

Review

# Is New Testament Theology Still Having an Identity Crisis? A Review of Five Recent Contributions

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**Abstract:** This article reviews five recent contributions to the field of New Testament theology. More accurately, three NT theologies will be examined alongside two biblical theologies, given that some regard NT theology as inherently deficient apart from OT theology. These five works are notable not only for their diversity of methodology but also their diversity of cultural perspective—one book by a Finn (Timo Eskola’s *A Narrative Theology of the New Testament*), one by two Germans (Reinhard Feldmeier’s and Hermann Spieckermann’s *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*), one by a Canadian (Thomas R. Hatina’s *New Testament Theology and its Quest for Relevance: Ancient Texts and Modern Readers*), one by an American (Craig L. Blomberg’s *A New Testament Theology*), and one by a native Briton (John Goldingay’s *Biblical Theology*). Along the way, this review article will consider how these works navigate the tricky and contested terrain of NT (or biblical) theology, particularly vis-à-vis matters of history, canon, synthesis and diversity, and contemporary relevance.

**Keywords:** biblical theology; theological interpretation; historical criticism; narrative theology; history of religions; canon; dialectical



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## 1. Introduction

The aim of the present article is to review recent contributions to the field of New Testament theology (NTT). For an excellent introduction to the history of NTT from its beginnings with J.P. Gabler’s inaugural address in 1787 to more recent contributions in the 1990’s, one should start with Frank Matera’s insightful review article (Matera 2005). Matera’s review is nicely supplemented by Kavin Rowe’s article from the following year, which considers several non-English NTTs (Rowe 2006). Finally, one should also consult Christoph Stenschke’s essay that brings the reader up to 2008 (Stenschke 2010), wherein he reviews the NTTs of Howard Marshall (2004), Frank Thielman (2005), Frank J. Matera (2007), and Thomas R. Schreiner (2008).

The present article takes up the baton from these excellent review articles and surveys five works published in the previous decade: three NTT’s and two biblical theologies. These five works are notable for at least two reasons. First, they are written by seasoned and accomplished scholars coming from diverse cultural locations—one book by a Finn (Timo Eskola), one by two Germans (Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann), one by a Canadian (Thomas R. Hatina), one by an American (Craig L. Blomberg), and one by a native Briton (John Goldingay). Second, they represent a spectrum of theoretical assumptions, theological convictions, and methodological approaches.

In Matera’s aforementioned review essay, he opens by claiming, “NT theology suffers from something akin to an identity crisis about its task, method, and goal” (pp. 1–2). This identity crisis stems from several contested questions. Is NTT descriptive, prescriptive, or both? If it is descriptive, is it describing the NT in its final form, or the supposed religious history and theological developments behind the text? If it is prescriptive, how can this ancient text (or the history behind the text) speak two-thousand years later to a contemporary audience that occupies a different time, place, and culture? Should one approach the task of NTT with theological convictions about inspiration and canon, or

should one try to be more agnostic and skeptical about such matters? If theological convictions are put aside, is there any reason to limit one's research to the canon, or to look for some unity in the NT, or even for continuity with the OT. If one does look for unity, how does one retain the diversity in the NT? Is unity about finding a core theme (or themes) from which may sprout diverse expressions of a common core; or is the unity closer to discovering various points of overlap among the NT voices, like a complex Venn diagram? Should all the NT voices be heard, and if so, with equal voice; or can we, for example, largely sideline Jude and the Pastorals?

## 2. Thomas Hatina

With these questions swirling, it is perhaps appropriate that we start with Thomas Hatina's *New Testament Theology and its Quest for Relevance* (Hatina 2013). Like Matera, Hatina believes that "the discipline of New Testament theology has been suffering from a kind of identity crisis" (1). Thus, he aims to point out the symptoms, diagnose the root cause, explain the shortcomings of current treatments, and prescribe his own solution. In effect, Hatina's book is reminiscent of Heikki Räisänen's *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (Räisänen 2000), as both offer insightful criticism of the field of NTT then propose a controversial way forward.

Hatina highlights that an ongoing problem in NTT is how (and whether) one should move from description to prescription. That is, how does one bridge the gap between historical reconstruction and present-day application? Or, how does the theology of an author from a different time, place, and culture have relevance for whatever culture we found ourselves in today? For Hatina, some NTTs try to avoid this by sticking to the descriptive task; the result is contemporary irrelevance because there is no scriptural voice to be heard. In contrast, other NTTs seem oblivious that there is a gap to be bridged and simply conflate description with present-day prescription, or they bridge the gap in an ad hoc and inconsistent manner; once again, the result is irrelevance (or the wrong kind of relevance), because such theologies fail to speak in ways that are culturally perceptible or acceptable.

Hatina divides NTTs into two broad categories—foundationalist and dialectical. These are further divided into subcategories based on how such theologies are structured: foundationalist (chronological, author-by-author) and dialectical (salvation-history, dogmatic and thematic, existentialist). In my opinion, Hatina's categories and subcategories get a bit muddled. This is either due to Hatina's imprecise categorizing scheme or to the inconsistent (or incoherent) methodologies among some NTTs. For the sake of space and clarity, I will sometimes use different categorical descriptions than Hatina while still trying to be faithful to his project<sup>1</sup>.

