Preliminary Considerations

"These things
[in the Old Testament]
were written down
for our instruction,
upon whom the end
of the ages has come."

1 CORINTHIANS 10:11

1. THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE

The Task of Biblical Theology

Theology is faith seeking understanding.[1] Standing within the circle of faith, a theologian articulates and elaborates the faith of the believing and worshiping community so that members of the community, or others interested, may understand who God is, God's relationship to the world and all that is in it, and the unfolding purpose of God from creation to consummation.

When this definition is applied to the Bible, which in the Christian community consists of both Old and New Testaments, the question immediately arises: what is faith?

The writer of the Epistle of Jude (v. 3) speaks of "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." Here *the faith* (with a definite article) means "a clear system of teachings"[2]—a body of doctrine that was packaged and delivered to the community. This view reflects the situation of the church at the end of the apostolic age when it became necessary to have a creedal "rule of faith," or essential affirmations of faith, for the purpose of maintaining the identity of the community in the world and defending the gospel against novel teaching (e.g., Gnosticism).

In the Bible, with the major exception of this passage in the Epistle of Jude, faith is generally a *relationship* between human beings and God. To be sure, faith is nuanced in various ways. In the New Testament faith centers in Jesus Christ, who reveals God and introduces a new age. In the Old Testament faith is steadfast reliance on God amid the uncertainties and insecurities of life. "The righteous live by their faith [*ʾemunah*]" (Hab. 2:4), that is, by faithful trust and waiting in hope for God's purpose to triumph. This vital faith finds expression in essential affirmations, such as the sole power of God (as in the Shema, Deut. 6:4), but it is weakened, if not eclipsed, when congealed into belief in doctrines.

When faith is understood in this dynamic, relational sense, the task of the biblical theologian is something other than organizing and systematizing doctrines. Biblical theologians engage in the difficult task of "beating the crust back into the batter," to borrow a figure of speech; that is, they seek to go behind the later incrustations of doctrine to the living experience of faith with all of its ambiguities, temptations, and struggles. This task requires that the theologian take into account the various ways that faith finds expression in the language of religious imagination: in poetry, story, and patterns of symbolism. Faith is not bound by literalism

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1. In a classical definition, *fides quaerens intellectum* (Anselm). See the introduction to systematic (dogmatic) theology by Daniel L. Migliori, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

2. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown et al. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 918.

on the one hand or by historicism on the other, but seeks to understand how words and events are charged with sacred meaning so that they become, as Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, "hyphens" connecting heaven and earth, God and humanity.[3] Theology of this sort is nearer to art than to science, to imaginative portrayal than to prosaic discourse. It appeals to the poet within us, as "deep calls unto deep" (Ps. 42:7). To comprehend God's relationship to the world and God's activity within it, writes Patrick Miller as he reflects on theological trends of the past decades, "it may be that our most helpful language will turn out to be located in poetic speech and in images that belong more to poetry and story than to philosophical analysis."[4]

The Old Testament as Canonical Scripture

Old Testament theology is a Christian discipline. Since the dawn of Christianity, "Old Testament" (Old Covenant) has been the standard label for the Scriptures that the early Christian community inherited from ancient Israel. The term indicates that the early Christian movement began in the heart of Judaism, that the pristine Christian proclamation was based on the Jewish Scriptures (called the Law and the Prophets), and that the two communities of faith belong together, as Paul argued effectively in Romans 9–11, sharing a common Bible and therefore a common story.[5]

The language "old covenant" (testament) is reminiscent of a famous prophecy in the book of Jeremiah (31:31-33) about two epochs: the time of the old Mosaic covenant, which ended in human failure; and the time of the new covenant, when the divine *torah* (law, teaching) will be written on the heart and there will be such personal knowledge of God that religious teaching will no longer be necessary. In Jeremiah's prophecy the issue is eschatology, the relation between the old age and the new, not between two bodies of Scripture.

The Jewish community located at Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea (end of third century B.C. to A.D. 70) thought of itself as a community of the new covenant. Believing that the new age was about to come, these covenanters (probably Essenes) searched Jewish Scriptures for prophecies that were going to be fulfilled. Similarly, the early Christian community considered itself a community of the new covenant. In their own way Christians also read Jewish Scriptures with the conviction that the anticipated age of the new covenant had already dawned through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah (Christ). It was appropriate, then, that in the second century, when Christians compiled their own

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3. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955), 244.

4. From the concluding paragraph of an editorial, "Revisiting the God Who Acts," *TToday*, 54, no. 1 (1997) 5.

5. See my essay, "The Bible as the Shared Story of a People," in *The Old and the New Testaments: Their Relationship and the "Intertestamental" Literature*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1993), 19–37.

writings, they labeled them the Scriptures of the new covenant, to distinguish them from the Scriptures of ancient Israel. Thus the church has a bipartite canon, a two-volume book of Scriptures: the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

In recent years the Christian title "Old Testament" ("Old Covenant") has been paralleled with, or even superseded by, the neutral description "Hebrew Bible." This "renaming of Scripture" is generally practiced in academic circles (e.g., American Academy of Religion, Society of Biblical Literature), but it has also crept into Christian worship services, where a reading from the "Old Testament" is sometimes introduced by: "Listen to a reading from the Hebrew Bible."[6]

At best, this retitling of Scripture expresses an irenic, ecumenical spirit. Too long has the contrast between the "old" and the "new" fostered an anti-Semitism that has resulted in vicious hostility and terrible genocide. Christianity does not supersede Judaism; indeed, Jesus did not come to "destroy" Israel's Scriptures but to "fulfill" them (Matt. 5:17), to "complete" them. To its credit, the new nomenclature, "Hebrew Bible," attempts to respect Judaism as a religion in its own right, not an error that Christianity came to correct. Also, this noncommittal language may express an openness to Islam, which includes portions of the "Old Testament" in the Koran. It is significant that three great religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—trace their roots to Abraham, the great ancestor of the faithful.

Often, however, this "politically correct" language is influenced by the reductionist view that the sacred writings of the Bible are only historical documents that must be interpreted in the context of ancient culture, specifically that of the ancient Near East. So viewed, the Old Testament is not interpreted "confessionally," as the inspired canonical books of a community of faith, but as literature that reflects "the religion of Israel," which, in turn, is part of the history of ancient religions. The great scholar Hermann Gunkel, who did so much to awaken a poetic appreciation of the Hebrew Bible through the use of form criticism, maintained that the biblical interpreter must view the religion of Israel in the wider context of the literature of surrounding peoples, such as the Babylonians and Egyptians. In his poetic universalism, biblical theology, with its concern for Israel's distinctive theological witness, was abandoned in favor of the history of Israelite religion.[7]

Problems in Renaming Scripture

The term "Hebrew Bible," however, is not satisfactory for a number of reasons. First, this label refers to the original language in which most of these writings were composed: Hebrew. A comparable designation for the "New Testament" would be

6. See the forceful article by William Johnson Everett, "Renaming Scripture," *Christian Century* 114, no. 30 (1997) 965–66, who challenges Christians to think theologically about this change in language.

7. On Gunkel's romanticism, see my introductory essay to the translation of Martin Noth's *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), especially xviii–xx.

"Koine Greek Scriptures." Designating these Scriptures by language gets us into difficulties. Not all of the Hebrew Bible is written in Hebrew: some is written in Aramaic (parts of the books of Ezra and Daniel). Moreover, the Hebrew Bible, as we can see from the translation of the Jewish Publication Society (NJPSV), excludes a number of writings found in the Catholic Christian Bible (sometimes called the Old Testament Apocrypha) that help to fill in the gap between the restoration of the Jewish community under Ezra and Nehemiah (fifth century B.C.) and the later rabbinical and Christian periods.

Second, the term is unsatisfactory because the early Christian church adopted for its Scripture the Greek Bible known as the Septuagint, a translation that began in Alexandria, Egypt, in the third century B.C. The Septuagint included not only the Hebrew Bible (preeminently the Law and the Prophets) but also writings that came to be called "apocryphal" (Protestant) or "deuterocanonical" (Catholic). At the time of the Reformation some parts of the Christian community (Lutherans, Calvinists) declared that only the books included in the Jewish Bible were canonical Scripture, and regarded the extra "apocryphal" books as useful for edification.

Third, the Christian Bible often has a different order of books. For instance, in the Hebrew Bible the book of Ruth is located in the third section (Writings), sandwiched between Proverbs and Song of Songs, whereas in the Christian Bible, influenced by the order of the Septuagint, it is found among the historical books (called Former Prophets in Jewish tradition), adjacent to the book of Judges. Also, the "minor prophets," Zechariah and Malachi, are located at the very end of the Old Testament just before the New Testament, whereas the Hebrew Bible concludes with 1–2 Chronicles, which belongs to the Writings.

The difference in the sequence of books may have theological significance.[8] On the basis of the arrangement of the Hebrew Bible some have argued that the Hebrew canon bears witness to "the disappearance of God." In the first part (Torah or Pentateuch) God is a primary actor and many miracles occur, but by the time one reaches the last part (the Writings) God scarcely appears (e.g., in Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah) or not at all (as in Esther). The disappearance of God is allegedly connected with humanity's coming of age, even at the terrible cost of "the death of God."[9]

If this is the canonical witness of the Hebrew Bible (which is doubtful), the Old Testament of the early Christian church (the Septuagint) makes just the opposite witness. There the last books (the Twelve Minor Prophets) express an eschatological expectancy of the Day of the Lord, when God will come in majesty and power to establish a new age on earth. The location of the prophets at the end of the Old Testament was appropriate in a community that announced that Jesus

8. See James A. Sanders, "'Spinning' the Bible: How Judaism and Christianity Shape the Canon Differently," *BR* 14, no. 3 (1998) 23–29. He discusses how the different scriptural canons arose and the hermeneutical implications of the differences between them.

