

Plots, Themes, and Responsibilities: The Search for a Center of Biblical Theology Reexamined

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1. The Search for a “Center”: Obsession or Responsibility?

In the prolegomena to his “approach to biblical theology,” Charles H. H. Scobie comments, “It is difficult to understand the obsession with finding one single theme or ‘center’ for OT or NT theology, and more so for an entire BT. It is widely held today that the quest for a single center has failed.”¹ With a body of literature as diverse and complex as Scripture, it is easy to see why Scobie would wonder at the labors of many to find a “center” of biblical theology.

But if, in Scobie’s (and others’) opinion, the “quest for a single center has failed,” does that mean necessarily that the quest is unjustified? Indeed, despite Scobie’s sentiments, could this preoccupation to find a center be well-founded, representing less of an “obsession” and more of a responsibility? An affirmative answer to the latter question is the underlying assumption and motivation for the present essay, which (1) provides a rationale for the search for a center to biblical theology; (2) refocuses what the object of the search for a center is (what should we be looking for?); and (3) discusses the process of the search itself (what factors and criteria are involved in the identification of what is central?).

2. A Rationale for the Search: Delivering “the Whole Counsel of God”

David Wenham suggests two reasons that a search for a center matters.² First, if we can discern a “coherent shape and a center in an author’s thought and writing,” then surely that center would provide us with a better grasp not only of the work as a whole but also of the various individual parts. If a center exists, it holds massive heuristic value.³ Second, the search for a center is driven by a prior conviction concerning the unity of Scripture. If Scripture consists of a collection of books with “significantly

¹ Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 87.

² David Wenham, “Appendix: Unity and Diversity in the New Testament,” in *A Theology of the New Testament*, by G. E. Ladd (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 710.

³ David M. Carr, “Passion for God: A Center in Biblical Theology,” *HBT* 23 (2001): 2, asserts, “There is a heuristic value in searching for *various* conceptual ‘centers’ in the Bible” (emphasis in original). He is, however, not satisfied with the language of “center,” and is tempted to speak of “nodal points” by which he means “multiple points where various traditions converge, all treating a common conceptual structure (often differently)” (3). See similarly, James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM, 1999), 343,

different centers,” then that seems to “undermine . . . the harmony of the different strands of New Testament Christianity.”⁴ To these two suggestions, a third could be added that recasts the question within a specific context.

Acts 20 recounts the final meeting between Paul and the Ephesian elders in which Paul describes how he fulfilled the ministry of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace that he received from the Lord Jesus (v. 24). In particular, he exonerates himself from “the blood of all men” (v. 26) since he “did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (v. 27). Is this merely naïveté or presumption? How could Paul possibly have communicated *all* God’s purpose in three short years without at least being severely reductionistic? He assumes a fundamental deposit (a heart, a core, a center?) that does not violate, but actually serves the manifold other details of Scripture, ordering and illuminating them such that when Paul departs, the Ephesians can fruitfully reflect further on those details in the light of the initial deposit.⁵

Of crucial importance with respect to the search for a biblical theological “center” is the context in which Paul makes this bold claim. Paul makes this sweeping statement while describing and unpacking his ministry in Ephesus. The search for and proclamation of a center—what may be termed *the whole counsel or purpose of God*—is, for Paul, a function of pastoral ministry for the good of God’s people. Compare Paul’s parallel statement in Acts 20:20: “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was *profitable*.” However one may want to recast the details of the search for a center, it is nevertheless no mere hobbyhorse. It is at the heart of how we pursue our pastoral ministries of teaching and preaching. The search for a center is the search to provide heuristic lenses for the people of God in their interaction with Scripture (and the world).⁶ It is with this task in mind that we take up again the question of whether a “center,” or something like a center, for biblical theology exists, and if so, in what ways we might pursue it.

who speaks of theologians appropriately appealing to “centers” as “the expression of structure” and as a “simple necessity for the organization of their work.”

⁴ Similarly, James M. Hamilton Jr., “The Glory of God in Salvation through Judgment: The Center of Biblical Theology?” *TynBul* 57 (2006): 61, comments, “The theological presupposition that the Bible is the revelation of a coherent and harmonious God keeps us probing for the best triage of themes, and at the centre of the sorting will be the centre of biblical theology.” From a slightly different perspective but coming to similar conclusions, Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 15; Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 41–43, suggests that canonization functions to “make one text out of many,” which possesses (a reader with a hermeneutic of charity may presume) a meaningful unity. Thus, Dempster argues, the literary structure of the Hebrew canon forms “a Text” out of many texts and makes the search for a “fundamental theme” of that “Text” a matter of “responsible hermeneutics.” However, Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Diversity and Unity in the New Testament,” in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. Scott J. Hafemann; Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 153, warns that we ought not flatly to equate unity with a center.

