A Quarterly for Church Renewal

VOLUME 14 · NUMBER 4 · 2005

What Kind of Book Is the Bible?

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No doubt this question perplexes many readers. For the question merely, "What is the Bible?" many would readily—and correctly—answer: "The Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God." But what *kind* of book is this inspired and infallible Word of God?

How we answer that question will determine how we interpret the Bible. When we truly grasp what the Bible is *intending to do*, we will more easily understand its central message and more knowledgably obey its commands.

REVELATORY HISTORY

The Bible is essentially the enumeration and interpretation of God's great acts of redemption in human history. The Bible is divinely inspired and therefore infallible,[1] but it is a book that originates within and speaks preeminently of human history. Its "bookends" are the creation of all things by God (most notably humanity) and the conclusion of human history in the new heavens and the new earth. Between those bookends is the account of God's redemptive work in history, or, perhaps more accurately, his work in—and as—*redemptive* history.[2] We read of Adam and Eve and their seduction by the serpent, the destruction of the world by the great flood, the calling of Abraham and the nation of Israel and the covenant relation of the latter to Jehovah (and frequent apostasies), and the numerous

Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah who would redeem Israel.

The apex of redemptive history and, therefore, that history's interpretation in the Bible is, however, the earthly work of Jesus Christ—his love-filled, law-keeping life; his atoning, sacrificial death; his resplendent, victorious resurrection; and his ascension to his heavenly throne from which all power and glory and authority to rule the earth was bestowed on him. Acts tells us of the exploits of the primitive church and Jesus' accredited representatives, his apostles. The Pauline and general epistles are specific, episodic treatments of the growth and odyssey of the primitive church and her leadership. Revelation describes the outward history of the kingdom of God in the entire interadvental era. In short, the Bible tells us *what happened* in redemptive history, and then it tells us *how* we should understand and *apply* what happened.

LITERATURE

When we see the Bible as something other than essentially an enumeration and interpretation of events in redemptive history, we tend to ask of it questions for which it has not attempted to give answers. For example, although the Bible is a piece of literature, and contains many and varied literary forms,[3] the Bible is *not* fundamentally a literary text. It is surely not a "pretty" book (at least most of it is not). There is no secret rhetorical key, no literary code by which to unlock its meaning. It is not designed for some special kind of "educated" reader; and, in some cases, the more "educated" its readers are, the more likely they are to miss its central message, which is not calculated to quench intellectual speculations, and which was written for ordinary people.

It is easy these days to posit the Bible as a piece of literature, because we live in an age that delights in abstracting texts from history. By their very nature, literary theories are about literature; they are not usually about history.[4] The problem with this tack is that the Bible is almost *totally* about history and not about literature. I repeat: the Bible tells us about what happened in history, and it tells us what we should believe

about, and how we should act upon, what happened. The spiritual virility is not in the text itself, abstracted from the person (Jesus Christ) whose redemptive work it preeminently reveals and acclaims. Literary and other "artistic" minds, therefore, are likely to misunderstand and greatly misinterpret the Bible, unless they are willing to set aside or seriously guard their artistic gifts when they read it. The Bible is redemptive-historical, not literary-artistic.[5]

THEOLOGY

Additionally, the Bible is not theology. Of course, if by "theology" we mean the simple denotative definition, "the knowledge of God," the Bible is all about theology. But we generally understand theology to mean human attempts to construct a coherent, systematic message of the Bible or other aspects of revelation. In this sense, theology is a necessary and, for that matter, inescapable enterprise. The problem with many theologians, however, is that they read their theological enterprise back into the text of the Bible, and treat the Bible as though it were a coherent, systematic exposition of the mind of God. It surely is not. The Bible is about history, not "theology." The epistle to the Romans, for instance, is not designed to set forth "Pauline soteriology." It is designed to meet a very pressing first-century problem: how the Gentiles were to be accepted *en masse* into God's redemptive plan.[6] The other epistles, likewise, are not setting forth a theology but rather a divine revelation of history and its interpretation.

If we look at the Bible as something of a textbook in theology, we vest it with an academic and scholastic character of which it has nothing to do. Concurrently, we strip from it its immediacy, its directness and concreteness, and we blunt its authority. For instance, it is more convenient to characterize the book of Romans as a soteriology than as an extensive attempt to do away with racial prejudices that infect the church. If we conceive of the Bible as articulating a theology, we will find it rather difficult to explain why the requirements for bishops in Timothy and Titus say virtually nothing about a systematic knowledge of the Bible. Spiritual and

moral qualifications, however, are quite understandable in the context of a revelation and interpretation of history, as opposed to a revelation and interpretation of theology.

ETHICS

Finally, it would be equally erroneous to see the Bible as centrally a code of ethics. There are plenty of ethical standards in the Bible (both "Old" and "New" Testaments[7]), and, within the parameters of careful interpretation, they are binding on Christians today. But the ethical commands are subservient to the history and the revelation in which it emerges. Biblical history is *redemptive* history, and an ethic separated from that history turns into a very ugly moralism and legalism. Think only of the Pharisees whom Jesus combated. They were interested in morality, but not in the redemption through which *alone* morality is possible.

To say that ethics is subservient to redemption is equally to say that law is subservient to covenant. Exodus 19 (the ratification of the covenant) must always precede Exodus 20 (the giving of the law). Covenant is God's loving, binding relationship with his people. He draws them to himself in lordly lovingkindness; he binds himself to them, and them to him, by a covenant. This covenant has stipulations ("law"), but this law has no meaning apart from the covenant.[8] Covenant law is designed for covenant *people*. This is why the mere enactment of biblical law into civil legislation is a dead end. The Bible's law is indeed designed to shape civil legislation,[9] but only within the covenant (a genuinely Christian) society.

The Bible is a covenant book given to a covenant people (Christian).[10] When it is conceived as containing abstract moral codes based on a natural theology available to everybody, and then implemented as a political program, it becomes an ideology. To be sure, God's law stands above all men and judges them (Romans 3:19). But that law is an aspect of God's revelation, which equally contains the gospel. And the law woos men to Jesus Christ through whom alone they may obey the law (Romans 10:1–6).[11]

When we grasp what *kind* of book the Bible is, we will be

inclined to interpret it accurately, recognizing the lordship of Jesus Christ as its central feature and human history as the (exclusive) bed of man's redemption.

Author

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Notes

1. But this is only to the eyes of faith, not in any "scientific," Enlightenment sense. See the reverent bibliology of Abraham Kuyper, "The Character of the New Testament Scripture," *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 174–78.
2. Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper, 1967).
3. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1987).
4. M. H. Abrams, "Deconstruction," *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth, Indiana: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1988 edition), 203–207.
5. Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988 edition).
6. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), chap. 9.
7. "Old" and "New" as designations of entire portions of the Bible are not themselves biblical categories. They are traditional and must be scrutinized with the same judgment of *sola Scriptura* that all traditions are. See Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 28, note 2.
8. C. van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel* (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1990).
9. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nacogdoches, Texas: Covenant Media, 2002 edition), 41–88.
10. Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1997).
11. Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), chap. 4.