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INTRODUCTION

Old Testament Theology as Narrative

The expression “Old Testament theology” suffers from a number of disadvantages and ambiguities, but I have retained it in the title for this book because of its value connotations with regard to my subject (though for some people these are negative value connotations). I do not care for the phrase “Old Testament,” which we inherit from some time in the patristic period, because it rather suggests something antiquated and inferior left behind by a dead person. But the politically correct term “Hebrew Bible,” as well as not being quite accurate (there is Aramaic in these Scriptures, too), from a Christian perspective moves too far away from the twin expression “New Testament.” “Tanak,” the Hebrew acronym for “the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings,” is more accurate, but as the Jewish equivalent to “Old Testament” it is close to being a confessional title that feels odd in Christian usage. From chapter two onward, I will normally use the phrase “First Testament.”

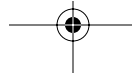
Meanwhile, what do we mean by “Old Testament theology,” and how should we go about it? Books on Old Testament theology commonly include substantial theoretical prolegomena. I have written at length on these matters elsewhere,¹ and now want to get on with the task. But here are some theses that lie behind the chapters that follow or emerge from them.

1.1 Theology

In what sense can a work on Old Testament theology count as theology?

First, Old Testament theology is different from Israelite theology. It is illuminating to study what Israelites actually believed in Old Testament times, and even what was viewed as orthodox theology in Old Testament times. For instance, books such as Kings and Ezekiel suggest that mainstream Israelite faith often included worship of Yhwh with the aid of images and recognition

¹See the bibliography and also the postscript to this volume. I am astonished to find James Barr declaring that “the question . . . of ‘methodology’ in writing a work on biblical theology is . . . a relatively unimportant one” (*The Concept of Biblical Theology* [London: SCM Press/Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], p. 59), but I am willing to shelter behind it, and behind Jürgen Moltmann’s comment, “At a time when so many colleagues are concerned solely with questions of method, what interests me are theological ideas” (*The Coming of God* [London: SCM Press/Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], p. xiii).





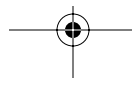
of a consort alongside Yhwh, and archaeological discoveries also indicate this. But the Old Testament books do not approve of such beliefs and practices, and Old Testament theology concerns itself with the stance taken by the Old Testament books on the nature of “authentic” Israelite faith.

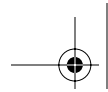
The raw material for this study of Old Testament theology is the Old Testament in the narrow sense—the books of the Hebrew Bible, or the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. Many Old Testament theologies have gone on to take some account of other Jewish writings such as those included in the Greek canon (the “apocrypha” or deuterocanonical writings), the Qumran documents and other writings of this period, and then the Mishnah and the Talmud. On the basis of the ongoing nature of the process whereby the biblical tradition developed, Hartmut Gese argued that the Greek canon should be the resource for biblical theology because it includes the “missing links” between the two Testaments.² But the narrower collection of books is the only one that (by a process we cannot trace) we know came to be recognized within Judaism as a definitive statement of God’s dealings with its forebears, and many Christian communities have followed Judaism in giving special status to this collection—including the community to which I belong.³ In this volume I make occasional reference to these other Jewish works, but I do not treat them as a source for a statement of Old Testament theology.

Old Testament theology can denote an attempt to give a purely descriptive account of the thought-world that lies behind the texts or of the faith held by the authors of the Old Testament—one that need carry no implications for what we ourselves might believe. One problem with this understanding is that no one in Old Testament times knew the whole Old Testament. Whereas studying the theology of Ezekiel might be quite like studying the theology of Calvin, formulating an Old Testament theology would be more like writing a theology of the Reformation—an attempt to describe Reformation thinking as a whole. We might thus more feasibly see the task as an attempt to describe the faith implied by the Old Testament or the faith that emerges from the Old Testament. We could see it as a statement of Old Testament faith as this might have been expressed by someone who studied the Old Testament in, say, 10 B.C., if we may imagine the Old Testament existing as a defined collection of Scriptures at that point.

