

# Dr. Tiberius Rata, Old Testament Theology, Session 1, Introduction and Methodology

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This is Dr. Tiberius Rata and his teaching on Old Testament Theology. This is session 1, Introduction and Methodology.

Hello everybody. My name is Tiberius Rata. I teach Old Testament at Grace College and Theological Seminary, and today, we're going to talk about Old Testament Theology. So first, we're going to talk about the introduction and the methodology of the discipline.

We don't do pure Old Testament Theology because we couldn't; we're not Old Testament prophets; we are Christian teachers, so we cannot teach the Old Testament as though Jesus didn't die on the cross and didn't rise again. So, we have to do, in a sense, biblical theology, but it is an Old Testament theology. Here are a few definitions from some previous scholarship.

A theology that's contained within the Bible, you might say that's pretty obvious. Vos says that the branch of exegetical theology deals with the process of self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible. So now we have some terms that are very, very important.

In other words, Old Testament theology has to be exegetical theology. In other words, it needs to come out from the text. We cannot do eisegesis, impose our beliefs on the text, but draw our beliefs from the text.

And it's talking about the self-revelation of God. This is not a human work. We believe that this is God's Word without error.

That's why we can believe that it's not just for faith and practice, but it's for everything that we are looking at. Ebeling defines biblical theology as a theology that accords with the Bible. And again, obviously, that's very simple.

But there's more to it than that. Actually, the concept of biblical theology was not born until after the Reformation. The term biblical theology was first time used in the 17th century by Johann Philipp Gabler, who is considered to be the father of biblical theology.

So, this is actually the title of the book. The title of his work is *A Discourse on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Correct Delimitation of Their Boundaries*. So Gabler looked at the way theology was done and said, I think there needs to be a different way to look at this.

So, he clearly delineates between biblical theology and dogmatic theology, or sometimes what we call systematic theology. So, what Gabler did that, again, helps biblical theologians is that he gave biblical theology a purely historical character. So, when we look at the Old Testament and see how God revealed himself, we have to look at it progressively.

We have to start at the beginning and then go see how God revealed himself in history. In other words, we shouldn't do, and again, systematic theologians might disagree with him. We shouldn't just put and talk about God in general and then take a verse from Genesis, take a verse from Malachi, take a verse from Psalms. But he said, let's look at how God reveals himself in history. And that's really at the root of biblical theology, according to Gabler.

He writes that biblical theology must attend to the individual documents of the Bible, placing them in their historical context and observing their form of expression. So again, this is where we go with the exegetical theology. First, you start with exegesis; you look at the Bible and the text, and then you look at the historical context, and then you see how they are expressed, and then you write it down as a theology.

Gabler himself considered the word biblical theology to be inadequate for true biblical theology, which for him meant, and I quote, an exegesis of individual documents and a comparison of their various expressions. I think the most important thing to remember is that biblical theology stands between exegesis and systematic theology. So there's nothing wrong with systematic theology, he would say.

But before you get there, you have to go through biblical theology. You look at how God revealed himself in history and look at the progression of that revelation. Again, that historical element is what Gabler brings to the table.

And I think that's a very good way to look at it. For example, when we look at God as the creator, we start in Genesis, and then we move along and see how God revealed himself. Now if you disagree with the dating of the books, you might say, well, we have to start with Job first.

And that's okay. Start with the Job first. Does Job talk about God as a creator? Yes, he does.

So, God as creator is a very important part of biblical theology and Old Testament theology, and God begins by describing himself as God the creator. There are other scholars who continue this idea of biblical theology, 19th-century theologians such as Hermann Schultz, Gerhard Vos, and E.J. Young. They saw biblical theology and quote, that branch of biblical interpretation that deals with the revelation of God to

men in the light of the revealing activity of God, the spiritual experience of men to whom he spoke, and the character of the written word.

And again, there are a few elements here. None of these theologians denied that this is God's word. God reveals himself in his word.

He could have chosen to reveal himself in other ways, through angels. But no, he didn't do that. He chose to reveal himself in his words and in historical acts.

Again, Gabler would say there is a place in our studies for systematic theology, but we need to understand the differences. So, first of all, there are similarities in how both systematic theology and biblical theology deal with the scripture material. They deal with the biblical text.

So, as long as we start there, we are good. Now, systematic theology presents scriptural truth in its totality in regard to, for example, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of God, sin, so forth, and so on. Biblical theology exposes the particular stage of maturation of God's revelation to men in the time of the patriarchs, Moses and Christ.

