or grand story. Richard Bauckham has also written on this topic. Lesslie Newbigin tells the story of being challenged by a Hindu friend who said to him:

I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion — and anyway we have plenty of books on religion in India. We don't need any more! I find your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the

human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.⁴

Newbigin consequently encouraged us to think of the Bible as the true story of the whole world, and to indwell it as such. N. T. Wright proposed that we think of the Bible as a drama in multiple acts.

6 ACTS

Mike Goheen and I developed this proposal in our *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*. We tell the story of the Bible in the following 6 acts:

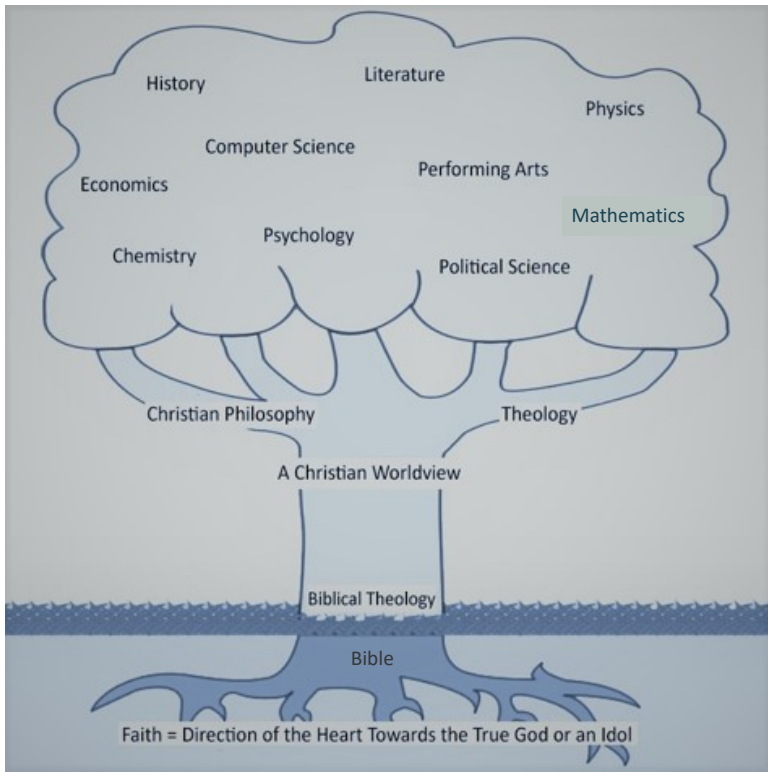
- Act 1. God Establishes His Kingdom: Creation
- Act 2. Rebellion in the Kingdom: Fall
- Act 3. The King Chooses Israel: Salvation Initiated
- Act 4. The Coming of the King: Salvation Accomplished
- Act 5. Spreading the News of the King: The Mission of the Church
- Act 6. The Return of the King: Redemption Completed

We fit in Act 5, and the genius of this approach, following N.T. Wright, is that we are called to leverage all the clues from all 6 acts to work out how to live today, *including* the practice of scholarship. We are to indwell, to think out of, to live out of the biblical story because it is the true story of the whole world. You can take any topic or discipline and ask yourself, how does the biblical story help me think about this?

A TREE

It is really important to note what I am and am not proposing here. I am not proposing that the Bible provides all your academic answers. Let us say, for example, as a psychologist you are trying to develop a theory of rape counselling. You will look in vain in the Bible for such a theory. What you will find in the Bible is a view of the human person that is indispensable to any such theory. But the Bible will not tell you

⁴ Leslie Newbigin, *A Walk Through the Bible* (London: SPCK, 1999), 4.



that rape victims, for example, often feel guilty as though they themselves have somehow brought the rape upon themselves. You learn this by studying what happens to people who have had the dreadful and excruciating experience of being raped. I like to think of scholarly work as an ecology and some of you will be familiar with my tree of knowledge from my *Biblical Hermeneutics*. What you will

immediately see from the tree is that there are many different components to Christian scholarship, *one* of which is biblical theology. You will also see that it is a foundational, indispensable part, but nevertheless only one part.

