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SONG, PSALM, AND SERMON: TOWARD A CENTER OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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Abstract: *Biblical theology is often described as reading the Bible on its own terms. This study is an exercise in that biblical theological task to understand better the central themes that emerge as most important and consistent when the biblical authors, prompted by various circumstances, retell the biblical storyline. By analyzing extended retellings of the Bible by biblical authors (often occurring in the form of songs, psalms, and sermons), this study proposes a methodology that avoids the circularity inherent in selecting a theme for the text and then proving that theme from the text. Biblical theology seeks to explain all Scripture as a unified story, and I am suggesting that giving special consideration to how these biblical authors interpretively retell the Bible is a step forward in reading the Bible on its own terms. Their emphases serve as a compass and corrective as we try to navigate the whole Bible.*

Key words: *biblical theology, center, kingdom, glory, presence, faithfulness, faith*

There has been a concerted effort in the field of biblical theology to locate a central theme, idea, or phrase that accurately describes the Bible's overarching message or story.[1] It is an effort to articulate the Bible's unity while recognizing its diversity. While this endeavor is the natural impulse for those who understand Scripture as arising from a single divine author, those who have undertaken this task have not agreed on either the central theme or the hermeneutic for locating that

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[1] Hamilton describes the necessary characteristics of the central theme, "The center of biblical theology will be the theme that is prevalent, even pervasive, in all parts of the Bible. This theme will be the demonstrable centerpiece of the theology contained in the Bible itself, because this theme will be what the biblical authors resort to when they give ultimate explanations for why things are the way they are at any point in the Bible's story" (James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010], 49). Duvall and Hays comment similarly, "Rather, the center of biblical theology would be the megatheme that provides the cohesion that connects the other pervasive themes, along with the details, into a coherent whole" (J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019], 4). Others argue that the idea of plotline or storyline, not a central theme, can more aptly summarize the Bible's message because it avoids some of the reductionism inherent with prioritizing a single theme or group of themes (e.g., G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011], esp. 161–84; 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, IL: IVP, 2000], 66).

central theme.[2] This lack of consensus has led many to claim that the attempt to locate one central theme, while laudable in theory, is reductionistic or impossible in practice.[3]

If biblical theology, as it is often described, is the study of the Bible on its own terms, then one expression of biblical theology is the biblical authors' own retellings and interpretations of the Bible. I am proposing that a helpful step forward is to analyze what themes are central when the biblical authors retell the biblical story. My concerns in this article involve both methodology (analyzing the biblical authors' own retellings) and content (discerning whether there is a consistent, central theme when they retell the Bible). If there is a central theme that unites the whole Bible, then it is likely also to be expressed when the biblical authors retell and interpret the biblical storyline.[4] By analyzing the biblical authors' retellings of the Bible (which tend to occur in songs, psalms, and sermons), I will propose that one theme that often concerns them is that God's faithfulness calls for faith-filled response from his people.

I. REVIEWING CURRENT APPROACHES TO THE CENTRAL THEME

1. *Current proposals for the central theme.* Two of the challenges of proposing a central theme for the whole Bible are that it must have sufficient specificity to communicate something in particular while also having sufficient breadth to describe diverse texts throughout the canon. The central theme must be somewhat

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[2] See for example, the debate between Hasel and Kaiser summarized by Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Hasel-Kaiser and Evangelical Discussions on the Search for a Center or *Mitte* to Biblical Theology," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 26 (2015): 46–48.

[3] For examples of the criticism of this approach in NT theology, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Diversity and Unity in the New Testament," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 153; Jeremy M. Kimble and Ched Spellman, *Invitation to Biblical Theology: Exploring the Shape, Storyline, and Themes of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2020), 237–38. Similarly, Carson notes the challenges of locating the center of the NT, "What does 'centre' mean and how might it be discovered? Does it refer to the most common theme, determined by statistical count, or to the controlling theme or to the fundamental theological presuppositions of New Testament writers…? Precisely how does one determine what a 'controlling theme' is?" (D. A. Carson, "New Testament Theology," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997], 810). For the NT, Köstenberger proposes that there are three centralizing themes: the one God, Jesus Christ, and the gospel ("Diversity and Unity in the New Testament," 158). Even in the NT, these three themes are not widely agreed upon. Frank Thielman, for example, proposes five themes: "In the interpretation of the New Testament writings proposed here, five issues occupy an especially important place: the significance of Jesus, faith as a response to Jesus, the outpouring of God's Spirit, the church as the people of God, and the consummation of all things" (Frank Thielman, *A Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 681). Even for a smaller subset of NT texts, such as Paul's epistles, there is no consensus about the "center." See, for example, the discussion by Stanley E. Porter, "Is There a Center to Paul and His Theology? An Introduction to the Study of Paul and His Theology," in *Paul and His Theology*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, Pauline Studies 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1–19.

[4] I recognize that particular contexts prompt the biblical authors to retell the biblical storyline, and they retell the story with the purpose of addressing that particular situation. So we should not expect complete uniformity. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect some patterns to emerge if the authors have a consistent controlling theme in mind.

elastic to be inclusive, but still rigid enough to be defining. The list of proposed "centers" is expansive, including concepts such as covenant, holiness of God, people of God, mission, presence of God, rule of God, servant of God, sovereignty of God, promise-plan or promise-fulfillment, and dominion and dynasty, to name only a few.[5]

In addition to this list of proposals, there are several "centers" that have garnered a larger following. One such theme is that of the *messiah*. T. Desmond Alexander, for example, states, "The concept of Messiah is central to the Old and New Testaments, indeed, it is the theme which unites them."[6] Alexander claims that the Bible progressively unfolds with messiah as the connecting theme to understand the goal and relationship among texts. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays agree that messiah is an important theme, but they place messiah in the broader theme of *God's presence* with his people. They argue that God's presence is the unifying "megatheme" that drives the biblical story: "Our basic thesis is that the Triune God desires to have a personal, encountering relationship with his people and enters into his creation in order to facilitate that relationship."[7] Others, such as James Hamilton, have argued that *God's glory* is the overarching theme: "I will pursue a biblical theology that highlights the central theme of God's glory in salvation through judgment.… In my view, this metanarrative presents a unified story with a discernible main point or center."[8] And the centralizing theme that currently seems to be gaining the most traction is the theme of *kingdom*. Tom Schreiner is a representative of this position: "The contention here is that the phrase 'kingdom of God' thematically captures, from a biblical theology standpoint, the message of Scripture. Now I would immediately add that God brings in the kingdom for the glory and praise of his name. Scripture unfolds *the story* of the kingdom, and God's glory is *the reason* for the story."[9] Due to the flexibility of the kingdom metaphor, there are a number of