⁵ It is curious that a survey of major NT theologies and related works reveals very few who appeal to Acts 20:27 in this connection. For a couple exceptions, see G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology* (ed. L. D. Hurst; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

⁶ Cf. Scott J. Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith: Understanding the Heart of the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 19, who seeks “to provide a basic framework for understanding the Scriptures in a way that will stimulate us to take up the Bible for ourselves.”

3. The Object of the Search: The Synthesis of Plot, Themes, and Responsibilities

It might be best to speak of “something like a center” because many are dissatisfied with the term “center” itself. No small part of this dissatisfaction arises from the term’s nebulosity. Indeed, D. A. Carson pointedly asks, “Does it refer to the most common theme, determined by statistical count, or to the controlling theme or to the fundamental theological presuppositions of the NT writers, so far as they may be discerned?”⁷

3.1. Problems with the Term “Center”

Few answer Carson’s question. In a recent attempt to argue for a center of biblical theology, James Hamilton defines center as “the concept to which the biblical authors point as the ultimate reason” for God’s activities and as “the theme which all of the Bible’s other themes serve to exposit.”⁸ But most are not so forthright and intentional about the term. Kaiser notes, “the very terms by which we referred to this phenomena [*sic*] [of a canonical theological center] remained elusive.”⁹ Indeed, the terms used to denote some chief element of Scripture vary nearly as much as the actual proposals of that element itself, and they suggest varied nuances in the very element sought (center, heart, core, main/controlling theme, ultimate purpose, unifying principle, etc.). It may be, as Kaiser goes on to suggest, that “a similar note is sounded” in the various terms used, namely, what integrates the whole into a unity, some unifying concept or theme. But he also laments that the term “center,” though communicating a unifying function, nevertheless fails to communicate the progressive, developing nature of the “center” throughout Scripture.¹⁰

When we add to the problem of definition the dizzying array of proposed “centers” and when we point out the widespread assumption that all potential “centers” will simply steamroll diversity,¹¹ we might lose confidence in the pursuit of a “center” as the best way to convey “the whole counsel of God.” Is there a better way to sum up the message of Scripture?

3.2. Plot, Themes, and Responsibilities

An increasingly popular reaction is to turn attention to the plot or storyline of the Bible. Indeed, communicating the storyline of Scripture has multiple advantages. It is an effective way to communicate “the progressive, developing nature” of biblical material, for which Kaiser has expressed concern. It seeks to be faithful to the most common form of Scripture, namely, narrative. Sticking to the storyline of Scripture seems to stand clear of criticisms that we are imposing foreign systems onto the biblical material or that we are not granting equal voice to all of Scripture. And it provides a way to bind together diverse and complex themes and concepts in a meaningful whole.

⁷ D. A. Carson, “New Testament Theology,” in *DLNT* 810.

⁸ Hamilton, “Glory of God,” 61.

⁹ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Towards an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

¹¹ On the latter point, see esp. Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 158, who asks, “Will not any center which is to serve as an organizing principle for the entire OT world of revelation and experience always turn out to be a *tour de force*?” See also Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 163–64.

This last point is especially important to emphasize. Certain wings of Christian thought have neglected elements of biblical plot, tending to view the narrative elements of Scripture as so much husk surrounding the kernel of doctrine, concepts, and themes.¹² But doctrine and concepts and themes cannot be utterly dissociated from the story of Scripture without in some way damaging them, without losing some of their meaning. For example, one could say that Irving Berlin's film *White Christmas* is about the need for clear communication in relationships (and the deleterious relational effects of misinformation, cold-shoulders, silent grudges, etc.). One could also say that the film concerns the search for significance in the face of aging. Both would be true statements about the film, and both would touch on two of its most important thematic strands. Yet they are not, in the abstract, integrally related nor necessarily tied to one another. What binds them together is the *plot* or *narrative*. Barry G. Webb, in arguing that the Book of Judges is best understood as primarily a literary work rather than political propaganda or a religious tract, articulates the point perfectly: "The meaning cannot finally be abstracted from the story. The narrative itself is the only formulation of the meaning which contains all its aspects."¹³

In light of all these advantages, it is not surprising that many turn to plot or storyline as a better way of summing up the biblical message. Thus, in addressing pluralism and the need to remediate a widespread ignorance of Scripture, Carson offers a "plot-line" of the Bible since "the fact remains that the Bible as a whole document tells a story."¹⁴ Similarly, Blomberg opines,

It is not often asked if it is necessary to reduce that which is couched in story form to a single theme or proposition. Perhaps it is more appropriate to consider how the story might be retold in its simplest form. Treating the Bible as narrative suggests a model for demonstrating in greater detail the unfolding unity and diversity within Scripture.¹⁵

Carson and Blomberg are just two examples of a growing number who appeal to narrative in an effort to be faithful to the form of Scripture, while at the same time trying to avoid the manifold difficulties of elevating any single theme or cluster of themes to prominence. While renewed emphasis on narrative, plot-line, and the kinds of literary analysis that often are connected to such emphases is a welcome development in biblical studies,¹⁶ nevertheless there are two reasons that we should not stop merely at recounting the plot-line of Scripture in summarizing what Scripture says to us.

