

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A THEOLOGICAL SYSTEM, THE SANCTUARY, AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

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Abstract: The use of a biblical motif as an integrative center or principle of articulation in a theological system is commonly practiced and methodologically discussed in theological literature. In the context of Adventist theology, the sanctuary is considered one of the main integrative motifs for the development of a theological system. The purpose of the present article is to depict proposals regarding the foundational place of the biblical sanctuary for the articulation of theological topics in Scripture from a systematic and biblical perspective. In interaction with these proposals, the complex debates concerning the definition of a theological (integrative) center in Scripture are taken into account. From a methodological standpoint, an interdisciplinary approach is adopted that involves the areas of Adventist studies, biblical theology, and systematic theology. In the area of Adventist studies, it is described how the sanctuary played a role in the development of a theological system in the history of Adventist theology. Then, in the areas of biblical theology and systematic theology, different proposals concerning the integrative use of the sanctuary by biblical and systematic theologians are described and examined in light of the problematization of the use of a theological unifying center.

Keywords: sanctuary; theological system; unifying center; theological method.

A CONSTRUÇÃO DE UM SISTEMA TEOLÓGICO, O SANTUÁRIO E A TEOLOGIA ADVENTISTA

Resumo: O uso de um tema bíblico como um centro integrador ou um princípio de articulação em um sistema teológico é comumente praticado e metodologicamente discutido na literatura teológica. No contexto da teologia adventista, o santuário é considerado um dos principais temas integradores para o desenvolvimento de um

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sistema teológico. O propósito do presente artigo é descrever propostas acerca do papel fundamental do santuário bíblico para a articulação dos tópicos teológicos das Escrituras, a partir de uma perspectiva bíblica e sistemática. Na interação com essas propostas, são considerados os complexos debates acerca da definição de um centro teológico (integrador) nas Escrituras. Do ponto de vista metodológico, adota-se uma abordagem interdisciplinar que envolve as áreas de Estudos em Adventismo, Teologia Bíblica e Teologia Sistemática. Na área de Estudos em Adventismo, descreve-se como o santuário teve um papel significativo no desenvolvimento de um sistema teológico na história da teologia adventista. Em seguida, nas áreas da Teologia Bíblica e da Teologia Sistemática, descrevem-se e analisam-se diferentes propostas do uso integrador do santuário por teólogos bíblicos e sistemáticos, à luz da problematização do uso de um centro teológico unificador.

Palavras-chave: santuário; sistema teológico; centro unificador; método teológico.

LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UN SISTEMA TEOLÓGICO, EL SANTUARIO Y LA TEOLOGÍA ADVENTISTA

Resumen: El uso de un tema bíblico como centro integrador o principio de articulación en un sistema teológico es una práctica común y metodológicamente discutida en la literatura teológica. En el contexto de la teología adventista, el santuario es considerado uno de los principales temas integradores para el desarrollo de un sistema teológico. El propósito de este artículo es describir propuestas acerca del papel fundamental del santuario bíblico para la articulación de los temas teológicos de la Escritura desde una perspectiva bíblica y sistemática. En la interacción con estas propuestas, se toman en cuenta los complejos debates acerca de la definición de un centro teológico (integrador) en la Escritura. Desde el punto de vista metodológico, se adopta un enfoque interdisciplinario que involucra las áreas de Estudios Adventistas, Teología Bíblica y Teología Sistemática. En el ámbito de los Estudios Adventistas, se describe cómo el santuario desempeñó un papel significativo en el desarrollo de un sistema teológico en la historia de la teología adventista. Luego, en los campos de la Teología Bíblica y la Teología Sistemática, se describen y analizan diferentes propuestas sobre el uso integrador del santuario por parte de teólogos bíblicos y sistemáticos, a la luz de la problematización del uso de un centro teológico unificador.

Palabras clave: santuario; sistema teológico; centro unificador; método teológico.

Submetido em: 12/03/2026

Aprovado em: 13/03/2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.19141/1809-2454.kerygma.v21.n1.pe2115>



INTRODUCTION

The use of a biblical motif as an integrative center or principle of articulation in a theological system is commonly practiced and methodologically discussed in the theological literature, as I will indicate below in this article. In the context of Adventist theology, the sanctuary² is considered one of the main integrative motifs for the development of a theological system. The purpose of the present article is to depict proposals of the foundational place of the biblical sanctuary for the articulation of theological topics in Scripture, from a systematic and biblical perspective. In my interaction with these proposals, I will take into account the complex debates about the definition of a theological (integrative) center in Scripture. These debates explore not only a significant topic of theological discussion but also touch, in different ways, on the very nature of biblical theology and systematic theology. In other words, the use of the sanctuary as a theological unifying center or principle of articulation involves the methodological discussions of whether a theological center can be discerned given the diversity of key topics in biblical theology, and whether the rational construction of a theological system does justice to the dynamic overall narrative of Scripture. I will introduce these methodological discussions in the areas of biblical theological and systematic theology in order to properly explore proposals of the sanctuary as a unifying center and the construction of a theological system. Given the limitations of space, I will be selective rather than comprehensive in my approach, as far as studies and arguments are concerned. However, I still hope that this short discussion will be informative for reflections about the potential use of the sanctuary theme for the construction of a theological system.

From a methodological point of view, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach that involves the areas of Adventist studies, biblical theology, and systematic theology. I will start the discussion in the area of Adventist studies in order to describe how the sanctuary played a role in the development of a theological system in the history of Adventist theology. Then, I will move to the areas of biblical theology and systematic theology, which constitute the major focus of this study. In the discussions of biblical and systematic theology, I problematize the use a theological (integrative) center or principle of

² In this article, I use the term sanctuary as a broad reference to the specific terminology of the tabernacle and the temple in Scripture.



articulation and, from this perspective, I describe and interact with different proposals about the integrative use of the sanctuary by biblical and systematic theologians.