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[5] For a summary of these positions, see Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 161–84; Daniel J. Brendsel, "Plots, Themes, and Responsibilities: The Search for a Center of Biblical Theology Reexamined," *Them* 35 (2010): 400–412; James Hamilton, "The Glory of God in Salvation through Judgment: The Center of Biblical Theology?," *TynBul* 57 (2006): 57–84; Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 37–56; Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 85–87; Gerhard F. Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 140–70.

[6] T. Desmond Alexander, *The Servant King: The Bible's Portrait of the Messiah* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 9; cf. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God*, 301–466.

[7] Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, 1. Cf. Brendsel, "Plots, Themes, and Responsibilities," 412; Samuel L. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

[8] Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 44. Hamilton makes a distinction between ultimate ends (glory) and subordinate ends (esp. 47–49). Similarly, Thomas R. Schreiner (*The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013], xii) and Beale argue that God's glory is the ultimate goal of the story, even while they argue for the concept of kingdom as the controlling theme. Beale, for example, states, "I contend that the goal of the NT storyline is God's glory, and that the main stepping-stone to that goal is Christ's establishment of an eschatological new-creational kingdom and its expansion" (*A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 16).

[9] Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, xiii. There are a number of significant works in this category: Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis:

variations, such as Beale's new-creational kingdom or Gentry and Wellum's kingdom through covenant. Most of these proposals, even while offering a unified theme, argue for some combination of themes. For example, even if some of these proposals do not see covenant as the controlling theme, most would affirm its significance to the biblical storyline. Similarly, most would agree that God's glory is the goal of the story, even if they differ on what theme is central in telling that story.

2. *Current methodologies for discerning the central theme.* While there is some overlap with the proposals above, my argument does not discount the significance of any of these themes. My approach is to offer another, hopefully complementary, methodology to the approaches that have already been taken. My aim is that my approach will provide additional insight and a check or clarification on the proposals that have been made. First, it is helpful to review some of the methodologies employed by a selection of recent works on biblical theology.

Schreiner nuances his approach carefully and claims to be tracing only one of several possible themes. He does not provide extensive rationale for choosing this one theme of the *kingdom* of God, although he does comment that a simple word study would not be a sufficient way to test the centrality of a theme.[10] The reader can assume that through Schreiner's extensive reading of the Bible this theme has repeatedly emerged as significant, and so he has set out to demonstrate its significance. This comment is not intended to criticize Schreiner. Unless one takes a word-study approach, it might be impossible to avoid the circularity of this approach.

Duvall and Hays provide slightly more insight into their methodology, stating that they began to be impressed with the centrality of *God's relational presence* as they worked through particular biblical texts and books.[11] They observed that scholars from other disciplines were coming to similar conclusions, but a full-scale treatment of the theme throughout the Bible was still lacking.[12] Their three criteria for the megatheme are that it should "drive the plot of the biblical story from beginning to end," appear extensively throughout the Bible, and best account for the

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Winston, 1981); Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014); Peter John Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015); Matthew Y. Emerson, *The Story of Scripture: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Nashville: B&H, 2017). Beale modifies this to be the theme of new creational kingdom: "The OT storyline that I posit as the basis for the NT storyline is this: The Old Testament is the story of God, who progressively reestablishes his new-creational kingdom out of chaos over a sinful people by his word and Spirit through promise, covenant, and redemption, resulting in worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this kingdom and judgment (defeat or exile) for the unfaithful, unto his glory.… The NT transformation of the storyline of the OT that I propose is this: Jesus's life, trials, death for sinners, and especially resurrection by the Spirit have launched the fulfillment of the eschatological already-not yet new-creational reign, bestowed by grace through faith and resulting in worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this new-creational reign and resulting in judgment for the unbelieving, unto the triune God's glory" (Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 16, italics removed).

[10] Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, xii–xiii.

[11] Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, 9–10.

[12] Duvall and Hays, 10–11.

other major themes.[13] The only way to enact this methodology is to choose a theme (of course, on the basis of their extensive study and scholarly engagement) and then to argue it throughout the canon to test its validity. The circularity is unavoidable: a theme emerges from reading the Bible and then the Bible is read through the lens of that theme.

Hamilton is to be commended, not only for his more extensive discussion of methodology, but also for answering actual objections to his methodology. Hamilton's basic approach is to ask if the Bible tells us what God's ultimate purpose is. Then if we know God's main purpose, we know the main point of the Bible. He states, "My argument is that God's glory in salvation through judgment is the center of biblical theology because it reflects God's ultimate purpose."[14] In addition to proposing that the center of the Bible is equivalent to God's ultimate purpose, Hamilton also contends that the center must be "prevalent, even pervasive, in all parts of the Bible," organizing the metanarrative and the origin of the metanarrative.[15] Hamilton admits that the only way to test this theory is to propose it and then attempt to falsify it.[16] But this of course, leaves one open to the charge of circularity, and in his response to this critique by I. Howard Marshall, Hamilton admits that there is no better way to proceed with identifying the center.[17]

3. Proposing a way forward. I am in basic agreement with Hamilton's admission that if one attempts to trace the thematic center throughout the Bible, circularity is unavoidable as a theme is proposed and then either proven or disproven to be the center. But I also think that Hamilton's own proposal suggests another way forward. He writes, "This theme will be the demonstrable centerpiece of the theology contained within the Bible itself, because this theme will be what the biblical authors resort to when they give ultimate explanations for why things are the way they are at any point in the Bible's story."[18] One way to discover what theme(s) the biblical authors view as the centerpiece of the Bible's theology of its own story is to study what theme(s) emerge(s) when the biblical authors retell the biblical story.