First, talk of storylines does not avoid the problems confronted by proposals for central themes or ideas in Scripture. Themes, concepts, and responsibilities are inextricably woven into a plot. Thus to open the storyline of Scripture with the creation of the world by the only true God is to set forth the theme of creation (and God's unique sovereignty/kingship) from the outset. Narrative is not an option

¹² Both conservative and liberal wings of Christianity have been guilty of stripping the Bible of narrative dressing and treating it as a "one-dimensional text" (Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 24–25).

¹³ Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading* (JSOTSup 46; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 75.

¹⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 194.

¹⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, "The Unity and Diversity of Scripture," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 66.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*.

over against ideas—the latter is intrinsic to the former.¹⁷ Thus, if proposals for specific central themes in Scripture can be criticized as reductionistic, then proposals of summary plot-lines are equally open to the charge and for the same reasons. Why are particular events (and the ideas and responsibilities entailed by them) selected instead of others?

Second, plot-line alone might not sufficiently summarize the message of Scripture, nor describe its fundamental heartbeat, because not all Scripture is narrative. Neither the NT epistles nor what is the bane of nearly all proposed centers of biblical theology—the Wisdom literature—is easy to fit into a concise storyline. Furthermore, while the vast majority of Scripture comes to us in narrative form and there are strong grounds for considering Scripture as cast in a purposefully narrative framework, nevertheless these observations cannot, by themselves, fully ground a decision to rely solely on storyline as a way of delineating *in nuce* the message of the Bible. 99.998% of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* is presented in the form of journal entries, with only a paragraph-long preamble and page-long “note” written by Jonathan Harker as a conclusion. Yet despite the numerical minuteness of the occurrence of these two forms, they may be the interpretive key to the whole book. Why are the journals available for us to read? Who compiled them? How can we be sure of their contents? Might we even question who the crazed monster in Stoker’s work really is? Narrative may dominate Scripture, but we may be justified in seeking to provide more than a plot-line in our effort to summarize the heart and essence of Scripture.

The insufficiency of a storyline on its own to adequately summarize the whole counsel of God is no reason to ignore the narrative aspect of Scripture. Rather, storyline can be an effective means of communicating the whole counsel of God *when the key concepts and commands arising from the storyline itself are also explicitly noted and highlighted*. An adequate proposal for a center to biblical theology, or more preferably, to use the language of Acts 20:27, a sufficient summary of the whole counsel of God, will link these elements together—plot, theme(s), responsibilities—in its formulation. These themes and demands should be the very ones suggested by the points in the plot-line we spotlight (e.g., the creator/created dynamic arising out of the event of the creation), but they must be highlighted or acknowledged *as concepts, ideas, and propositions* with particular *duties and responsibilities* implied therein.¹⁸

It is true that elements of biblical plot have often been neglected within the church. We ought not to be content merely with outlining main themes and ideas. But if we emphasize that meaning cannot be abstracted from story, then we must equally acknowledge that story necessarily conveys meaning. The synthesis of plot, themes, and responsibilities is what forms an adequate summary of the message of Scripture, and it is the goal and object of the search for a center to biblical theology.¹⁹

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 140, suggests that “stories are a key worldview indicator,” which may, in fact, “carry, or be vehicles for, authority.”

¹⁸ We ought explicitly to add “responsibilities,” bearing in mind Jon D. Levenson’s observation that while duty to God is “a theme that occupies most of the biblical materials, legal, prophetic, and sapiential alike,” yet it is conspicuously absent from lists of commonly proposed “centers” to OT (or biblical) theology (“Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology,” in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* [ed. J. Neusner et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], 299).

¹⁹ For convenience (unless context clearly specifies otherwise), the term “center” will be used in the rest of this essay as shorthand for a summary of the message of Scripture in terms of plot, theme, and responsibility.

