



James Barr and the Future of Biblical Theology

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Abstract

James Barr, one of the greatest biblical scholars of the twentieth century, also made significant contributions to the field of biblical theology by considering what biblical theology is and how it relates to the wider world of theology (dogmatic or systematic theology), philosophy, the other humanities, and even the sciences. For Barr, biblical theology should not be a confessional theology, but an attempt to capture the diverse theological ideas of the Bible read on its own terms. Barr's ideal was that biblical scholars should take an interest in systematic theology, not in order to assimilate it, but so as to enable there to be a real interchange of ideas. Christian faith, Barr held, is not related primarily to a book, but to God and to Jesus.

Keywords

Barr, James; Biblical Theology; Revelation; Systematic Theology; Dogmatics; Natural Theology; Philosophy

James Barr was one of the greatest biblical scholars of the twentieth century. In this paper I argue that he also contributed massively to the enterprise of biblical theology, and that his insights hold much promise for the future of the discipline. This may cause some surprise, since many people think of Barr's work as mainly negative and critical in relation to biblical theology, rather than positive or creative. There are two reasons for this.

For one thing, his first book, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, published in 1961, was overwhelmingly negative in both intention and effect.¹ Barr took apart, brick by brick, the foundations of the biblical theology of the post-War period insofar as that rested on certain ideas about language. He showed that theologians were arguing for the distinctiveness and uniqueness of biblical ideas by appealing to theories about the working of languages that no contemporary linguists would have countenanced—appeals to etymology, and to Whorfian ideas about the relation of language to thought, and a tendency to see theological ideas as embedded in individual words rather than in discourse. The effect was devastating, not only because of the substance of the book, but because

1 James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

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of its tone. Barr's criticisms of others were always trenchant and could be offensive in style to those he criticized, and certainly his first book caused widespread ill feeling. Though mild in manner when encountered in person, on paper he could be devastating: I think of lines such as "all the chapters of this book say the same thing," which Barr said of Brevard Childs' *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. But the unfortunate consequence from the point of view of the theme of biblical theology is that people came to think that Barr was opposed to biblical theology as such, whereas he was in reality concerned only with a particular way of approaching it, through faulty linguistic theory. He continued throughout his career to write on biblical-theological subjects, but the negative impression was hard to shake.

For another thing, when towards the end of his life Barr turned to the topic of biblical theology in a systematic way, his book—by far his longest—was called *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Approach*, and was almost entirely a discussion and analysis of various other scholars' works in the genre of biblical theology, rather than a constructive theology of the Bible or theology of the Old Testament.² As a survey of the work done in Old Testament theology it is unsurpassed, and it shows all Barr's analytical and critical powers still at their height, with (at least this is my impression) more readiness to appreciate the constructive work of others than in some of his earlier books and articles. But it cannot be denied that the book is not itself a piece of biblical theology. So if even this very long work is not a constructive contribution to the theology of the Bible, it may seem that I shall have an uphill task in describing Barr's contribution to biblical theology so as to suggest positive possibilities for the future of the discipline.

I would, it is true, want to defend the usefulness of rigorous criticism of work in this field as in itself a contribution to the field. All disciplines advance as much by scrutiny of existing proposals as by making new ones, and Barr's placing of "No Entry" signs in various places greatly facilitated other people in finding their way through the maze of ideas scholars have had about the theology of the Bible. Negativity can be liberating, as the scales fall from one's eyes. So I do not see the difficulty about finding a contribution to biblical theology in Barr's work as lying in its critical and destructive tendencies, but rather in another feature, that his work is mainly conceptual and structural, rather than focused on content. He did write a few things on central features of the theology of the Bible: there is, for example, an important paper on the covenant, though centered mainly on lexical and philological questions about the word *bērît* rather than on biblical assertions about the covenant relationship between God and Israel.³ But for the most part his interest was in what biblical theology is and how it is to be arrived at, as well—and we shall see that this is central—as how it related to the wider world of theology (dogmatic or systematic theology), philosophy, and the other humanities, and even the sciences. His contribution is thus more an answer to questions such as, "What are we doing when we are doing biblical theology?" than to questions such as, "What is