9. Richard Elliot, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995). Reviewed by Ronald S. Hendel, *BR* 12, no. 1 (1996) 17.

came to fulfill the hopes and expectations of Israel's prophets.

Finally, the retitling of Scripture, despite the intention to avoid the view that Christianity supersedes Judaism, may result in too sharp a separation between the Jewish and the Christian communities. After the Holocaust we want to be sure that Judaism has its own integrity as a religion and that, along with Christianity and Islam, it receives equal legal protection and social recognition. But this separation can be carried too far. Christianity and Judaism belong closely together in the elective purpose of God; therefore, the Old Testament cannot be torn out of the Christian Bible. "From the Christian perspective the literary separation of the two testaments," writes William J. Everett, "undermines the very core of Christian faith. The New Testament simply doesn't make any sense apart from the Old, and we need to say so every week in the way we worship."[10]

Thus for theological reasons it is best to avoid the term "Hebrew Bible" and speak of either Jewish Scriptures (Jewish usage) or the Old Testament (Christian usage). Some people, believing that "old" and "new" are prejudicial (the new is supposedly better), suggest shifting to First and Second Testaments. But it is doubtful that this innovation will become established. In my judgment, Christians should not be hesitant to use their own canonical language in Christian worship services and in intramural theological discussions.

Early Christian Scripture

Before the Christian community published this two-part canon of sacred writings, it had no scriptures of its own. It had only the received Scriptures of the Jewish people, divided into three major parts: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. The third part, the Writings, was not yet completed in the first century A.D., but one of its major components was the book of Psalms, which was used in synagogue worship. Indeed, this book was so important that the third part of the Jewish canon could be referred to simply as "the Psalms." Philo of Alexandria, who died about the middle of the first century, spoke of "the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms."[11] The same usage is found in Luke's Gospel, from the late first century, which refers to "the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44).

The latter reference is in Luke's beautiful story of two disciples walking from Jerusalem to a nearby village, Emmaus. They were sad about the crucifixion of their leader, and disillusioned about the hope that he was the Messiah of Israel; but as they walked, so the story goes, they were joined by a stranger who interpreted the recent events in the light of Israel's scriptures, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets" (v. 17). The stranger proved to be Jesus, who declared that these

10. Everett, "Renaming Scripture," 966.

11. *De Vita Contemplativa*, cited by Nahum Sarna, *BR* 9, no. 4 (1993) 32–40. See also the prologue to the Wisdom of Ben Sira (in the Protestant Apocrypha) which refers to the teachings given "through the Law and the prophets and the other books," showing that at this time the third part of the Hebrew Bible (Writings) was still open-ended. Ben Sira's grandson translated the work from Hebrew to Greek ca. 130 B.C.

things had happened "in order that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." We read (v. 45): "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures."

This story indicates two things. First, the Scriptures of Israel do not prepare readers for the event of the crucifixion of God's Messiah and, the other side of that event, his victorious resurrection from the dead. There is a profound discontinuity between the witness of the Old Testament and Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. These events were surprising, and in a sense unexpected and unbelievable. But second, the disciples were persuaded to believe that, in a profound sense, the Jesus story was part of "the great story and plot of all time and space," as Amos Wilder puts it.[12] In a Christian rereading of Israel's Scriptures it was indeed "necessary" (Greek *dei*) for Jesus to suffer as he did before his vocation was crowned with victory (Luke 24:26). This event was not accidental but belonged somehow to the unity of God's redemptive purpose. The surprising novelty of all of this did not cancel out the expectations of the prophets.

Written for Our Instruction

Hence, early Christians insisted that the Bible they read, that is, the Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms, did not belong exclusively to the Jewish community; it belonged to them too. They could say, as did Paul, that "these things were written down for our instruction upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11). Or as Paul puts it succinctly toward the conclusion of his Epistle to the Romans: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

Even today in the Christian communion service worshipers often join in the "Great Thanksgiving" to God "for the goodness and love which you have made known to us in creation, in the calling of Israel to be your people, in your Word spoken through the prophets, and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus your Son." Creation, Israel, the prophets, Jesus Christ—that is the sequence of the great story.

Early Christians, then, seized the Jewish Bible and made it their own. Indeed, whenever the word "scripture(s)" (*graphe, graphai*) occurs in the New Testament it refers, almost without exception, to the Jewish Bible. That is probably true of the famous statement in 2 Tim. 3:16: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." Here the scriptures of Israel are regarded as "God-breathed" on the analogy of Gen. 2:7, where God breathes vitality into the first human being.

In sum: the "Old Testament" is an essential part of the Christian Bible. It was "canonical" Scripture long before the discussions of the second century produced a list of authoritative Christian writings. Even today this part of the Christian Bible is—or should be—used in worship, preaching, and education. It is also consulted when formulating Christian doctrine (e.g., creation) or when seeking guid-

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12. Amos N. Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 64.

ance on ethical issues (e.g., questions of social justice).

1. See the title of Brevard Childs's work, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). The distinction between Old Testament and New Testament theology in the context of biblical theology goes back to G. L. Bauer in works written at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

2. The Relative Independence of the Old Testament

Early Christians, we have seen, regarded the scriptures of Israel as their scriptures too, in which they perceived the unfolding purpose of God since creation and in which they found clues to the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. But this appropriation of the Old Testament proved to be difficult. For the Christian church the Old Testament has a somewhat alien character. This has shown up in various ways down through the centuries, beginning with early attempts to reject these scriptures as non-Christian and coming into the present, when many Christians sense the Old Testament to be a problem. This part of the Bible is sometimes written off as "pre-Christian" literature, because of its ancient views of God or outdated moral injunctions.

The truth of the matter is that the Old Testament has a relative independence in the Christian Bible. That is why it is possible for Christians to speak of "Old Testament theology," as something relatively distinct from "New Testament theology." A better designation would be "biblical theology of the Old Testament," a formulation that implies the essential relationship between the Old and New Testaments in the Christian Bible.[1]

Relationship between the Testaments

The relationship between the two testaments is one of continuity and discontinuity. In dealing with the Old Testament, the church has often fallen into one of two extremes.

The first extreme has been to overemphasize discontinuity. In this view the "new" has superseded the "old"; hence the "old" must be regarded as antithetical, preparatory, provisional, inferior. That was the view of Marcion in the second century, who went so far as to say that the Old Testament presents the revelation of "the strange God," different from the God revealed in Jesus Christ. His view, though regarded at the time as a heresy, was echoed by the church historian Adolf

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2. English translation by John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1989) of Adolph Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (2d ed.; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1924).

3. See the lead essay by Bultmann, "The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Faith" (trans. B. W. Anderson), in the symposium that I edited, *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 8–35. Elements of the present discussion have been drawn from my introduction there, pp. 1–7.

4. Hartmut Gese's thesis, set forth in a German essay, "Erwägungen zur Einheit der biblischen Theologie," *ZTK* 67 (1970) 417–36, is cited and summarized by Petr Pokorny, "The Problem of Biblical theology," *HBT* 15, no. 1 (1993) 90–91.

5. See his essay, "Everywhere the Scripture Is about Christ Alone," in *Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. Anderson, 90–101.

6. Pokorny, "Problem," 91.

Harnack in the twentieth century. In his book *Marcion: The Gospel of a Strange God*, Harnack declared that in the second century the church rightly refused to reject the Old Testament, that in the sixteenth century the retention of the Old Testament was a fateful necessity that the Reformation was not yet able to escape, but that in the period since the nineteenth century the inclusion of the Old Testament in the Christian canon is the sign of "a religious and ecclesiastical paralysis."[2] The New Testament theologian Rudolf Bultmann came very close to this position in his view of the significance of the Old Testament for Christian faith. He maintained that the Old Testament provides only a "preunderstanding" for the Christian gospel, in the sense that it shows human inadequacy and failure that, when taken seriously, prepare one to receive the grace of God in Jesus Christ.[3]

The other extreme is to minimize the distinction between the testaments and to regard the Old Testament as leading directly to the New. This view is held, for instance, by Hartmut Gese, who regards the New Testament as part of a continuing stream of tradition that flows through the whole Christian Bible.[4] This view is espoused in another way by Wilhelm Vischer, who finds Jesus Christ hidden in the Old Testament.[5] For instance, Jacob's nocturnal wrestle with a stranger at the ford of the Jabbok River (Gen. 32:22-32) is understood to be an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ incognito.

"These views," as Petr Pokorny observes rightly, "run the risk of defrauding the Old Testament of its relative autonomy, in which it could also remain the Bible of the Jews, and of relativizing the unique features of the Christian message."[6] He goes on to say: "the New Testament was canonized neither as a substitute for the Jewish Bible, nor as its continuation, but as its counterpart." In short, it has a relative independence. Not an absolute independence, please understand, but a relative one, like that of two partners when joined in matrimony. Or, to shift the figure, the Christian Bible is like an antiphonal choir, in which both testaments stand vis-à-vis each other, joining in praise to the God who is creator and redeemer.

Letting the Old Testament Speak for Itself

One of the implications of this view of the relationship between the testaments is that, if we are faithful to Scripture, we are obligated to let the Old Testament speak with its own voice, even though that means interpreting passages differently than New Testament authors do. For instance, we must free texts like Genesis 2–3 from questionable interpretations that emphasize the subordination of women to men, as in 1 Tim. 2:12-15: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man;

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7. See Phyllis Trible, "A Love Story Gone Awry," in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), chap. 4.

8. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 77–78.

9. See his essay and my response in *HBT* 8, no. 2 (1986) 33–50, 51–59, respectively.

10. The Talmud is a large body of Jewish law and commentary that evolved during the period A.D. 200 to approximately the mid-sixth century.

11. Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985), 4.

she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve." This view does not do justice to the Old Testament narrative. For when it is read on its own as "a tale that is being told," or a process of creation that takes place in dramatic episodes, the relation between the sexes in God's original creation is one of mutuality, not subordination, as Phyllis Trible has perceptively shown.[7]

Of course, in the Christian community it is proper to regard Scripture as a whole in a christological perspective, but this does not mean forcing particular texts to bear witness to Jesus Christ or to carry a Christian meaning. That the Old Testament must be allowed to maintain its own voice, and the New Testament too, is stressed in Brevard Childs's canonical approach to the Christian Bible. Though the Old Testament is promise and the New Testament is fulfillment, he writes, the Old Testament has not lost "its vertical, existential dimension which as scripture of the church continues to bear its own witness within the context of the Christian Bible."[8]

Admittedly, it is difficult in the community of faith to allow the Old Testament this relative independence. I was once called on to respond to a paper by Matatiahu Tsevat on "Theology of the Old Testament—a Jewish View."[9] He admitted the novelty of his presentation, for in Jewish circles "Old Testament theology" is almost unheard of—something like "the zoology of a unicorn," as he put it. He argued, however, that the Old Testament should be allowed to speak for itself independently, rather than being ancillary to the Talmud[10] (or we Christians might add, to the New Testament). At one point he used a marvelous illustration: the conveyor belt that one takes in some airports (e.g., Chicago's O'Hare), connecting both ends of a long passageway. It is easy enough to take it in one direction, he says, for "the Talmud understands itself to be a continuation and supplement of the Old Testament." But if one wants to reverse the direction, and move from the Talmud (Christians, read: "from the New Testament") to the Old Testament, it demands incredible exertion. It is well nigh impossible.

Yet what is almost impossible should be attempted. This is also the view of another Jewish scholar, Jon Levenson. In his important study of biblical theology, *Sinai and Zion*, Levenson takes his stand firmly within the Jewish community, with the result that he makes numerous references to rabbinical commentary and some critical remarks about the New Testament, especially Paul's interpretation of the law. In the introduction to this work he writes: "I make no claim that Rabbinic Judaism offers the correct understanding of the Hebrew Bible. Talmudic religion is different from its biblical ancestor . . . but the change is more evolutionary than revolutionary." He concludes: "The ultimate measure of success or failure adopted here, however, is not conformity to the Jewish tradition, but whether or not the reading proposed is true to the biblical texts themselves."[11]

That is a goal worth striving for: to give an interpretation that is "true to the biblical texts themselves" so that this body of literature (the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament) may speak with its own voice in a relatively independent way.

Continuity/Discontinuity

It is precisely this relative independence that we Christians must grant the Old Testament in the Christian Bible. There is a chasm between the two testaments, one that can be bridged only by those who are able to make the confession Peter made at Caesarea Philippi: that Jesus (whom the reader knows to be the crucified and resurrected one) is God's Messiah, the Christ (Mark 8:27-30). That christological confession establishes a deep discontinuity with Israel's Scripture and, at the same time, a deep continuity in the purpose of God. The discontinuity is expressed in the Gospel of Matthew: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, . . . but I say to you . . ." (Matt. 5:21-22, 27). The continuity is expressed in the same Gospel: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17).

This hermeneutic (or mode of interpretation) of continuity/discontinuity will result, on the one hand, in a critical assessment of the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Some of this literature has been superseded in God's ongoing purpose, for instance, the practice of holy war or the sacrificial system of the temple. On the other hand, this hermeneutic will enable the church to understand that the Old Testament has its own positive theological witness that often supplements and perhaps even corrects the New Testament witness. Some theological dimensions in the Old Testament are taken for granted in the New, such as creation theology or the prophetic message of social justice. Both testaments are theologically necessary to each other if the church is to hear in the human words of the Bible the word (revelation) of God.

The Coexistence of the Jewish and Christian Communities

This whole question of the relation between the Old and New Testaments demands that we come to terms with the coexistence of the Jewish and Christian communities in the mystery of God's purpose. Too often the downplaying of the Old Testament has been connected with anti-Semitism, which should have no place in Christianity, although tragically it has persisted down through history. A special kinship exists between Christianity and Judaism—more so than in the case of Islam, which also traces its spiritual ancestry to Abraham.

One of the outstanding attempts to deal with the kinship between the Jewish and Christian communities was that of the political philosopher Eric Voegelin in

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12. Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (rev. ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 60–61.

13. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History,* vol. 1: *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1956). See my review essay, "Politics and the Transcendent: Voegelin's Philosophical and Theological Exposition of the Old Testament in the Context of the Ancient Near East," *The Political Science Reviewer* 1 (Fall 1971) 1–29; revised and updated version in *Eric Voegelin's Search for Order,* ed. Stephen A. McKnight (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1978), 62–100.

his five-volume study, *Order and History*. In this work he addressed the question many people raised during the twentieth century—probably the most violent in human history—of whether "the created order of society, in one way or another, corresponds to an underlying order of the universe."[12] It is highly significant that Voegelin laid the foundation for his massive study by turning to the Old Testament, or more specifically to the phenomenon of ancient Israel in the context of the religions of the surrounding world.[13] He was not concerned with Israel as a political state or with the religion of Israel but with Israel as the bearer of "revelation" that provides a key to understanding the search for order in human history.

Voegelin maintained that Israel's exodus from Egypt was not just a political event in world history but an exodus from a symbolic world that enabled ancient empires, like that of Egypt, to see themselves as belonging to a cosmic order. Gods and humans, cosmos and history, the heavenly order and earthly empire, were bound up in one compact whole. Israel, however, broke from this "cosmological symbolism" and achieved a sense of "transcendence," that is, an awareness of the rule of God that cannot be identified with the political order or anything "worldly." The revelation of the transcendent God and God's created order, expressed in the symbolism of the biblical language, came to inspired persons, beginning especially with Moses, whose souls were so attuned to God and God's cosmic kingdom (rule) that they represented a new type of human being in world history.

According to Voegelin, God's revelation came at a great cost, which he described as a "mortgage" of Israel's mundane existence on the transcendent rule of God, as evidenced in attachment to an ethnic group (the people Israel) and a promised land (the land of Israel). As long as this mortgage was in effect, God's revelation could not achieve the universal implications anticipated in the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). In Christianity, however, this mortgage was liquidated, so to speak, and the promises to Israel were extended to all people (not just the chosen people) on the whole "earth" (not just the "land" of Israel).

Here we find a bold attempt to deal with a fundamental theological subject: divine revelation. Even those who do not share Voegelin's philosophical presuppositions will be allured by the author's treatment of religious symbolism, particularly the symbolism of biblical language. To this matter we shall return again and again.

The thorny problem, however, is the proposed understanding of the relationship between the Jewish and Christian communities of faith. It is ironic that

14. Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, 144, 315, 506. See further my essay, "Israel and Revelation," *BR* 13, no. 5 (1997) 17, 46–47, from which some of this discussion is taken. Also my essay presented to the Second International Conference on Voegelin's Work, held at the University of Manchester (July 1997), "Revisiting Voegelin's *Israel and Revelation* after Twenty-five Years."

15. English translation by William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) of Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (1930). See further Aaron L. Mackler, "Universal Being and Ethical Particularity in the Hebrew Bible: A Jewish Response to Voegelin's *Israel and Revelation*," *Journal of Religion* 79, no. 1 (Jan. 1999), 19–53.

Voegelin, for whom revelation to Israel is the foundation and starting point, comes out with a negative assessment of the future of Israel in God's purpose. As a Christian, he finds much that is true and good in the Old Testament, but these benefits are only partially valid because of the "mortgage"—the attachment of God's revelation to the concrete realities of this world: ethnic identity, a nation state, life on the land. Hence, just as Israel made an exodus from "cosmological civilization" under Moses, it must—owing to its inescapable involvement in the mundane sphere—engage in an "exodus from itself." It is the destiny of Israel to die and to be superseded by the universal revelation of God in Jesus Christ, in whom the promises to Abraham are extended to all peoples.[14]

The Mystery of Divine Election

In my judgment, there is a better way to view Jewish-Christian relationship, and correspondingly the relation between the Old and New Testaments. The particularity of God's revelation to the ethnic group Israel and the universal outreach and inclusivity of the Christian community need not conflict. The vocations of the two communities—one to be the people of the Torah and the other to be an inclusive community that knows no boundaries (see Gal. 3:28)—are complimentary in God's purpose. That view was set forth in Franz Rosenzweig's classic, *The Star of Redemption*.[15] At the center of the Jewish community is the fire of God's holy presence (cf. Exod. 3:2: "the bush burned, yet it was not consumed"); in the other community the rays of the fire reach outward into the whole world (cf. John 1:9: "the true light that enlightens everyone").

That view, I believe, is consonant with Paul's agonized discussion of the relation between the two communities in the face of Israel's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah (Christ). The statement that "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26) does not mean that the Jewish community of faith will make "an exodus from itself" and that all Jews will be Christianized. Rather, Paul grapples with the "mystery" (Rom. 11:25) of God's election that includes both Jews and Gentiles in "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). God is faithful to the promises made to the ancestors of Israel

16. See the important book edited and introduced by Fritz A. Rothschild, *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1990). The book presents the views of five Jewish thinkers on the relation of Christianity to Judaism, including Leo Baeck, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Will Herberg, and Abraham J. Heschel, each of whom is introduced by a Christian theologian. Note my introduction to the essay by Will Herberg, my friend and former colleague, "Judaism and Christianity: Their Unity and Difference."