3.3. Two Important Precedents

Before moving on to reflect upon key aspects of the search itself (i.e., the means by which and the manner in which we might perform the search), we might note that there are two important precedents for this fusion of plot, theme, and responsibility as a way of summarizing Scripture to be used as a heuristic tool by God's people. The first comes from Jesus himself, the second from the early church.

First, in a well-known passage at the end of Luke, we are told that Jesus opens the minds of the disciples to comprehend "the Scriptures," saying, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:45–47). Note two things: (1) Jesus presents a concise summary of "the Scriptures," offering what could be considered the core of what "is written." (2) This core consists of a plot (the story of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection, and a proclamation beginning in Jerusalem and moving outward), a theme (repentance for the forgiveness of sins), and responsibilities (repentance, proclamation).

Second, ante-Nicene theologians (esp. Tertullian and Irenaeus) spoke of a "Rule of Faith," which they viewed as being both derived from and serving deeper reflection on Scripture.²⁰ Tertullian offers one variation of this Rule:

The rule of faith, indeed, is altogether one, alone immoveable and irreformable; the rule, to wit, of believing in one only God omnipotent, the Creator of the universe, and His Son Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised again the third day from the dead, received in the heavens, sitting now at the right (hand) of the Father, destined to come to judge quick and dead through the resurrection of the flesh as well (as of the spirit). (*Virg.* 1)²¹

The rule was viewed as "the sum content of apostolic teaching"²² and functioned as a guide to fruitful and appropriate reading of Scripture. Irenaeus mentions for illustrative purposes individuals who stitch together Homeric verses to form a narrative, or *ὑπόθεσις*,²³ which though understandable and perhaps appealing, is nevertheless quite foreign to Homer. A familiarity with Homer's genuine *ὑπόθεσις* would enable readers to detect the labors of an opportunistic imposter. For Irenaeus, "the rule of the truth" (*τὸν κανόνα τῆς ἀληθείας*) functions as the correct roadmap or storyline (*ὑπόθεσις*), helping believers to discern faithful biblical interpretation from the charlatan's distorted formulations (see *Haer.* 1.9.4).²⁴

²⁰ For further description of the nature and function of the Rule of Faith in ante-Nicene Christianity, see Kathryn Greene-McCreight, "Rule of Faith," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. K. J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 703–4; and esp. Paul M. Blowers, "The *regula fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith," *ProEccl* 6 (1997): 199–228.

²¹ This translation is from ANF, vol. 4. Tertullian offers a longer and more explicitly Trinitarian version of the Rule in *Praescr.* 13.

²² Greene-McCreight, "Rule of Faith," 703.

²³ The sense in which Irenaeus uses the term *ὑπόθεσις* is debated, but, citing Richard Norris and Robert Grant in support, Blowers believes it is best rendered as "storyline" or "plot" (esp. when it is used in this passage with respect to Homer).

²⁴ Earlier in the same work, Irenaeus uses the illustration of a mosaic which can be arranged to form the image of either a king or a fox or dog (*Haer.* 1.8.1). Greene-McCreight, "Rule of Faith," 703, explains, "In the ancient world, unassembled mosaics were shipped with the plan or key (*hypothesis*) according to which they were

The Rule of Faith offers four important parallels with the present proposal. First, it seeks to offer a narrative digest of Scripture. Second, it combines plot (moving through creation, fall, redemption, and restoration),²⁵ themes (creation, sin, salvation, etc.), and responsibility (as a creedal statement). Third, it was used as a kind of framework or guide for further fruitful reflection on Scripture, a kind of heuristic lens through which the people of God may discover truth.²⁶ Fourth, as Paul Blowers has argued persuasively, ante-Nicene theologians were not interested in using the Rule merely as a useful guide for biblical instruction and interpretation or as a way to fend off error, but also in the formation of Christian identity, that is, in shaping believers' "storied" existence as themselves part of the biblical story.²⁷ In other words, the Rule of Faith was formulated and passed on within the context of pastoral care for the people of God.

There are, therefore, at least two important precedents for the kind of proposal being advanced here, which identifies the search for a center to biblical theology as the effort to distill the Bible's message through plot, themes, and responsibilities. All of this merely begs the question, however, of how to discern and determine which themes and responsibilities and which turning points in the Bible's plot-line to emphasize. Thus, it is to the process of the search itself that we now must turn.

4. The Process of the Search: Selecting Key Points and Stating Context-Driven Purposes

Carson, though rejecting the search for a center as "chimerical," nevertheless acknowledges that "inevitably the texts themselves will force a hierarchializing of unifying themes."²⁸ But how does the text provide such "forcing"? More to the point, is it the text doing the forcing or the interpreter? Is the process whereby certain events and themes move into the interpretive and proclamatory spotlight a matter of interpretive imposition, mere arbitrariness, or something else?

to be arranged." For Irenaeus, the Rule of Faith functions like such a key (ὑπόθεσις), with which Christians can produce the correct image of the King, rather than a fox or dog.