2 James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Approach* (London: SCM, 1999).

3 James Barr, "Some Semantic Notes on the Covenant," in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie (FS Walther Zimmerli)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 23–38; repr. in John Barton, ed., *The Bible and Interpretation: The Collected Essays of James Barr*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2:164–77.

the Old Testament doctrine of creation?" And his habit was always to analyze rather than to systematize: this is a matter of intellectual temperament.

Consequently, Barr's main contribution to biblical theology was to work out its nature and character and its interrelation with other theological and non-theological disciplines. I believe his major writing on this can be found not in his books, but in an article, "Biblical Criticism as Theological Enlightenment," written in German in 1982,⁴ but published in an English translation for the first time in his collected papers; bits of it also appear in his book *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*.⁵ In this essay he argues that critical study of the Bible—in which he thinks biblical theology is included—is not some kind of abandonment or weakening of a full-blooded commitment to Scripture, but on the contrary is part of what Martin Luther called "the freedom of the Christian man"⁶: freedom from the constraints of external ecclesiastical authority, freedom to explore the Bible on its own terms and to ask of it any questions that suggest themselves.

Through faith in Christ the believer is completely and freely justified, and therefore has no additional religious duties that he must fulfil in order to fulfil his vocation as a Christian. Applied to our theme, this might mean that the critic as a believing Christian has biblical exegesis, even biblical criticism, as his vocation, and it is precisely his freedom—or in other words his God-given duty—to carry out this task, without asking anxiously whether it is useful, whether it disturbs people, whether it is agreeable to the church authorities, whether it accords with the official confession. Perhaps in this way one can see the freedom of biblical criticism as grounded in the gospel itself. ... The Reformation idea of freedom is a basis for the freedom of biblical criticism.⁷

This is enormously different from current moves in the direction of 'theological interpretation of Scripture', which claim that biblical interpretation should be governed by a rule of faith. For Barr, if critical biblical study has a fault, it is not that it is insufficiently confessional, but on the contrary that it has been much too confessional. It has too often been guided by

the tendencies of confessional theology. Even the links between biblical criticism and liberal theology can be understood in this way: the churches tended towards liberalism, and biblical criticism found in this a stimulus to historical speculation. It is precisely because biblical criticism has so often walked in the footsteps of dogmatic theology, one may perhaps say, that theology has failed to recognize the corrections that are necessary in the light of biblical criticism, and has rather neglected the task of defining the role and importance of biblical criticism within theology.⁸

4 James Barr, "Bibelkritik als theologische Aufklärung," in *Glaube und Toleranz: Das theologische Erbe der Aufklärung*, ed. T. Rendtorff (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1982), 30–42; translated by John Barton as "Biblical Criticism as Theological Enlightenment," in Barton, *Collected Essays*, 1:156–68.

5 James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

6 Martin Luther, "On Christian Freedom" (1520), in *First Principles of the Reformation (or The Ninety-five Theses and Three Primary Works of Dr. Martin Luther)*, trans. H. Wace and C.A. Buckheim (London: John Murray, 1883).

7 Barr, "Biblical Criticism as Theological Enlightenment," 159.

8 Ibid.

Any biblical theology produced within the program hinted at here will obviously be very different from most of the theologies that have existed hitherto. Barr seems to me to be calling for something that would be a real novelty in our discipline, a theology that follows the natural contours of the biblical text without paying any attention to the theologies the churches have produced. Just as systematic theologians generally write without much attention to the Bible, so biblical theologians would write without much attention to systematic theology—with one eye covered, as it were. Then they and systematicians could compare notes, on an equal footing. That seems to be Barr's wish, and it is a wish for a style of biblical theology that, to my knowledge, has never existed, though it is arguably what Johann Phillip Gabler had in mind in his assertion in 1787 that biblical and dogmatic theology were different things.⁹ It could not be further from the "canonical" trend in Old Testament study today, for which biblical and dogmatic theology run on parallel lines, or even on a single line, and ought to do so.