THE SANCTUARY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A THEOLOGICAL SYSTEM IN THE HISTORY OF ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

The use of the sanctuary as a foundational theme for the systematic integration of doctrines in the history of the development of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) theology is substantially explained by Timm (1995).³ His study focused on the periods of doctrinal integration (1844-1850) and consolidation (1850-1863) in the history of SDA theology. During these periods, doctrines such as the law and the Sabbath, Christ's heavenly ministry, the second coming, the state of the dead (conditional immortality), and spiritual gifts (the gift of prophecy) were systematically articulated in light of the sanctuary (especially considering Dan 8:14) and the three angels' messages (Rev 14:6-12).

For instance, as far as the articulation with the sanctuary is concerned, the perpetuity of God's law, with particular reference to the seventh-day Sabbath, was affirmed based on the idea that the ark of the covenant, which is the most important piece of furniture in the sanctuary, contains the Ten Commandments. The affirmation of perpetuity has in view that this was not only true about the earthly sanctuaries but also describes the reality of the heavenly sanctuary (Rev 11:19) (Timm, 1995, p. 139). Moreover, Christ's heavenly ministry, which is situated in the heavenly sanctuary, was explained in terms of two major phases broadly informed by the notions of forgiveness and judgment, according to the (high-)priestly ministry typified in the two apartments of the earthly sanctuary, one performed daily in the Holy Place (with a particular emphasis on forgiveness) and the other yearly (with a particular emphasis on judgment) in the Most Holy Place (Timm, 1995, p. 147). Furthermore, the Second Coming was understood as being preceded by the prophetic period of the cleansing of the sanctuary (Dan 8:14). Thus, the Second Coming happens shortly after this work of purification is concluded and Christ leaves the heavenly sanctuary (Timm, 1995, p. 153). With regard to the state of the dead, the cleansing of the sanctuary (Dan 8:14), informed by the notion of a pre-Advent investigative judgment, presupposes that the dead have not received their final reward yet. This presupposition rejects the idea of the unconditional immortality of the soul

³ See also Timm (2003).



(Timm, 1995, p. 159). In addition, the belief in spiritual gifts, with particular reference to the gift of prophecy, was connected with the sanctuary from the perspective that Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary was associated with the notion of God's people (the church) being guided by this gift on earth (Timm, 1995, p. 393-394).

Timm also associates the unifying role of the sanctuary with other foundational themes of the system being developed in SDA theology. Besides the three angels' messages, he highlights themes such as God, the covenant, the great controversy, and the remnant (Timm, 1995, p. 398-419). The cosmic controversy framework has an eschatological tone, which is delineated by a historicist prophetic interpretation of Scripture (Timm, 1995, p. 173-177). Timm highlights that "The heavenly sanctuary was perceived as protecting the present truths within the context of the *cosmic controversy*" (Timm, 1995, p. 410). This idea of a necessary protection of truths is better understood in the context of an eschatological emphasis.

It is also noteworthy that he identifies in the history of SDA theology, as we move beyond 1863, statements about the sanctuary as a focal unifying center in the doctrinal system. For example, in 1863, R. F. Cottrell referred to the heavenly sanctuary as "the grand center of the Christian system" (Timm, 1995, p. 437; see Cottrell, 1863, p. 21). In 1867, J. N. Andrews qualified the sanctuary as "the great central doctrine", inseparably connecting "all the points" of "faith, and presents the subject as one grand whole" (Timm, 1995, p. 438-439; Andrews, 1867, p. 12). In 1877, Uriah Smith compared the sanctuary, the "focal point of the great truths", with the "central hub" of a "wagon wheel" (Timm, 1995, p. 439; Smith, 1877, p. 10-11). In 1884, Ellen G. White underscored that the sanctuary "opened to view a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious" (Timm, 1995, p. 439; White, 1884, p. 258).

While Timm's line of investigation is situated in the area of Adventist studies, focusing on the historical development of Adventist theology, the foundational place of the biblical sanctuary for the articulation of theological topics in Scripture has also been proposed in the areas of systematic theology and biblical theology. In the sections below I will describe and interact with these proposals, in light of the complex debates about the definition of a theological (integrative) center in Scripture.



A THEOLOGICAL CENTER IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

While the goal of biblical theology is not the construction of a theological system, as is the case with systematic theology, the more descriptive⁴ task of biblical theology in the formulation of a given topic in Scripture puts specific pieces of information together to produce a cohesive whole. In fact, even the meaningful interpretation of a (Scriptural) text requires more than the understanding of individual words and sentences, but attempts to discern the text as a totality. This discernment implies the identification of the relationship between the parts of the text, distinguishing primary and subordinate topics in the totality of the text.⁵ Eventually, the identification of a primary topic sheds light on the focus of the text and facilitates the understanding of its parts and relationships. In his proposal of a theological center of Scripture, James Hamilton speaks of “a main theme of the Bible”, which acts “as the center of gravity for all of its other themes” (Hamilton, 2006, p. 59). On the basis of the assumption that the Bible is a canonical cohesive text,⁶ it is not surprising to see that the discussion of a theological center in Scripture has been quite extensive in the area of biblical theology. For instance, Richard Davidson lists fifty different proposals in the literature for the theological center of the OT or Scripture as a whole (Davidson, 2009, p. 5-9). We may draw at least two conclusions about this long list. First, this extensive list seems to suggest that the debate of a theological center in Scripture is relevant in the area of biblical theology, since a large number of Bible scholars are engaged in this discussion. Indeed, Charles Scobie refers to the quest for a theological center as an “obsession” in biblical theology (Scobie, 1992, p. 7). Second, the existence of so many different proposals appear to indicate that this is, at best, a very complex (and perhaps even impossible) enterprise, or even arbitrary. Complexity and the danger of arbitrariness reflect the rich diversity of relevant topics in Scripture. James Barr points out that “The idea of a theological ‘center’ is an easy target for mockery, and in much Christian biblical theology it is regarded with scepticism” (Barr, 1999, p. 295). However, Barr does not simply dismiss the search for a theological center. Instead, he underscores that different proposals are more or less reasonable, inasmuch as each one of them

⁴ Elsewhere, I have delineated the similarities and differences of the methodological tasks of systematic theology and biblical theology. See Rodrigues (2020, p. 36-39).

⁵ Elsewhere, I have explored the hermeneutics of reading texts and interpreted actions. See Rodrigues (2025, p. 106-108).