²⁵ Blowers, in particular, argues strongly for the narrative structure and dimensions of the Rule of Faith ("The *regula fidei*," 199–228).

²⁶ Greene-McCreight, "Rule of Faith," 703, refers to the Rule as "a hermeneutical key for the interpretation of Scripture." Similarly, Blowers, "The *regula fidei*," 202, speaks of it functioning "as an hermeneutical frame of reference for the interpretation of Christian Scripture and Christian experience."

²⁷ See, e.g., Blowers, "The *regula fidei*," 214: "The handing on of articles of belief and the inoculation of the believer against heresy and apostasy inevitably figured prominently in the transmission of the Rule of Faith, but the most basic issue remained that of Christian *identity*, identification with and in a particular story that transcends all *local* particularities and aspires to universal significance."

²⁸ Carson, "New Testament Theology," 811. Scobie, *Ways of Our God*, 76, is also quick to say that the need to address every part of Scripture "is not to say that every part of Scripture is of equal value."

4.1. The Use of “Validation Tests” in the Selection of Key Points

In an appendix to an essay proposing “new creation” as the theological center of the NT, G. K. Beale reflects on the method involved in the search for a center to NT theology.²⁹ He offers four “validation tests” for determining the plausibility of various proposals, which provide helpful points of departure in identifying how certain elements in Scripture are brought to the fore. Proposals for a center must be (1) “more overarching” than other proposals; (2) related to the other major themes of the NT; (3) “integrally related to major Old Testament themes,” resting ultimately upon “a broad storyline” and rooted in Christ; and (4) individually examined. These four tests can be condensed into two broad criteria: comprehensiveness and integral relationship to the major themes of Scripture, especially the Bible’s plot-line and the death and resurrection of Christ.³⁰ Both of these criteria may be criticized in different ways. In addressing the criticisms a way forward will emerge.

First, the concept of relatedness to other major themes is susceptible to the charge that the very identification of “major” themes is largely driven by cultural and historical factors. Perhaps our identification of “major” and “central” is, in fact, due to our seeing only what culture and historical location inclines us to see as major and central.³¹ Just as, if not more significantly, Levenson adds, “It is difficult to resist the suggestion that the faith of the theologian is the greatest factor in his or her positing a center for the Old Testament.”³² To what extent, then, can we really validate that a proposed center is at the heart of Scripture using the criterion of relatedness to other major themes?

Entering into the philosophical and hermeneutical quagmires uncovered by such lines of inquiry is far beyond the scope of this essay. But perhaps an observation, or more accurately a pondering, might lessen the force of this kind of objection. While there is surely much truth in the notion of culturally and confessionally conditioned identification (or failed identification) of biblical themes, nevertheless one might well wonder whether *some* themes are consistently identified, at least to some extent, across cultures and historical eras. For instance, are there significant and material overlaps between Augustine’s “city of God” and the kingdom of God we hear so often of in contemporary theological works? Are Aquinas’s “beatific vision” and Edwards’s supremely beautiful and worthy glory of God into which believers are engulfed two perspectives on what is largely the same thing? As Scobie has pointed out, it is striking how many of the various proposals for centers in the last century coalesce around a few major concepts, especially when the varied nature of the individuals suggesting these centers is

²⁹ G. K. Beale, “The Eschatological Conception of New Testament Theology,” in *The Reader Must Understand: Eschatology in Bible and Theology* (ed. K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott; Leicester: IVP, 1997), 45–52. It should be noted that Beale uses the language of “center” in this article without specifying precisely what is meant by the term.

³⁰ The fourth test is really just a proposed method for the process of evaluation.

³¹ Thus, e.g., John F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11–12, is intrigued that “certain interpretations [of Isaiah] became popular or influential at particular periods or in particular communities.” Cultural/contextual factors create atmospheres ripe for particular ways of handling Scripture.

³² Levenson, “Jews,” 299.

considered.³³ There may be external evidence, therefore, that emphasizing certain themes and items in Scripture is not arbitrary or a practice purely in imposition.