This implies, for Barr, that biblical study should be at least partly definitely untheological: it should pay attention to the biblical texts without asking all the time about their theological relevance to us, and should register their strangeness and difference from our theological ideas. For that reason the natural habitat of biblical criticism is the university rather than the church—a massively anti-Barthian idea—which would be anathema to many in biblical studies today. Biblical texts should be studied as other ancient texts are studied, with the skills that only universities have. For the same reason, ministers in the churches need to be trained in universities, not only in seminaries, because they need to be exposed to secular criticism. Any biblical theology will thus share to a good extent in the pursuit of the history of ideas, rather than being part of, still less subject to, dogmatic or systematic theology.

Another fault of biblical theology, according to Barr, is that it has often been too synthetic, too keen to produce a system out of the materials in the Old or New Testament.

... was not the drive towards a synthetic understanding the real weakness of criticism? Instead of blaming the Tübingen School, or even Wellhausen, for dividing up the Bible into different pieces, would it not have been more appropriate to blame them for having reassembled these pieces into a questionable unity?¹⁰

Biblical study has in many ways been too constructive, when it should have concentrated on demonstrating the individual profile of different strands in the Bible. Thus, it seems, a true biblical theology would be a portrayal of diversity rather than of unity. There is a tendency here that reminds me, in the New Testament context, of Ernst Käsemann, with his famous saying that the

9 For a translation of Gabler's address, see John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *SJT* 33 (1980): 135–58.

10 Barr, "Biblical Criticism as Theological Enlightenment," 164.

New Testament witnesses not to the unity but to the diversity of the early church.¹¹ For constructive theology, systematicians would then need to grasp the plurality of beliefs attested in the Bible, and with the help of biblical scholars allow them to question and qualify their own systems. This is, to me, an exciting idea: I don't think it has ever been tried. It may sound as though it would place the systematic theologian under the thumb of his or her biblical counterpart, but that is not what Barr means: he thinks of this as a real collaboration. Indeed, as I shall go on to argue, it actually shows *more* respect to systematic theology than biblical theologians generally have shown, because it recognizes biblical and dogmatic theology as separate disciplines and does not try to merge them to the advantage of either party.

Thus Barr made a definite and very distinctive contribution to biblical theology, not in the sense of a new synthesis of biblical materials, but in a new way of conceiving the biblical theologian's task. Some further aspects of this I set out in my introductory essay to the Festschrift for Barr which Samuel Balentine and I edited in 1994,¹² and I will reprise those points now.

First, theology is not concerned only with the Bible, as some strands of Protestantism have argued; but nor is it concerned with Scripture plus tradition, as on a traditional Catholic model. Theology is concerned with extra-textual reality, that is, with things, persons, and events in the real world, not just those inside the sacred text—with the experience and conceptualization of God and God's relation to the people of Israel, and with the life and work, death and resurrection of Jesus. One of his sharpest comments on Brevard Childs's "canonical approach" is the remark that "there is no question that Jesus rose 'canonically' from the dead, but it is the extrinsic resurrection that matters for faith."¹³ I do not believe that Childs would have denied this: it is something of a straw man. But its implications certainly do need to be thought through by anyone who is attracted to canonical approaches or to the "theological interpretation of Scripture." But the remark makes a good point in its own right, even outside a polemical context. Christian faith, Barr held, is not related primarily to a book, but to God and to Jesus:

Salvation belongs not to the networks of meaning within a text, not even the text of the Bible, but to a set of people and events ... Even if the Bible as a book could be studied in a non-referential way, paying no attention to anything outside the text itself, the structure of Christian faith does not work in that way.¹⁴

11 Ernst Käsemann, "Begründet der neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?" *Evangelische Theologie* 11 (1951–1952): 13–21; also in idem, *Das Neue Testament als Kanon: Dokumentation und kritische Analyse zur gegenwärtigen Diskussion* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 124–33, esp. 131.