17. These words echo the concluding paragraph of my *Understanding the Old Testament* (4th ed.; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 643.

and extends the meaning and power of those promises to all who have faith, those who are true children of Abraham (see Romans 4). The eschatological realization of God's purpose that "all Israel will be saved" is a mystery hidden in the grace of God. It is that mystery that prompts the apostle to exclaim at the conclusion of his anguished and not altogether consistent discussion:

> O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways!
>
> —Rom. 11:33

This is the mystery to which our subject, the relation between the testaments, pertains. The Jewish and Christian communities belong together as closely as twins in the womb of God's creative purpose. In a deep sense both communities belong to Israel, the people of God (cf. Gal. 6:16). They have in common a Bible, the shared history of the People of God, which provides the basis for creative dialogue.[16] They differ—and probably will differ till the end of time—over the question of the climax of the story: whether the pilgrimage of God's people leads through the Jewish Scriptures to the Talmud and a continued life of messianic expectancy, or whether that pilgrimage leads through the Old Testament to Jesus, the Christ, who came not to destroy but to fulfill the Law and the Prophets.[17]

1. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik,* 5 vols. in 14 (Zurich: Evangelische Verlag, 1932–1970); *Church Dogmatics,* 5 vols. in 14, trans. G. W. Bromiley, et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936–1977).

2. Robert C. Dentan, *A Preface to Old Testament Theology* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1950); this approach is elaborated in idem, *The Knowledge of God in Ancient Israel* (New York: Seabury, 1968).

3. The English translation from the Latin is by J. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldridge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology," *SJT* 33 (1980) 133–58. See Rolf P. Knierim, "On Gabler," in *The Task of Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 495–556.

3. Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century

Before venturing into a treatment of biblical theology of the Old Testament, let us pause to consider what has been going on in this field, especially in the twentieth century.

For centuries there was no separate discipline of biblical theology; rather, the issues of biblical theology were dealt with in the context of church dogmatics or the system of Christian doctrine. A modern example of this would be Karl Barth's multivolume *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (*Church Dogmatics*), which, when dealing with the various rubrics of doctrine (e.g., the doctrine of creation), gives extended treatment to the biblical witness on the subject.[1]

Some biblical theologians insist that the only way to do biblical theology is to organize the discussion according to the rubrics of doctrinal theology, which are broadly: God, humanity, salvation, eschatology. This approach has been stoutly defended by Robert Dentan, among others, in his *Preface to Old Testament Theology*.[2]

In the discussion of methodology—how to go about doing biblical theology—a fundamental question is the meaning of the preposition "of" in "theology of the Old Testament." Is there a theology of (subjective genitive) the Old Testament, one that is intrinsic to the Old Testament itself? Or is there a theology related to, or in accord with, the Bible that is the product of theological reflection from a Christian standpoint? Brevard Childs's *magnum opus, Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (1992), is compatible with a dogmatic approach, as evident from some of the chapter titles in the final section entitled "Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible." These chapters include "The Identity of God," "God the Creator," "Covenant, Election, People of God," and "Reconciliation with God."

The Rise of Biblical Theology

The rise of biblical theology as a discipline separate from dogmatic theology is usually traced back to the inaugural lecture in 1787 of Johann Phillip Gabler at the University of Altdorf, Germany, "A Discourse on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Correct Delimitation of Their Boundaries."[3] In this lecture Gabler declared that the two disciplines differ because

4. See Ben C. Ollenburger, "Old Testament Theology: A Discourse on Method," in *Biblical Theology: Problems and Perspectives: In Honor of J. Christiaan Beker*, ed. Steven J. Kraftchick et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 81–103.

5. First used in the Student Christian Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, later published in several recensions. The version published by Fortress Press (1988) is still in circulation. This study guide is strongly influenced by historical criticism.

6. Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, trans. S. G. Sowers (New Testament Library; London: SCM, 1967).

each uses a different method: the biblical theologian uses a historical approach, while the systematic theologian has a didactic interest, to give teaching (doctrine) to the church.

The first step for the biblical theologian, according to Gabler, is to consider the historical context (period, authorship, social circumstance); the next step is to compare the various historical texts to see where they agree or disagree; the final step is to sift out what is historically incidental from what is timelessly true. It is this "pure biblical theology," freed from what is temporary and passing, that the dogmatic theologian uses in setting forth teaching for the church. Thus biblical theology stands over against dogmatic theology, the one being basically historical and the other doctrinal.

Gabler raised a new question, but he was unable to give a constructive answer that stood the test of discussion. In his search for ideas that are timelessly and universally valid, he was too much under the influence of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. In retrospect it is evident that his groundbreaking essay only opened up the question of what biblical theology is and the method appropriate to the discipline.[4]

History of Salvation

A creative attempt to take seriously the historical character of Scripture was made by Johann Christian Hoffmann (1810–1877). He espoused the view that the Bible presents a "history of salvation" (*Heilsgeschichte*), that is, an unfolding drama of God's saving purpose, manifested in crucial events. Hoffman was influenced by the "federal" or "covenant" theology of John Koch, or Cocceius (d. 1669), one of the early Protestant theologians. In his *Summa Doctrinae de Foedere* (Summation of Covenant Doctrine) Hoffman insisted that people should cease turning to the Bible for proof texts (*dicta probantia*) to support doctrine; rather, they should study the dramatic movement of the Bible as a whole. For him the Bible presents a series of revelatory stages, a history of redemption, extending from creation to consummation. The canon of the Bible, in this view, is dynamic in the sense that it is based on the sequence of sacred history, the story of "the marvelous deeds of God."

This dramatic understanding of the Bible, which is reflected to some degree in my study guide, *The Unfolding Drama of the Bible*,[5] has had considerable influence in the twentieth century. It is defended, above all, by the New Testament theologian Oscar Cullmann in his book *Salvation in History*.[6] Although he avoids using the term "history of salvation" (*Heilsgeschichte*), he maintains that the Bible portrays a series

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7. Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. xxvii.

8. See my later treatment of covenantal patterns of symbolism, chapters 4ff.

9. Fosdick's writings include *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), and *A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1938).

10. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, 2 vols., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961–67), 1:31.

of events that the biblical authors regarded as revealing the saving presence of God in human history—not history in general, but the special history reported in the Bible.

Theology of Divine Presence

A creative attempt to deal with biblical theology as a whole, including both Old and New Testaments, is the fascinating work by Samuel Terrien, with its elegant title *The Elusive Presence*. Terrien maintains that "it is the distinctiveness of the Hebraic theology of presence rather than the ideology of the covenant which provides a key to understanding the Bible."[7] The biblical theology of God's presence is rooted in the cult (community worship) and finds expression in symbolism that appeals to both the "mystical eye" (God's "glory") and "the ethical ear" (God's "name"). Both types of symbolism are necessary to express what is fundamental in both testaments: the real presence of the holy, transcendent God who is both revealed and hidden (Isa. 45:15). This study, which has not received the attention it deserves, is important for biblical theologians who want to take seriously the symbolic, poetic, aesthetic dimensions of Scripture.[8]

Two Major Old Testament Theologies

The question of whether there is a theology that can be derived from the Old Testament itself is answered in the affirmative, but in quite different ways, by the two great Old Testament theologians of the twentieth century, the Swiss theologian Walther Eichrodt and the German theologian Gerhard von Rad. In their separate ways they broke with the liberal view that had emerged since the Enlightenment that in the Bible one can trace a spiritual growth or evolution from the primitive level of Mosaic religion to the "ethical monotheism" of the prophets and the New Testament. This "modern use of the Bible" was popularized by Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878–1964), minister of Riverside Church in New York City, who maintained that "abiding experiences"—relevant even today—underlie the "changing categories" of the biblical development.[9]

Eichrodt's Covenant Theology

Eichrodt defined the task of Old Testament theology by raising a question: "How to understand the realm of Old Testament belief in its structural unity and how, by examining on the one hand its religious environment and on the other its essential coherence with the New Testament, to illuminate its profoundest meaning."[10]

This definition indicates two fundamental concerns. First, Eichrodt wanted to understand the Old Testament in the context of the cultural environment of the ancient Near East. To appreciate this interest we must consider the situation in

11. For translations of both of these stories, see *ANET*, 42–44 and 72–99. A popular version, quite accessible to the general reader, is David Ferry, *Gilgamesh: A New Rendering in English Verse* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992).

12. See *ANET*, 129–55.

which he found himself as a biblical interpreter. When he wrote (in the early 1930s), Old Testament theology was overshadowed by study of the religion of Israel, which in turn was viewed in the wider context of the history of religions (*Religionsgeschichte*). There was much excitement about the rediscovery of the literature of ancient cultures, for example, the excavation of the palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (from the late sixth century B.C.) that yielded the Babylonian story of the flood (Gilgamesh Epic) and the Babylonian creation epic (*Enuma Elish*).[11] Also, beginning in 1928 new light was thrown on the religion of Israel by the discovery of the Ras Shamra tablets, Canaanite mythological texts dating from the fourteenth century B.C.[12] It became increasingly clear that the Old Testament was part and parcel of the literature of the ancient world. Eichrodt attempted to revive the task of Old Testament theology by demonstrating that something unique was going on in ancient Israel—not just a general historical-cultural development but a special movement of divine revelation.

Another concern was to understand the Old Testament's "essential coherence" with the New. Eichrodt wanted to let the Old Testament speak in its own way, but also to show that its message is consistent with that of the New. He insisted that the Old Testament has a relative independence, but that it belongs within the canonical context of the Christian Bible.

What, then, is the witness of the Old Testament that was unique in its ancient cultural environment and coherent with the message of the New Testament? Eichrodt maintained that the dominant thrust of the Old Testament was the inbreaking of the kingdom of God into ancient Israel and its dynamic movement toward the manifestation of God's dominion in Jesus Christ. In this sense, the Bible as a whole discloses a history of salvation—a movement of divine redemption, evidenced in God's entrance into the historical arena to call and constitute a people and, through that people, to lead toward the time when God's kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven.