According to Hatina, the foundationalist approach "was initiated by a search for a 'pure' theology that has not been 'distorted' by traditions and doctrines . . . [which] alone becomes the standard for Christian belief and practice" (p. 21). Thus, we might think of the foundationalist approach as seeking a foundation either *behind the text* or *in the text* (these are my descriptions not Hatina's). Those who seek a foundation *behind the text* use historical-critical methodology to discover and describe "what really happened". Consequently, such NTTs can ironically seem to have little to do with either the NT or theology. Instead, they tend to be reconstructions of the historical Jesus and the early churches, in which case the NT canon represents an arbitrary limit and there is less emphasis (or expectation of) a unified theology. Moreover, for Hatina, such a project is doomed to fail because (a) it does not account for the historian's subjectivity that inhibits the discovery of pure results, (b) it does not have criteria that produce consistent or agreed-upon results, and (c) even if it did produce such results, it has no neutral strategy for moving from description to prescription or contemporary relevance.

Those foundationalists who seek a basis *in the text* use literary analysis to describe what each NT author or redactor originally meant, with the assumption that there is a singular meaning to be found. Such NTTs are often limited to the canonical books,

offer insightful descriptions of the various theologies of the NT writings, but struggle to synthesize these theologies into a singular theology. This foundationalist strategy is also problematic insofar as (a) the literary critic's subjectivity inhibits the discovery of pure results, (b) it is notoriously difficult (and arguably impossible) to determine a singular meaning for many texts, (c) there is no neutral or "pure" way to synthesize or unify the various theologies of the NT without appeal to some subjective thematic or dogmatic schema, and (d) once again, there is no neutral strategy for moving from description to prescription or contemporary relevance.

Hatina finds more promise in the dialectical approach, though not in every iteration. His description and examples of the dialectical approach lack precision. Nonetheless, we might think of the dialectical approach as a kind of dialogue between (a) that which is *in front of the text* and (b) that which is *behind the text* and/or *in the text*. For an example of how this might be carried out in a more traditionally Christian way, we might consider what Hatina calls the dogmatic or thematic approach. In this case, the NT theologian might bring themes from systematic theology (i.e., *in-front-of-the-text* inquiry) into dialogue with the various NT writers (*in the text*) and/or into conversation with a reconstructed historical Jesus (*behind the text*). For Hatina, this dialectical approach still lacks relevance in a globalized, pluralistic world because, among other things, it tends to assume a kind of theological superiority that will inherently limit its voice in the public square. It might be okay for "insiders" but probably not for anyone for whom these sacred texts are not authoritative. For an example of a less traditionally Christian dialectical approach, we might consider Bultmann's NTT, wherein he brings his existential framework (*in front of the text*) into dialogue with the historical Jesus (*behind the text*) along with the writings of John and Paul (*in the text*). Hatina finds Bultmann's existentialist demythologizing strategy more promising, but critiques it as having limited relevance insofar as Bultmann's focus tends to be too individualistic and fails to address contemporary societal issues.

This brings us to Hatina's proposal that the future of NTT, especially if it hopes to be relevant, requires a dialectical approach that is informed by "the science of religion". The discipline of religious studies, according to Hatina, is characterized by inclusivity, nonpartisanship, cross-disciplinary inquiry, and "non-(a)theism" (i.e., neutrality with regard to the existence of God). Then, from such a vantage point, "with one ear tuned to the hum of contemporary culture and the other trained on the voices from the historical context of Scripture, the New Testament theologian's task is to speak to the life of faith as it wrestles with contemporary complexities, such as human identity, human rights, poverty, global warming, terrorism, imperialism and racial inequality" (p. 214).

Although this sounds good on the surface, one wonders how Hatina could have such a sharp eye for discerning the problems in other approaches to NTT while being blind to the problems in his own proposal. First, and most problematic, he treats the discipline of religious studies as self-evidently superior, as obviously the right way to have a respected voice in a global world. It is startling that he can critique the exclusivity of a faith system like orthodox Christianity, then turn around and claim "what is needed is a theory of religion that can establish a common ground" (p. 219)—as though religious studies occupies some neutral space that all peoples should recognize as right. One wonders why it is neither disrespectful nor colonizing for religion scholars to place themselves as the authorities on how Christians should read the NT, and presumably how Muslims should read the Quran, and Jews the Torah. To be fair, Hatina works hard to claim that sacred texts are still sacred and can have some authoritative role; in practice, though, it becomes evident that Scripture can no longer function as divine revelation (unless the divine being in question is either fallible or deferent to the religion scholar). As Hatina describes the role of sacred texts, it becomes apparent that their authoritative voice can only speak when deemed right and relevant by some a priori criteria deemed appropriate by religions scholars; and the voices of sacred texts are muted, opposed, or made metaphorical when deemed wrong or irrelevant by that same elusive criteria.

Second, despite Hatina's repeated appeal to "relevance"—even within the book's title—this term is never clearly defined. By "relevant", Hatina apparently means being "respected" and capable of speaking to whatever social problems are deemed (by religion scholars or the dominant culture) as worthy of attention. (It is worth asking whether Hatina has considered whether his proposal is "relevant" to NT scholars or orthodox Christians). Further, one suspects Hatina is suffering from what Larry Hurtado called "cultural amnesia", being unaware of the tremendous impact that the Christian faith had and continues to have in the world (Hurtado 2017). That is, in the very areas that Hatina thinks matter (like human rights and poverty) Christianity (and not the discipline of religious studies) made a culture-altering impact. Even more, early Christianity's tremendous impact came via a message that seemed neither respectable nor relevant to the dominant Greco-Roman culture.