12 John Barton, "James Barr as Critic and Theologian," in *Language, Theology, and the Bible*, ed. John Barton and Samuel E. Balentine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 16–26.

13 James Barr, "Historical Reading and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," in *Explorations in Theology 7: The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1980), 30–51 (47); Barton, *Collected Essays* 1:28–51 (42).

14 Ibid.

And again:

The Christian faith, as a religion, is not purely an understanding of the Bible: rather, it is a relation to really existing persons, a relation which is communicated, enriched and controlled through the Bible.¹⁵

Barr was actually quite welcoming to a literary, non-referential reading of the Bible; but he denied that it could ever be adequate for *theology*, which is about a divine-human relationship existing not in a text but in an external reality. Theology is thus not concerned only with the Bible, and biblical study is not simply a handmaid of theology: each has its own proper sphere of action. Though himself a biblical scholar, Barr was far from being a biblical maximalist. He recognized the independent status of religious faith and of systematic theology over against the study of the Bible. He wrote:

It is characteristic of this faith [Christianity] that it produces questions which generate theology, questions which cannot be properly dealt with by the faith-inspired utterances of scripture but press for consideration under the more deliberate, more disciplined, more conscious and perhaps even more abstract process that is theology ... they can be answered satisfactorily only in so far as the answers suggested provide a framework within which scripture can be expounded in a way that conforms to its actual text and also brings out its inner intentions.¹⁶

Some distancing of constructive theology from biblical study, even from biblical theology, is essential if the Bible is to be properly interpreted. As soon as the Bible replaces theology, its interpretation, carrying too heavy a freight of importance, becomes distorted, and its natural sense gets lost.

Secondly, the emphasis on external reference points for theology implies that the relation of Christian faith and Christian theology to the Bible is not primarily a hermeneutical one. Barr makes this point in commenting on Paul Ricoeur's theory that the New Testament, and the faith expressed in the New Testament, are in essence an interpretation of the Old Testament. "Ricoeur exaggerates when he says that 'the kerygma is the rereading of an ancient scripture'; one could rightly say that the kerygma permits or enables the rereading of an ancient scripture, but it is not in essence a rereading."¹⁷ Christianity did result in a massive rereading of the Old Testament, but this was not because it was in essence a hermeneutic: rather, because it believed that there had been a fresh revelation of God, embodied not in a book but in a life.

Of course the New Testament does provide interpretations of Old Testament materials; but its *essence* is not that it provides interpretations of the Old Testament, its essence is that there is a new substance there, the substance of the coming of Jesus, his teaching, his life, death, and resurrection.¹⁸

15 James Barr, "Biblical Language and Exegesis—How Far does Structuralism Help Us?", *King's College Review* 7 (1984): 48–52 (52); Barton, *Collected Essays* 2: 361–72 (372).

16 James Barr, "The Bible as a Document of Believing Communities," in *Explorations in Theology* 7, 130; Barton, *Collected Essays*, 1:46–64 (61).

17 Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 70.

18 Barr, "The Bible as a Document of Believing Communities," 128; Barton, *Collected Essays*, 1:59. Cf. also Barr's comments in *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 373.

This new substance cannot be adequately captured by saying merely that the New Testament reinterprets the Old, and hence by constructing an entirely biblical theology. Trying to understand and make theological sense of Jesus Christ, Barr believes, takes one beyond hermeneutics into a more-than-textual theology. It takes one to a point where biblical scholars have to recognize their limits, and systematic theologians to recognize that simply persuading biblical scholars to interpret texts in a more consciously theological way will not solve the problem. What is needed is primary reflection on the givens of Christian faith, one of which is Jesus Christ, who had, and has, an extra-textual existence and significance. Hermeneutics is not enough!