Furthermore, Eichrodt maintained that the theologian can take a "cross-section" (*Querschnitt*) of this dynamic development at any point in the historical process in order to explore the Old Testament's structure of belief and to perceive its integrity vis-à-vis the religions of the environment. Just as a logger can cut through a tree and study the structure of its growth, so the theologian can study the "cross-section" that shows the "inner shape" or consistent structure manifest in its development. The faith of Israel is not a miscellaneous assortment of beliefs, nor is it only a process of growth and development. Rather, it manifests a structural unity or theological integrity that is fundamentally the same in all historical stages. Eichrodt's approach is *synchronic* ("happening together," like notes struck simultaneously in a musical chord), though he also attempted to do justice to the *diachronic*

13. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955). See further my essay, "Coexistence with God: Heschel's Exposition of Biblical Theology," in *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Exploring His Life and Thought*, ed. John C. Merkle (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 47–65, especially 53–58.

dimension ("happening through time," like the successive notes of a scale). In his view Old Testament theology does not concentrate on growth or evolution (e.g., the growth of the idea of God) but on "structural" features that remain the same in all historical periods.

Finally, Eichrodt maintained that when a cross-section is taken, the structure of the "log," visible at any place that one chooses to make a cut, is covenantal, that is, it manifests relationship between God and people. He was not concerned to lift up a particular covenant (e.g., Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic) or to study the uses of the term "covenant" (*berith*); rather, he wanted to stress the relational character of the faith of ancient Israel. The Old Testament does not deal with God as a separate subject (theology) or with Israel as a separate subject (anthropology); rather, theology and anthropology belong together, in relationship. Hence the importance of the copula "and": God *and* Israel, God *and* the world, God *and* human being—the major captions of his work.

Here, then, we find an attempt to deal with the dynamic (historical) and the structural (systematic), the diachronic and the synchronic. In this view the Old Testament discloses a movement in time toward the New Testament revelation (a history of redemption), but the faith of Israel, the people of God, maintains its identity and integrity during the whole movement.

This impressive proposal was instrumental in bringing about a revival of interest in Old Testament theology. But the question was quickly raised and debated: Can the whole Old Testament be brought under the umbrella of "covenant"? There are actually several covenant "theologies" in the Old Testament, as we shall see; and not all the literature of the Old Testament belongs in any kind of covenantal framework (e.g., wisdom literature such as Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes). Furthermore, Eichrodt's attempt to discover "structural unity" was unsuccessful; there is too much variety and diversity to allow for that. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the *relational* character of Old Testament theology was a salutary contribution that we need to retain. The Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel said something similar from his perspective: revelation is not the disclosure of God's nature or essence but of God's "relation to history."[13]

Von Rad's Story-telling Theology

We turn now to the second major Old Testament theologian of the twentieth century, Gerhard von Rad. His monumental work, *Old Testament Theology*, came out in two volumes: *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (1962) and *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions* (1965). This work represents a radical departure from Eichrodt's presentation.

14. See definitions of "form criticism" and "canonical criticism" in my *Understanding the Old Testament* (abridged 4th ed.; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 487–88, 578.

15. In Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 1–78.

Von Rad criticized Eichrodt's work for not doing justice to the character of the Old Testament itself. It was too structural, too systematic, and not sufficiently dynamic and historical. Consonant with this criticism, he advocated a new methodology, one that uses form criticism and the history of traditions. Form criticism is a method that studies the literary form of scriptural units in their social setting (e.g., a poem for an enthronement ceremony; cf. Psalm 2). Tradition history is a method that studies the expansion, combination, and reinterpretation of literary units (poems, stories, law codes, oracles, proverbs, etc.) from their original formulation in oral tradition until the final formation of the tradition as the received Scriptures.[14]

His method was set forth in his programmatic essay, "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch," in which he tried to account for the simplicity of Israel's early confession of faith, found in the so-called little historical credo (Deut. 26:5-10), and the greatly expanded elaboration of its content in the Hexateuch as a whole.[15] In his view the final literary composition (Hexateuch) was the end result of a history—a history of traditions. It is this history that the theologian must take seriously—not events in a history of Israel or even events in a "history of salvation," at least in the old sense, but a history of traditions, that is, history of the interpretation and reinterpretation of the core confession of faith.

Thus von Rad's method is diachronic. The Old Testament, he said, is by and large a history book that, in all its diversity, bears witness to the history of Yahweh with his people. It presents the unfolding drama of the divine purpose with Israel from its beginnings until the coming of the Son of Man. This "history," however, is not ordinary history, as John Bright and Martin Noth have written, but a history of traditions, in which an early Israelite confession of faith was constantly being reinterpreted in new situations. Past tradition was always being contemporized in new times, new circles, new ways; and this went on continuously until finally the process of reinterpretation reached its climax in the New Testament.

Accordingly, the task of the Old Testament theologian is to "retell" the story just as Israel told and retold it. "Event," von Rad said with a critical eye toward Eichrodt and all systematicians, "has priority over logos." In this history of traditions there are many breaks, many new starts, many disconnected testimonies. There is no systematic unity, but diversity, variety, multiplicity. Indeed, he went so

16. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962–65), 2:428–29.

17. Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 111. The flux and ferment in the Old Testament field is well described and analyzed by Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

18. A helpful introduction to postmodern philosophy and its impact on Christian theology is *A Primer of Postmodernism*, ed. Stanley J. Grenz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). See also Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

19. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

far as to say that the attempt to find anything in the Old Testament that gives it theological integrity or unity is misguided. Here we are dealing with a process, a movement, a history of traditions that has no "center" (*Mitte*). The process reaches its culmination in Jesus Christ, who is the center of the Bible (obviously this means the Christian Bible).

This, too, is a magnificent presentation. For a brief time it swept the field until the demise of the "biblical theology movement" around 1970 (approximately the time of Brevard Childs's book, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*). Several problems emerged in the course of discussion. For one thing, von Rad made a sharp distinction between "actual history" and "story of faith." Theologically, he was concerned not with events in history but with a history of traditions, reconstructed according to the method of form criticism. Also, von Rad was not very clear about what gave Israel a distinctive theological integrity and sense of identity over against the environment. He spoke about "the inner connection (*Zusammenhang*) of Old Testament speech about God," but surely this coherence cannot be explained only on the basis of a history of traditions. Moreover, von Rad seemed to deny that the Old Testament speaks with an independent theological voice, even within the Christian canon. Apart from Jesus Christ, he said, the Old Testament has no theological center or integrity, and belongs only to the history of Israel's religion. It is with words to this effect that his *Old Testament Theology* closes.[16]

The Future of Old Testament Theology

So, where do we go from here? As a student humorously asked, "Is there life after *Heilsgeschichte*?"

Walter Brueggemann begins an essay on "Futures in Old Testament Theology" with the observation: "The only two things sure about Old Testament theology now are: l. The ways of Walther Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad are no longer adequate. 2. There is no consensus among us about what comes next."[17]

Brueggemann's Bipolar Theology

Among scholars of a younger generation Brueggemann has taken the lead in addressing the problems and possibilities of producing an Old Testament theology in the "postmodern" climate of biblical studies, that is, in the period after the domination of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.[18] In advance of the recent appearance of his own major opus, *Theology of the Old Testament*,[19] he wrote several preliminary essays that give some indications of how a "new" Old Testament theology should be conceived.

20. Walter Brueggemann, "Futures in Old Testament Theology," in *Old Testament Theology*, 114.

21. Ibid., 114–15.

22. This bipolar dialectic is discussed in his two lead essays on Old Testament theology in *Old Testament Theology*: "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation," 1–21; and "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," 22–44.

To begin with, he proposes that the biblical theologian should "accept a mode probably more appropriate to our cultural moment of scattering and our intellectual moment of hermeneutical self-knowledge." We should be realistic about the breakdown of any consensus in biblical studies and about the inescapability of a hermeneutical perspective. This is no time, he avers, for "a grand design" that "includes and accounts for everything," such as attempted in the monumental works of Eichrodt and von Rad.[20]

Specifically, this means that "we might cease to ask about a *center* for Old Testament theology and ask about boundaries, edges, limits, parameters, within which faith proceeds and beyond which it may not legitimately go." Unlike Childs, who, as we shall see, declares that the canon of Scripture sets the boundaries, Brueggemann proposes a sociological criterion: "cultural embrace" and "cultural criticism." By this he means that "in every issue [under discussion] one may ask the extent to which Israel borrows, appropriates, coheres with the general practice of the ancient Near Eastern culture and the extent to which it makes its own distinctive statement out of its own concrete experience, which has the effect of transforming cultural forms and values."[21] From these statements it is clear that Old Testament theology must take seriously the religions of the ancient Near East, which in this discussion are designated "the common theology."

Old Testament theology, he says, will be "bipolar"; it will reflect the tension between texts that serve to "legitimate structure" (the common theology) and those that, by "embracing pain," challenge the established order (Israel's distinctive witness). It is not that the theologian selects one or the other: either those texts that legitimate order (creation theology in this sense) or those that express the pain of oppressed minorities; rather, it is the interaction of the two that constitutes the dynamic of Old Testament theology.[22]

Now that Brueggemann's monumental *Theology* has appeared, we can appreciate the fulfillment to which these preliminary remarks point. To begin with, despite his criticisms of historical criticism, as a child of the Enlightenment he is profoundly under its influence when he concentrates on the "multiplicity" and "density" of Old Testament texts. This book could only have been written by one who had been subjected to the analytical dissection of historical criticism.