²See Hartmut Gese, *Vom Sinai zum Zion* (Munich: Kaiser, 1974), pp. 11-18; “Tradition and Biblical Theology,” in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. Douglas A. Knight (Philadelphia: Fortress/London: SPCK, 1977), pp. 301-26; see pp. 317-24; cf. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1992, 1999), 1:6-9; 2:288-91; Hans Hübner, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 3 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1990, 1993, 1995), 1:37-70.

³Cf., e.g., Brevard S. Childs’s arguments in *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress/London: SCM Press, 1979), pp. 661-69.





Theology as an Analytical, Critical, Reflective Exercise

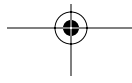
Yet the way we go about formulating this faith two millennia later is different from anything anyone would have formulated at that point. Our categories and structures of thought are different. We go about analysis, formulation and reflection in different ways. That is one reason why no one wrote an “Old Testament theology” until a century or so ago. Old Testament theology attempts not merely to describe the faith implied by the Old Testament but to reflect on it analytically, critically and constructively. By *theology* I mean such an analytic, critical and constructive exercise, a discipline or a set of disciplines that developed through the interaction between Middle Eastern and European thought in post-New Testament times, particularly after the Enlightenment. One reason Western thought has felt the need for such a critical and constructive exercise is our awareness that the Old Testament incorporates different, even clashing, theological convictions. Old Testament theology’s task is to see what greater whole can encompass the diversity within the Old Testament.⁴

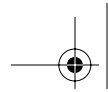
The circumstances of Old Testament theology’s development do not mean it was an inherently misguided exercise, or one that tried to turn chalk into cheese. One evidence that it was not is the presence of material in the Old Testament that reflects something like analytical, critical and constructive thought: Isaiah 40–55, Job and Ecclesiastes are instances of this. Admittedly, most Old Testament books are not works of theology in the sense in which I have just used the word, and works such as those three are thus different from others. The development of theology was not a development required by the nature of the Scriptures, but an accidental result of the journey of the gospel into Europe.⁵ But the Scriptures as a whole belong on a continuum and the books that more clearly have this nature provide evidence that such reflection need not be alien to the collection as a whole. For the purposes of the present volume in which we will be focusing on the Old Testament narrative, it is especially noteworthy that Job, arguably the most “theological” book in the Old Testament, is a drama—not a narrative, but something quite like a narrative. Old Testament theology seeks to formulate the inherent nature of Old Testament faith in the analytic, critical and constructive categories that help us interact with it in our own age.

The interaction between the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean worlds may have been beginning within the Old Testament. It is certainly evident in books in the Greek Bible such as Wisdom, and it appears further in the New Testa-

⁴See my *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995).

⁵Cf., e.g., Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 53–58.





ment. The discussion in the world of Greek thought regarding matters such as the trinitarian nature of the one God, the divine-human person of Christ, creation out of nothing, and the "Fall" is not in principle alien to the Scriptures as a whole, but it does take scriptural thinking further than the Scriptures do themselves or takes them sideways or backwards from them. Such discussion takes scriptural thinking itself a considerable distance further or sideways or backwards in relation to the Old Testament, and risks losing sight of the wisdom that appears there. If we are to learn from the Old Testament theologically, Old Testament theology will be wise to keep closer to the Old Testament's own categories of thought in order to give it more opportunity to speak its own insights rather than assimilating it to Christian categories.

Other aspects of the categories of thought that we bring to the text have also made Old Testament theology reflect more (or less) than merely what we find there. People who aim to write descriptively are influenced by what they bring to the text. The greatest would-be descriptive work on Old Testament theology, by Walther Eichrodt, takes covenant as its organizing principle.⁶ This is an illuminating idea, but covenant is not as pervasive in the Old Testament as Eichrodt implies, or as his readers infer that he implies. One may guess that one reason why the idea appealed to Eichrodt and appeals to many other readers of the Old Testament is that covenant thinking is prominent in some Christian theological circles. Authors' commitments, contexts, and presuppositions affect how and what they see. The much-reviled "biblical theology movement" of the mid-twentieth century⁷ illustrates that.