Thirdly, biblical theology seems to imply a systematic statement of what the Bible *asserts* about God and the world. But “asserts” is a slippery word here, because in both Testaments, many references are to ideas that are *presupposed* rather than asserted. The Bible *implies* a previous revelation of God, or at least a previous acquaintance with God. The God of Christians is the God who was already known in Israel. The new reality in Christ makes sense only if this God is the God of Israel, already familiar before Jesus comes (that was the problem with Marcionism, which denied that the God of Israel was the God of Christ). But we can go further: this God was known before there was ever an Old Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures relate the deeds and describe the character of a God who is postulated as already familiar even to the earliest ancestor of the nation, not as one who became known for the first time through the witness of the scriptural writers. As Barr puts it:

Unlike the situation in modern theology, there is no problem of revelation which has to be solved or overcome ... What you learn about God in the Bible is not the first contact with deity, it is new information about a person you already know.¹⁹

Thus in the Old as in the New Testament, revelation occurs before and outside the text, not only within and through it. The Old Testament may be said to testify to the self-revelation of the God of Israel, but it is not itself that revelation. Thus what biblical theologians study, the set of theological beliefs held in ancient Israel and the early church, is not coterminous with the contents of the Bible. This again is very much at odds with current canonical readings. It brings biblical theology much closer to the history of Israelite religion, as conceived by Rainer Albertz,²⁰ and Barr certainly had some sympathy with that perspective, though he also thought that biblical scholars needed to talk to theologians and not only to ancient Near Eastern specialists.

Fourthly, I have spoken of God’s self-revelation; but “revelation” may not always be the correct word to use. In a final departure from a Barthian model of the Bible (which one senses was his original starting-point), Barr dedicated a lot of his writing to rehabilitating the idea that there is natural knowledge of God in the Bible, indeed something that can be called natural theology. Barr’s belief in the legitimacy of seeing natural theology in Scripture (which is not the same, necessarily,

19 James Barr, “Story and History in Biblical Theology,” in *Explorations in Theology* 7, 1–17 (16); Barton, *Collected Essays* 1: 233–48 (247).

20 Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, 2 vols. (London: SCM, 1994), esp. 1:12–17.

as affirming it himself) was already hinted at in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, but it became a central theme in his later works, especially *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* in 1993.²¹ Natural theology, he argues, actually occurs within the Bible itself. This was acknowledged by earlier exegetes, who pointed to Acts 17 (Paul's speech on the Areopagus) and Romans 1 as appealing to a knowledge of God based on reason rather than on revelation. But within a modern context more biblicistic scholars have tended to reject natural theology and to be uneasy about its possible presence in Scripture. The danger they have seen is precisely the point Barr wished to make, namely that the Bible itself teaches that there are important theological truths, such as the existence of God, that can be known without the assistance of the Bible. The Bible itself tells us that we do not need the Bible to know that there is a God, a moral law, and a relationship between God and humanity. Thus, just as the Bible is related to revelations of truth which pre-existed it and are presupposed by it, so also it is related to a natural knowledge of God, which is available beyond the bounds of the Judaeo-Christian tradition altogether. These are rather terrible ideas for more conservative Bible readers of a Barthian stamp, whom Barr was forever combating—indeed, throughout *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* Barth is seldom far away. I shall return to this point.

