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## **The Shape of Biblical Theology Today**

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*Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 2007 37: 88

DOI: 10.1177/01461079070370030101

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://btb.sagepub.com/content/37/3/88.citation>

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## The Shape of Biblical Theology Today

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The current issue of BTB explores a range of approaches that give access routes to contemporary biblical theology. Their very range suggests that the field is not limited to one or another methodology and thus has no single set of conclusions. Perhaps this best represents the present state of scholarship both in religious denominations as well as within the academic field.

The range encompasses what may best be characterized as *emic* (how insiders understand their religion) and *etic* (how scholars view religions comprehensively). There is a difference, and the difference is fundamental. *Emic* studies (the term is derived from phonemics, the sounds within a language) have the purpose of presenting what insiders mean or think in presenting their religious traditions. *Etic* (the term is derived from phonetics, the sounds in human speech) employ historical consciousness identifying enculturated assumptions at a higher level of abstraction.

Pope Benedict's recent book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, may well characterize an *emic* perspective. While scholarly, it is not comparative nor even cognizant of modern categories of contemporary critical methodologies. Geza Vermes well characterizes this kind of exposition:

The Pope was engaged not in academic research but in a series of meditations on the Gospels for his own and his readers' edification. The efficacy of these meditations cannot be judged by academic criteria.

This is not to say that Pope Benedict (AKA Joseph Ratzinger) is wrong or even unerudite. His work is simply *emic*, an insider's assertion of meaning that must be taken for its truth value within in-group discussion. What needs recognition is that this theological exposition does not employ the methodology of contemporary biblical scholarship, notably the scholarship espoused by the Catholic Pontifical Biblical Commission, which has made notable strides in employing critical methods

in exploring biblical meanings in historical and cultural contexts since the papal decree *Divino afflante spiritu* in 1943 opened the doors to modern biblical scholarship.

Biblical theology today spans a variety of forms, including both the *emic* and the *etic*. BTB authors typically have espoused the latter, while honoring the former. The current issue explores meanings in the abstract characterization of cultural memory, an *etic* category whose studies are both comparative and based in modern social science.

What exactly was the source, "Q," which collected the sayings of Jesus, replicated in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke? **Santiago Guijarro**, in "Cultural Memory and Group Identity in Q," explores this question in an *etic* category, recognizing that group memory is a field that cultural anthropologists examine comparatively and critical biblical scholars today utilize in examining the process inherent within biblical communities. This is a different kind of enterprise from the traditional *emic* exposition of "truth" and allows for a bridging of communal resources within a variety of religious traditions that *emic* categories fail to acknowledge because of their internal criteria.

**Jerome Neyrey** applies a category derived from literary criticism of comparative ancient texts in his enlightening study, "In Conclusion... John 12 as a Rhetorical *Peroratio*." Recognizing that biblical authors utilized the literary resources of their contemporaries, Neyrey has exposed a form that present-day readers may fail to recognize for lack of familiarity with the author's literary ambiance.

"The Limitations of the Bible" is a necessary challenge to a naïve set of assumptions concerning the applicability of biblical "norms" today. **Séan P. Kealy** cites the critical yet studiously orthodox Catholic biblical Johannine scholar, Raymond Brown:

A third example from Brown is his honest view of the four weaknesses of the Johannine tradition "shaped by polemic and be-

cause it claimed unchallengeable guidance from the Paraclete.” “Noting these weaknesses,” he remarks, “is particularly important for ecumenical discussions today between Protestants and Roman Catholics, for the sixteenth-century division was also bitterly polemic, involved excommunication and accusations of being antichrist, and sought to justify positions through appeals to the Spirit and to the common scriptures. If we learn some of the problems of the first-century divisions, we may learn some of the problems of the sixteenth and of the twentieth.”

A present-day *emic* fundamentalist might regard this historical perspective as undermining faith and group loyalty. An *etic* scholar would find credibility in the honesty.

Revisiting the influential Swiss Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, **Michael T. Dempsey** studies “Biblical Hermeneu-

tics and Spiritual Interpretation: The Revelatory Presence of God in Karl Barth’s Theology of Scripture.” On a parallel track with Joseph Ratzinger’s *emic* theology Barth critiques both modern fundamentalist and patristic exegesis alongside modern historical-critical and literary interpretation as secularizing. Dempsey instead sees Barth calling for a spiritual interpretation for contemporary hermeneutics.

Perhaps it is this opposition to perceived modern secularism that both Barth and Ratzinger share in common. Therein lies the challenge within contemporary biblical theology. Can an *emic* perspective be more authentic than an *etic*? Or, must theologians find ways to accommodate both?

David M. Bossman  
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