Despite these criticisms directed against Hatina's proposal, his diagnosis of NTT demands attention. In what follows, we will be considering how several recent NTTs have navigated the complex questions Hatina raises. What is the role of history, the limits of the canon, the unity of the NT witness, and their ongoing relevance for today?

### 3. Craig Blomberg

Craig Blomberg offers his own attempt at this tricky genre with his recent book, *A New Testament Theology* (Blomberg 2018). For those familiar with Blomberg's impressive resume of NT scholarship, there are many ways in which his NTT will not disappoint its readers: it is chock-full of scholarship, provides an evangelical voice on numerous theological and historical topics throughout the NT canon, and is written with enviably clear syntax. Blomberg identifies his project as closest to a "redemptive-historical approach", which tends to be "arranged chronologically, focusing on developments for one period of time to the next [and] may be tied to the concepts of progressive revelation or salvation history and is an overtly Christian endeavor" (pp. 6–7).

Thus, the book is arranged in a kind of loose chronological order, based on Blomberg's assumptions about dating, with a chapter devoted to each of the following: historical Jesus, early church, James and Jude, Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, the Pastorals (with Luke as a possible amanuensis of Paul), Hebrews, 1–2 Peter, and Johannine Literature. Most chapters have a similar structure: background material (author, date, audience, etc.), prominent themes of each author/collection, and theological themes that Blomberg traces through nearly every author/collection (esp. the themes of fulfillment and Christology). Each chapter reveals a depth of research and an intimate familiarity with the NT work(s) in question, making the book a valuable resource for those interested in (a) an author's major themes, (b) where those themes show up, and (c) relevant scholarship pertaining to these themes.

In many ways, the result is a NTT that reads like a NT Introduction of inverse proportions. Whereas NT Introductions tend to be heavy on background information and light on an author's recurring themes, Blomberg provides the reverse: a quick survey of background material followed by a detailed survey of major themes. Blomberg's concluding chapter—a mere fourteen pages—does disappointingly little in the way of synthesis, offering a mere paragraph that points out some shared emphases along with three paragraphs on distinctive contributions of each NT book. To be fair, the motif of "fulfillment" is Blomberg's scarlet thread that runs throughout, but this does less to build a synthesized NT theology and more to highlight a shared assumption of the NT authors. The reader may find it odd that a book titled *A New Testament Theology* claims it is "not our goal to evaluate the amount of unity and diversity in the NT in any detailed way" (p. 700). However, one wonders how that could not be a goal. It seems almost a self-evident necessity for something called NT "theology" and not NT "theologies". Instead, Blomberg offers a collection of NT theological themes loosely arranged according to a conservative chronology.

As we look closer, we might categorize Blomberg's approach as a blend of historical criticism and evangelical scholarship. After a cursory survey of various approaches to

NTT, Blomberg identifies his work, as mentioned above, as having “most in common with the redemptive-historical approach” (p. 7). Unfortunately, Blomberg gives no explanation for why he adopts this approach; instead, he immediately moves on to the structure of his work. The reader is left wondering if Blomberg has understood that a coherent and compelling NTT cannot bypass this conversation; that this is no mere matter of taste or personal preference, but establishes the foundation upon which one constructs their NTT. What is particularly frustrating is that Blomberg references the works of both Räisänen and Hatina, but has apparently not found it necessary to address the valid questions they raise. For example, Räisänen offers a compelling case for why a *consistent* application of the historical-critical method should lead one away from a synthesized theology of the NT canon and toward history-of-religions reconstructions. From what I can gather by reading between the lines, Blomberg apparently believes there’s a simple solution to this problem—namely, any *good* application of the historical-critical method will produce results that are either consistent with the NT witness or simply neutral vis-à-vis the NT. Those historical critics who might dissent are presumably too skeptical or biased. The result is that Blomberg’s NTT contains historical claims that are likely to be well received by many evangelicals but dismissed by the traditional historical critic.

Two examples might suffice to show how Blomberg’s lack of theoretical clarity leads to confusing and unsatisfying results. First, Blomberg writes, “I must also be transparent about other presuppositions and principles I decided on in advance. I have limited my treatment to the twenty-seven books of the NT historically agreed upon by all major wings of the Christian church” (p. 13). One expects this statement to be followed by more details defending this particular presupposition, but Blomberg merely points to other publications defending “that the church’s ratification in the fourth century . . . was a good decision and superior to other collections that might have been chosen” (p. 13). Did Blomberg limit his focus to the NT canon based on theological reasons (“what is agreed upon by all major wings of the Christian church”) or historical-critical reasons (it is historically “superior to other collections”)? If the former, then he might make this more transparent by appeal to the Spirit’s guidance in the discernment process (which may then have implications for how to carry out the task of NTT). If it is the latter, then canonical limitations still seem arbitrary at best, or evangelical confirmation-bias at worst. After all, what historical critic, striving for neutrality, would contend that every NT document (including 2 Peter) is historically superior to every noncanonical document? This seems to be a place where Blomberg is making a theological move, but presenting it as a historical move to make it more respectable to the scholarly guild.