Beale goes further and asks why, if a center is truly present, it is not more pervasively explicit? He questions and answers, "Were the NT writers really conscious of having new-creational reign as the core of their storyline and theology? I believe that the answer to this question is 'yes' to varying significant degrees.… I am now faced, however, with this question: if they did have such a storyline con-

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[13] Duvall and Hays, 325–26, cf. 4–5.

[14] Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 555; cf. 39.

[15] Hamilton, 49, 51. Beale (*A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 168–84) claims that the most comprehensive center is the most probable, but pursuing comprehensiveness, of course, runs the risk of resulting in a theme that is too vague. He helpfully provides four criteria for validating the centrality. (1) While necessarily being related to all other central storylines, it must be shown to be more overarching. (2) It must have a textual basis that helps to explain the content of every book of the NT. (3) It must be integrally connected with the OT. (4) Every possible competing theme or storyline must be analyzed to ascertain if it is more central. Beale admits that the final step must rely on the work of others, as it would not be possible to undertake that task by oneself.

[16] Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 41.

[17] Hamilton, 536.

[18] Hamilton, 49.

sciously in mind, why did they not make it more explicit, and would they have agreed among themselves that new-creational reign was central?"[19] These challenges are necessary entailments for an inductive approach to uncovering the central theme or storyline. But data exist within the Bible by which the biblical authors tell us what they think are the central aspects of the story.

While scholars have attempted the monumental task of analyzing the entire Bible to uncover a unifying or centralizing theme, my suggestion is that to investigate themes that are explicitly central to smaller subset of texts, where biblical authors retell the biblical story, offers a valuable lens for understanding the whole. While this approach avoids introducing the subjective interpretive element of self-selecting a theme, it is not without methodological challenges. The biggest challenge for this proposal is the establishment of criteria for selecting the texts to be evaluated. Universally agreeable criteria are not possible because the biblical authors were not attempting to conform to a set of standards. I will look at texts that are deliberate (intentional exegesis of previous texts is evident in quotation or allusion) and extended (extending over ten or more verses) retellings of the biblical storyline (the events described extend beyond a single episode or time period).

I am not the first to investigate the Bible's retelling of its own storyline. Hood and Emerson helpfully summarize past approaches and suggest that a compositional category of "summaries of Israel's story" exists in canonical and extracanonical writings.[20] Their summary criteria are that "an Israel story summary must reflect Israel's history; that is, her characters, events, and institutions must be present. Chronological order and substantial length are required, although, with the former aspect, exceptions can be allowed for minor chronological digression (Hebrews 11; Ap. Const. 7.37.1–5) if the passage otherwise moves in proper 'historical' direction." Recently, Bruno, Compton, and McFadden have borrowed Hood and Emerson's criteria for a book-length treatment of the summaries of Israel's story in the NT.[21] Even though we are in substantial agreement on the criteria, we come to slightly different conclusions about which texts should be included as retellings of the biblical story, so this approach is still open to methodological criticism.[22]

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[19] Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 181.

[20] Jason B. Hood and Matthew Y. Emerson, "Summaries of Israel's Story: Reviewing a Compositional Category," *CurBR* 11 (2013): 328–48. They are drawing especially on the work of Ethelbert Stauffer, *New Testament Theology*, trans. John Marsh (London: SCM, 1955).

[21] Chris Bruno, Jared Compton, and Kevin McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles: How the Earliest Christians Told the Story of Israel*, NSBT 52 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020). Unfortunately, this book was released after this article was submitted, so my interactions with it are limited to citations.

[22] Hood and Emerson's list includes the following texts as summaries of Israel's story: Exod 15; Lev 26:4–11; Deut 26:5a–10a, 29, 32; Josh 23:2–4; 24; Pss 78, 105, 106, 135, 136; 1 Sam 12:7–15; 1 Kings 8; 1 Chron 1–9; Isa 5:1–7; Jer 2:2–9; Ezek 16, 20, 23; Dan 9:1–27; Ezra 5:11–17; Neh 9; Hab 3:1–16; Matt 1:1–17; Mark 12:1–12 (Matt 21:33–46; Luke 20:9–18); Acts 7, 13:16–41; Rom 9–11; Heb 11:1–12:2; Rev 12:1–12. Bruno, Compton, and McFadden limit their analysis to the NT and include the following texts: Matt 1:1–17; 21:33–46; Acts 7, 13:16–41; Rom 9–11; Gal 3–4; Heb 11. The list by Bruno, Compton, and McFadden helpfully includes genres, such as genealogy and parable, that are beyond the

Space constraints prohibit a detailed analysis of even one of these canonical retellings of the biblical story; nevertheless, an overview of four representative texts (Deut 32; Ps 78; Acts 7; Heb 11) will alert us to some of the characteristics and emphases of these retellings within the Bible. These texts include the longest song in the OT (outside of the psalms), the longest historical psalm (and second longest overall), the longest speech in Acts, and the only undisputable retelling of the biblical storyline in the Epistles. While primarily looking at these four texts, I will also interact with several others: Deuteronomy 29, Joshua 24, 1 Samuel 12, Nehemiah 9, Psalms 105, 106, 135, 136, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 20, Acts 13, and Romans 9.[23] A concluding section will offer some synthesis of the themes and intentions that these texts share.

II. ANALYZING REPRESENTATIVE TEXTS

1. *Deuteronomy 32*. Deuteronomy and thus the Pentateuch concludes with the renewal of the covenant (chap. 29), recounting of blessings and curses of the covenant (chap. 30), Moses's address to the people (chap. 31), the Song of Moses (chap. 32), Moses's blessing of the people (chap. 33), and the account of Moses's death (chap. 34).[24] As they prepare for the conquest of the land and leadership transition, Moses predicts that the people will enjoy the land and tragically despise YHWH, who has given them the land (chap. 31). And then Deuteronomy 32 contains the Song of Moses, which was given to Moses by YHWH. The Song functions as a testimony against the people, by recounting and predicting YHWH's faithfulness and the people's faithlessness.[25] The purposes of the Song are indicated in its open-

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scope of what can be done in an article. Also see the list in Michael B. Shepherd, *The Textual World of the Bible*, StBibLit 156 (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 2.