Second, the idea of comprehensiveness might be rejected on two fronts: (1) there is no basis for relegating some elements of Scripture to mere sub-categories under other more comprehensive themes, and (2) even if there were a basis, it is extremely difficult to know what to subordinate under what. The first objection, that there is no basis for relegating some things underneath others, is particularly important to consider. Indeed, it is a problem faced even by so-called multi-perspectival approaches to biblical theology. For even multi-perspectivalists inevitably elevate certain themes (or stops along the plot-line) over others as somehow deserving of more attention; stated negatively, they reduce certain elements to a peripheral, subordinate role. But it is precisely the tendency toward hierarchy, to set some items in prominent and commanding positions and others in subordinate positions, which seems to be at the heart of much criticism of the search for centers. Thus, for example, Hasel is concerned that “single concepts, themes, ideas, or motifs . . . relegate essential aspects of the OT (or Biblical) faith to an inferior and unimportant position.”³⁴ Similarly, Blomberg complains that narrow proposals for a center “seem to exclude certain material within the canon or at least move certain books or portions of books to the periphery.”³⁵ Surely the same criticism could be leveled against any proposal that a multiplicity of ideas or “clusters of broadly common themes”³⁶ should be elevated as “major” while others are treated (implicitly) as “minor” and peripheral.³⁷

For lack of a better term, this method of criticism could be referred to as a “marginalia critique.” Four things may be said in response to such a critique. First, Barr helpfully reminds us that selectivity is inevitable, and thus only on the criterion of exhaustiveness can the exclusion/omission of biblical elements in a proposal by itself be considered fatal.³⁸

³³ Scobie, *Ways of Our God*, 87. Barr, *Concept*, 340–43, is quite helpful on this count. He is struck by the fact that most proposals for biblical theological centers “may complement others or indeed may be combined with others.” He even speaks of “a sort of evolution” wherein later writers build upon and develop (not discard) previous proposals. In this case, the search for a center is more of an “ongoing discussion” than a sheer “contest,” such that “Talk about a ‘winner’ is a crude caricature.” Cf. also Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 13.

³⁴ Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, 159.

³⁵ Blomberg, “Unity and Diversity,” 66. Similarly, Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 187, in searching for a unified ethical vision in the NT, warns of making “the text speak univocally” since to do so “will at best limit our perception of the range of these witnesses and at worst produce distortion of their messages.” It seems that speaking of and emphasizing a supposed “center” (or “centers”) of Scripture carries with it the danger of muting the voices at the periphery.

³⁶ Carson, “New Testament Theology,” 810. Köstenberger, “Diversity and Unity,” 154, speaks of a “plurality of integrative NT motifs.”

³⁷ In this light, it is ironic that Scobie, after pronouncing the search for a center a failure, on the same page proposes that “when numerous suggestions for a single ‘center’ are examined, many similarities are to be observed, and the suggestions tend to fall into four major groupings” (*Ways of Our God*, 87). This is not to suggest that he is wrong about the “many similarities” between various proposals. But his subordinating of other themes as “sub-themes” under these four major groupings ultimately leads him into a criticism faced by single-theme proponents.

³⁸ Barr, *Concept*, 341–42.

Second, calling attention to the fact that certain things are at the periphery in a proposal for central events and themes is not a criticism of the proposal *per se*, but a recognition of the centering process in action. That is, the fact that some elements are at the margins while other elements are at the “center” in proposals for a center is a description not a criticism.

Therefore, third, proposals for centers should be criticized on other grounds. It may be that the very act of “peripherizing” is *de facto* unbiblical and sinful and that we should be absolutely and utterly egalitarian in our identifying, presenting, and attending to themes in Scripture. It may be that another articulation of plot, theme, and responsibility is deemed better. Or it may be that certain portions of Scripture (whether sentences, paragraphs, or whole books) actually contradict the proposal in question. But such criticisms are of a different sort than those arising from a marginalia critique.

Fourth, and most significantly, there are indications in Scripture itself that certain elements are to be prioritized. Dempster notes Jesus’ criticism in Matt 23:23 of the religious leaders of his day who neglected the “weightier matters of the law” for marginalia.³⁹ One might also point to prophetic statements that God desires obedience, loyalty, and knowledge of God *more than* sacrifice; to Micah’s summation of the Lord’s requirements in the three poles of justice, kindness, and humility; to the NT’s repeated summation of the Law in the greatest and second commandment or simply in the love commandment; and to Jesus’ insistence that the Law bears witness of him. It seems that there is no hesitation in Scripture to summarize large swaths of biblical material, and in that summary to prioritize and “hierarchialize,” such that some elements move into the spotlight while others slide to the periphery.

Thus, we need not reject the criterion of comprehensiveness. It may be that the process of identifying which elements properly fit underneath others is hard, complex, and laden with obstacles,⁴⁰ but this does not mean it is impossible. Multiple factors should weigh in on the decision. Repetition and representation in diverse portions of Scripture, while certainly not sufficient in and of itself, is a significant consideration.⁴¹ Climactic portions of the biblical narrative would be key places to identify clusters of important events and ideas.⁴² Integral relationship with other major themes has been shown to be a valid area for examination. And related to this is whether or not parallel suggestions have been made in the history of interpretation, which could be either different expressions of or perspectives on a substantive core, or the seed form of something one is trying to develop. All of these are helps in the task of identifying what clusters of themes, responsibilities, and elements on the plot-line are to be seen

³⁹ Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 27.