⁶ House (2002, p. 270) argues that “a biblical theologian must be committed to interpreting the Bible as a coherent whole because it is the word of an inherently coherent God”.



identifies an important theological element of Scripture (the Hebrew Bible) (Barr, 1999, p. 342). From this perspective, he sees the quest for a theological center as an interpretive exercise of “hypothesis formation” (Barr, 1999, p. 340), which mostly contributes to a growing understanding of biblical theology.

In his discussion of NT theology, D. A. Carson (1997, p. 810) underlines at least three of the complexities involved in the attempt to discover a theological center, which I will summarize into three basic questions: (1) Definition: What is a center? (2) Method: How should the center be discovered? (3) Scope: How broad is a center? In terms of definition, does the center describe “the most common theme”, “the controlling theme”, or “the fundamental theological presupposition” of the text? As far as the method of discovery is concerned, if the center is the most common theme, should it be determined directly by “statistical count” in the text? If the center is a controlling theme or a fundamental theological presupposition, how does one determine and identify it? With regard to the scope, it is noteworthy that Gerhard Hasel (1991, p. 168) concludes that proposals for a center generally “have God or an aspect of God and/or his activity for the world and humankind as a common denominator”, which indicates that the OT is “*theocentric*” and the NT is “*christocentric*” (see also Hasel, 1978). In connection with this idea that the NT is Christocentric, Carson maintains that to have Jesus Christ as the center of NT theology says “everything” at one level but also says “almost nothing” at another level (Carson, 1997, p. 810). In other words, Carson is wondering if the reference to Christ would not be too broad or general, in terms of scope, to serve as a theological center. To put it more sharply, he seems to assume that a theological center should be more specific. Overall, this debate illustrates the complexity involving the adequate scope of a theological center, which can be deemed too broad, in the sense of lacking the specificity of a meaningful center, or too narrow, in terms of lacking an organic relation to the manifold richness of other canonical themes.

The sanctuary as a theological center

With an awareness of the difficulties surrounding the debates about a theological center of Scripture, but also considering the potential benefits of this interpretive exercise for the growing understanding of biblical theology (at least at the level of hypothesis formation, as Barr suggests), it is relevant for the purposes of the present article to



describe one of the proposals of theological center found in the extensive list provided by Davidson, namely, the sanctuary.

The sanctuary as a key element in the narrative center

At the end of his list, Davidson refers to the sanctuary/temple as a theological center in biblical theology and mentions Roberto Ouro (2025; 2012; 2008) as its main representative (Davidson, 2009, p. 9). However, before I outline Ouro's proposal, it is important to notice that Davidson himself includes the sanctuary as part of his multi-faceted account of the theological center of Scripture. However, before I outline Ouro's proposal, it is important to notice that Davidson himself includes the sanctuary as part of his multi-faceted account of the theological center of Scripture.⁷ Davidson identifies this integrative account at the beginning of the canon (Gen 1–3) and confirms it in Job, assuming that it was written by Moses just as Genesis was, and at the end of the canon (Rev 20–22).⁸ The sanctuary figures as the last of the seven facets of his integrative account: (1) "Creation and the divine design for this planet", (2) "The character of the Creator (with implications for theodicy)", (3) "the moral conflict concerning the character of God", (4) "The Gospel covenant promise centered in the Person of the Messianic Seed", (5) "The substitutionary atonement worked out by the Messianic Seed", (6) "The eschatological windup of the moral conflict with the end of the serpent and evil", and (7) "The sanctuary setting of the moral conflict" (Davidson, 2009, p. 19). It is noteworthy that this multi-faceted theological center attempts to highlight the main features of "salvation history", which seems to indicate that the center has a narrative shape. In other words, the center is understood as a structural sketch of the biblical narrative, in which the combination of its key elements preserves the essentials of the narrative in a nutshell. In this multi-faceted account, the sanctuary is one of the key elements of the overall canonical narrative.

⁷ See Davidson's extensive and helpful theology of the sanctuary in Davidson (2022).

⁸ Davidson (2009, p. 24-26) also identifies this multi-faceted account of the theological center of Scripture in the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, especially considering the language of center in Ellen G. White's writings.



The sanctuary as the nexus of the relationship between God and human beings

Ouro is more emphatic than Davidson about the central place of the sanctuary in biblical theology. This emphasis follows a methodological strategy concerning the handling of the canonical material. While Davison investigates particularly the beginning (Genesis) and the end (Revelation) of the overall canonical narrative, Ouro explores the relationships between the sections of the canon, especially in the OT. In short, he argues that the Prophets/*Nebî'im* and the Writings/*Ketûbîm* theologically depend on the Torah (the Pentateuch) in the Hebrew canon (Ouro, 2012, p. 165). Likewise, this assumption methodologically implies that the NT theologically depends on the OT.⁹ Ouro defines the relationships between the sections of the Hebrew Bible essentially by paying attention to the transitions from one section to the other. First, the final note in the Torah qualifies “Moses as the greatest of all the prophets, implying that all later prophets are subordinate to him because it was to him that God gave his Torah” (see Deut 34:10-12) (Ouro, 2012, p. 165). Then, the second section of the Hebrew canon (Prophets) begins with an affirmation of continuity, depicting Joshua as Moses’ assistant, and Moses is described as “the servant of the Lord” (see Jos 1:1-8). Moreover, the success of Joshua (see Jos 1:8) and later Israel as a whole (2 Kgs 17:13-16) would depend on their faithfulness to the torah or the law of Moses. Similarly, at the end of the canonical section of the Prophets, Malachi urges his audience to remember the law (torah) of Moses, the servant of the Lord (Mal 4:4) (Ouro, 2012, p. 166). Finally, the third section of the Hebrew Bible (Writings) starts with a vivid reflection about the torah as a source of delight and the object of continuous meditation (see Ps 1:2) (Ouro, 2012, p. 167).

