

John Webster, 'Biblical Reasoning' | A Brief Reader's Guide

As I've re-read this essay, I've realized that although it is brilliant, it is difficult, and extremely dense—it contains more than enough material for a whole book...For you, this may be ☺ or it may be ☹. Either response is fine...

I apologise for picking something so hard for our first session. If you're finding it heavy-going, it's entirely my fault, not yours. Please don't be discouraged—do the best you can and come armed with questions!

I've put together a summary of the essay, a list of definitions of difficult terms, and some questions that might help focus your attention. I hope that what follows will guide you through the thickets and help you at least grasp the main points Webster's making. **Even if you struggle with / skim the rest of the essay, please pay careful attention to section V.**

A. Structure & Summary

It's helpful to keep in mind the structure of what Webster is doing. At a high level it's pretty simple. Each numbered section has one main point.

I. Introduction/Overview of the question: **Christian theology is biblical reasoning.** In summary, what does it mean to say theology is 'biblical reasoning'? Webster will consider both terms in turn: 'biblical' (section III) and 'reasoning' (section IV), before considering theology as biblical reasoning (section V). But first he turns to...

II. The 'Divine Economy' is the setting for Scripture, reason and theology. This orderly reality—creation, fall, redemption and revelation, all grounded in God's own perfect life and works—is the setting within which theology does its work.

III. Holy Scripture is the 'embassy' of God's revelation of himself to creatures within the divine economy.

IV. Human reason and its work must be understood as created, fallen and redeemed.

V. Christian theology is biblical reasoning—the use of reason to grasp God's voice in Scripture so that we may know him. Webster distinguishes two main kinds of biblical reasoning: exegetical reasoning and dogmatic reasoning.

VI. Conclusion. In the light of what Webster has said, good theology requires us to kill sin and flee idols in order to know and love God.

B. Some Definitions

- **'ontology'** (p. 115)—an account of what a thing *is*, its nature or essence.
- **'teleology'** (p. 115)—an account of the purpose, goal, or end of something—what is it *for*?

- **'God's act of dispensatio'** (p. 115)—(Latin): how God arranges ('dispenses') created reality. A synonym for 'economy'.
- **'divine economy'** (p. 115)—from the Greek *oikonomia* (household management). God's household management of all of reality.
 - Note that Webster uses 'economy' to mean two things (p. 115):
 - a. What God does in his acts of creation, redemption and perfection of creatures.
 - b. The result of this—the God-determined 'order of reality' within which we live and act.
- The **'immanent perfection of the Holy Trinity'** (p. 117) God's perfect life in himself
- **'opera Dei externae'** (p. 117)—(Latin): the external works of God. This refers to what God does 'outside' himself in creating, governing, redeeming and perfecting creation.
- **'opera Dei ad intra'** (p. 117)—(Latin): the internal works of God. This refers to the eternal relations of the three Persons of the Trinity—the Father begetting the Son, the Father and the Son breathing forth the Spirit.
- **'divine aseity'** (p. 117)—God's life in and from himself—the truth that, in order to be fully and perfectly what he is, God needs nothing and no one outside himself.
- The **'principles' of theology** (pp. 128-29). In classical philosophy and theology, a principle [Latin: *principium*] is the foundation from which something proceeds.
 - An **ontological principle** is the foundation through which something *is*. How can knowledge of God (theology) even exist? Only because of God—because he exists and because he knows himself perfectly and therefore also knows all other things perfectly in relation to himself.
 - A **cognitive principle** is the foundation through which something is *known*. How can *we* know God? Through the Bible, because this is where God has revealed himself. Scripture is therefore the cognitive principle of theology.¹

¹ As Webster elaborates in a different essay, the cognitive principle of theology can be further divided into two. The external cognitive principal (*principium cognoscendi externum*), also known as the objective cognitive principle, is Holy Scripture. The internal cognitive principle (*principium cognoscendi internum*), also known as the subjective cognitive principle, is the Christian's redeemed intellect, renewed and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. See John Webster, 'Principles of Systematic Theology', in *The Domain of the Word* (Continuum, 2012), 131-49.

This gives us a slightly fuller set of distinctions. The *ontological* principle of theology is God and God's self-knowledge. God's perfect self-knowledge is sometimes also known as archetypal theology. In contrast to archetypal theology, but totally dependent on it, is ectypal theology. This is the knowledge of God that is possible for rational creatures (like us!). Ectypal theology is founded on archetypal theology (God is the source of all knowledge and wisdom), and on his free decision to reveal himself to us through the God-given external/objective cognitive principle (Scripture) as received by the God-given internal cognitive principle (our redeemed intelligence).

- **'*sacra scriptura locuta, res decida est*'** (p. 122)—(Latin): Holy Scripture has spoken, the issue is decided.
- **'*viva vox Dei*'** (p. 130)—(Latin): the living voice of God

C. Some Questions to Guide Your Reading

Please come with your own questions and thoughts. But if you need a bit of help, here are some questions it might be helpful to ponder:

Section I

- According to Webster, what is theology? What is it for? How does it relate to God, reason and Scripture?

Section II

- What are the main points Webster makes in describing the divine economy? What are the main 'moments' in his description?

Section III

- According to Webster, what is Holy Scripture? How does it relate to God? What is Scripture *for*?

Section IV

- What are the main points Webster wants to make about reason? What are the main errors he wants to avoid? How does reason relate to the divine economy?

Section V

- In speaking of biblical reasoning Webster distinguishes two main kinds: exegetical reasoning and dogmatic reasoning. What is exegetical reasoning? What is dogmatic reasoning? Why are both important? How do they relate to Scripture? How do they relate to one another?

Section VI

- What is required of us if we are to be good theologians?