[23] Some will argue that additional texts fit my criteria of deliberate and extended retellings of the biblical storyline. While I cannot comment on all biblical texts that evidence some intentional retelling (Stauffer, for example, locates 121 such texts), I will note that I omit the genealogy in Matthew 1 because it is more a list than a retelling. Citing examples of Israel's history differs from retelling the story.

[24] This section serves as a concluding frame that parallels Deuteronomy 1–3. "But whereas the primary focus of chapters 1–3 is on the past, chapters 31–34 look to the distant future through the song (32:1–43) and blessing (33:1–29) of Moses. The book concludes with a moving account of the death of Moses (34:1–12)" (Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 5 [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011; cf. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 294).

[25] Many scholars influenced especially by Ernest G. Wright ("The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962], 26–67; contra Matthew Thiessen, "The Form and Function of the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:1–43)," *JBL* 123 [2004]: 401–24) have seen covenantal and kingly elements even in the way this complaint is structured. Merrill, for example, comments, "Scholars are in general agreement that the song of Moses is in the form of a *rîb*, that is, a 'lawsuit' address in which the Lord outlined the controversy he had entered into with Israel because of Israel's covenant disloyalty" (Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC 4 [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994], 409; cf. J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, ApOTC 5 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002], 450–52; Woods, *Deuteronomy*, 308–309, 316–17; Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, AOTC [Nashville: Abingdon, 2001], 277; Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 297–98)

ing and the subsequent section. By retelling YHWH's faithfulness, the Song calls the people to praise him (32:3, 7) and to obey the law (vv. 46–47).[26]

In the opening verses, the heavens are called to witness against Israel as God's goodness and faithfulness are proclaimed (32:1–4).[27] In verses 5–6, the object of their witness becomes the faithlessness of the people. Despite YHWH's special choice of and provision for his people, they have chosen another way. Israel's response to his gracious provisions was to forsake God and engage in idolatry (vv. 15–18).[28] YHWH's response is to hide his face from them. As they have made him jealous with their idols, he will make them jealous by another nation. YHWH's judgment results in calamity (vv. 19–25). Nevertheless, verses 26–38 describe YHWH's reasoning for not abandoning Israel completely; it is in order to vindicate his own name. As the Song started by calling the heavens to witness the declaration of God's greatness, so it concludes by calling the heavens to rejoice in his judgment and deliverance (vv. 39–43). YHWH will judge and defeat all those who oppose him, and he will cleanse the land and people.

The broader context of this passage, especially beginning in Deuteronomy 29, involves the theme of covenant renewal. Even though the term "covenant" is absent from Deuteronomy 32, it is prominent in Deuteronomy 31 and the book as a whole. YHWH's faithfulness to the covenant is recounted and predicted even as Israel's faithlessness to the covenant is likewise recounted and predicted. This covenantal theme is expressed even in the way Israel is described as YHWH's chosen people, his sons and daughters (32:5, 19, 20, 43). The twin themes of judgment of enemies and salvation of God's people are made explicit in the ending. Land is also an important theme as YHWH gives Israel the inheritance of the land, and then again will cleanse the land from their idolatries. Further, this is the final speech of Moses as the people are about to begin the conquest of the land.[29]

2. *Psalm 78*. Psalm 78 is an exhortation to proclaim the mighty acts of YHWH and his law from one generation to the next, and it achieves this by rehearsing the biblical story. Daniel Estes comments on the purpose of the psalm, "Through its long exposition of Israel's history of unfaithfulness to the Lord, Psalm 78 challenges the nation to learn from the past failures of its ancestors. The nation must heed

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[26] Craigie comments, "The song was not only a song of witness for the present, but one that would continue to be sung in the future, thus bearing a continuing witness of the covenant commitment and reminding the people of the implications of a breach of the covenant" (Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 374).

[27] For the function of the term "rock" as an address for God, see Michael P. Knowles, "'The Rock, His Work is Perfect': Unusual Imagery for God in Deuteronomy XXXII," *VT* 39 (1989): 307–22.

[28] The contrast between YHWH's faithfulness and Israel's faithlessness is emphasized through the structure, as Merrill notes: "The Lord's gracious goodness notwithstanding, Israel had rebelled against him at every turn and had trampled his covenant underfoot. The arrangement of the text makes this crystal clear by matching every beneficence of the Lord by a corresponding negative response by Israel" (*Deuteronomy*, 416).

[29] Hamilton comments, "The death of Moses functions as a seal on all that he has announced to Israel. Yahweh will keep his word and Moses's own death outside the land is proof of it. Israel is to understand that Moses died outside the land because he did not believe Yahweh's word and treat Yahweh as holy, and they should learn from his death. Their salvation is to come through the judgment that falls on Moses" (*God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 132).

the lessons of its history and learn to be faithful to the Lord."[30] Psalm 78 recounts an extensive number of events surrounding the exodus and conquest and demonstrates strong literary ties to the Pentateuch.[31]

The psalm begins with a wisdom-like exhortation not to forget the faithful works of YHWH and his gracious law, but rather for one generation to recount them to another (78:1–8). The central problem is stated explicitly in verses 9–11: they did not remember God's deeds nor keep God's covenant and law. The psalmist then backs up to recount the faithlessness of the wilderness generation despite God's mighty works (78:12–41). There is a pattern of the people responding to God's goodness with unbelief (78:32). And there is another pattern of God's judgment prompting their explicit repentance even while they continue to act unfaithfully (79:34–37). The psalmist backs up again in verses 42–53 to recount the miracles of the exodus which the wilderness generation had forgotten. The narrative then resumes the conquest and settlement of the land (78:54–64). The cycle of Israel's faithlessness recurs in the land, particularly expressed in their idolatry. Verse 65 signals a new sequence of events in the psalm as YHWH reengages with his people and delivers them from their enemies (78:65–66). The exclamation point rests on YHWH's choosing of David and Zion. God's covenant promises to Abraham are focused now on the person of David and the place of Zion.

