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Ben Witherington, III
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Biblical Theology

In *Biblical Theology*, Ben Witherington examines the theology of the Old and New Testaments as a totality. Going beyond an account of carefully crafted Old and New Testament theologies, he demonstrates the ideas that make the Bible a sacred book with a unified theology. Witherington brings a distinctive methodology to this study. Taking a constructive approach, he first examines the foundations of the writers' symbolic universe – what they thought and presupposed about God – and how they revealed those thoughts through the narratives of the Old and New Testaments. He also shows how the historical contexts and intellectual worlds of the Old and New Testaments conditioned their narratives, and, in the process, created a large coherent biblical world view, one that progressively reveals the character and action of God. Thus, the Yahweh of the Old Testament, the Son in the Gospels, and the Father, Son, and Spirit in the New Testament writings are viewed as persons who are part of the singular divine identity.

Sensitive to do a more than merely thematic reading of the Bible which strips texts out of their original context, Witherington's progressive revelation approach allows each part of the canon to be read in its original context and with its original meaning. The result is a biblical theology that allows Jews and Christians to dialogue about and appreciate the sacred scriptures in both testaments.

The capstone work of an internationally known theologian, *Biblical Theology* also offers new insights on key theological issues, including the character of God, grace, covenants, salvation, election, and eschatology as they relate to the doctrine of God.

Ben Witherington III is Amos Professor of the New Testament for Doctoral Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary and Emeritus doctoral faculty at St. Andrews University, Scotland. A prolific author, he has written more than 40 books and six commentaries, most recently, with Amy-Jo Levine, *Luke*.

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The Convergence of the Canon

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We are only beginning to learn that in order to understand a great teacher's message we must take pains to get his point of view. You cannot possibly understand Browning apart from his point of view. "In Memoriam" only yields its full message to those who know Tennyson's grief at the loss of his friend, Arthur Hallam. *Pilgrim's Progress* becomes a new book when, in thought, you sit by Bunyan's side in Bedford jail. I am not particularly concerned with that as a principle in general educational methods, but as it applies to our understanding of religious truths.

How much more vital and valuable the Bible becomes if we put ourselves in the places of those who first uttered its truths. It saves us from fantastic interpretations. Stand by some grief-stricken father who has come from his days of toil to find his home in ruins, his children slain, and his wife carried off, and you will understand why in the collection there are "vindictive psalms." Sit with the captive Jews on the banks of the river Chebar and the Lamentations of Jeremiah and the rebukes of Ezekiel will take on a new meaning. Gather with a few humble Eastern saints in an upper room at Corinth or Philippi and you will understand Paul's Epistles as never before. Still more does the truth apply to our endeavor to teach Christianity.

Fred Barrett, in his sermon "Put Yourself in His Place" on Ezekiel 3.15, *Luminescence*, vol. 3: *The Sermons of Charles Kingsley and Fred Barrett* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 158.

Although these premodern Christians knew that biblical texts had human authors, they read the texts not for what some author "behind" the text might have "meant" but for what the words of the text "said" … the *main voice* of the text was the text itself. The text was its own agent and had its own voice. People considered that the text was what was speaking, not a historically "reconstructed" author *behind* the text.

Dale B. Martin, *Biblical Truths: The Meaning of Scripture in the Twenty-First Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 1–2.

The notion of the readerly creation of meaning is incompatible with the role of a particular set of texts as Christian Scripture. This role requires the communication of determinate meaning to readers. Although the elaboration of that meaning will always be shaped by the context of its reception, it remains possible to argue that texts have a "literal sense" dependent on "authorial intention" and that their ambiguities may be contained (if not eliminated) by a set of "objective," non-context-dependent interpretative procedures … A determinate communicative intention is embedded in the text; it is not to be found "behind the text" in an authorial psychology or in an "original" historical context.

Francis Watson, *Texts and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 11.

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A text without a context is just a pretext for whatever you want it to mean. The biblical text itself is not an autonomous voice or "its own agent with its own voice." It is rather the voice of God speaking through the voices of a myriad of his people down through the ages of the biblical era. To ignore, dismiss, or belittle the need for studying the historical context of God's Word is to deny the *incarnational* nature of that Word, and to give free rein to a postmodern reader to anachronistically read all sorts of current notions, ideals, and shibboleths into the biblical text which the original authors would have rejected. This is not exegesis but rather eisegesis. The Bible is God's living Word not because it is *contextless*, but because there is a living God still using it to speak to us in and through its original contextual meanings.

Ben Witherington (see e.g. *The Living Word of God*: *Rethinking the Theology of the Bible* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007]).

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Soli Deo gloria

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Note on the Text

This work is a capstone project, based on my previous exegetical, theological, and intertextual works, and would not have been possible without the kind permission of several of my publishers to reuse some of my previous work but reorient and reapply it to a different subject which I have not written about previously – biblical theology.

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In a couple of passages, I have used the NETS Septuagint translation (2007) with the kind permission of Oxford University Press, all rights reserved.

Finally, a special thanks to Stan Gundry for the use of a small bit of the old NIV once again, though most of the translations in this study are my own.

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