
The discipline of New Testament studies can boast of having perhaps more scholars than any other single field of study, religious or secular, and few writers have made the type of impact on New Testament studies as I. Howard Marshall. Marshall, Honorary Research Professor of New Testament at the University of Aberdeen, has written numerous books, including *Exploring the New Testament, Beyond the Bible*, and commentaries on Luke, Acts, 1-2 Thessalonians, the Pastoral Epistles, 1 Peter, and 1-3 John. His most recent book, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*, is the culmination of a lifetime of scholarship on the New Testament. Though the work itself is comprehensive, this review will focus only on John through the conclusion (491-730), though it will be done in the context of the aims set forth in the preface (9-10) and the methodological discussion of chapter one (17-50).

**Summary**

Marshall aims in the work to “provide a guide to the theology of the New Testament that will be at a level and of a length suitable for use by students but will also be of use to all who are interested in the subject” (9). Since there are many ways to organize such a work, Marshall establishes immediately that he intends to “let each of the individual books of the New Testament speak for themselves and then to attempt some kind of synthesis of their teaching” (9). Marshall begins chapter one with a discussion about the “legitimacy and possibility of the enterprise” (17). He highlights four arguments by Heikki Räisänen that New Testament theology cannot and should not be done. Marshall then follows by arguing against each of Räisänen’s conclusions. Marshall next defines the aim of New Testament theology so that he can discuss how to approach the task: “the aim of students of New Testament theology is to explore the New
Testament writers’ developing understanding of God and the world, more particularly the world of people and their relationship to one another” (23). In the rest of chapter one, Marshall outlines other issues involved in the methodological task of New Testament theology. Among the many other issues discussed are how to structure the material (31-34), recognition of the missional emphasis in the New Testament (34-37), the relevance of the historical Jesus to New Testament theology (40-43), and the difference between New Testament theology and systematic theology (43-46). Marshall concludes chapter one by stating that he will begin with the synoptic gospels, followed by Acts, then the Pauline letters, followed by the Johannine literature, and concluding with the rest.

As mentioned above, this review will concern itself only with the Johannine literature through the conclusion. Moving then to chapter twenty, Marshall begins his discussion Johannine literature with the Gospel of John. Marshall first outlines the theological story of the Gospel of John, essentially giving brief commentary as he retells the narrative in short form. In the next section, he addresses the theological themes of the book. Here he identifies the main theme of John as “the presentation of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God who came into the world to bear witness to the truth and to give his life so that all people might have the opportunity of receiving eternal life through faith in him” (512). Marshall proceeds to discuss the Johannine epistles and Revelation, following these discussions with a synthesis of the Johannine literature with the synoptics and Acts and Paul. With respect to the relationship with the synoptics and Acts, Marshall notes that while there are clear differences in style, they essentially agree in content and structure (593). The differences, he argues, can be attributed in some sense to the synoptic approach to presenting Jesus’ actual words (ipsissima verba), whereas John “evidences a much more developed theology that reflects more fully the insights of early
Christians in the period after the resurrection” (593). With respect to the relationship of Johannine literature with Paul, Marshall again sees similarities in structure and content, though differing in conceptuality and style (601).

Following the discussion of Johannine literature, Marshall moves on to the rest of the general epistles of Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, and Jude. According to Marshall, the main point of Hebrews is the replacement of the old covenant by a new covenant, an event so great that it would seem inconceivable for a Christian to abandon his or her faith, though that remains a remote possibility (620, 626). With respect to James, Marshall notes its lack of an explicit theology, so his stated task is to find the implicit theology of the letter (628). This implicit theology, likely obscured by its practicality that causes many readers to miss the theological roots of the points (633), is one of “Christian perfection, seen in a life of active faith that successfully copes with the temptations arising from the love of money and the abuse of the tongue” (640). Marshall calls 1 Peter an “epistle of hope” (658) on account of the overarching message of encouragement, and he labels Jude’s main theme as one of a call to perseverance in the face of false teaching, knowing that the false teachers will be judged by Christ in the judgment (668). Marshall notes similarities in 2 Peter’s theology and framework with Jude, namely the Christian Judaism flavor, apocalyptic accent, and emphasis on perseverance while avoiding false teachers (679).

As in the previous sections, Marshall then discusses each of these letters in relation to the rest of the New Testament. Marshall suggests that James is quite individualistic in nature, though it is closest to the wisdom tradition and teaching of Jesus (693), and closer to the book of Acts than Paul or John (695). 1 Peter reflects a Pauline theology and therefore “fits comfortably within the parameters of one of the main streams of early Christian thinking” (697). Marshall
then considers Jude and 2 Peter, noting Jude’s relationship to Paul with respect to being “called” and appearing blameless before God (698-699), while 2 Peter is significant in that it “retains the missionary character that is fundamental to New Testament Christianity” (703).