Two major movements in biblical criticism provide the lens, so to speak, through which Brueggemann views the Old Testament. The first is rhetorical crit-

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23. A great pioneer in this field was James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," a presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, *JBL* 88 (1969) 1–18. A magnificent example of the use of this method is found in Phyllis Trible's study of Genesis 1–3 in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

24. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 118–20.

25. For a summary of Ricoeur's philosophy of language, see the introduction to Ricoeur's essays, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 1–32.

26. Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *HTR* 70 (1977) 27–33.

27. Ibid., 26. See further my discussion of the name of God, chapter 6.

icism, the child of form criticism; the second is sociology, a relative newcomer on the scene of biblical criticism.

The Hermeneutic of Language

Rhetorical criticism is a method that concentrates on the art of expressive speech found in biblical texts. Form criticism had concentrated on literary units and their "setting in life" (e.g., the "covenant lawsuit," Hebrew *rib*; cf. Jer. 3:4-13); rhetorical criticism goes beyond this into a study of the language itself: its style, structure, symbolism, assonance, and so on.[23] Brueggemann takes a step further: for the Old Testament theologian "speech is the reality to be studied," for speech creates the world in which God is presented. The theological task is not to seek some reality behind the text, for instance, a historical event that may have happened, or even the Being of the God who transcends the reality of the text. Rather, the theologian studies Israel's speech about God in biblical texts in their multiform variety. The question is simply and profoundly, "What is said?"—Israel's testimony in words.[24]

At the outset of this new venture in Old Testament theology, Brueggemann pays tribute to the influence of Paul Ricoeur, an outstanding philosopher of the twentieth century. In Ricoeur's philosophy of language, the basic question is one of epistemology, that is, "How do we know?"[25] He rejects the view, dominant since the philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), that human beings are thinkers who cogitate an external world that can be rationally (mathematically) measured, historically explained, and subjected to scientific control. This rationalism, summed up in Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), underlies the modern scientific world. It is manifest, for instance, in so-called historical criticism that subjects biblical texts to rational analysis and historical verification. Instead, Ricoeur advocates a mode of interpretation (hermeneutic) that relies more on the imagination. A biblical text (say, a narration, a prophecy, a hymn of praise) "opens onto a world, the biblical world, or rather the multiple worlds" portrayed in diverse kinds of biblical literature. The task is not to understand the intention of biblical authors, or to penetrate the ancient historical situation out of which the texts came, but to hear the "testimony" of the text, which has a poetic function in that it projects a "new world of being," different from "the world of ordinary experience." The reader is invited to enter and "inhabit" the new world of the Bible and thereby to find a new being.[26] "The Bible is one of the great poems of existence," says Ricoeur, and therefore like any great literature offers a new being; but it is also unique in that it brings one to the limits of discourse about God and to "the name of the unnameable."[27]

Sociology and the Bible

Another major influence in Brueggemann's *Theology* is the sociology of knowledge,

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28. Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979), 692. See my review in *TToday* 38 (April 1981) 107–8.

29. Brueggemann, "Shape, I," in *Old Testament Theology*, 19.

30. In *Rumor of Angels* (rev. ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1990) the sociologist Peter Berger explores the question of whether sociology can reach beyond its own methodological limitations. The results are not encouraging for the theologian.

which views human language as expressing the interests and values of a social group or, in the Marxist version, the group that holds power. Under the influence of Norman Gottwald, who proposed a quasi-Marxist dialectic of the conflict between those who have power and those who are oppressed by the power hold-ers, Brueggemann perceives that the dynamic of Old Testament theology is found in this bipolarity. Gottwald, to whom he is indebted, has attempted to translate theology into sociology without remainder. In his view "Yahweh" means "the his-torically concretized, primordial power to establish and sustain social equality." "Chosen people" means "the distinctive self-consciousness of a society of equals created in the intertribal order and demarcated from a primarily centralized and stratified surrounding world." And so on.[28]

Sociology of this kind helps to understand the "bipolar" dynamic of Old Testament theology: the conflict between "cultural embrace" and "cultural criti-cism." Brueggemann wants to avoid the reduction of theology to sociology. He declares that God is not only "in the fray" (the social process) but "above the fray" (beyond the reach of sociological analysis). "The poets and narrators in Israel," he says, "do, in fact, speak the mind of God [*sic*]," who is beyond the historical process. Yet "biblical artists enter into the struggle in which God is involved," whether to be the god of common theology who sanctions order or to be the God who acts with liberating power and does what is new and unexpected.[29] Although Brueggemann wants to emphasize both order and novelty, structure and protest, one gets the impression that "the word of God" is spoken most authentically in those texts that deal with "the embrace of pain," that is, the cries of those who lack power.

This sociological approach, influenced by the Marxist dialectic of power and powerlessness, can have a heuristic value, enabling us to notice theological dimen-sions that otherwise might be overlooked. This sociology calls our attention to the problem of faith and ideology, an issue that we must wrestle with from time to time. Sociological method, however, has its own limitations. It may enable us to see how God is "in the fray," but it offers little help in understanding how God, who is "above the fray," speaks a word of revelation. If the Bible is the Word of God in some sense for a community of faith, it surely contains more than "a rumor

31. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 122–30.

32. This contextual approach to Old Testament theology (which we are following in this book) is also suggested by Philip Peter Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World*, JSOTSup 106 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992). He speaks of a "conceptual approach" (p. 214) based on "groups of texts which reflect a distinctive set of concerns and a relatively unified outlook (e.g., the prophets, the Deuteronomic history, the Priestly writing, the wisdom writings). These tend to reflect the predominance of a certain style of writing or genre (e.g., cultic law), and a particular social setting (e.g., the priesthood)."

33. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 118.

34. Ibid., 120–21.

35. See Appendix 2, "The Relevance of Biblical Archaeology to Biblical Theology: A Tribute to George Ernest Wright."

36. Will Herberg, *Faith Enacted as History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 156–60.

of angels," that is, hints of divine transcendence.[30]

Testimony and Trial

To organize his theological exposition of the Old Testament, Brueggemann adopts the metaphor of the court trial before the nations, found centrally in the poetry of Second Isaiah (cf. Isa. 41:1—42:4). This trial has three elements: (1) Israel makes its core testimony, grounded primarily on the God of the exodus who liberates from bondage; (2) Israel and the nations make a countertestimony about the God who upholds order and grants fertility; and (3) this dialectic prompts Israel, as an advocate for Yahweh, to make a new theological witness.

In his elaboration of this metaphor, Brueggemann invites us to break out of past theological categories and to view the witness of the Old Testament in an entirely new way. This creative proposal will no doubt prove to be a powerful ferment as a new century begins.

Like its predecessors, this bold theological venture raises questions for theological discussion. First, there is a basic methodological question: how does one ascertain the "core testimony" in the context of the "multiple worlds" presented by texts of the Old Testament? Brueggemann, of course, knows well the rich diversity of the Old Testament; nevertheless he speaks of "Israel's characteristic speech about God," "the usual modes of speech," "consensus testimony."[31] In describing what is allegedly Israel's "normative" testimony, Brueggemann draws widely on Old Testament texts without giving a clear criterion for selection.

Brueggemann attempts to deal with this methodological problem by appealing to a "grammar of faith," which starts with God as the subject (verbs), moves to the objects that are transformed (nouns), and includes adjectives that portray the character of the God who acts. This approach, however, is questionable when one considers that the meaning of a theological sentence depends on the context in which it functions (e.g., Deuteronomistic, Priestly, Davidic).[32]

Second, Brueggemann "brackets out all questions of historicity," such as "what happened" or the historical circumstances that prompted the testimony.[33] The court "cannot go behind the testimony to the event"; it has to take the testimony as "the real portrayal."[34] Here the analogy of a trial seems to break down, for generally the court seeks factual evidence other than the testimony (e.g., DNA tests, ballistics tests, fingerprints). There is a problem here, I believe, that cannot be resolved by "bracketing out" historicity.[35] The dimension of "facticity and his-

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37. This is a legitimate objection of Dennis T. Olson, "Biblical Theology as Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann and Bakhtin," *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 6 (1998) 162–80.

38. See the discussion of the election of Israel, chapter 2.

39. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 121. See his n. 9, where he comments on what it means "to take something as reality."

40. Brueggemann, "Moving Toward True Speech," in ibid., 743–50.

41. Ibid., 750 (the final sentences of the book).

toricity," as Will Herberg emphasized, cannot be ignored theologically.[36] Surely a Christian theologian has to deal in some way with the factuality of the crucifixion, to say nothing of the reality of the resurrection.