So, there is that progression, something that, again, systematic theology doesn't do. They both do exegesis, both biblical theologians and systematic theologians. They do biblical exegesis, but how they arrange their material is different.

Biblical theologians have a more historical, progressive arrangement. Scholars that are interested in the biblical picked up on this. One of the more well-known ones is G.E. Wright, who said God is not only the God of covenant but also the Lord of history.

In a sense, he reacts against the German school, which rejects some of the biblical material because of miracles, for example. You had theologians who said, well, you don't have to believe the exodus. The exodus actually happened for you to believe that God is great and God is the Redeemer. And G.E. Wright would say, no, God revealed himself in historical acts.

You cannot separate theology from the historicity of the event. That's why he goes on and says God is not only the God of covenant, he is also the Lord of history. Von Raad, even though he said some things that might not fit in with our theology, he did believe that the Old Testament is a historical book.

Israel's faith is grounded in a theology of history. Now, where he went wrong, he said he's not necessarily about what happened that's important. What is important is what Israel believed that happened. Well, the problem with that is that sometimes

Israel didn't really believe what happened, or at least they didn't act in accordance with that belief.

There are other scholars who follow this idea of biblical theology. Terry Ann focuses on the literature of the Bible rather than on its history. So, these guys counteract what Philip Gobbler said and others.

They said what's important is not the historical historicity but the literature. And that's why you have, for example, now you can take Bible classes at the University of Michigan, Ohio State, Harvard, but they don't believe anything that they're writing as far as, or they're saying as far as the historicity of the biblical events. They just say it's a beautiful book of literature.

Obviously, we could not agree with that. Kaiser says history is not only the medium of revelation; it is the basis through which God can be known. Again, God revealed himself in history.

Westermann and Clemens, the Bible is literature with a historical and intellectual dimension. Again, they do not always reject the historicity of events, but they admit to the historical element or the historical dimension of theology. Now, there are other models of Old Testament theology.

Some current models are, for example, the typological model, Von Rad and Eichrodt . And we'll talk about Eichrodt later when we talk about Covenant. A lot of people look at biblical theology through the lens of Heilsgeschichte, the idea of the history of salvation.

And this is actually very close to biblical theology because Heilsgeschichte, the history of salvation, traces how God is saving his people in history. And it's a very important concept in Old Testament literature. Frey develops this narrative approach.

And again, as evangelical believers, we don't accept this model, although there are some very important elements that we can learn from Frey. Lindbergh develops a cultural-linguistic method. He's actually considered the father of post-liberal theology, also known as narrative theology.

He argued that the church should focus on the narrative presentation of the Christian faith, on the Christian story from beginning to end. So, he says, if you look at a story, you also learn about the culture and about the different background matters, grammar, and practices of the culture. And again, he would say that that's the way to study the Old Testament.

Gotwald develops the sociological perspective, and he actually draws from Marxist analysis to present the early history of Israel not in terms of the traditional conquest, but rather as a peasant revolt within Canaanite society. So, what these scholars are doing, really, is they're looking at what's happening in the world today, and they're reading that into the past, which is a very, some might say, very wrong way of doing theology. And then there's also, of course, Jewish biblical theology.

There are some great Old Testament scholars that we can learn and draw from. Again, the difference would be that Christian scholars look forward to the messianic promises being fulfilled in Christ, whereas Jewish scholars do not. I had a professor one time who took a Romans class with actually a Jewish rabbi.

He said it was one of the best classes on Romans he ever took because the guy who was able to make the correlation to the Old Testament, by the end of the class, the rabbi said, well, that's Paul. I don't believe it. So it is, in the end, a matter of faith and what we believe about the Bible.

Is the Bible the word of God without error, or is it not? And we believe that it is. Biblical theology: even though they didn't call it like that, church fathers practiced biblical theology, and they looked at the historical elements of faith. Or Arianus, Origen, Augustine, in the third century, Aquinas did it, the great reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin did it.

If you look at John Calvin's Institutes, he did not come up with those things. He was just a great systematizer of data. He took what existed out there and then systemized it into his works.

And there's a whole lot of biblical theology in his works. One question that we need to ask is, is there a center of the Old Testament? Is there an Old Testament center? Is there a center of the whole Old Testament? Can we talk about a center? And one of the scholars that suggests there is a center is Walter Eichrodt. Of course, he would not be able to teach in our evangelical schools today because he actually said the Old Testament contained very little actual doctrine.