Second, and related, there is no explanation for why Blomberg includes a chapter on both the historical Jesus and the early church. Having just claimed to limit his survey to the “twenty-seven books of the NT”, he seemingly backpedals by starting his NTT with two chapters of historical reconstruction (nearly one-hundred-twenty pages, occupying one-fifth of the book). This raises a multitude of unanswered (and unaddressed) questions about the relationship of such historical-critical constructions to NTT? If I were to surmise a guess, I would assume Blomberg sees these chapters serving an apologetic function—namely, showing that the theology of all twenty-seven books of the canon are not based on myth and hearsay, but are rooted in and consistent with real historical events. This is a laudable goal but requires a better strategy. I suspect Blomberg has made his NTT susceptible to two problems. First, Blomberg is unlikely to sway the traditional historical critic, because his historical constructions lack sufficient rigor and skepticism. As an example, his historical-Jesus research focuses almost exclusively on Q and parts of Mark. Second, by choosing to *play the game* of historical criticism, it would seem he has positioned himself to *play by the rules* of the historical-critical method. Further, if Räisänen is correct (and Blomberg has not demonstrated otherwise), this means, among other things, that methodological integrity demands that history of religions is the proper subject matter, rigorous skepticism is the chief virtue, the canon is an arbitrary limit, and Blomberg’s periodic prescriptive statements are incongruous with the historian’s descriptive task. Consequently, for some

readers, it will be disappointing that someone with such intellectual caliber, such clarity of writing, and such concern for the Church did not base his theology on a more coherent, consistent, or clearly defended foundation.

#### 4. Timo Eskola

Next, we turn to Timo Eskola's *A Narrative Theology of the New Testament* (Eskola 2015), which Blomberg (2016) describes in a review as "by far the most erudite and helpful of the narrative theologies to date for NT study" (p. 869). In this stimulating work, Eskola charts a distinct path. Eskola aims "to construct a synthesis of the theological thinking present in different New Testament writings by focusing on the metanarrative of exile and restoration" (p. 14). In short, he hopes to show that the worldview of exile and restoration—made famous especially by N.T. Wright—enhances a reading of the NT. He is confident that this worldview lens will not only clarify many biblical passages but will also reveal shared assumptions that bring a certain unity to the many NT witnesses.

For Eskola, a worldview or metanarrative approach to NTT allows one to combine two important elements that belong together: (1) a close reading of the biblical narratives, and (2) a more current and informed understanding of the nature of historiography. "History, as it appears in ancient documents, has been presented to us in the form of narratives. A proper understanding of New Testament theology depends on a proper reading of narratives" (pp. 7–8). As Eskola points out, it is increasingly recognized that history-writing is never just a chronicling of bare facts but always involves selection, interpretation, and narrative arrangement; consequently, studying history requires good narrative analysis. Moreover, for Eskola, good narrative analysis requires understanding the metanarrative that shaped the interpretive, narrational process of history-writing: "[The] past is presented in the form of narratives, and *most descriptions are directed by metanarratives* that provide the rationale of the presentation. *Understanding theology, for the most part, depends on understanding these metanarratives* (p. 2, italics my own).

The structure of Eskola's NTT is a bit like a set of case studies of various NT texts and themes, testing the "fit" or explanatory power of the exile-and-restoration metanarrative. Besides an Introduction that lays out methodology and a Conclusion that summarizes things nicely, the book has four long chapters: Jesus' Message, The Teaching of Earliest Christianity<sup>2</sup>, Paul the Theologian, and Jewish Christianity<sup>3</sup>.

To help evaluate Eskola's work, I will adapt Alister McGrath's metaphor for thinking about worldview or metanarrative (McGrath 2010, pp. 51–52). McGrath describes worldview as a lens—something we can both look *at* and look *through*. In some places, Eskola invites the reader to look *at* the exile-and-restoration lens, showing where it can be found in the OT prophets, the intertestamental literature, and the NT writings. In much of the rest of the book, Eskola directs the reader to look *through* the exile-and-restoration lens, noting how it clarifies obscure NT texts while it also "helps the reader understand several other theological themes that previously may have looked like independent and separate elements" (p. 421). If I were to extend McGrath's worldview metaphor, I would note that some lenses are prescription lenses and others are colored lenses. At times, Eskola's metanarrative lens functions like a good set of prescription lenses, enabling the reader to see NT texts and themes with greater accuracy and clarity. At other times, Eskola's metanarrative lens seems more akin to colored lenses, tinting everything with the same hue, which can lead to both uniformity and self-fulfilling predictions (e.g., inviting people to look through blue lenses, then pointing out how much blue we "discover" in whatever object we're viewing). Regarding uniformity, one wonders if Eskola's colored lenses cannot but filter out the distinct "colors" of some NT witnesses, so that, for example, his NTT allots only seven pages for Hebrews, three for James, and two for Peter's letters. Regarding self-fulfilling predictions, for example, Eskola sees Israel's exile and restoration in the Prodigal Son parable. In this case, it appears that Eskola's metanarrative carries more interpretive weight than does the immediate Lukan narrative. (After all, in its literary context, Jesus tells this parable in response to the religious leaders grumbling that Jesus

eats with tax collectors and sinners). Superseding the literary context of the historical narrative in this way seems out of step with Eskola's earlier claims that we only have access to ancient history alongside such narratives.