A methodological outcome of this discussion of the relationship between the parts of the OT canon, which establishes the theological priority of the Torah (the Pentateuch), is that the theological center must be identified primarily in the Torah and, then, confirmed in other canonical sections. Ouro employs the quantitative argument that “forty-five chapters in the Torah are devoted exclusively to the sanctuary building and rituals”, and that almost one-third of Exodus is devoted to the tabernacle, with an impressively detailed account of the instructions for the construction of the sanctuary

⁹ This seems to be reflected in the table of contents of the book *El santuario*, where the discussion of the NT focuses on “Christ in the sanctuary” as the unifying center of the NT. In this section of the book, Ouro explores the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), Acts, the Epistles, Hebrews, and Revelation respectively. See Ouro (2012).



(Exod 25–31) and the description of its construction (Exod 35–40) (Ouro, 2012, p. 175). This detailed account in Exodus provides the setting for the prescriptions about sacrifices and other rituals and procedures in the tabernacle in Leviticus (1–17), just as its “religious, moral, and physical centrality to the wilderness community that surrounded it (Leviticus 17–Numbers 10)” (Ouro, 2012, p. 175). Using a qualitative argument, Ouro qualifies the sanctuary as “the center of Jewish religious and theological life” (see, e.g., Num 2:2), as “it was to serve as a vital and dynamic center, where the power, the blessings, the protection and the forgiveness of God were manifested as a guide before the nations of the earth, with the universal God serving as both judge and protector” (Ouro, 2012, p. 174).

Taking into account the centrality of the sanctuary in the Torah, Ouro stipulates that “Just as the physical sanctuary in ancient Israel served as the centralized point around which the rest of the camp was situated, so the theological concept of the sanctuary is the point around which OT and NT theologies are structured” (Ouro, 2012, p. 175). The canonical OT section of the Prophets also affirms the “indispensability of the sanctuary” and (the major prophets particularly) rebuke the misconception of an allegedly formal efficacy of the sanctuary disconnected from the moral attitude of the people (see, e.g., Jer 7:1-15; 26:1-15). In the Writings, the Psalms as a whole constituted the temple hymnal, containing an impressive number of references to the sanctuary. Similarly, the NT makes several allusions to the terminology of the sanctuary and its rituals, as being fulfilled in Christ.¹⁰

In his dialogue with debates about the theological center of Scripture in biblical theology, including the influential arguments that God is the center of the OT (the OT as theocentric), and Christ is the center of the NT (the NT as christocentric) as the revelation of God in the NT, Ouro maintains that the affirmation of God as the center “merely restates the subject of theology, while failing to identify the object (humanity) or the nexus (or element) of union between *subject* and *object*” (Ouro, 2012, p. 173). According to this proposal, the center cannot be reduced to the subject or the object, but should rather refer to the “vehicle (or nexus) of union” between them. It is from this perspective that Ouro

¹⁰ Ouro argues that NT books such as the Gospel of John, Hebrews, and Revelation are “structured around the sanctuary” (Ouro, 2012, p. 175).



argues that the sanctuary should be seen as the center, in the sense that it constitutes the element of union between God and humanity in biblical theology (Ouro, 2012, p. 174).

It should be noted that this proposal provides an intriguing formal definition of a center. More specifically, the center is not the most important topic in Scripture. Instead, the subject of theology (God) is the most important topic, especially when we consider the interaction of the subject (God) with the object (humanity). It is precisely at this point that the center becomes relevant, in the sense that it articulates and clarifies the interaction or relationship of the subject with the object. To put it in another way, the center plays the role of a servant rather than a protagonist in biblical theology.

In short, I have depicted in this section the complexity of the debate about a theological center of Scripture in biblical theology, especially considering the variety of key theological topics in the OT and NT. However, proposals of a unified picture (the whole) that integrates the different parts of Scripture should not be simply dismissed, given the potential benefit of a clear and cohesive description of the theological message of Scripture, even if this exercise is taken at the level of hypothesis. In this context, I have briefly described two proposals that focus on the sanctuary in the discussion of the theological center of Scripture. One proposal views the center as a condensed narrative of the history of salvation, which is presented in the first chapters of the canon (and confirmed in Job and in the last chapters of the canon). In this proposal, the sanctuary is a key theme of the narrative. Another proposal views the center as the nexus in the relationship between God and human beings. The nexus is particularly formulated in the Torah and becomes the foundation for other sections of the biblical canon. In this second proposal, the sanctuary constitutes the nexus between God and human beings.

A THEOLOGICAL UNIFYING CENTER IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

While the discussions about the existence of a theological center of Scripture in biblical theology involve the methodological complexity of dealing with the rich diversity of relevant topics in Scripture and the risk of arbitrariness in the selection of a center, contemporary debates on the methodological construction of a theological system problematize the very nature of system in theology. To put it more sharply, should theology be systematic? In the introduction of *System and Story: Narrative Critique and Construction in Theology*, Gale Heide emphasizes that “the epistemological



appropriateness of using system as a hermeneutical device for theological investigation and construction” (Heide, 2009, p. xiii) constitutes one of the most relevant debates in contemporary theology. One of the key points of this debate is the critique that the development of a system carries the assumptions of modern epistemology, such as the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Rationalism reduces the manifold richness of life and experience to the one-sided abstraction of a concept or theory, leading to dogmatic positions deemed as comprehensive, completely coherent, and final (Heide, 2009, p. xiii, xviii).

These epistemological critiques of system generally propose its replacement by the larger framework of narrative epistemology in theology, since narratives portray, among other things, concrete actions and experiences (rather than abstract concepts) with openness to their ambiguities (rather than absolute and final coherence). Overall, the critique of systems and the affirmation of narrative in theology is promoted by the so-called postliberal (in the sense of rejecting the liberalism of the Enlightenment and its rationalist epistemology) or narrative theology. According to Stanley Hauerwas, we “must learn to write theology in a way that denies that theology can be systematic” (Hauerwas, 1991, p. 182).¹¹

In response to this provocative statement, different answers have been offered to the dismissal of system in theology. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that most of the theological defenses of system tend to agree on (1) the importance of narrative thinking for theology and (2) that the theological use of system should not be informed by the rationalism of the Enlightenment. In other words, defenses of system in theology need to explain what it should (particularly considering its interaction with narrative) and should not mean (especially in contrast to strict/rationalistic definitions of system). For instance, Harry Huebner (1995, p. 161) claims that “story does not exclude system”, but rather “requires it”. This short statement could be further elaborated in light of Paul

¹¹ In the context of note 14, where we find this statement, Hauerwas argues that it is “crucial that we find a form that unsettles the Enlightenment presumption that truth can be presented in a lecture and/or essay”. According to him, “Assertions in speech are written [...] but these as secondary expressions of intelligent thought which is or is not adequate in dealings with its objects, the realities of the social and rational world. This is a point at which it is important to remember that the presupposed conception of mind is not Cartesian. It is rather of mind as activity, of mind as engaging with the natural and social world in such activities as identification, reidentification, collecting, separating, classifying, and naming in all this by touching, grasping, pointing, breaking down, building up, calling to, answering to, and so on” (Hauerwas, 1991, p. 182).