Third, it is questionable whether Brueggemann does justice to the fact that Old Testament theology is in a special sense a Christian discipline, as the designation "Old Testament" suggests. He seems to feel that the so-called Old Testament stands by itself, independent of the Jewish and Christian communities, and therefore may be understood in its own right with the method of modern rhetorical criticism.[37] But this does not do justice to the canonical status of these writings in the Jewish and Christian Bibles. This literature is inseparably related to a community of faith, "the people of God," that produced it and interpreted it during its historical pilgrimage. In the mysterious grace of God the Christian community, along with the Jewish, belongs to the Israel of God (Gal. 6:17). In the future, new light may break forth as these two communities of faith engage in dialogue about the meaning of the Scriptures they hold in common.[38]

Finally, in Brueggemann's theological exposition the question of "revelation" comes to the fore. He does not say that the biblical testimony *reveals* God, but that the testimony is adjudged to be truthful and is *taken as* revelation. "That is, the testimony that Israel bears to the character of God is taken by the ecclesial community of the text as reliable disclosure about the true character of God."[39] More clarity is needed on the identity of this "ecclesial community of the text" (the jury) in which the testimony *becomes* revelation. Brueggemann concludes his *Theology* with a ringing challenge to this community, wherever it is present, to engage the theological claims of the biblical testimony and to reorder its life according to "the world of Yahweh."[40]

In conclusion, Brueggemann maintains that new revelation occurs, and will occur, through the dialectical conflict between Israel's core testimony of God's saving power and the countertestimony of God's maintenance of order. In the face of countertestimony, which also claims to be true, the court has to decide what is the truth. The question of the true linguistic portrayal of God is debatable, and a final verdict has not been reached. In the great court trial, "the waiting is long and disconcerting, because other gods are sometimes most formidable. And the jury only trickles in—here and there, now and then."[41]

1. See my tribute to Dr. Muilenburg, "A Teacher Like Elijah," *BR* 14, no. 1 (1998) 16.
2. See Rolf Rendtorff, "The Importance of the Canon for a Theology of the Old Testament," in *Canon and Theology*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 46–56.
3. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. John Marks, rev. ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 42.
4. This attractive view, which suggests a hermeneutic for the appropriation of the sacred tradition today, is set forth in such writings as *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972),

4. AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

This period of uncertainty, if not confusion, in the biblical theology field is a good time to experiment with various approaches. That is what I am offering: an experiment in Old Testament theology. This experiment, however, is based on "laboratory tests" in teaching Old Testament theology, a course I began teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1968. At first I started gingerly with a course on "Motifs of Old Testament Theology" (echoing a course taught by my esteemed teacher, James Muilenburg).[1] Over the years I gradually became bolder, until eventually I actually titled a course "Old Testament Theology" or, as at Boston University School of Theology, "Biblical Theology of the Old Testament."

From Analysis to Synthesis

Looking back over the past thirty years, it is evident that a revolution has been going on. There has been a shift from attempts to explore the earliest phases of Israelite tradition, whether by isolating putative literary sources or preliterary forms of oral discourse, to an emphasis on the final canonical shape of the biblical "books" or larger scriptural units (e.g., Pentateuch).[2]

In the former period the important word was "tradition," an English term that encompasses both "that which was handed down" (content or *traditum*) and "the transmission of what was received" (process or *traditio*). Gerhard von Rad, who dominated the discussion, subtitled his theological work: "A Theology of Israel's Traditions." He was not really concerned with the final canonical shape of biblical books. Admittedly, in the preface to his commentary on Genesis he quoted approvingly the observation of the distinguished philosopher of Judaism, Franz Rosenzweig, that the sign "R," used to designate "redactor," must not be under-

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Canon and Community (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), and "Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God. Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. Frank M. Cross Jr. et al. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 531–60; see my extended review of Sanders's contribution in *RelSRev* 15 (1989) 97–100.

5. See, for instance, my essay, "From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Genesis 1–11," *JBL* 97 (1978) 23–29.

6. See Muilenburg's monumental essay, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969) 1–18.

7. Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. Bernhard W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972; repr. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981). See now *The History of Israel's Traditions: The Heritage of Martin Noth*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and M. Patrick Graham, JSOTSup 182 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).

8. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

9. Wright, *God Who Acts*, SBT 1/8 (Chicago: Regnery, 1952). Wright's valid concern for the acts of God—not just the word(s) of God—has been considered anew by Patrick D. Miller, "Revisiting the God Who Acts," *TToday* 54, no. 1 (1997) 1–5.

rated; the sign should really signify *Rabbenu*, which in Hebrew means "our master," for we are dependent on the editor who has given us the Scriptures in their final form.[3] But von Rad was basically concerned with the process of tradition—the transmission and appropriation of materials handed down—not the final redactional or canonical formulation. Similarly, James Sanders emphasized the "canonical process" in which the received tradition, as appropriated in new situations in the history of the people of God, became "adaptable for life."[4]

My writings reflect this shift in scholarly emphasis—"from analysis to synthesis."[5] Under the influence of my teacher, James Muilenburg, I came to appreciate the literary study of the Old Testament, as advocated especially by Hermann Gunkel, the founder of form criticism and the subsequent shift to "rhetorical criticism."[6] And having studied under von Rad, I was much influenced by the history of Israelite traditions, beginning with the early oral period. Indeed, I took the time to translate Martin Noth's study of the history of the transmission of pentateuchal traditions.[7]

Brevard Childs's Approach

A decisive turning point was reached in 1970 with the publication of Brevard Childs's *Biblical Theology in Crisis*.[8] Childs showed the weaknesses of a biblical theology resting on the revelation of God in historical events. During the days of the so-called biblical theology movement (just after World War II), this view had been set forth preeminently by George Ernest Wright in his monograph *God Who Acts*, in which he took a stand against a doctrinal approach and emphasized historical recital, that is, the narrative of God's acting in the world.[9] Childs was critical of any attempt to base biblical theology on objective historical events (the Albright school), and he extended his criticism to history in the sense of "history of traditions" (Noth, von Rad, and others). He insisted that there must be "a still more excellent way."

Canon and Biblical Theology

The even better way, in Childs's view, involves taking seriously the final form of the tradition, not just as it is shaped by redactors but as set forth in the canon of biblical books that the community of faith accepts as authoritative. Against his critics, he insists that emphasis on the canon does not mean a flat interpretation of Scripture, which lacks the dynamic of a diachronic movement. The interpreter, he declares, must take seriously the "depth dimension," that is, the stages of development that took place in the long period before the tradition was given its final scriptural form. However, the purpose of studying the depth dimension through source criticism, form criticism, tradition history, and redaction criticism

10. See Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), "Methodological Problems," 104–6, quotation, 105.

11. See above, chapter 2.

is not to recover the theological interpretation that lies behind the present text but to understand the Bible in its final canonical shape. "One can better appreciate a symphony," he says in this connection, "if one has been trained to recognize the contribution of each of the various musical instruments involved."[10]

Childs's exposition of biblical theology is governed by the following considerations:

1. In the canon of the Christian Bible, Old and New Testaments are bound together christologically, that is, each bears witness to the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

2. This interrelationship of the Testaments respects the discrete witness of both. The Old Testament, specifically, has a quasi-independent status in the canon.

3. When turning to the discrete witness of the Old Testament, Childs follows a historical outline as far as possible, that is, from Genesis through Ezra. Thus he discusses theologically, in conversation with biblical scholars: "Creation," "From Eden to Babel," "Patriarchal Traditions," "Mosaic Traditions," "The Possession of the Land and the Settlement," "The Tradition of the Judges," "The Establishment of the Monarchy," "The Divided Kingdom," "Exile and Restoration." When this chronological outline runs out, he turns to special materials: "Prophetic," "Apocalyptic," "Wisdom," and "Psalms."

4. After treating the discrete witness of the New Testament following a similar chronological sequence ("The Church's Earliest Proclamation" to "The Post-Pauline Age"), Childs turns to "theological reflections on the Christian Bible," considering in parallel the Old Testament witness and that of the New Testament. Here he abandons historical sequence and turns to a topical discussion: "The Identity of God," "God the Creator," "Covenant, Election, People of God," "Christ the Lord," "Reconciliation with God," and so on. One can see clearly that, in Childs's view, biblical and dogmatic theology are closely related.

This is truly a monumental work that will be discussed for years to come. For two decades I have struggled with Childs's canonical approach, finding in it things to agree with and to differ over. On the positive side, it has been a major influence in moving me to concentrate on the final form of the Scriptures that we have received. Also, I welcome the insistence that the Old Testament has a relatively independent place in the Christian Bible, although I would emphasize more the dialectic of continuity/discontinuity between the Testaments.[11] My major difficulty is that this approach, being so close to dogmatic theology, does not give sufficient theological attention to the "discrete witness of the Old Testament," and especially to the pattern of symbolism that governs literary units in their final

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12. See Rolf Rendtorff, "Toward a Common Jewish-Christian Reading of the Hebrew Bible," chap. 4 in *Canon and Theology*.

13. Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985).

14. Christoph Barth, *God with Us: A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

15. Karl Rahner, *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth, Theological Investigations 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 363.

form (e.g., Pentateuch, Deuteronomistic history). As noted above, biblical theology finally turns out to be a discussion of theological topics. Perhaps there is another way that follows more closely the Old Testament canonical structure.

Hermeneutical Considerations

The following presentation also begins by taking a firm stand in the community of faith known as the church. At the same time, I give due consideration to the way the Jewish community reads this common Bible and, from time to time, engage in Jewish-Christian dialogue.[12] There is a great deal of affinity between this presentation of Old Testament theology and the "entry into the Jewish Bible" given by Jon Levenson in *Sinai and Zion*.[13]

In this venture, I recognize that the Old Testament contains a diversity of materials that resists being pressed into a coherent, structural unity (the weakness of Eichrodt's approach). Nevertheless, theological understanding is aided by an organization of the diverse materials, rather than just reading the Bible "from cover to cover." Other organizations may be helpful too, such as the work of Christoph Barth, *God with Us*, which is organized in a sequence of narrative statements, "God Created Heaven and Earth," "God Chose the Fathers of Israel," "God Brought Israel out of Egypt," and so on.[14]

Also, I recognize that invariably we read the past through the lens of our own experience or categories. We are sociolinguistic beings who want to bring the past into *our* world and appropriate it on our terms. This epistemological limitation, however, does not justify a deliberate reading of the past through a particular lens (as in the case of some liberation theologies); it only warns us to be deliberate about allowing the past, in so far as possible, to speak to us with its own voice, rather than being ventriloquists who project our voice onto the Bible. We must allow the Old Testament to be a different, even an alien, voice that speaks to us from another world of discourse.

Moreover, as Karl Rahner[15] has well said, the interpreter must have a poetic sense that yields to and appreciates biblical imagery if she or he is to hear in the Bible "the Word of God." This view is echoed in Walter Brueggemann's Yale Lectures on Preaching, in his introductory essay, "Poetry in a Prose-Flattened World," where he effectively quotes Walt Whitman:

> *After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)*
> *After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,*

16. See Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*, especially the introduction, "Poetry in a Prose-Flattened World" (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 1–11. The lines are from Walt Whitman's "Passage to India," 5:101–5, in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: New American Library, 1954), 324.