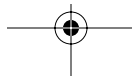
In principle I am not interested in Old Testament theology as a merely theoretical discipline. I am interested in it because I have found that the Old Testament has a capacity to speak with illumination and power to the lives of communities and individuals. Yet I also believe it has been ignored and/or emasculated and I want to see it let loose in the world of theology, in the church and in the world. I want to formulate a statement that is theological in the sense that it expresses what we can believe and live by and not merely one that restates what some dead Israelites believed.

Listening to the Whole Old Testament

Systematic theology involves a further level of one's evaluative or critical stance in relation to Scripture. It does that in practice, whether or not it does in theory, in deciding what parts of Scripture are more or less important and/or more or less true. Even if it does not actually declare that Scripture is wrong,

⁶See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961, 1967).

⁷See, e.g., Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).





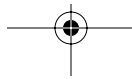
it omits scriptural material in a way that constitutes a practical declaration of this kind. Works on Old Testament theology do the same, and I expect I will do so, but my aim is to avoid it. Even if my effort to cover all the material may lead readers to conclude that the Old Testament's theology is wrong, I want to state what its theology actually is. David Clines has made explicit something generally implicit in Old Testament study, that interpreters evaluate the Old Testament (or anything else) on the basis of what they believe already. In evaluating texts, "there are no absolutes, no universal standards, and so there is nothing wrong with using your own standards. . . . 'Ethical' can only mean 'ethical according to me and people who think like me.'"⁸ In the past this was less obvious because, for example, modernity or pietism gave different reading communities a common evaluative framework that felt self-evidently true. The pluralism of postmodernity helps us to see "that there is no innocent or neutral scholarship, but that all theological and interpretive scholarship is in one way or another fiduciary."⁹ Like Walter Brueggemann (I think) and unlike David Clines, I want to try to subject my framework of thinking to the Old Testament's. I am betting that this is more likely to generate new insight than if I operate the other way round.

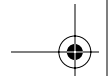
I identify with those Christians who affirm the entire trustworthiness and authority of Scripture, but I do not attempt to justify such convictions a priori, or to prove the truth of individual statements that emerge from the Old Testament. I doubt whether theology or ethics very often works like that. If a statement does not carry intrinsic conviction, it is unlikely that a priori arguments will convince many people to accept it. The exception might be that if we find that the Old Testament speaks with illumination ninety percent of the time, we may be inclined to reckon that the other ten percent also has something in it, if only we can find the key. I take it that this is part of what is implied by speaking of the Old Testament's "entire trustworthiness." Certainly my own reflection works thus.

That prejudice and my general passion for the Old Testament to be heard may well skew what I write, though I do not want it to do so. Readers will have to discern where this has happened. My conviction that one hundred percent of the Old Testament has theological significance has driven me to seek to work through all its books and ask after the theological implications of all of, for example, Judges and 2 Kings as well as, for example, Genesis and Exodus. I have still given more space to Genesis and Exodus. I hope that is

⁸David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 205 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p. 109.

⁹Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), p. 18. I take it that in this context "fiduciary" denotes "based on faith."





because the tradition is right that there is more theologically significant material in them.

Let us imagine that God is like a lion, as the Old Testament says (e.g., Lam 3:10; Hos 5:14; Amos 3:8). Testimony is then like telling people you have met a lion. Preaching is like inviting people to come to meet a lion. Theology is like reflecting on your meeting with a lion. It will involve some distancing, though during the process of reflection the lion may suddenly pop its head round the door. This reflection will be open to conversation with scientists who have read books about lions and people who have watched nature programs on television, whether or not they have met a lion or are sure they exist. Indeed, there are many scientific ways to seek to understand a lion, and many angles from which to do so: there are the angles and the categories of the zoologist, the geographer and the economist. In a parallel way, there are many angles from which to seek to understand the metaphysical lion. There are the angles of the systematic theologian and the philosophical theologian, the New Testament scholar—and the Old Testament scholar. The nature of the beast is such that no one angle and no one set of categories will reveal everything. The conviction of this theologian is that there is insight to be gained by looking at the metaphysical lion from the angle of the Old Testament and focusing resolutely on that. Whether this is so must emerge a posteriori.