Ricoeur's depiction of narrative as a "work of synthesis", in which the plot connects different parts (causes, goals, and chance) into "a whole": "By means of the plot, goals, causes, and chance are brought together within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. x). Following this perspective, Ricoeur calls narrative the "synthesis of the heterogeneous", discerning a "congruence in the organization of the events" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. x). This understanding of narrative in terms of "synthesis", "congruence", and "organization" seems to imply a minimal definition of system, which describes the articulation of parts into a unified whole. As Kevin Vanhoozer emphasizes, "Narratives have a cognitive import", considering that they have "a particular kind of unity or coherence", as the plot "brings order to what would otherwise be a confused and arbitrary diversity of actions and incidents" (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 93).

Vanhoozer (2005, p. 93) discerns a significant advantage of theological narrative thinking, namely, the exploration of "the unity of Scripture", which "tells one overarching story from creation to consummation" through a variety of literary styles ("psalms, law, parables, prophecies, and so on"). In fact, his dramatic approach to doctrine (the drama of doctrine) is close to postliberal narrative theology,¹² but he adjusts the idea of system¹³ in connection with forms of narrative thinking.¹⁴ In Vanhoozer's understanding of system in theology, he argues for a "soft" system, which describes forms of "overall consistency", in contrast to a "hard" systematic theology that rationalistically "deduces its truths from a set of axiomatic first principles" (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 259). Furthermore, while David Ford and Paul Fiddes develop different projects in the area of systematic theology, they are also examples of an intended integration between story and system in theology (Ford, 1997, p. 191-215; Fiddes, 2009, p. 3-23). Even though John Webster does not explicitly engage the integration of system and narrative in his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, he does propose a form of systematic construction that avoids a

¹² Vanhoozer affirms this similarity but also distinguishes his view from the postliberal narrative approach because they fail "to preserve biblical authority" (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 93).

¹³ Vanhoozer criticizes the idea that theology is "merely a system of belief" (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 12). He points out that Hegel's philosophy "represents an extreme—even pathological—version of the theologian's systematization ambition" (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 85). Moreover, Vanhoozer distinguishes the wholeness of narrative and of a conceptual system: "The wholeness of a unified narrative is one thing; the wholeness of a conceptual system, quite another" (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 153). He attempts to distance himself from "the risk of conceiving wholeness in too systematic and static fashion", which is a reductive symmetry produced by "frozen" systematicity (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 257).

¹⁴ Vanhoozer proposes that when "narrative is lived out with others, it becomes drama" (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. xii). His dramatic approach resembles aspects of Balthasar's theo-drama. See Balthasar (1989-1998).



“hard” or rationalistic system and prioritizes the narrative (see point 3 below: “persons, events, and acts”) teaching of the Christian faith. His proposal emphasizes four principles for a sound system in theology:

- (1) the systematic character of the schema should not be imposed by analytical reason but should emerge from attention to the subject matter’s self-unfolding;
- (2) systems must retain provisionality and openness to revision from sources which cannot be given exhaustive description within the system;
- (3) systems must be indicative of, not a replacement for, the persons, events, and acts which form the substance of Christian teaching;
- (4) formal, systematic coordination must serve material scope and coherence (Webster, 2009, p. 14).

Besides the combination of narrative and system, in which narrative is conceived as a unified whole of parts (so narrative could be considered systematic in a broad sense) and system is seen as soft, open, and informed by the biblical narrative, another type of answer that may be offered to the dismissal of system in theology is that pre-modern Enlightenment theologians organized theology in a coherent/systematic fashion. In other words, systematic theology is not simply defined as a rationalistic project of modern theology, even though we should not deny that the use of system in current systematic theology follows a modern understanding of system.¹⁵ Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses* (ca. 175-185 AD, *Against Heresies*), Origen’s *De Principiis* or *Peri Archon* (ca. 220-230 AD, *On First Principles*), Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* (1265-1274), and John Calvin’s *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (1536-1559, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*) are included in the list of pre-modern Enlightenment systematic theologies, although they were not called this way. Once again, this type of argument needs to modulate the different concepts of system in the debate, since modern systematic theology is not formulated in the same way as the historical examples mentioned above. In other words, the concept of system is used here in a broad and soft sense that describes a coherent whole that organizes the parts of theology. The debate on whether pre-modern Enlightenment theological works could be called systematic theologies is problematized

¹⁵ For a helpful discussion of the history of system in theology (systematic theology), see Heide (2012); Watson (2012). Watson offers a detailed historical account of the use of the term system in the context of theology.



by Heide (2012), and it is noteworthy that Hauerwas does “not think that the development of theology in the early centuries of the church” should be called “‘systematic’ theology”, as he associates this expression with “developments after the Reformation in which ‘doctrine’ became an end in itself” (Hauerwas, 2015, p. 24). Therefore, Hauerwas’ critique of systematic theology is directed against a specific and strict/hard conception of system in theology, as developed in the modern Enlightenment period.

In his philosophical and theological reflection, Fernando Canale amplifies the critique of system in systematic theology that includes pre-modern theologies. In fact, his critique identifies the roots of rationalistic modern systems in ancient Greek metaphysics, which influenced the articulation of theological thinking in a large portion of the history of Christian theology. Canale explains that Greek metaphysics articulates the parts of reality into a coherent whole “by way of a static hierarchical structure of timeless-temporal entities” (Canale, 2006, p. 57). However, similar to Vanhoozer, Canale discerns in Scripture an overarching narrative (metanarrative), and he adds that this narrative should have not only priority over the system to be articulated, as Webster proposes, but goes a step further by arguing that the ongoing historical dynamics of the biblical narrative should even shape the way the parts are articulated into a coherent whole. In other words, the biblical overall narrative not only offers the content or the parts to be systematized into a coherent whole, but should also formally shape the way the systematization articulates the parts into this whole.