Following this discussion, Marshall then concludes with his attempt to synthesize the individual “theologies” into an essential core (717). He goes on to argue for four stages common to all the writers: situation of human need, namely sinners under divine judgment; there is a saving act by God accomplished through Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection; there is a new life for those who have faith in Christ; and there is a final judgment in which God will bring redemption to its consummation (717-718). He also speaks of developing this theme along the lines of context of mission (God the Father and the story of God and humanity), center of mission (Jesus Christ and saving event), community of mission (renewed Israel, response of faith, Holy Spirit, the church, and the love commandment), and finally a consummation of mission (fullness of salvation) (718-726). Finally, Marshall explores Arland Hultgren’s four categories of Jesus’ work to determine if the New Testament reveals unity or diversity. These four categories—redemption accomplished in Christ, confirmed through Christ, won by Christ, and mediated by Christ—ultimately show a unity of New Testament theology, though expressed through the diversity of the perspectives of each individual author (726-731).

**Critical Evaluation**

Marshall’s work has several points to commend itself, but the greatest strength is his ability to address the New Testament books on their own terms and then attempt to synthesize their individual theologies into a cogent whole. While his final analysis is somewhat broad (e.g. he has subpoints under each of his four main points of context, center, community, and consummation of mission), he nonetheless gives solid argumentation and sufficient evidence to
convince the reader that the New Testament writers did agree on these aspects of theology and attempted to communicate these ideas, albeit in different forms and fashions. The ability to bring the theologies of the New Testament into a theology of the New Testament is thus helpful.

However, though Marshall does good work in turning the theologies into a theology, there is some question as to whether his theologies are always on the mark. The reader is likely to question Marshall at several points, especially those points where he does not prevent counter-arguments or defend his own position well. Moreover, in many of these cases he is dismissive to the detriment of his position. One example of his dismissive approach is with respect to the view in John’s prologue that God causes certain people to believe and not others (493). Marshall presents this as the second of two options before writing that the “text clearly favors the former type of understanding rather than the other” (493, emphasis added). How is this clear, though? He provides no support from the text to show how clear this is. Additionally, it is unclear that these are the only two options. If there are more than two options, then simply negating the second, even if it were better argued, would not be sufficient grounds for determining the first argument as best. Thus, Marshall not only argues poorly in favor of his view, but he also dismisses the second view with no evidence and possibly commits a logical fallacy of bifurcation.

Marshall is dismissive in other places as well. Another example is in his discussion of Christ coming in the flesh versus a spiritual body. Marshall argues against this view, suggesting that “there is not the present stress on his coming in the flesh; indeed according to Paul he will have a spiritual body. So this can hardly be the meaning” (532, emphasis added). Once again, Marshall is dismissive in his approach. He gives no evidence that this can “hardly be the meaning” other than a vague reference to Paul with no Scripture reference. The only likely
passage that Marshall could be referring to is 1 Corinthians 15, but if this is the case, it would appear that he has misread that text as well. Paul’s point is precisely that the hope of the believer is that he or she will be raised as Christ was raised in a resurrected body. Marshall misreads the understanding of “spiritual” in this context to mean non-fleshly, but Paul’s distinction is something altogether different. His point is not that the body is spiritual in the sense of non-fleshly, but rather that the spiritual body is incorruptible, in contrast to the present body that is subject to decay and death. Thus, Marshall is not only wrong to dismiss the alternative view, but he likely is wrong altogether in his interpretation of the passages.

This dismissive approach thus leaves readers with some concerns. The conclusions he draws regarding the theology of the New Testament from the individual theologies of each book is well done. However, are the premises of the conclusion, that is the theologies of the individual books, already flawed from poor argumentation and exegesis? If Marshall is dismissive in several cases, one should be careful to accept his conclusions uncritically. When one of his dismissive conclusions seems simply to be wrong, that should cause additional pause. Consequently, while Marshall provides some helpful insight into various books and works hard to bring them together, the reader will need to assess each conclusion critically before simply accepting the conclusions. Furthermore, in those cases where Marshall is dismissive of other views, the reader should be especially cautious of accepting his conclusions.

Conclusion

While Marshall’s work has a vast scope and certainly many helpful comments along the way, there are too many occasions in which he simply dismisses other positions without supporting his rejection of them. While these are likely the result of trying to keep the work more manageable in length, these problems often come at critical junctures and significantly detract
from the quality of the work. For readers who are interested in seeing how one can go from many theologies to one theology successfully, this will be a helpful work. However, for those who want a more thorough defense of individual points, it may be more helpful to read an alternative work on the subject.