He was very critical of systematic theologians because they would adopt the outline from doctrinal theology or dogmatic theology. You know, you talk about God, and now we talk about man, and now we talk about sin. He would say, we can't do that.

We have to study the text and then come up with what he's talking about from the text. So, he would say it is about God and people, God and the world, God and humanity. So, I can appreciate Eichrodt because he keeps God at the center, even though he doesn't get the entire theology correct.

The other place where Eichrod is right, in a sense, is that he puts a lot of emphasis on the idea of covenant. He actually suggests that the covenant is the center of Old Testament theology. God makes a covenant with Noah, he makes a covenant with Moses, he makes a covenant with Abraham first, then Moses, and then David, and then you have the new covenant.

So there is this theme of the covenant from beginning to end, and it's hard to disagree with him because when you get to the New Testament when Jesus talks about his relationship with us, the Lord's Supper, he institutes the new covenant. We, as believers today, are under the new covenant. So it's very hard to disagree with Eichrod in a sense.

He describes the centrality of the covenant, and he talks about the Mosaic covenant at Sinai, which brings together all the other Old Testament themes. The covenant of the Old Testament is really the same thing as the kingdom of God in the New Testament. And again, I'm sure some would disagree with him, but I think his teaching is very, very important when it comes to Old Testament studies and especially the study of covenant.

Theodorus C. Vriezen, another biblical theologian, that's very important, his main idea was God's communion with human beings. If Eichrod focused on the covenant, Vriezen focused on God's communion with human beings. And again, it's hard to disagree with him.

God was getting together with Adam and Eve in the cool of the garden. So, from the beginning, God wants to be in a relationship with people. But he says that theology is a matter of faith and revelation and is concerned with the reality of God and with the faith of the Christian church.

For that reason, Old Testament theology has its own place alongside the history of the religion of Israel as a separate branch of scholarship. He does agree with this biblical-theological point that you cannot just do pure Old Testament theology, but you also have to look to the New Testament for deeper understanding. The connection with the New Testament, he says, is not accidental but must be integral.

G.E. Wright, as I mentioned earlier, emphasizes the entire unity of Scripture because of his emphasis on history. History is the revelation of God. History is the arena of God's activity.

He agrees with Eichrod that the idea of covenant is central and formative. He goes back and says history cannot be divorced from archaeology and exegesis. Why? Archaeology gives us a window into the history and culture of the people when all these events happened.

But, of course, you cannot divorce it from exegesis. Exegesis should actually be the first step. Gerhard von Rad, again, we mentioned him earlier, and again, he got some things right, and then he got some things wrong.

He utilized a synthetic approach that claimed that the Old Testament theology is a series of confessions of faith preached through the years. His treatment of the message of the prophets is very, very good because he puts a lot of emphasis on the prophets. He liked this *heilgeschichte* approach, again, the history of salvation.

The purpose of Old Testament theology is not to produce a systematic organization of the world of faith. So von Raad and systematic theologians would butt heads over here. The purpose is rather to retell a story.

The subject is what Israel itself directly enunciated about Yahweh. And this is, I think, where he went wrong. He basically said it's not what happened in history.

It's not what God did but what Israel believed that God did. Well, again, Israel, many times, didn't get what God was doing or didn't believe what God was doing. So, we cannot base our theology on what someone believes or someone experiences because that might be subjective.

We have to believe in the objective word of God, and if God said it happened, then it happened. It really doesn't matter what Israel believed that it happened. And von Raad goes against Eichrod where he says no, there is no theological center in the Old Testament.

Yeah, covenant is an important aspect, but it is not the center. Walter Zimmerli, another Old Testament scholar, says the key to the key, and here I would agree with him that the center of Old Testament theology is God himself. And I think a lot of Old Testament scholars, even today, would say yes, that is correct.

Even though Israel had a particularly intimate relationship between its faith and its historical experiences, we must avoid the mistaken assumption that for Israel, history as such became the revelatory word of Yahweh. So, in a way, he reacts against von Raad. History does not proclaim Yahweh in the course of events.

Catastrophic events urge people to hear the word of Yahweh. And again, he gets some things right and some things wrong. Klaus Westermann says the structure of an Old Testament theology must be based on events rather than concepts.

The Old Testament tells a story, and again, for him, it is a true story. Emphasis on blessing. He is not the only one.

There are some who say the key, and the center of Old Testament theology is a blessing. God blesses his people from the beginning. You can start with Genesis 1:28, and then you go to Noah and Abraham.