To further clarify Canale’s contrast between the systematic form of articulation in Greek metaphysics and in biblical metanarrative, the former assumes that the whole of (ultimate) reality is static/timeless, and this entails a systematization via rationalized abstraction, whereas the latter presupposes that the whole of reality is dynamic, which entails a systematization via historical reflection. More specifically, in the abstract systematization informed by the paradigm of Greek metaphysics, narratives are taken merely as temporal illustrations of deeper abstract ideas that do not depend on the narratives to be articulated. Since ultimate reality as a whole is assumed to be static/timeless and narratives are obviously dynamic and temporal, they do not closely portray the whole of (ultimate) reality as such but only serve as metaphorical parables or temporal shadows of the allegedly timeless/static realities of God and the human soul. On the other hand, in the dynamic systematization informed by the overarching biblical



narrative, narratives are the privileged form of reflection because they have the potential to closely portray the dynamics of the whole of reality (without necessarily implying automatic or crude literalization), especially considering the relationship between God and His creatures, as historical. From this perspective, the systematization is always dependent on the biblical narrative, both in terms of the content (the parts) and the articulation (the whole).

Metanarrative articulation of the whole, God, and the dynamics of the sanctuary

More specifically, Canale (2006, p. 57) argues that metaphysics and metanarrative are two different forms of articulating the whole of reality. The former is a static/timeless articulation, while the other entails a dynamic historical articulation. Affirming the metanarrative approach of theological systematization, Canale speaks of “the center that articulates the biblical metanarrative”, which he identifies as “The historical acts of God’s being”, considering that the acts of God “proceed in a real historical chronological progression” (Canale, 2006, p. 53). Moreover, Canale qualifies the doctrine of the sanctuary as the hermeneutical “key” to explain the way “God operates in the history of salvation”, assuming that this explanation constitutes the construction of “the inner logic or order” of the theological system (Canale, 2006, p. 65). To put it in another way, God is the center of the system, but since the systematization of the whole follows a dynamic/narrative rather than static/metaphysical approach, the focus is on the historical actions of God instead of an allegedly timeless divine being (See also Canale, 1998, p. 183-206). Moreover, this historical or narrative systematic approach formally centered on God’s historical acts benefits from the biblical portrayal of the sanctuary, which materially gives “historical structure and precision to the covenant relationship” (Canale, 2006, p. 61) between God and his people. In his words, “The sanctuary is the spatiotemporal structure through which God was continuously present and relating to His people through Old and New Testament times” (Canale, 2006, p. 60). The incarnation of Christ follows the pattern of divine dwelling in the sanctuary, as suggested by the language of tabernacling (verb σκηνώω) in John 1:14. After Christ’s ascension, the salvific process of redemption continues with His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews). Furthermore, Canale indicates that the doctrine of the sanctuary does not include only the biblical description of its structure and rituals but integrates this description with the



historicist prophetic interpretation of Daniel and Revelation. This integrative picture of the sanctuary provides a dynamic and historical understanding of God's being and acts.

(Meta)narrative¹⁶ articulation of the whole, Christ, and the dynamics of the sanctuary

Norman Gulley also affirms the metanarrative approach of systematization. He argues that “A systematic theology penetrates the biblical material and reaches the foundational story of Scripture in which all other stories are best understood. This is the metanarrative. It enables each doctrine to be understood within this biblical worldview and thus corrects any interpretation that does not fit in with the biblical worldview” (Gulley, 2003, p. 140). Gulley also employs the idea of biblical interpretive penetration to describe the choice of a center in a theological system, which he considers essential for the configuration and dynamic articulation of the system.¹⁷ In other words, he claims that “The center of a theological system must be the same as the underlying center of Scripture” (Gulley, 2003, p. 146). In this context, Gulley problematizes part of the debates about a theological center in the area of biblical theology that I have described above. For instance, he underscores the dangers of superimposing a center on Scripture and ignoring the contribution of other central biblical topics to a theological system, which create the problem of a “canon within the canon” (Gulley, 2003, p. 146-148).¹⁸ With this problematization in mind, he eventually defines Christ as the center of his system, arguing narratively that “He is the center of the plan of salvation, which begins in Genesis, is

¹⁶ I have the impression that the term metanarrative is not a prominent term for Graf, as it is in Canale and Gulley. However, his theological articulation still follows a narrative/historical approach, in contrast to the abstract articulation of Greek metaphysics, as he explores the overall narrative of Scripture.

¹⁷ The importance of a center in systematic theology is affirmed in the literature in different ways. For instance, Clodovis Boff (2015, p. 272) speaks of an architectonic principle that internally organizes the parts in the sense of constructing an organic system. Without an architectonic principle, only an external arrangement is possible, as is the case with topics organized in a dictionary or encyclopedia. Therefore, an external organization does not describe a system. In the context of Adventist studies, Rolf Pöhler (2009, p. 17-32) argues that Adventist theology has and needs a unifying center, especially considering that clear theological understanding and communication entail the articulation of parts into a coherent whole. He briefly describes a number of focal points in Adventist theology as potential candidates for the qualification of a theological unifying center.

¹⁸ Similarly, Frank Hasel (2020, p. 453) proposes a careful distinction between “a central theme in Scripture and a theological center that functions as a hermeneutical key whereby other portions and statements of Scripture are relegated to a secondary or inferior status. A theological center that functions as a” reductive “hermeneutical key leads to a canon within the canon that does not do justice to the fullness, richness, breadth, and scope of divine truth as we find it in all of Scripture”. Hasel calls this reductive hermeneutical key a “monophonic center” and affirms that “the Bible presents us with a more encompassing ‘symphonic’ theological perspective”.



looked forward to through types and prophecies in the Old Testament, actualized in the Gospels in the New Testament, proclaimed by the apostles, and predicted to be completed in the return of Christ, who inaugurates the new heaven and a new earth” (Gulley, 2003, p. 148).