We might also return to how Eskola navigates the relationship between history, narrative, and theology. I admit that I found Eskola hard to pin down. On the one hand, it would seem that Eskola is not interested in *behind-the-text* reconstructions based on his insistence that "theology is a matter of the content of texts and, therefore, depends on the semiotic nature and narrative structure of the texts in question" (1). On the other hand, he hopes to quell the fears of those who are nervous that narrative theologians "focus on the final version of the New Testament text and neglect the historical processes forming the material". This leads him to suggest that his metanarrative-informed historical construction can be something like data for the criterion of "coherence in order to evaluate which stories or traditions support the general picture" (p. 420). For example, in answer to the question, "Did [the historical] Jesus anticipate his death and resurrection?", Eskola thinks the exile-and-restoration metanarrative shows that "it is not logical to assume he didn't" (p. 187). I cannot understand why Eskola even considers such historical-Jesus questions. Is this not an instance of trying to peel back the layers of tradition and redaction to find the events behind the narrative, which Eskola had earlier problematized as guided by bad historiographical theory?

As for how Eskola's narrative theology of the NT speaks to a contemporary audience, that seems largely avoided; instead, Eskola sticks to the descriptive task. Perhaps Eskola recognizes that a shift to the prescriptive task may require a theological appeal, whereas he may desire to stay within the seemingly neutral and/or more respectable realms of socio-historical inquiry and literary analysis.

## 5. Hermann Spieckermann and Reinhard Feldmeier

Given that for some, NTT is inherently deficient apart from the OT, it seems wise to include two biblical theologies. We will start with *God of the Living*, which is the product of two German biblical scholars—Hermann Spieckermann (an OT scholar) and Reinhard Feldmeier (a NT scholar) (Spieckermann and Feldmeier 2011). Their biblical theology is worth considering for at least three reasons. First, its pages contain a vast amount of German scholarship that will likely be unfamiliar to many readers (although it is surprising that there is no bibliographical reference to towering English-speaking Pauline scholars such as John Barclay, N.T. Wright, E.P. Sanders, Michael Gorman, or Richard Hays). Second, it laudably combines the expertise of both an OT scholar and a NT scholar. This makes perfect sense for something as complex as writing a biblical theology. Third, Spieckermann and Feldmeier, whether they are aware of it or not, present a kind of *via media* between history of religions and theological interpretation. It is this third point that will be the focus of our review.

Their approach is to consider biblical theology by focusing on the doctrine of God. They describe their project as follows: "The doctrine of God seeks to examine the biblical understanding of God to the depths permitted by the biblical texts themselves and brought to light in all its complexity and controversy by the interpretive art of theological scholarship" (3). Precisely how they will be guided in this endeavor is somewhat mysterious. Despite closely reading the Introduction twice, I could pin down neither a clear methodological strategy nor the metaphysical assumptions that would guide their biblical theology. The following quotation is lengthy but necessary to capture the many strands the authors are trying to weave together:

With regard to the presentation of a biblical theology in the form of a biblical doctrine of God, it is self-evident that it must be conceived simultaneously in historical-genetic and systemic fashion. Contexts in the history of religion and philosophy will be taken into account to the extent that they are necessary for an understanding of biblical notions of God. Equally indispensable are insights from literary and theological history ... [These insights] serve the objective

of appropriately understanding the knowledge of God in the Christian Bible in its final forms and tracing the internal logic of the understanding of God attained there. This purpose requires the systematization called for by the subject matter, without which the reflection of the theo-logic of the Christian Bible cannot succeed and relational knowledge of God cannot be facilitated (p. 12).

The brevity by which they lay out this approach may leave the reader unsatisfied. Whether the authors are trying to avoid the complex conversation about the nature and methods of biblical theology, or whether they assume that all sensible readers will share their presumptions, the result is that it will leave some readers, like myself, disoriented and frustrated. Nevertheless, their approach seems to be something like a history-of-religions account of the development(s) of the Judeo-Christian doctrine of God coupled with a literary exegesis of the final, canonical form of Scripture, all with the goals of (1) facilitating a “relational knowledge of God”, and (2) presenting “biblical content . . . [that] can become fruitful and authoritative for contemporary reflection and insight” (p. 12). If all that sounds confusing, that’s because it is.

In order to provide a lay of the land, let us briefly consider the arrangement of *God of the Living*. Part 1, “Foundation”, considers “God’s being” in six chapters: The Name and the Names, From Lord God to Father God, The One as the Unifier, The Loving One, The Almighty, and Spirit and Presence. Part 2, “Development”, examines “God’s doing” in twelve chapters: Word and Creation, Blessing and Praise, Justice and Justification, Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Hiddenness and Wrath, Suffering and Lament, Transience and Death, Eternity and Time, Commandment and Prayer, Covenant and Promise, Salvation and Judgment, and Hope and Comfort.

There is something of a consistent pattern for each chapter. The authors highlight an issue or doctrine, trace the supposed development of this doctrine from earlier OT texts to later OT texts, then to intertestamental literature, then typically to the Gospels (starting with Mark and ending with John), then to Paul’s letters, and sometimes to the Catholic epistles and Revelation. Their survey is less a series of prooftexts, and more like a string of short interpretive essays on various texts—sometimes more of a historical-critical variety and sometimes more akin to a literary exegesis of the text’s final form. Thus, their biblical theology at places reads like a history-of-religions survey, especially as the authors make numerous references to the history *behind the text*. At other times, the authors abandon history-of-religions commitments when they (1) try to locate some constant thread uniting this development, (2) act as though whatever they have teased out provides some kind of authoritative picture of God, and (3) hope that this invites the reader into a relational knowledge of God.