I can hear some of you saying: really, how about a good example of how the Bible might inform rigorous scholarship? A good question.

FRUIT

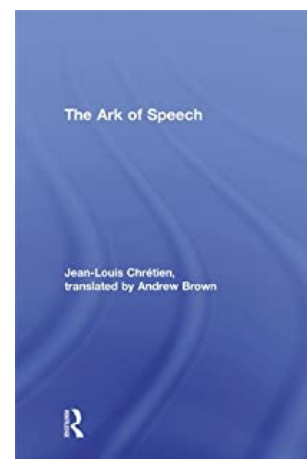
Within philosophy there is a complex area called *philosophy of language*. Imagine you are a philosopher and seeking to develop a theory of how language works. Does the Bible help with this? Well, think through the different acts of the biblical story. Is language reflected on at any points? The answer is yes, but, because of our privatised Bible, we often do not notice! I could provide many examples, but I limit myself to two.

1. In biblical studies we refer to a repetition at the beginning and end of a section as an *inclusio*. In more accessible language this is often referred to as the envelope structure of a section, where the beginning is repeated at the end to highlight what the section is all about.

Now, astonishingly, in one sense the Bible is contained within a language *inclusio*: Genesis 10 -11 and Acts 2. In Genesis 10, in the Table of Nations, which, if I have it right, is unparalleled in all of Ancient Near Eastern literature, you will find repeated some version of the phrase “and language”. This is followed in Genesis 11 with the Tower of Babel narrative and the judgment of confusing the languages of the world. Note that different words are used in the Hebrew for “language” and “speech” in Genesis 11. In my view, but I cannot elaborate on it here, the juxtaposition of Genesis 10 and 11 presents us with a sophisticated view of language in a good but fallen world. What is crucial is that you take note that these narratives are inter alia about *language!*

Move to Acts 2 and the day of Pentecost. Remember Acts 2:7-12, how the crowds on that memorable day were amazed to hear the good news spoken by Galileans in their own languages. Confused and amazed they asked, “What does this mean?” I love good questions and this is a very good one. What indeed does this mean? Well, if you are familiar with Act 3 of the biblical drama you will immediately note what far too many commentators do not, namely that Pentecost undoes the *linguistic* judgment of Babel. Redemption, we might say, *has everything to do with language.*

2. My second example comes from hard philosophy. Look at the cover of this book – does it not ooze theory and evoke feelings of it being difficult and boring? In fact it is a remarkable piece of work. When I first see the title I tend to read “Ark” as “arc” and take it to mean the trajectory of language. But no, it is “Ark.” Chrétien is part



of the recent flourishing of Christian philosophy among French Catholic phenomenologists, and they gloriously move across theology and philosophy, often with good doses of the Bible, in a highly creative way. Ark is a metaphor for Noah's Ark which Chrétien appropriates to develop a remarkable, Christian view of language. The Ark protects, and Chrétien argues that the first great test Adam faced was when he was asked to name the animals. Will Adam use the power of naming to affirm and protect the alterity of the animals or to dominate them?

Similarly, George Steiner in his remarkable *Real Presences*, argues that for most of history a covenant between word and world has been assumed so that "being is sayable." He tracks how in modernity and especially in postmodernism this covenant has been shattered until with Derrida, according to Steiner, we are faced with a choice: either "In the beginning was the Word" or nihilism. Steiner argues that we need a grammar of creation to ground the real presences – a eucharistic metaphor – we experience in art and literature and language. In much postmodernism language is regarded as inherently violent whereas by grounding language in creation (Act 1), both Steiner and Chrétien have produced wonderfully human views of language without denying its potential for abuse.

THAT BOMB AGAIN

Scripture is a bomb waiting to be detonated in the service of life and human flourishing to the glory of God. Biblical theology is an indispensable tool in setting Scripture to work in our scholarship. It is there to help us produce rigorous work drenched in the Spirit, infused with Christ.

FURTHER READING

You will find a feast of resources for biblical theology on Mike Goheen's website:

missionworldview.com

Jean-Paul Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*. Translated by Andrew Brown. (New York: Routledge, 2004).

George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989).

- *Lessons of the Masters* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).

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