You can trace the idea of blessing through scripture. Again, we cannot deny the fact that blessings are a very important concept. But to say that it is the center is probably debatable.

Unlike salvation, blessing is something that goes on all the time and may apply to all the world. So, he basically talks about what reformers later will call common grace. Quote, it is quiet, continuously flowing, and unnoticed working of God, which cannot be captured in moments or dates.

And I think for us who like to break down in points one, two, and three; sometimes it is good to look at Westermann's work because it allows for a little bit of mystery and allows for a little bit of time to say, sometimes we don't really know. And I think sometimes in Old Testament theology and in any theology, we need a little bit of humility, and that is why I like this idea that sometimes we cannot capture what God is doing in moments and dates. And I think that is very, very good.

When I went to school back in the day, Brevard Childs was one of the first people who was big. He came up with two volume sets, and he developed this canonical analysis in the 80s and 90s. The problem is that he also accepted the critical conclusions about the Old Testament and rejected a lot of the historicity of the Old Testament or the historicity of Acts.

But his work is very good in the fact that he understands, and he affirms that the theology of the Bible and the theology of the church was not developed in a vacuum, was not developed in an ivory tower, but it developed alongside the development of the church. And that is the canonical approach. He defines the canon as the received, collected, and interpreted material of the church.

So, please note that for some, the canon would be just the received and collected text. But he adds the interpreted material of the church. So again, he brings in the church, and you cannot have theology, he would argue, without the interpretation of the church.

That's why a lot of students, and rightly so, go back to the church fathers. How did they interpret scripture right after it happened, after the events of Christ's death and resurrection and the development of the early church? So, I think his idea is very good. It establishes the material theological context in which the tradition continues to function.



And from the idea of canon we have the idea of canonical, the reception of traditions as authoritative and the process by which the collection arrived at its literary and textual stabilization. For example, why didn't some apocryphal text for example make it into scripture? Well, they didn't because some would say, well, it didn't make it because the church did not accept it. So, you can have all these writings from the first century or second century or whatever, and they're not in scripture.

Why? Well because the church said they're not canonical. So that's why he said you cannot divorce the church from the process of theology. He goes on to say the testimony of the most ancient congregations having a claim to historical continuity with the earliest apostolic tradition and representing the most inclusive geographical testimony of the universal church was used as a major criterion by which to determine a book's authority.

And again, this could not have been done apart from the church. It had to be done within the church and the church tradition. The Old Testament is understood in relation to the New Testament, but the New is incomprehensible apart from the Old, and all the Old Testament scholars would say amen to this, and we would have to emphasize this to our students.

A major task of biblical theology is to reflect on the whole Christian Bible with its two very different voices, both of which the church confesses bear witness to Jesus Christ. Where I would disagree with him, I would say that not two different voices. It's the same voice, and if he chooses to focus on the differences, that's okay.

Some people like to focus on the discontinuity between testaments. Some of us like to focus on the continuity. I'm sure there's a happy medium there somewhere.

So, what is the task of the biblical theologian? Well, the Old Testament bears witness to the Christ who has not yet come—the New to the Christ who has appeared in the fullness of time. So, if we believe Jesus that the Old Testament is about him, then we need to look back to the Old Testament and see where he is.

When Jesus rises from the dead, Luke tells us on the road to Emmaus how he encounters the two disciples who are a little puzzled about what happened in Jerusalem, and Jesus kind of rebukes them. All foolish ones, Jesus says, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary that Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? And beginning with Matthew? No.

Beginning with Mark? No. Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all scriptures the things concerning himself. And later when he appears to the disciples says these are the words that I spoke to you while I was still with you.

That everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. So, if we read the Old Testament without seeing Jesus, we miss the point. Jesus himself says that.

Neither biblical theology nor dogmatic theology is an end in itself, but rather, they remain useful tools by which to enable fresh access to the living voice of God in sacred scriptures. The canonical criticism, again, is from Brevard Childs. This is just a summary of his work.

God intervened in the history of ancient Israel. Religious writings arose in faithful testimony of God's acts. The religious writings received various degrees of acceptance among the community of faith as normative.

As time passed, the more accepted writings were revised, redacted, and shaped to communicate the record of God's acts to future generations. The writings were sufficiently shaped so that it is to be declared by the community of faith as canonical. That is, they are capable of expressing the facts and meaning of God's historical acts to all future believers.

And that is the end of the introduction and methodology of Old Testament theology.

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