Take for example, Ch. 5, “The Almighty”, which considers the doctrine of God’s omnipotence. After raising some troubling issues associated with the implications of this doctrine, the authors hope to quell any fears by offering a biblical doctrine of God’s omnipotence. To do so, they trace the development of this doctrine from a selection of Psalms to the Minor Prophets to Job to Ancient Judaism (*Letter of Aristeas*, Judith, 2 Macc) to excerpts of the undisputed Pauline letters to the Synoptics to John to Revelation. This survey leads to the authors’ conclusion: “In the biblical context, almightiness is not unbounded omnipotence, but a power expressed in God’s will for the salvation of his people. One may demonstrate the beginnings of a corresponding tendency in the Old Testament and in a clear form in the writings of Hellenistic Judaism. In the New Testament, this tendency develops into the assignment of omnipotence to the Father” (p. 197).

Generous readers might treat *God of the Living* as a vigorous quest to expose the biblical doctrine of God by discerning some scarlet thread(s) that runs throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Thus, the authors trace some theological idea from the earliest OT witness all the way through Jesus and the NT church, teasing out some shared doctrine and its historical development. For others, though, *God of the Living* will be more akin to an eccentric, connect-the-dots theological survey. Despite the vast amount of exegetical and historical insight on display, their biblical theology is particularly unsatisfying in that

it is never made clear why the authors chose to connect these particular historical and literary dots and why they connect them in this particular order. Moreover, once the dots are connected, the resultant picture never seems to be as self-evident as the authors assert. Instead, it resembles something closer to a Rorschach inkblot, which could plausibly resemble what the authors claim but could just as well resemble something altogether different. Rather than playing by the rules of either the historical-critical paradigm or theological interpretation, Spieckermann and Feldmeier seem to play by their own unspecified rules.

## 6. John Goldingay

Next, we will consider John Goldingay's *Biblical Theology* (Goldingay 2016). Along the way, we will come full circle by returning to some of the questions raised by Hatina at the beginning of our survey: namely, what does this biblical theology assume about the role of history, the limits of the canon, the unity of the biblical witness, and the ongoing relevance for today?

Let's begin with the structure of Goldingay's biblical theology. Perhaps only an author like Goldingay—one with his combination of scholarly credentials, courage, and provocative charm—can get away with admitting this research strategy: "I made a list of possible chapter headings on the basis of my hunches . . . and then began to read the New Testament and to make notes under those headings" (p. 9). Following a brief Preface and short Introduction—both of which touch on methodology without going into detail—the book has eight long chapters: God's Person, God's Insight, God's Creation, God's Reign, God's Anointed, God's Children, God's Expectations, and God's Triumph. Each of those chapters is further subdivided; for example, God's Creation, is broken down into the following themes: The Heavens and the Earth, The Human Community, The Nation, Human Beings, The Person, Waywardness and Its Consequences. For each theme, Goldingay references passages from both the Old and New Testaments, highlighting distinct contributions of various canonical witnesses. The result is an engaging book that I would characterize as *abstracts of major theological themes found in Scripture*. That is, one could ask, "What does the Bible say about human beings?", then consult Chapter 3.4 in Goldingay's *Biblical Theology*, and see a cleverly arranged essay containing brief descriptions of what the canon says about "human beings", which pulls from Colossians, Genesis, James, Hebrews, Proverbs, Psalms, Job, Leviticus, Ephesians, 1 Corinthians, Luke, Matthew and more.

Next, how does Goldingay address matters of unity, canon, history, and ongoing relevance? Regarding unity, he states, "My aim is not to identify a 'common core' or 'underlying unity' that that biblical writings share; the nature of such a common core is inclined to be thin. I am seeking to identify the 'building' that might be constructed from the materials that the writings offer, in a way that does justice to them . . . This volume is the impression I have as I come away from the Scriptures" (p. 16). There is "unity" in the sense that all these witnesses rightfully belong together as one "building", but this need not result in uniformity nor in muting dissident voices. Thus, "the canon does not imply a simple unity of doctrine . . . [although it] sets boundaries" (p. 127). Further, "[the] diversity of forms by which [a theological theme] finds expression, and then the diversity within those forms . . . reflects the complexity of reality . . . [which] implies a warning about biblical theology, about thinking that we can systematize it without losing the reality" (p. 84).

Why does Goldingay assume some measure of unity; why does he assume that these diverse forms and expressions are part of one "building"? Based on statements such as "The church regards these two collections as belonging together, and they are commonly printed as one volume" (p. 13), it appears that Goldingay is either sneaking in a theological basis (i.e., the Church's discernment of canon should be trusted<sup>4</sup>) or simply pointing to a practical literary fact (i.e., the Bible typically comes to us as a single two-testament volume, so we may as well read it that way). All of this is further complicated by Goldingay's recent book, *Do We Need the New Testament* (Goldingay 2015), which acts as something of a

prelude to this biblical theology. In that book, Goldingay gives the strong impression that the NT is not revealing much that cannot already be found in the OT. If that's the case, why would Goldingay write a biblical theology after completing his OT theology; would not that just be redundant? Is it because, after all, the NT has something to add? That would fit the unity-in-diversity "building" model where distinct canonical voices need to be heard; at the same time, that would seem to undermine his position that the NT is not revealing much that cannot be found in the OT.