Barr, I think, would have been generally favorable towards the very recent tendency to see points of contact between biblical theology and philosophy in the ancient world and even the modern world, as one sees this idea being developed by Yoram Hazony and Jaco Gericke.²² Hazony insists that the Bible is a book of reason rather than a book of revelation. Barr would no doubt have thought that an exaggeration, but I believe he would have been hospitable in general to the idea that there is much reason in the Bible, and that its theology is by no means the pure revelational theology one would expect to find on Barthian principles. He was always cool towards the insistence on *Heilsgeschichte* and covenant in the so-called Biblical Theology Movement, and he emphasized the human character of much that is said in the Bible, preferring “story” to “saving history” as the superior term for the narrative material in the Old Testament, for example. He favored biblical theologians who stressed continuities between human insight and biblical expressions. Thus the emphasis on natural theology in the Bible was not as it were a footnote to his work, but lay very close to its center. It was of a piece with his insistence, from his first work, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* onwards, that “the Bible speaks in human language,” as the rabbis said: there was not a special biblical language that somehow conveyed special meanings, but normal Hebrew and Greek. In the same way there was not a special biblical way of thinking divorced from the thought of other cultures or peoples. If the Greeks arrived at the notion of natural knowledge of the divine, then so did the Hebrews. The Hebrew Bible of course is not philosophy in the same sense as Plato or Aristotle are philosophy, but it does not come from an entirely alien culture. Deutero-Isaiah in some ways exists in the same thought world as the Pre-Socratics (his contemporaries), arguing with an imagined audience about what it means to be divine. Barr was very much

21 James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

22 Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Jaco Gericke, *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

committed to the quest to “read the Bible like any other book,” a phrase of Benjamin Jowett’s on which he commented at length in one of his important articles on the history of biblical scholarship.²³

For James Barr, then, a biblical theology would not be a confessional theology, but an attempt to capture the theological ideas of the Bible read on its own terms. Almost all existing biblical theologies, in his opinion, failed this test: they were normally organized around topics from dogmatics, illustrated from the biblical text. This is true of Walther Eichrodt’s great *Theology of the Old Testament*, which takes the covenant as its organizing principle and so has to be cool towards ideas such as natural theology.²⁴ It is a Reformed theology of the Old Testament, rather than a theology of the Old Testament that could then enter into dialogue with Reformed theology. Gerhard Von Rad’s *Old Testament Theology*²⁵ is similarly arranged around the great theme of *Heilsgeschichte*, which Barr tried to show owed much to Lutheran dogmatics. Rightly or wrongly I have tried to argue similarly that Brevard Childs’s *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*²⁶ is essentially a Reformed dogmatics.²⁷ What Barr looked for, but failed to find, was a theology of the Old Testament that would genuinely start from the biblical text itself. And despite all my sense that he offered what was most truly his own on this subject, namely criticism and analysis, I do wish he had attempted such a theology himself.

The mistake that people make in contemplating Barr’s arguments for detaching biblical theology from dogmatics, and proceeding in a non-confessional mode, is to assume that he therefore depreciated confessional or dogmatic theology. Nothing could be further from the truth. As I argued earlier, Barr believed that theology had its own proper place in Christianity, which was a religion peculiarly and rather distinctively prone to produce theological speculation and systematization, and that the biblical theologian ought not to try to usurp that place, as he thought some biblical theologians did. What was needed was a proper dialogue between biblical scholars and dogmatic theologians, each arguing in the mode proper to them. This too has been lacking, in my judgement, in modern times. When biblical scholars take an interest in theology, they tend to align themselves with the idea that the interpretation of the Bible belongs in the church, so that we hear of the need to “reclaim the Bible for the church”; when systematicians take an interest in the Bible, it tends to be a matter of reflecting on particular biblical *topoi* or reading the Bible in a fundamentally ahistorical way that does not connect with the ordinary work of biblical scholars. Barr’s ideal was that biblical scholars should take an interest in systematic theology, not in order either to assimilate it,

23 James Barr, “Jowett and the Reading of the Bible ‘Like Any Other Book’,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* (1983): 1–44; Barton, *Collected Essays* 1:169–97.

24 Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, OTL, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1961).

25 Gerhard von Rad, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker, OTL, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1962; repr. 2001).

26 Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (London: SCM, 1992).