17. The last words could be punctuated, "who is God over all, forever praised," as in NIV.

18. See the discussion by J. A. Fitzmyer in *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown et al. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 856.

After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy of that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.[16]

Singing a new song (Ps. 96:1) requires avoiding, on the one side, the Scylla of literalism and, on the other, the Charybdis of historicism. The texts of the Bible invite us into a world—a real world—that is construed by poetic imagination. Therefore, we shall give due attention to the covenantal patterns of symbolization (Priestly, Mosaic, Davidic) that govern Old Testament books or blocks of material (e.g., the book of Isaiah, the Chronicler's history).

God's Covenants with Israel

Accordingly, let's start with a clue found in the New Testament, specifically Paul's discussion of the relation between the Jewish and Christian communities in the economy of God's purpose in Romans 9–11. In a context where Paul expresses sadness that his own people, the Jews, do not accept Jesus as God's Messiah, he lists seven historic privileges that belonged to Israel as the people of God:

> They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.[17]

> —Rom. 9:4-5

This is a very solemn statement, as indicated by the concluding "amen." Its solemnity is heightened by Paul's use of the term "Israelites" (rather than "Jews")—the ancient sacral term for Israel as the people of God (Gen. 32:28). He lists seven prerogatives of Israel—eight if one counts the last statement that the Messiah sprang out of Israel.[18]

1. Sonship, that is, Israel was adopted or elected as God's son, according to important Old Testament passages: Exod. 4:22; Deut. 14:1; Hos. 11:1.

2. The glory, or "glorious presence." This refers to the resplendent manifestation of God's presence (*kabod*, "glory") during the wilderness wanderings (Exod. 16:10; 40:34) or in the Jerusalem temple (1 Kgs. 8:10-11; Ezekiel 10; etc.).

3. The covenants—the Abrahamic (Genesis 17), Mosaic (Exod. 19:5; 24:1-4; renewed at Shechem, Joshua 24), and the Davidic (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89). Some manuscripts read singular, *diatheke*, in which case the reference would probably be to the Mosaic covenant. But most translations render the plural *diathekai*.

4. The giving of the law: the revelation of God's will, as given to Moses (e.g., Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5).

5. The worship, that is, the cult—worship in the tabernacle or the temple, where God chose to be present as "the Holy One in your midst." The book of

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19. E. W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), v.

Psalms is the book of worship for the praises of Israel.

6. The promises—primarily the promises made to Abraham (land, posterity, relationship with God that would benefit other peoples), although promises of grace were also made to Moses and to David (Deut. 18:18-19; 2 Sam. 7:11-16).

7. The patriarchs, that is, the ancestors of Israel who were invited into special relationship with God, so that God was known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod. 3:6). The Israelites, Paul could say (Rom. 11:28), were loved by God on account of the patriarchs.

Thus election, promises, covenant, law, God's holy presence in the midst of the people, as they gathered in the temple for worship—these are some of the major subjects of the Old Testament. Instead of taking these up one by one, I propose an organization according to the major covenants with Israel: the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, the Davidic.

The term "covenant" (Hebrew *berith*) points to a fundamental reality in Israel's experience: God's special relationship with the people. After a thorough review of the controversial discussion of this subject, especially since the time of the founder of modern biblical criticism, Julius Wellhausen (from 1878 to 1918), E. W. Nicholson concludes that "covenant" expresses "the distinctiveness of Israel's faith":

> So, far from being merely one among a wide range of terms and ideas that emerged, flourished, and had their day, "covenant" is a central theme that served to focus an entirely idiosyncratic way of looking at the relationship between God and his chosen people, and indeed, between God and the world. As such it deserves to be put back squarely on the agenda for students of the Old Testament.[19]

Our interest will fasten not on covenant itself but on a *pattern of symbolism*—or perhaps one should say, a theological perspective—that is expressed in each of the covenants. Each covenant, considered in its scriptural context, nuances in symbolic terms what it means to live in the presence of the holy God, who has entered into special relationship with the people Israel.

Covenant Trajectories

Now, it so happens that each of these covenants is dominant in a major block of Old Testament literature (see fig. 1). The Abrahamic covenant is fundamental in the Tetrateuch (or Pentateuch, i.e., Tetrateuch plus the last verses of Deuteronomy), which reached its final form at the hands of Priestly writers. The Mosaic covenant is dominant in Deuteronomy, which serves as a preface to the historical work Joshua through 2 Kings (Former Prophets, or Deuteronomistic history). The Davidic covenant is dominant in the major book of the Writings, the book of Psalms, as well as in the Chronicler's history (1 and 2 Chronicles).

20. This is a broad way of describing the ancestral covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Remember that in the final Priestly form of the Pentateuch the Abrahamic covenant embraces and supports the Mosaic covenant found in the book of Exodus; see Exod. 2:14 and references to "the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob" (Exod. 3:6, 13, 16, etc.).

FIGURE 1. *God's Covenants with Israel*

	PRIMARY SCRIPTURAL CONTEXT	BIBLICAL FIGURES	MAJOR PROPHET
Abrahamic Covenant[20]	Pentateuch in final Priestly form	Abraham and Sarah	Ezekiel
Mosaic Covenant	Deuteronomy, Deutero-nomistic history	Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (cf. Mic. 6:4)	Hosea, Jeremiah
Royal Covenant	Book of Psalms, 1–2 Chronicles	David	Isaiah

Thus the three major figures in Old Testament tradition are Abraham (add Sarah), Moses (add Aaron and Miriam), and David the great king, Yahweh's anointed, who was regarded as the prototype of the Messiah to come.

It is also significant that major prophets were influenced by each of these theological perspectives: Ezekiel by the Priestly theology of the tabernacling presence of the holy God in the midst of the people; Jeremiah by the Mosaic covenant as expressed supremely in the book of Deuteronomy; and Isaiah by Zion theology with its salvific institutions of temple and kingship.

After exploring these theological perspectives, we shall see how the great catastrophe of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple affected each and precipitated a profound theological crisis. In this period, the time after the crucial event of 587 B.C., the tragedy of Israel called into question the covenantal relationship between God and people and precipitated the problem of theodicy, or the justice of God, as expressed in the skeptical wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes and Job. In this period of suffering and change, when the foundations of Israel's faith were shaken, torah came to be identified with wisdom, an independent movement in Israel that originally was sponsored by the royal court. Prophecy, as represented by the great classical prophets (e.g., Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah), moved into apocalyptic, as evident from the book of Isaiah and late prophetic writings such as Haggai and Zechariah.

The Pentateuch and the Abrahamic covenant, the Deuteronomic history and the Mosaic covenant, the books of Psalms and Chronicles and the Davidic covenant: in these major blocks of literature we find three dominant covenantal perspectives. Owing to the gravity of the problem of evil, however, each of these perspectives was tried in the balance and found wanting, prompting a movement from torah to wisdom, and from prophecy to apocalyptic.

Finally, we shall see how these theological perspectives converge in the New Testament, though it is not my task to give a detailed discussion of New Testament

21. "On the Parameters, Date, and Provenance of P," *Leviticus 1–16* (Anchor Bible 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991).

theology. The Christian community celebrates God's apocalyptic triumph in Jesus Christ—over all the powers of sin, darkness, death, and anything that threatens to separate people from the love of God known in Jesus Christ. In the last analysis, Jesus Christ is hailed as prophet, the one who stands in the Mosaic tradition like Jeremiah; as priest, the one who, standing in the Abrahamic tradition, is acclaimed as a priestly mediator between the holy God and human beings (Epistle to the Hebrews); and as king, that is, the Son of God of the Davidic tradition.

In this exposition of God's covenants with Israel we shall be influenced by the shape of the canon, considering first the Pentateuch, then the Former Prophets (Joshua through 2 Kings), then the major prophets who are associated with particular theological perspectives, and finally the Writings, chiefly the book of Psalms and the Chronicler's history, which reflect Davidic (or "Zion") theology. The movement from torah to wisdom, evident in the book of Psalms, allows us to explore other books in the Writings (wisdom literature: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job), with some consideration of wisdom writings outside the Hebrew Bible (Wisdom of Ben Sira, Wisdom of Solomon). The movement from prophecy to apocalyptic allows us to consider the book of Isaiah in its final form and writings that lie at the boundary of the New Testament in the Christian Bible: Zechariah and Malachi.

Theology and Imagination

While this presentation is organized, as much as possible, according to the canonical sequence of the books of the Old Testament, we shall also be influenced by historical and sociological considerations. Each covenantal perspective belongs to a particular historical and social setting. The Priestly perspective belongs to the priestly order of the Jerusalem temple, perhaps dating into the period of the monarchy (around the middle of the eighth century according to Jacob Milgrom),[21] though it was given its final shape during the exile. The Deuteronomic perspective reaches back into the period of the northern kingdom (the capital, Samaria, fell in 722 B.C.), though it was given its final expression in and around the reform of Josiah on the eve of the fall of Judah (587 B.C.). The Davidic covenant belongs to the time of the Davidic kingdom, inaugurated by David and Solomon and surviving throughout the prophetic period and beyond (reflected in the book of Isaiah as a whole).

These covenantal perspectives represented the symbolic world of particular social circles and reflected the tragic reality of Israel's historical experience before

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22. See further my essay, "Biblical Theology and Sociological Interpretation," *TToday* 42 (1985) 292–306.

23. On the role of imagination in biblical understanding, see the "hermeneutic of language" advocated by Paul Ricoeur, discussed above, chapter 3.

24. George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan* (1924), scene 1.