In his study of the principle of articulation in theological systems, Roy Graf (2017, p. 26) is close to Canale, from whom he borrows the expression “principle of articulation” used as the organizing key of systematic theology, and Gulley, considering the emphasis on Christ for the discussion of systematic center or articulation.¹⁹ Graf still agrees with Canale that the articulation of the whole in theology must refer to God, as I will indicate below, but he further elaborates this point from a Christological standpoint, and this brings him closer to Gulley.²⁰ Overall, Graf offers a more detailed discussion on the articulated construction of a theological system. Graf proposes a phenomenological description of the principle of articulation encompassing four components: (1) parts, (2) articulating agent, (3) articulating action, and (4) the whole. In the context of systematic theology, the first component (parts) refers to individual doctrines, while the last component (the whole) describes the unified system, which is formed by organic articulation rather than a mere aggregation of doctrines (Graf, 2017, p. 38-47). As far as the second and third components are concerned, it is noteworthy that Graf distinguishes between agent and action in the specific discussion of articulation. From a broad theological perspective, the agent is God and the action consequently refers to divine actions in the context of His relationship with creation (Graf, 2017, p. 41).

More specifically, he argues that Christ is the divine articulating agent of reality as a whole, particularly considering His mediatorial role in creation and reconciliation (Col 1:16-20). According to Graf’s (2017, p. 345) reading of this passage, creation is seen as an

¹⁹ For Graf (2017, p. 42), a theological center is not necessarily the same as a principle of articulation. He thinks that the former is consciously chosen by the theologian, while the theologian can sometimes use a principle of articulation unconsciously.

²⁰ It should be noted that in his discussion on the remnant, Canale approaches the principle of articulation from a Christological standpoint. Perhaps this is due to the fact that he is dealing with ecclesiology in this article, which arguably requires a Christological focus. In reference to the principle of articulation, Canale explains that “This principle deals with the way in which the manifold components of historical reality interconnect forming a whole. The historical Christ ‘connects’ the whole of reality historically, thereby replacing the ‘chain of being,’ ‘order of being,’ or ‘pyramid of being’ tradition uses to articulate biblical contents and spiritual realities” (Canale, 2013, 152-153). In reference to SDA theology, Canale (Canale, 2013, p. 154) argues that “Adventists have always assumed that the historical, incarnated, resurrected, and ascended Christ is the principle of articulation of all realities in the vast universe from past to future eternity”.



organic system. The parts are cosmically described as “all things” (τὰ πάντα), and they are cohesively held together (Greek verb συνίστημι), as a whole, in Christ (Col 1:16-17). With regard to the articulating action, Graf suggests that the sanctuary depicts the divine presence and actions in (a covenantal) relationship with the creatures in the form of tabernacling. Even before the fall, the heavenly sanctuary is the center of the universe, describing God’s throne and rule, as a pattern of His relationship with the world, involving divine revelation, fellowship with His creatures, and the worship they offer to Him. This pattern becomes even more explicit in God’s dwelling and fellowship in the Garden of Eden (Davidson, 2015, p. 65-89), and, after the Fall, in the typology of the earthly sanctuary, the incarnation of Christ (Graf, 2017, p. 350), and even His ministrations on behalf of His creatures in the heavenly sanctuary, making God’s throne accessible to them (Heb 4:14-16; Graf, 2017, p. 358). After the sin problem is resolved, “God’s direct dwelling with His people is the temple in the sense that the redeemed have direct access to God’s presence ([Rev] 21:3[, 22]). At the same time, God has a specific place in the city where His throne is located and from where He rules and receives adoration. In Revelation, the structure of the temple (Rev 23:1, 3) is integrated to the structure of the city” (Graf, 2017, p. 360).

As far as the articulation of the whole is concerned, Graf speaks of a horizontal or historical sequence of “original harmony-controversy-restoration”, which is defined by the metanarrative of the great controversy (Graf, 2017, p. 385).²¹

Sanctuary Theology, Canonical Narrative, and Systematic Theology

In a recent publication about the sanctuary, John Peckham wrote a chapter titled “Toward a Systematic Theology of the Sanctuary”. In this chapter, he does not seem to approach this topic from the perspective of the discussion of an integrative center or principle of articulation for the construction of a theological system. Instead, Peckham proposes a preliminary outline of the theology of the sanctuary from a systematic perspective.²² At the same time, he believes that “the sanctuary is integral [...] to the entire biblical system of truth” (Peckham, 2022, p. 680). Moreover, Peckham (2022, p. 686) is

²¹ For helpful studies on the connection between the sanctuary and the great controversy, see Timm (2003, p. 59-84); Davidson (2000, p. 102-119).

²² Peckham (2022, p. 680) explains that a systematic theology of the sanctuary requires “a full-scale treatment of all of the canonical data, which is (obviously) beyond the scope of” his chapter.



interested in exploring the theology of the sanctuary not only as a doctrine (what Scripture teaches about the sanctuary) but also as touching the area of fundamental (canonical) theology, which is methodologically crucial for the development of a system. More precisely, “What does the biblical data relative to the sanctuary entail regarding the nature of reality, knowledge, God and the world?”

Moreover, Peckham points out that a systematic theology of the sanctuary should be attentive to the sanctuary as a reality, both as the typical earthly Israelite ritual system and the antitypical sanctuary in heaven. This emphasis on the reality of the sanctuary(ies) calls our attention to Scriptural references to spatial location and temporal processes in theological reflection, which touches, once again, the area of fundamental theology (Peckham, 2022, p. 691). Furthermore, he believes that the biblical canon not only informs our understanding of the sanctuary but also its “integral role within the biblical system of truth” (Peckham, 2022, p. 692). This (systematic) role is revealed by canonical answers to questions such as,

What kind of God does the sanctuary presuppose and explicate? What light does the sanctuary shed on the Great Controversy? What does the sanctuary tell us about the nature and works of Christ? What view of humanity and of sin does the sanctuary explicate? What does the sanctuary convey about atonement and salvation? (Peckham, 2022, p. 692).