We might further consider how Goldingay "constructs" this one biblical-theological building. Notice above Goldingay's references to "my hunches" and "the impression I have". Interestingly, such appeals sit side-by-side with claims such as "I wanted to give priority to my reading of the Scriptures themselves and to let them set the agenda for the work" (p. 9). So, is this biblical theology fashioned from Scripture's voice(s) or Goldingay's hunches? A generous reader might make sense of this by appeal to something like a "model reader" or virtue theory. This would require four assumptions. First, all readings are to some degree dialectical as the situation-shaped voice of the text is interpreted by the situation-shaped mind of the reader. Second, some readers are better—i.e., more virtuous or model—than others. Third, the more virtuous or model readers are presumably those that are most in line with the voice(s) of Scripture itself. Fourth, Goldingay is presenting himself as such a virtuous or model reader whose immersion in Scripture has honed his instincts, so that his hunches and impressions are not haphazard but trained by the text itself to be on target<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, proper evaluation of his biblical theology may not be possible on the front end by examining methodology, but only by following Goldingay on the journey. In the same way as the Apostle Paul says, "Follow me as I follow Christ", perhaps Goldingay is saying, "Follow me as I follow the grain of Scripture". As far as I can tell, this framework would also explain how Goldingay hears the voice of Scripture speaking to contemporary issues (i.e., Goldingay is presumably the kind of virtuous or model reader who can hear how the text speaks to his own contemporary context). This would not be the foundationalism that Hatina critiques, but a kind of model-reader-dialectical approach. Nonetheless, Goldingay is evidently reserved about this task: "I want to know what significance these Scriptures have in our time . . . [but] I don't want such interests to stop me from seeing what they have to say in their own right" (p. 15).

If I am correct to apply a model-reader or virtue-theory framework to Goldingay's biblical theology, this raises some questions about other claims he has staked. For example, he writes, "I aim to write a critical biblical theology in the sense that I seek to avoid reading into the Scriptures the categories and convictions of postbiblical Christian theology", such as the doctrine of the Trinity and the Nicene Creed (p. 17). (In *Do We Need the New Testament*, Goldingay even has a chapter titled, "Theological Interpretation: Don't Be Christ-Centered, Don't Be Trinitarian, Don't Be Constrained by the Rule of Faith"). Are we to assume that Goldingay believes his hunches and impressions are superior to the collected witnesses of the ecumenical councils? Is he a more virtuous or model reader than they? Might the doctrine of the Trinity and the rule of faith be the time-tested, authorized, ecumenical, global "impressions" for how to read Scripture? Further, given that Goldingay apparently focuses on the canon for theological and/or literary reasons, would not either of those same reasons support a "ruled" reading of Scripture (i.e., theologically, the church catholic handed down both the canon and the Creed, which suggests that if Goldingay defers to one [the canon] he should defer to the other [Creed]; literarily, the same church who bound the two testaments together [so that Goldingay reads them as one volume] also provided an interpretive guide for reading them properly via the rule of faith)?

Lastly, we turn to the relationship between history and theology in Goldingay's work. He writes, "The choice between being historical, critical and academic or being ecclesial . . . is phony"; and, "my conviction [is] that [Scripture's] understanding of reality is true" (p. 17). His solution, which is spelled out in *Do We Need the New Testament*, is neither to claim that the Scriptural record is fabrication nor that it's some pure record of events exactly as they happened. Instead, he categorizes it as "memory", by which he means something

like an authorized interpretation and narration of events. For example, “Scriptures such as Exodus thus pass on the revelation, the account of the event, the proclamation and the interpretation” (p. 95). The history *behind the text* is, therefore, not Goldingay’s focus, because he is more concerned with the memory transmitted *in the text*, which gives the authorized narration and interpretation of past events. Consequently, Goldingay’s “critical biblical theology” will not satisfy the classic historical critic, but it may find an audience with the literary critic and the theological interpreter.

## 7. Conclusions

The title of this review posed the question, “Is New Testament theology still having an identity crisis?” Based on the five works surveyed, it appears the answer is “yes”. Not only does our survey reveal there to be no standard approach to NTT (or biblical theology), it also shows that each work struggled to articulate and/or consistently implement a coherent strategy for carrying out its own approach. That is, it is not merely a matter of an identity crisis in the *field* but also an identity crisis in each surveyed work. To switch to a building metaphor, despite the tremendous amount of scholarship evident in these books, they all came up short of building something that was adequately sturdy and inhabitable and inviting, because they did not lay a sufficiently solid theoretical foundation and/or erect a structure that could weather the storms of the apt criticisms that their works elicit. By avoiding, minimizing, or mishandling one or more crucial issues—such as the role of history, the limits of the canon, the synthesis of the diverse biblical witness, and the ongoing relevance for today—these five books have left the door open for others to attempt a NTT (or biblical theology) that contains the kind of theoretical coherency and consistency required for bringing the genre out of its longstanding identity crisis.