The psalm begins with the explicit purpose of declaring YHWH's good and faithful deeds for his people, and it concludes with his faithfulness expressed in choosing a particular servant, David. Thus, Beth Tanner comments, "It is shaped in a particular way to teach a particular lesson: that of the cost of disobedience to the Lord and what that faithlessness has cost Israel."[32] Despite YHWH's faithful deeds in the exodus, wilderness, conquest, and settlement of the land, the people repeatedly doubt, complain, forget, and engage in idolatry. The psalm concludes with the declaration that David responds to YHWH's deeds in faithfulness and care for the people. While kingship language is not pervasive in the psalm, the psalm concludes with the emphasis on David and Zion. The whole story of Israel, with its failures, is

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[30] Daniel J. Estes, *Psalms 73–150*, NAC 31 (Nashville: B&H, 2019) 72; cf. 89–90. Cf. Shepherd, *The Textual World of the Bible*, 48; cf. John Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, Baker Commentary on the OT Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 479–82.

For the communal setting, see Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, WBC 20 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 286–87; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II, 51–100*, AB 17 (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 238.

[31] On this point, see the excellent analysis by Shepherd, *The Textual World of the Bible*, 48–52. Estes comments, "Psalm 78 is a historical recital that parallels Deuteronomy 32 in its form and in some of its language" (*Psalms 73–150*, 72). Commenting on Deuteronomy 32, McConville remarks, "There are also similarities with several Psalms, including 50, 78, 95 and 105–106. Of these, the most interesting analogy is with Ps. 78, with which it shares not only a similar opening, but also the theme of the people's chronic unfaithfulness to faithful Yahweh, and the name 'Most High' (Elyon) for God, as well as the metaphor of the 'Rock' (Ps 78:35)" (McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 452). For more on the literary ties of Psalm 78 on preceding biblical texts, see Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 286–87; Jeffery M. Leonard, "Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions: Psalm 78 as a Test Case," *JBL* 127 (2008): 241–65.

[32] Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 617.

retold in order to emphasize YHWH's unique selection of and purpose for the Davidic king.[33] With the Davidic covenant undergirding the psalm, the theme of the people's disobedience to the Mosaic covenant is recounted throughout.[34] YHWH's covenant faithfulness starkly contrasts the people's faithlessness. Thus, another thematic undercurrent is the significance of the land as a fulfillment of YHWH's promises (78:54, 68) despite the people's faithlessness in the land.

3. *Acts 7*. The occasion for Stephen's biblical theological exercise is to defend himself against the claim that he has spoken against God, Moses, the temple, and the law (Acts 6:11–14).[35] Stephen's response, while partly addressing these accusations, primarily serves as an indictment against his opponents for continuing in the line of those who reject God's plan and ultimately his King. Stephen explains that the promises of God in the Messiah Jesus are not tied to a particular land. This explanation of God working outside the land is especially important in the program of Acts, in which Stephen's martyrdom is the impetus to send the church beyond Jerusalem.[36]

Stephen's defense traces the promises of God from Abraham to Solomon and shows God's faithfulness to his promises of inheritance while also explaining that God cannot be contained in a physical house. Beginning with Abraham, Stephen cites Genesis 12 and evokes the covenantal promises relating to the land and the covenantal sign of circumcision (Acts 7:2–8). When Stephen turns to the stories of Joseph and Jacob (vv. 9–16), he seeks to explain how God's faithfulness is expressed even in their departure from the land. The retelling of Moses's story occupies the bulk of Stephen's speech (vv. 17–43) and includes a range of topics.[37] Stephen's speech focuses on the goodness and faithfulness of God in providing for his people while verses 39–43 describe the rebellious idolatry of the people in the wilderness. Most of the particularly Jewish elements are spoken of highly with the

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[33] The issue of the divided kingdom is explicit at the beginning and end of the psalm.

[34] Samuel Terrien, for example, argues that verse 37, which describes the people's unfaithfulness to the Mosaic covenant is the key to understanding the whole psalm (*The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*, ECC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 569).

[35] Eckhard Schnabel summarizes Stephen's message: "Luke narrates Stephen's defense and proclamation with a threefold focus: the story of Israel is a story of God's raising up leaders of his people whom Israel repeatedly failed to recognize; God has fulfilled his promises to the fathers as he gave them the land and the law and eventually the temple, but Israel repeatedly turned away from God to idolatry and did not realize that God cannot be contained in a temple built by human beings; Israel's behavior in the past and the behavior of Jewish leaders in the present demonstrates their need of salvation" (*Acts*, ZECNT [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 355). Michael Shepherd has convincingly demonstrated that Stephen is not merely drawing on the history of Israel, but he is exegeting the biblical text, possibly even modeling his structure after texts like Nehemiah 9 and Psalm 105 (*The Textual World of the Bible*, 84; cf. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 276; Schnabel, *Acts*, 362. David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 270–75).

[36] Schnabel, *Acts*, 354; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 1229–32; Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 237.

[37] The topics include the oppression by Pharaoh, the miraculous preservation of Moses, Moses's exile from Egypt, the burning bush, the exodus, the leadership struggles with Moses, Moses's prediction of a prophet like him (Acts 7:37; cf. Deut 18:15), the giving of the law, and Israel's idolatry. In answer to their accusations, Stephen also addresses the tabernacle and the temple (Acts 7:44–50).

exception of the temple that through a quotation of Isaiah 66 is explained to be incapable of housing God.[38] By retelling Israel's history with a focus on Abraham and the patriarchs, Moses and the exodus, and Solomon and the temple, Stephen is interpreting Israel's history in terms of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants. Thus, the New Covenant may also be assumed as the fulfillment of all God's promises. This conclusion assumes the rebellious history of God's people in the land as they persecute the prophets (Acts 7:52). The history of Israel's rebellion is applied to the listeners as being in the line of those who have rejected God and his ways (vv. 51–53). Bruno, Compton, and McFadden summarize the speech, "In short, Stephen reads (and preaches) the OT as a story of the covenant faithfulness of Israel's God in the face of the people's continuing rebellion."[39]