As Peckham offers a few remarks regarding these questions, he actually engages with different topics and/or loci of systematic theology from a systematic perspective of the sanctuary: (1) “The Sanctuary and the God-World Relationship”, (2) “The Sanctuary and Great Controversy Theodicy”, (3) “The Sanctuary and Atonement/Sin/Soteriology”, (4) “The Sanctuary and Christ”, (5) “The Sanctuary and Humanity/Anthropology”, (6) “The Sanctuary and Ecclesiology”, (7) “The Sanctuary, Judgment, Law (Sabbath, etc.), and Hell/Eschatology” (Peckham, 2022, p. 692-708).

Therefore, even though Peckham does not explicitly discuss the debates about an integrative center or principle of articulation for the construction of a theological system, his canonical approach implicitly explores the integrative potential of the sanctuary for the articulation of systematic theology. This potential is explored in two main directions, one related to the area of fundamental theology (the nature of reality, knowledge, God and the world), which is methodologically crucial for the construction of a theological system,



and the other referring to the specific interpretation of different themes and/or loci of systematic theology.

In short, I have problematized in this section the epistemological debate about the use of a theoretical system in theology. A key point of this debate is the suspicion that a system carries the assumptions of modern rationalism, which reduces the manifold richness of the overall biblical narrative into abstract concepts deemed as comprehensive and final. In order to avoid the risk of reductive rationalism in systematic theology, it is important to develop a “soft” system, in that sense that it is open and constantly informed by the overall biblical narrative in the articulation of key theological themes (loci/doctrines) into a unified coherent whole. This openness to the biblical overall narrative should not be understood only in the sense that this narrative is supposed to materially inform the content of the parts (themes/doctrines/loci) of the theological system, but also in the sense that the historical dynamics of the overall biblical narrative has to formally inform the articulation of the parts into the whole (system). According to this standpoint, the unifying center or principle of articulation of the system is shaped by the historical dynamics of the overall biblical narrative. To put it more sharply, it is not enough to say that God, or more specifically Christ, is the unifying center of the system. Rather, the unifying center must involve the divine historical actions. To use Graf’s terminology, it is not enough to speak of the articulating agent. We also need to consider the articulating action. In the context of these methodological discussions, I have briefly described largely similar proposals that focus on the sanctuary for the unified articulation of a theological system.

Overall, the proposals view the dynamics of the sanctuary as crucial for understanding the presence and the actions of God (and, more specifically, with reference to the mediatorial role of Christ) in His relationship to the created world (especially considering human beings) in the biblical overall narrative. In other words, divine action, as observed especially in the dynamics of the (typical earthly and antitypical heavenly) sanctuary, is what unifies the parts of theology into a coherent whole in reality. From this standpoint, the task of systematic theology is to outline this unification in a theoretical system (considering its different loci), on the basis of Scripture. Canale and Graf explicitly explore the sanctuary in the larger context of the epistemological nature of systematic articulation, with particular reference to divine action, while Peckham engages more with



the themes and/or loci of systematic theology in light of the canonical theology of the sanctuary. Both efforts are important and necessary for the construction of a theological system informed by the sanctuary.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Even though I interact with different specificities from distinct areas of theology (historical theology, biblical theology, and systematic theology) in this article, it is possible to affirm that the integrating role of the sanctuary in the articulation of a theological system in the history of SDA theology, as investigated by Timm and cursorily outlined above, bears general similarities with discussions about a theological center in biblical theology and the articulation of parts into a coherent whole in systematic theology. In comparison with biblical theology, the history of SDA theology identifies the sanctuary as a central topic in Scripture and, in dialogue with systematic theology, the prophetic/eschatological emphasis of SDA theology gives to the systematic approach of the sanctuary a narrative/historical shape.

The methodological discussions and the proposals of the sanctuary as a unifying center or principle of articulation in the areas of biblical and systematic theology, described in this article, have the potential to enrich the integrative contribution of the sanctuary for the construction of a theological system. In the more descriptive approach of biblical theology, the sanctuary is a key theme in the condensed narrative of the history of salvation that we find since the first chapters of the biblical canon (Davidson). While it could be said that this proposal confuses a unifying center with the articulation of the whole, as some would qualify this condensed narrative as the unified whole that results from the articulation rather than the unifying articulation itself (See Graf, 2017, p. 310-311), this proposal of a multifaceted unifying center could be compared to DNA, which contains the basic structure to be developed in the system. Furthermore, the sanctuary is a unifying center in the sense that it constitutes the nexus in the relationship between God and human beings, and the delineation of this nexus is particularly established in the Torah, which is the foundation for the development of biblical theology. Comparatively, in the more constructive approach of systematic theology, the understanding of a unifying center or principle of articulation is not primarily defined in terms of a central topic identified in the canonical text, but as the divine/Christological historical unifying activity



in the world, which is presented in the canonical text. According to this standpoint, the sanctuary is seen as a unifying center or principle of articulation in the sense that its historical dynamics canonically inform our understanding of divine historical action and, as a result, illuminate each doctrine of systematic theology, as our understanding of the loci flows from the explanation of God's actions.

These proposals of the sanctuary as a unifying center or principle of articulation should inform and stimulate further research on the integrative role of the sanctuary in the construction of a theological system. One avenue to be explored is the investigation of the different ways in which the sanctuary itself implies a system. For instance, if we take the earthly sanctuaries, the concrete structural dimension of the sanctuary implied a system, since all the concrete parts (and furniture) constituted a coherent whole. More broadly, its concrete structure organized/systematized the people of Israel as a community. Moreover, the sanctuary articulated a temporal system, in terms of organizing a calendar to be followed in Israel. Furthermore, the combination of spatial (concrete structure) and temporal (calendar) dimensions entailed a ritual system, divinely delineated in connection with a legal system that formalized the covenant between God and His people. All these systems are to be taken as types to be temporally fulfilled in history, which involves dimensions such as Christology (and soteriology) and prophecy (eschatology) in connection with the heavenly sanctuary. The relationship between type and antitype also implies some form of typological system to be delineated. Individually, these discussions are not new, but they could be more specifically investigated from the methodological perspective of a systematic dynamics, having in view previous proposals of the unifying role of the sanctuary, and offer additional insights to reflections on the integrative role of the sanctuary for the construction of a theological system.

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