27 See John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

on the one hand, or to bow down before it, on the other, but so as to enable there to be a real interchange of ideas. This goes right back to his early work for the World Council of Churches, often unappreciated. He did not believe that Old Testament study should be simply a branch of Semitics or of the study of the ancient Near East, even though he contributed massively to those specialisms. He wanted biblical scholars to play their distinctive part in the enterprise of theology, which for him, as we have seen, was not simply a confessional discipline but also a proper subject for study in a university.

Barr was unusual among biblical scholars in taking an interest in contemporary philosophy, and this was part of his coolness towards hermeneutics. His philosophical interests lay in the Anglo-American analytical tradition, and he was never an enthusiast for continental philosophy, frequently making disparaging remarks about Martin Heidegger and the entire tradition that emanated from him: hence, no doubt, his scepticism about the work of Paul Ricoeur and others in the modern tradition of hermeneutics. Barr stood in a more empiricist tradition of philosophical thinking and would have liked biblical theology to interact with that kind of philosophy rather than, as is often the case, with the continental approach. In his lifetime, that seemed unlikely to happen, but in the last couple of years we have seen Gericke and Hazony, whom I mentioned above, trying to bring about a genuine rapprochement with analytical philosophy: it remains to be seen how both biblical scholars and philosophers will react. Barr would certainly have welcomed such a rapprochement, and would have contributed greatly to it.

James Barr's approach to theology was generally characterized by opponents as "liberal," the general catch-all expression used by biblical conservatives for anyone committed to a style of biblical scholarship to the left of their own, wherever exactly it stands on the map. I have never felt comfortable with the characterization of Barr as a liberal. In later years, particularly, Barr exhibited various attitudes that did not belong to the usual picture of a liberal in matters ecclesiastical or political. And his theology in general was not liberal: he believed in miracles, especially in the external reality of the resurrection of Jesus, and the very centrality he ascribed to the Bible in all his thinking was not the mark of a classic liberal theologian. He once remarked to me that most liberal theologians were not really interested in the Bible, implying that this was a defect in theological liberalism. A biblical theology written by Barr would certainly have stressed the human element in Scripture and its continuity with other human traditions of thought—which are perhaps liberal ideas—but it would also have emphasized that the Bible does witness to revelation by God, not simply to human reflection. His opposition to a *purely* revelational model, which he thought an exaggeration by Barth and his followers, did not mean that he did not believe in revelation at all. It remained true that the theological agenda for Barr was at least partly set by Barth, and perhaps there was no biblical theologian in the twentieth century who did not come under Barthian influence in some measure and was to that extent, entirely contrary to what fundamentalists tended to think, "anti-liberal." It was interesting in Oxford to see interchanges between Barr and Maurice Wiles, who was always a great friend, but who definitely stood to Barr's left on such matters; in such a context Barr emerged as quite conservative. His ability to analyze and criticize the biblical text did not spring from liberalism (unless we call any analytical and critical tendency liberal by definition),

but from his emphasis on what he called the “factuality” of the text and the importance of hearing it on its own terms. The continental hermeneutic tradition is of course skeptical that we can ever do this, stressing that we always make the text to an extent in our own image, but Barr was quite clear that we could and must do it.

Now the Biblical Theology Movement (capital letters) of the post-War years has died—James Barr takes much of the credit for its demise—or maybe one should say it has transmuted into the canonical approach to reading the Bible. But biblical theology (small letters) is still flourishing: people still write about theologies in the Old and New Testaments and study theological themes in the Bible. If we are to go on doing that, I believe that we have much to learn from Barr’s understanding of the nature of the task, and that we should in particular heed his call to do our thinking in collaboration or at least in discussion with systematic theologians and with philosophers, so that biblical theology is not confined to an ecclesiastical ghetto, but is part of a wider humanistic discipline in the history of ideas, and can contribute to what can be thought and believed in our own day.