⁴⁰ How, for instance, do kingdom and new creation relate? How do we determine if one should be subordinated under the other? Or is there another option available? The issue is quite knotty. This very difficulty may account for the change occurring from Beale’s 1997 essay cited earlier, to his 2002 essay “The New Testament and New Creation” (in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* [ed. Scott J. Hafemann; Downers Grove: IVP, 2002]). In the former he speaks of “new creation” as the center of NT theology, but in the latter he refers to “the kingdom of the new creation” or a “new creational kingdom” as being the center.

⁴¹ Kaiser, *Theology*, 33, points out that we need not restrict ourselves to searching for a single term, but have at our disposal a “constellation of terms.” Brian S. Rosner, “Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), also notes the need to study “concepts, not just words” (6–8).

⁴² In this respect, it may be helpful to consider the ways in which canonical structure at a macro-level may help orient us to key events and ideas. See, e.g., Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 23; see also John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 35–37, who discusses the significance and function of narrative or poetic “seams” in the Pentateuch.

as the most comprehensive and, therefore, highlighted in a sufficient summation of the Bible's message. But one further observation, related to the criterion of comprehensiveness, will aid in the task, while also providing a necessary focusing for a multi-perspectival approach.

4.2. The Search within the Context of Particular Purposes and Agendas

Beale, like many others, argues that “the center which is most comprehensive” is most likely to be the key thread in the biblical story.⁴³ However, it is interesting that he stops short of suggesting God as the best center. Surely this is the “most comprehensive” we can get. It is likely that Beale, along with the vast majority of others,⁴⁴ is unsatisfied with the broadest suggestion of all (“God is”) because he implicitly realizes that “at one level that is saying everything at another level it is saying almost nothing.”⁴⁵ Generalities have a way of evaporating substance. But an intentional setting forth of the particular purpose for which one proposes a dominant theme in Scripture helps in this regard, for it provides a frame, a handle, that purposefully (rather than arbitrarily) specifies and focuses the effort to be comprehensive.

A significant problem with multi-perspectival approaches is that they view the task of biblical theology in a one-sided manner. What is generally meant in the call to look at Scripture from multiple perspectives is viewing Scripture from the perspective of kingdom or the perspective of covenant or the perspective of Jesus—that is, from the perspective of various text-based concepts. Typically all that is emphasized is the object of observation and study, namely, the Bible. While this is valuable and necessary, it also seems to be only half of the picture. For observation and study necessarily involve observers and students, that is, us. And we examine Scripture with particular purposes in mind: making sense of suffering, caring for the environment, providing heuristic lenses for the church, addressing neglected elements of Scripture. In fact, it is inevitable that we come to Scripture with purposes and agendas. Perhaps acknowledging these purposes and agendas up front will go a long way in explaining why such diversity of themes can be identified as central in Scripture and may ultimately help in reconciling them with one another.

Furthermore, such purposes are usually, if not always, context-driven and context-sensitive. Rosner speaks of the need to “‘tell the old, old story’ in fresh and unexpected ways.”⁴⁶ We might add “in contextually sensitive ways,” that is, in ways that the moment and our callings demand. Thus, for a couple struggling with infertility, emphasizing the collocation of the themes of barrenness, suffering, promise, sovereignty, and prayer emerging in the patriarchal narratives, in the story of Hannah, and in the birth narratives of Jesus, may be a powerful, relevant, and necessary way of explicating the message of Scripture. Or when ministering within and to a church implicitly operating with largely Gnostic categories of thought and practice (reinforced in no small part by an increasingly digitized age in which “virtual reality” is comprehensible as part of our regular vocabulary), an appropriate summary of the

⁴³ Beale, “Eschatological Conception,” 45. See also Hays, *Moral Vision*, 189.

⁴⁴ Though cf. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, 168, who states, “God/Yahweh is the dynamic, unifying center of the OT.” He calls this the “theological center,” which does not organize or systematize one’s reading of the OT, but merely provides its unifying principle.

⁴⁵ Carson, “New Testament Theology,” 810. Carson’s comment is specifically applied to the suggestion that Jesus Christ is the center of NT theology.