The themes that predominate this speech are people (God's covenant with them and their faithlessness), place (God's special presence), and repeated idolatry and rejection. Stephen presents Israel's leaders as faithful without mentioning their missteps (with the exception of Aaron in 7:40–41), while the people are faithless (7:9, 19, 27–28, 35, 39–41, 51–53). Emphasis is placed on the Abrahamic covenant with its land promises, while the Davidic covenant is only in the background. The law, God's "living oracles" (7:38), is presented positively because it and Moses point to Christ, especially in Deuteronomy 18:15–18 (cf. Acts 7:37), in which it is foretold that God will raise up a prophet like Moses. The description of God's promises of land conclude with the declaration of God's universal rule: "Heaven is my throne." There is only one King, and he is extending his rule over all the earth.[40] Thus, kingdom is an important theme as it relates to land and God's rule extending over all the earth through the missionary program described in the rest of the book of Acts. The overriding message communicates that Stephen's hearers are like their ancestors who reject God's faithfulness by persecuting the prophets and ultimately killing the Prophet.

4. *Hebrews 11.* Hebrews 11, which many consider to be sermonic in its approach, stands out in the Epistles as an extended retelling of the biblical storyline. One unique feature of Hebrews 11 is the scope of the storyline that begins with creation (v. 3) and extends to the future resurrection (vv. 39–40).[41] Again, this is not a disinterested retelling, as the author intends to retell biblical examples of faith

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[38] See C. K. Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1994), 338; cf. W. Gil Shin, "Integrated Stories and Israel's Contested Worship Space: Exod 15.17 and Stephen's Retelling of *Heilsgeschichte* (Acts 7)," *NTS* 64 (2018): 495–513.

[39] Bruno, Compton, McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles*, 65.

[40] Israel's kings are barely mentioned and are referenced only to explain the transition from the tabernacle to temple. The minimization of the kings is probably occasioned by the circumstances in which there was no current king in Israel and thus it was not an accusation against Stephen.

[41] For a comparison between Hebrews and other lists of OT examples in Jewish and Christian literature, see Michael R. Cosby, *The Rhetorical Composition and Function of Hebrews 11: In Light of Example Lists in Antiquity* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988); Cosby, "The Rhetorical Composition of Hebrews 11," *JBL* 107 (1988): 257–73; Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 311–14; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, WBC 47B (Dallas: Word, 1991), 317–20; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 560–61.

in order to exhort the contemporary readers to express persevering faith.[42] Both the preceding (10:32–39) and the following sections (12:1–2) exhort the readers to enduring faith, as they have been warned about unbelief. The author is assured that the recipients will persevere in their faith (Heb 11:39), in contrast to the faithless generation in the wilderness in Hebrews 3.[43] Chapter 11 rehearses examples of those who expressed faith and hope while not receiving the final reward. In light of these examples of faith, the readers are exhorted to persevere in their faith in Christ by following the example of Christ who endured suffering before glory (12:1–2).

The thematic structure of chapter 11 is well recognized as a chronological retelling of the Old Testament that progresses through periods of biblical history. The author begins with creation that is understood by faith to be the work of God (vv. 1–3), and then moves on to pre-Flood examples of faith (vv. 4–7), and then to the patriarchs. The focus of Abraham's faith is the land as an inheritance, and the focus of Sarah's faith is to bear a child (vv. 8–12). Verses 13–16 provide an interlude in which the author summarizes these people as examples of faith while not receiving the promise. Their homeland is in heaven, and so they are exiles on earth. Thus, even the land promise to Abraham is viewed eschatologically as ultimately pointing to heaven. Moses demonstrates faith by rejecting Egypt and its wealth as his homeland (vv. 23–28). So also, the exodus and conquest of the Promised Land are expressions of faith (vv. 29–31). Verses 32–38 provide additional examples of faith including the judges, David the king, the prophets, and others. Many of these faithful people had no place on earth, and all of them expressed faith while waiting for their ultimate reward. The book as a whole has been pointing toward that ultimate fulfillment of God's promises being the preeminent revelation of God in his Son, who is King and Priest; thus, Christian faith is focused on Jesus (12:2).

Hebrews 11 is distinct among these biblical retellings in that it focuses on the human response to God and also is an entirely positive retelling of the faithfulness of God's people, even omitting the wilderness generation that was prominent earlier in the epistle. Perhaps because the wilderness generation was the archetype of unbelief, even faithful characters like Joshua and Caleb are omitted from Hebrews 11.[44] An undergirding theme of Hebrews 11 is that present faith is sustained in the future hope of God's dwelling place.[45] Even the land promises to Abraham are

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[42] Cf. Gareth Lee Cockerill, "The Better Resurrection (Heb. 11:35): A Key to the Structural and Rhetorical Purpose of Hebrews 11," *TynBul* 51 (2000): 215–34; Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 514–15; Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 312–14, 394–95; David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, NAC 35 (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 567–68; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 337–38.

[43] Cockerill argues for a chiastic structure to the epistle that contrasts Hebrews 11 with 3:7–19 (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 515); cf. Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 563.

[44] It should be noted that Joshua is mentioned earlier in the epistle, but the argument primarily intends to show how Jesus is better than Joshua in bringing final rest for his people (Heb 4:8).

[45] The land theme is evident in the following descriptions: universe (3), land of promise (9), future city built by God (10), strangers and exiles on earth (13), seeking a homeland (14), desiring a heavenly country (16), God prepared a city for them (16), Joseph's bones removed from the place of bondage (22), exodus and conquest (23–31), choosing captivity to be faithful to God (35), the world not being worthy of the faithful (38), wandering about the earth (38), and these all were looking forward to the

defined in future eschatological terms. Because Hebrews as a whole is making arguments about the covenants, covenants also play a background role in this chapter. The Abrahamic promises of land and people are prominent, even though they are read in light of the new creational promises of the New Covenant. Hebrews argues that the kingdom has come (12:28), but in the retelling of the biblical storyline in Hebrews 11, kingdom does not have the same explicit prominence.[46] Most prominent are the twin themes of hope-filled faith and a promise-keeping God.