In studying Old Testament theology, I am seeking to formulate some convictions that all Christian theology should acknowledge. Yet even when combined with convictions deriving from the New Testament, the Old Testament's theological insights do not form the whole of what Christian theology must affirm. There are issues that Christian theology appropriately addresses that biblical theology does not cover: for instance, the nature of science, or the significance of the Holocaust, or the development of feminism, or the nature and location of revelation, or the nature of religious language, or the significance of church history, or the development of worldviews from premodernity through modernity to postmodernity. It is intrinsic to dogmatic or systematic theology to take into account questions that have arisen in postbiblical times. Biblical theology focuses more on working out the theological implications of the biblical material itself. This material will need to inform the development of a Christian understanding of issues such as the ones just listed, but biblical theology may not itself do so.

1.2 Old Testament Theology

So this is a work of theology, written by a Christian who wants to heed the whole of Scripture. Yet I want to try to write on the Old Testament without looking at it through Christian lenses or even New Testament lenses. By "Old Testament theology" I mean a statement of what we might believe





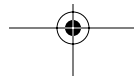
about God and us if we simply use the Old Testament or if we let it provide the lenses through which we look at Jesus. I am prepared to say that the Old Testament's insights must be seen in light of those of the New, but only as long as we immediately add that it is just as essential to see the New Testament's insights in light of those of the Old. Indeed, the latter is more important given that in practice the declaration that the Old must be looked at in light of the New is generally a euphemism for the conviction that the Old must be evaluated by means of the New and discounted when it says something different.

There are a number of points where Old Testament faith differs from New Testament faith. It is more interested in creation, the world of the nations and politics; it is more accepting of death and of the ambiguities of human life; it lacks a "positive" picture of life after death or a stress on the Messiah; it understands human sinfulness differently; it stresses reverence for God; it sees us as free to complain at God and to express doubt; it emphasizes enjoyment of everyday family life and food and drink; it values sacramental worship; and it enjoins detailed outward obedience to divine commands. My attitude to such differences is in principle to see them not as points where the New Testament surpasses the Old, but as points where Christians are especially likely to have something to learn.¹⁰ Even where the New may surpass the Old, the church will likely especially need the Old, especially now that the world has gone on for another two millennia since New Testament times, far longer than the period from Abraham to Christ. Over this time the church has not found it possible to live as if God had become incarnate or as if God's son had been given for it or as if God's reign had begun, and one can hardly maintain in the third millennium that it might be about to do so. If there is material in Scripture that starts from our stubbornness (so, e.g., Mk 10:5), we still need it. Indeed, only when people have learned to take the Old Testament really seriously can they be entrusted with the story of Jesus, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer more or less argued.¹¹ The church has reversed that argument and turned Christian faith into a faith that is itself truncated.

The conventional wisdom derived from Jean-François Lyotard declares that the postmodern condition essentially involves "incredulity towards metanarratives," that is, overarching narratives or statements about the

¹⁰Rolf Knierim expresses this point trenchantly, e.g., in "On Biblical Theology," in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium*, ed. Wonil Kim et al., 2 vols. (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity, 2000), 1:11-20. Cf. also Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Theologies in the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark/Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), pp. 283-84.

¹¹See the "Letter to a Friend of Advent II, 1943," in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Collins Fontana, 1959), p. 50.





nature of truth as a whole.¹² Walter Brueggemann suggests rather that “our situation is one of conflict and competition between deeply held metanarratives.”¹³ Brueggemann’s postmodernism thus deconstructs: Brueggemann has his liberal Protestant metanarrative and his volume argues relentlessly for it.¹⁴ My application of his point is that there is a virtually unacknowledged conflict between the church’s metanarrative and that of the Old Testament (and the New Testament, actually, but that is another story). I refer not to churches that do not claim to stick too close to Scripture, but to churches that do so claim. The point is well illustrated by the nature of the creeds, which may (or may not) have been appropriate situational responses to the contexts in which they arose but do not form a reliable guide to the contents of biblical faith.