My own modest contention is that NTT needs to stop attempting to be all things to all people. First, for the traditional historical-critics, sticking with their field’s own theoretical presuppositions, they should abandon the project of NTT, focusing instead on the historical developments of Jesus and the early Christians. It is simply, and obviously, confusing or misleading to call such historical-reconstruction projects “NT theology”, given that it makes little sense for the consistent historical critics to either (a) limit their focus to the NT, or (b) assume that these witnesses can be synthesized into a singular theology. Second, for the literary critics, who want to let all the “voices” of the NT be heard, but are reticent to synthesize these voices, they should cease referring to their works as “NT theology”, but should instead call them “Theologies of the NT”, which is more accurate. Third, my hunch is that the kind of NTT that Hatina proposes should be largely abandoned due to, of all things, a lack of relevance. Ironically, in attempting to make the NT relevant, Hatina has made it largely irrelevant by stripping it of its weight and status among the primary community that looks to the NT for direction. Consequently, I am not sure who the audience would be for the kind of NTT that Hatina proposes—a theology that speaks with no real authority to either the global or Christian community.

Fourth, I think the most promising way forward is to embrace a theoretical and metaphysical framework that befits something called “NT theology”—i.e., the kind of framework that naturally aligns with studying these twenty-seven NT books while also assuming they can be synthesized into *a* theology (*singular*). To my mind, this requires an unapologetically Christian framework that not only regards these twenty-seven books of the NT as special revelation, but also assumes these witnesses are capable of being synthesized into *a* theology, because they are inspired by *one* God. The audience for this work is not primarily the historical critic nor the literary scholar nor the pluralistic world; after all, some theoretical and metaphysical assumptions are different and/or incompatible. Sensibly, the primary audience for NTT would therefore be the community that regards the NT as this kind of special revelation. Then, when the writers of NTT come to matters such as history, contemporary relevance, or synthesis, they will not try to please all peoples of all assumptions but will instead inquire how Christian convictions and traditions might guide them. This is not to say that such a NTT would be fundamentalist or would ignore all the

tools of literary criticism or socio-historical inquiry. Of course, some tools might be seen as irrelevant to the specific project of NTT (such as historical-Jesus criteria, given that NTT would focus on the final, canonical form of the Gospels' witness to Jesus). However, other literary and historical tools would still play a role as they are wielded by those working within the larger framework of a Christian worldview. The Christian worldview that befits NTT (or biblical theology) would presumably operate on several guiding assumptions that make up basic Christian belief, such as the following: (1) God exists; (2) the one God has given special revelation in Scripture; (3) this special revelation is contained in both the Old and New Testaments; (4) this special revelation plays an authoritative role over believers of all times and cultures, because the Spirit makes it a living word capable of speaking beyond its original audience; (5) the special revelation of Scripture comes through God inspiring humans and working through their distinct languages, communication styles, and cultures (unlike the dictation model of the Quran), which means interpreting special revelation sometimes requires linguistic and cultural translation; (6) the same Spirit who inspired Scripture presumably guided the church to hand down the rule of faith (especially the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds), which functioned as a kind of core and authoritative synthesis of the canon, while still allowing room for diversity of emphases and guidance on secondary and tertiary matters; and, (7) Jesus was the God-incarnate Messiah who fulfilled Scripture, was crucified, died, resurrected and ascended, thereby ushering in the already/not-yet kingdom of God that will culminate in the redemption and reconciliation and right-making of all things. It appears time for a NTT that is boldly and coherently and consistently Christian.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> More specifically, I will use the following three categories: (1) "behind the text," (2) "in the text," and (3) "in front of the text." Joel B. Green (2007) concisely and clearly defines these categories:

*Behind-the-text* approaches address the text as a window through which to access and examine the deposit of "meaning." These approaches, then, locate meaning in the history assumed by the text, the history that gave rise to the text, and/or the history to which a text gives witness. *In-the-text* methods recalibrate their gaze so as to bring into focus the qualities of the text itself, its architecture, consistency, and texture. Emphasis falls on the perspective contained within and transmitted by the text, apprehending the text as a kind of sealed "container" of meaning. *In-front-of-the-text* approaches orient themselves around the perspectives of various readers of the text, on readerly communities, and/or on the effects that texts (might) have on their readers. In this case, readers do not simply perceive but actually produce, or at least assist in the production of, meaning (p. 105 [italics original]).

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, Eskola examines "the earliest stratum of hymns, confessional statements and kerygmatic formulas still detectable in the New Testament writings" (p. 189).

<sup>3</sup> This chapter offers a brief survey of the exile-and-restoration metanarrative in Hebrews, James, Peter, and the Johannine literature.

<sup>4</sup> "Their canonical authority signifies that they are our key resource and norm for our thinking because they alone can tell us what God was doing in the story of Israel and the story of Jesus" (Goldingay 2016, p. 133).

<sup>5</sup> These four assumptions might be inferred from the following: "While our grasp of truth is partial and is skewed by our perspective and context, so that our account of the narrative will be local, there is such a thing as objective truth . . . and the Scriptures convey truth . . . The scriptural story seeks to encourage people to look at their own story in the context of the story of creation; the exodus; David; the exile; Ezra and Nehemiah; the Maccabees; Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection; and the beginning of the Jesus movement" (Goldingay 2016, p. 83).

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