III. SYNTHESIZING THE DATA

Having surveyed the approaches that these texts take to retelling the biblical storyline, we can make observations about themes that are typically present in these authors' understanding of the biblical story. Some of the emphases are determined by the situation that gave rise to the retelling, but the diversity of contexts makes any consistent themes all the more significant. Moreover, we can make some comparisons between the significant themes of these texts and the current proposals for the central theme of the Bible as a whole.

1. *Synthesis of themes.* The first observation is that all of these texts address the gathered community. Rather than arising from situations such as interpersonal dialogue, the situations that give rise to these retellings are situations in which the gathered community of God's people (or its representatives) is present.[47] The contexts range from leadership transitions (Deut 32; Josh 24; 1 Sam 12), to corporate worship (Pss 78, 105, 106, 135, 136), to covenant renewal or remembrance (Deut 29 and 32; Josh 24; Neh 9), to public indictment (Jer 2; Ezek 20; Acts 7), to an explanation or exhortation to the church (Rom 9; Heb 11). Several of these texts are prophetic speeches that humans deliver to God's people on behalf of God (Deut 32; Josh 24; Jer 2; Ezek 16 and 20) while others are delivered by leaders such as Samuel (1 Sam 12), the Levites (Neh 9), Stephen (Acts 7), and Paul (Acts 13).

These texts tend to have two primary outlooks. Some texts focus on the faithfulness of God with the resulting exhortation to praise, thank, or obey. Other texts focus on the faithlessness of God's people with the exhortation to repent, obey, or believe. These polarizing outlooks (focusing on God's faithfulness or the people's faithlessness) are illustrated well by Psalms 105 and 106. Psalm 105 is an altogether positive retelling of God's faithfulness to his covenant people, and then it is followed by Psalm 106, which praises God for his steadfast love to a faithless people. The psalmist confesses the repeated sins of Israel and requests God's salvation. Flowing from those twin themes of God's faithfulness and the people's faithless-

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better thing/place that God had provided for them. Schreiner comments on the theme of land, "The author of Hebrews understands the land promises of the OT typologically. The rest in the land granted to Israel under Joshua points to a greater rest, a heavenly rest, a Sabbath rest, which will be enjoyed by the people of God. Believers, like the patriarchs, are exiles on earth (11:13–16). They are looking forward to a homeland in the future, a better country, and a heavenly city" (*The King in His Beauty*, 595).

[46] See especially, Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, 583–596.

[47] An accusation could be made that the criteria for the selection of these texts predispose the audience.

ness, these texts tend toward a less nuanced presentation of history. When they focus on God, they are altogether positive (and understandably so). When they focus on the people's response, they tend to be very negative, even though particular heroes such as Abraham, Moses, and David are not criticized. The wilderness generation is a recurring example of faithlessness in the face of God's faithful provisions—the faithfulness of Joshua and Caleb is omitted. Connected with the negative portrayal of the people is their covenant faithlessness expressed in idolatry (e.g., Deut 29 and 32; Josh 24; 1 Sam 12; Jer 2; Ezek 20; Pss 78, 136, 135; Acts 7). Hebrews 11, of course, is the remarkable exception to this pattern, and it should be noted again that Hebrews 11 omits the wilderness generation, which is the archetype of faithlessness.

Lastly, these texts commonly praise God for providing the good land and his good law. The land theme tends to be more about God's promised inheritance and provision than it is about his presence.[48] This is explained in large part by observing that these narratives often retell the stories of the patriarchs and the wanderings in the wilderness outside the land, and it is recognized that God is working among his people even in a foreign land—that is, God is present with his people even outside the land. God's faithfulness and goodness are evidenced by bringing his people into a good land; and this, in turn, heightens the contrast with the faithlessness of the people in despising God in his good land. In fact, the discussion about land often gives rise to these retellings: Deuteronomy 29 and 32 prepare for the entrance into the land; Joshua 24 is after the conquest; Jeremiah 2 and Ezekiel 20 directly precede the exile; Psalm 78 promises that God will cleanse the land; Psalm 106 expresses the desire for God to gather his people from exile; Nehemiah 9 deals with the resettlement of the land; Acts 7 is Stephen's defense about the temple; and the faithful in Hebrews 11 are all seeking a homeland beyond this earth.[49] The law, when it is mentioned, is portrayed as God's good and gracious gift (Deut 29, 32; Ezek 20; Pss 78, 105; Acts 7; Rom 9). Acts 7, for example, argues that if Stephen's accusers had really understood the law, they would see that it points to Christ. Instead, they rejected Christ as they had even Moses. Even in a text like Hebrews 11, where the surrounding argument details the limitations and nullification of the law, the law is presented positively within Hebrews 11. However, in these retellings, God's salvation in the exodus and the people's faithlessness in the wilderness are themes that are far more prominent than the law itself.[50] It is probably correct to understand the provision of land and law as particular expressions of the larger category of God's covenant faithfulness.

2. *Application to current methodologies*. This analysis provides some data points in understanding what is central to the minds of the biblical authors when they do biblical theology. Taking an approach similar to that of this article, Bruno, Comp-

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[48] The one exception might be Psalm 78 that describes how God departs from Shiloh (v. 60) and then dwells with his king in Zion (v. 69).

[49] The importance of the theme of land is described at more length in T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2008).

[50] See Shepherd, *The Textual World of the Bible*, 71.

ton, and McFadden argue that the way we summarize and retell the biblical story should conform to the way that the biblical authors themselves tell the story: "If the SIS [summaries of Israel's story] in the NT are inspired examples of biblical theology, then they provide a kind of biblical-theological 'rule of faith' that should shape our own retellings of Israel's story."[51] While recognizing that the texts analyzed in this article are only a small subset of the biblical canon, we can still ask if the previously proposed "central themes" appropriately summarize these texts. The theme of *God's glory* has the advantage of being all-encompassing, but the disadvantage of not being specific. Several of these texts begin with an explicit call to praise God (Pss 78, 105, 106). Others emphasize that God's covenant faithfulness was for the sake of his own name (Deut 29:6; 32:27, 30, 39; Ezek 20:9). But the theme of the glory of God does not help one summarize the content or intent of any of these retellings beyond merely noting that they are God-oriented. One of the strengths of Hamilton's scheme of God's glory in salvation through judgment is that it expresses both the goal (God's glorification) and the active means of enacting that goal (God's faithful salvation and God's judgment of faithlessness).