⁴⁶ Rosner, “Biblical Theology,” 9.

biblical message may need to emphasize God's original act of creating a "very good" universe, the very physical nature of the Levitical cultic system, the danger posed during the monarchy not merely by the wrong ideas of the nations but also by the improper practices of the nations, the incarnation of the Word and his physical death and resurrection, the nature of sacraments and sacramental grace, the embodied nature of community in the early church, and the hope of new creation. All of this, of course, requires discernment, which assumes Spirit-dependence in our identification not only of emphasized and unifying themes in Scripture, but also of the various good purposes to which they may be applied. Furthermore, it makes the issue of describing the core message of the Bible more than a matter of utilizing different but equal metaphors. Different metaphors have different connotations, especially in differing contexts. The metaphor of Yahweh as king, though related to the metaphor of Yahweh as father, has differing emphases, and it would surely have differing images associated with it depending on the target culture.

Christopher J. H. Wright has perfectly illustrated what we are proposing here.⁴⁷ In arguing for a "missional" hermeneutical framework for reading Scripture, he acknowledges that "*any* framework necessarily 'distorts' the text to some degree." In fact, "The only way not to distort the biblical text is simply to reproduce it as it is."⁴⁸ Like maps of the world, summaries and hermeneutical frameworks necessarily do some kind of "distorting" of Scripture. But like maps, summaries of Scripture and frameworks for reading it are justified in this, inasmuch as they attempt "to simplify and clarify" the message and to open the door to further exploration of it. And just as a variety of different maps are useful for a variety of different contexts and aims (e.g., maps of London tourist attractions, maps of the London Underground, maps of London roadways), so also a variety of different summaries of Scripture may be useful in ministering to the people of God. Thus, Wright comments,

[A]ll world maps ('projections') compromise on where the unavoidable distortion occurs—the shape of the continents, or their relative area, or the lines of latitude and longitude, or distortion at the poles, or compass orientation and so on. The choice will depend on *who the map is for and what it is intended primarily to show*.⁴⁹

The search for the center to biblical theology, that is, the search for a formulation of plot, themes, and responsibilities to adequately convey "the whole counsel of God," will best be performed when one acknowledges for whom the "map" is intended and for what ends it will be used.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, what has been argued thus far is that the search for a "center" to biblical theology is, at least, a pastoral concern. It is rooted in the desire to communicate to the church the whole counsel of God for their profit and benefit. It should seek to hold plot, theme, and responsibility inseparably together, and thus it resembles a version of multi-perspectival approaches. Both tend toward hierarchy, and both must fend off criticisms of reductionism. And while no biblical center has been proposed that is

⁴⁷ Christopher J. H. Wright, "Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. C. Bartholomew et al.; Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 138–40.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 139, emphasis added.

fully satisfactory for a decisive majority, nevertheless, both the Bible and the history of its interpretation demonstrate centering tendencies. This suggests, therefore, that we are justified in continued attempts to tease out from Scripture a centering structure and a centering substance, a summarizing plot and a summarizing purpose, a particular theater in which particular themes are emphasized. All the while we must acknowledge that identifying themes and theaters to emphasize involves engaging both Scripture and the world. That is, the particular themes we choose to highlight are intimately related to the purposes and agendas that we seek to address.

To return, then, to the opening purpose and agenda in which this particular essay has been situated: What constitutes the best way of summarizing the message of Scripture, indeed “the whole counsel of God,” in the specific context of pastoral ministry? What basic, general hermeneutical lens ought we to provide for the people of God? Perhaps we might suggest the following: *The triune God is actively engaged in increasing (and incarnating) his presence among his people, a presence that entails for his people the responsibility of worship, in the fourfold story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.* This proposal constitutes both a theme and a responsibility (which are variously and diversely represented in Scripture) and a plot (which aligns with the climactic moments of, and key transitional portions in, Scripture, and is recapitulated throughout). It seems integrally related to other major events and themes in Scripture. And it has the advantage of aligning well with other proposals of the central message of Scripture, both contemporary proposals⁵⁰ and ones occurring in the broader history of interpretation.⁵¹ Regardless of whether, in the final analysis, such a proposal will be considered convincing or distinctive, hopefully some of the questions raised and suggestions made here will be useful in advancing our ability to minister the Word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ to the church and the world.

⁵⁰ Note, e.g., how Wenham’s proposal hits on the four major chapters of the Bible’s storyline (Wenham, “Appendix,” 712–13). Scobie’s fourfold schema of promise-proclamation-fulfillment-consummation also has noticeable parallels (Scobie, *Ways of Our God*, 93–99).

⁵¹ The proposed “fourfold story” shares the basic structure of the Rule of Faith and the ancient creeds. For discussion of some shared creedal core among the earliest Christian communities, see Peter Balla, *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 199–207.