The proposal of *God's presence* as the center of the Bible finds support in the texts we have analyzed. The repeated theme of land is most closely connected to God's presence, although these texts tend to place the emphasis on the land as God's good provision more than on his presence, since several of these texts communicate that God is actively present with his people even outside the land. Even so, the texts that have a negative tone do not have the presence of God as their primary focus. Compared with biblical texts like Revelation 21–22 that focus on the theme of God dwelling with his people, none of these retellings makes God's presence the explicit central theme. Hebrews 11 keeps pointing to the future dwelling of God's presence with his people, but the focus is on how that future hope impels present faithfulness.

Keeping in mind that the theme of *messiah* is clarified as the biblical storyline unfolds, we can look at precursors to the messiah theme in earlier texts. For example, 1 Samuel 12 rebukes the people for a rejection of God as King that when read canonically, helps point to the establishment of the King. Certainly, the theme of messiah is central to texts like Acts 7 and 13, but it is not as central in Hebrews 11, even while messiah is one of the central themes of Hebrews as a whole. And while Psalms 78, 105, and 106 have the Davidic king as a focus, the same cannot be said of Psalms 135 and 136. While one could make a strong case that the arc and aim of Scripture is to present God's saving King, that is not the consistent or primary focus of these retellings.

Kingdom, like the theme of glory, is an expansive and flexible concept. As a metaphor, kingdom includes elements such as king, people, and land, and the way that these relationships are understood in the Bible is through a series of cove-

[51] Bruno, Compton, and McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles*, 183.

nants.[52] First Samuel 12 and Ezekiel 20 make the claim that God intends to reign over his people, and Psalms 78, 105, and 106 clarify that God establishes his Davidic king. Hebrews 11 calls the people to faith in the Davidic King / Son (cf. Hebrews 1), and the expression of faith is to seek a homeland beyond this world, a heavenly city. Moreover, the repeated covenantal context of these retellings can be understood as an expression of God as the great King. But while the theme of king or kingdom might undergird some of these texts, it is not the explicit metaphor or image that predominates throughout any one of the texts.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The methodology of this article has been to select a small subset of texts (in which the biblical authors retell the biblical storyline) to analyze whether they evidence consistent or central theme(s). The value of this approach has been to discover what is explicitly central in the minds of the biblical authors as they summarize the Bible. On the other hand, a limitation of this approach is that all retellings of the Bible within the Bible are contextual; that is, the biblical authors are retelling the Bible with particular purposes arising from their own situations. While great variation exists in the contexts that give rise to the retellings, there are some consistent patterns with both the audiences and purposes of the retellings. The audiences are the gathered community of God's people (or its representatives), and one consistent purpose is to call for faith-filled response. If we ask, "What situations give rise to retelling the Bible?" then the answer is varied. But if we instead ask, "What do the biblical authors intend to accomplish by retelling the Bible?" then the answer consistently is to call God's people to faith in its various expressions. This relationship between the situation prompting the retelling and the content of the retelling demands further inquiry. But it is at least valuable to note that the biblical authors do biblical theology in order to call God's people to faith.

But is this the central theme or one of the central themes that frames the whole Bible? One way to understand the center of biblical theology is to envision a wagon wheel with all the spokes connected to a central idea. Many scholars have come to admit that if a single theme forms the center of the wheel, it must be too flexible to provide a valuable structure to the whole. Duvall and Hays propose another image, the spider web, which might better account for the diversity of themes in the Bible while also illustrating their connectivity.[53] The spider web analogy

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[52] Köstenberger, in discussing the multiple integrative motifs that comprise the center of the NT, argues that kingdom is not a governing NT idea, "But for the search for integrative motifs in the NT to be successful, the following criteria must be applied. First, an integrative motif must be found in all major NT corpora, the Synoptics as well as John, Paul as well as the General Epistles. This, for example, would rule out the kingdom of God, which is found in the Synoptics and Paul but not in John (with one or two exceptions)" ("Diversity and Unity in the New Testament," 154).

[53] "The major themes of biblical theology would be like the main threads in the web, connected in one way or another to the center, but not always directly (some go radially and some go in concurrent circles). In the wheel analogy, everything must connect directly to the hub of the wheel, which can result, theologically speaking, in forcing an artificial orderliness onto the diversity of the Bible. The center of a web, on the other hand, conveys a sense of interconnectedness that still allows for canonical flexibility.

acknowledges that some themes may be more central even while there may be a multi-plex of interconnected themes.[54] If these retellings of the biblical story evidence a centralizing theme, it will be more akin to the connectivity of the spider web that than the wagon wheel. Within the biblical canon, this strand of God's faithfulness calling for faith is certainly connected to other central themes. God is faithful to his covenant. God's faithfulness is expressed preeminently in his messiah. And the call for people to believe and worship has as its ultimate end the glorification of God. In this analysis, we have not uncovered one theme that explicitly governs the way each of these biblical authors retell the Bible. Even if this search for the center of biblical theology has been unsuccessful, it has not been unfruitful. It has uncovered themes that are significant for the biblical authors when they express what the Bible is about. Their emphases, in turn, serve as a compass and corrective as we seek to navigate the whole Bible.[55]

All of the central themes and subthemes in biblical theology would ultimately depend on the center for structural integrity and cohesion, even while the specific manner of interconnection, both historically and theologically, can be complex" (Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, 4–5).

[54] Citing his agreement with Gerhard Maier and D. A. Carson, Andreas Köstenberger concludes, "We concur therefore that the search for a single center of the NT should be abandoned. It seems more promising to search for a plurality of integrative NT motifs" ("Diversity and Unity in the New Testament," 154).

[55] I am thankful to several of my colleagues at Cedarville University who read and commented on an earlier draft of this article. They embody fellowship centered on the text.