I therefore resist the principle that interpretation must recognize the limits set by the church’s creed, “within which it must work and beyond which it must not stray.”¹⁵ The church’s faith may function as a preliminary understanding, a way into theological study of Scripture, not least in the conviction that the Holy Spirit has been guiding the church in its understanding of Scripture over the centuries. But we know that in general the Holy Spirit’s success in conforming the church to God’s will and vision is somewhat partial. One would expect this also to apply to the church’s interaction with Scripture, and a look at the relationship between the Scriptures and the church’s faith and life makes it clear that this is indeed so.

I want to articulate part of the metanarrative that the church accepts in theory but ignores in practice. “Old Testament theological articulation does not conform to established church faith, either in its official declaration or in its more popular propensities. There is much that is wild and untamed about the theological witness of the Old Testament that church theology does not face.”¹⁶ But the church’s “incomplete conversion toward the God of Israel” is a broader and deeper matter. The conventional outline of the Christian story of salvation has four stages: creation, Fall, the coming of Christ and the final judgment. The church’s framework for reading Scripture thus jumps from the “Fall” to the birth of Jesus and enables it to con-

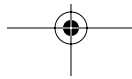
¹²Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

¹³Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, p. 712.

¹⁴So, e.g., Jon D. Levenson, “Is Brueggemann Really a Pluralist?” *HTR* 93 (2000): 265-94; Craig R. Bartholomew, “Reading the Old Testament in Postmodern Times,” *TynBul* 49 (1998): 91-114.

¹⁵Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark/Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 6.

¹⁶Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, p. 107; Brueggemann puts the first clause in italics.





tract out of God's concern for the world, to forgo "creative theological engagement with the hard edges of human history" in favor of a focus on the personal and private.¹⁷

But I am not especially concerned about the tough aspects of the Old Testament or the aspects that the church might want to avoid. The Old Testament is not basically hard or demanding news to swallow, but good news that has not been heard.

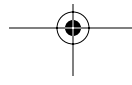
The Pressing Imperative

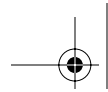
Reading the New Testament in light of the Old is thus a more pressing imperative than reading the Old in light of the New because the church has systematically neglected the Old Testament. John Bright compared the two Testaments to the acts of a play.¹⁸ An audience cannot expect to show up during the interval and understand Act II, nor to leave at the interval with an understanding of the play based on seeing Act I. To adapt the analogy, when I watch later episodes of a television sitcom or drama without having watched episodes from earlier seasons, I get the basic idea but I miss what is taken for granted, and thus I watch the repeats, too, and also find them fun in their own right. My aim here is to help people watch the first episodes of the Scriptures. When I watch those repeats, my having already seen subsequent episodes makes a difference. I am aware of aspects of people's characters that have now come out more fully. Yet if the writers have done their job well, it is fundamentally the same characters that get filled out in later episodes. So my understanding of the first episodes, and the understanding of someone who watched the programs in the right order, should not be so very different.

Another application of the analogy occurs to me. My wife and I went to see the rereleased film *A Hard Day's Night*. Amongst my reactions were tears at the contrast between the joyous innocence of John, Paul, George and Ringo in 1964 and the toughness of the lives that have since unfolded. Those years have seen

¹⁷R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 109, 17. N. T. Wright suggests that the biblical story comprises five acts: Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus and a final act for which he does not have a title (*The New Testament and the People of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress/London: SPCK, 1992], p. 141). This is a significant improvement on the framework of the creeds, though under the influence of Paul even it may yield too much to the importance of "the Fall" (on which see section 3.2 below). I suggest Beginnings, Israel, Jesus, the End. Contrast Robert W. Jenson's discussion of "The Works of God" in his *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), which moves with breathtaking directness from "Creation" and "Creatures" to "The Church," though he does then bewilderingly describe the church as "an event within Israel" (p. 182).

¹⁸John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon/London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 202.





John's murder, Paul's bereavement, George's death through cancer and Ringo's divorce (they were tears at the tough aspects of my own life since 1964, too, no doubt). One also recognizes how postmodern this film was, even though postmodernity had not been invented. All that makes one look at the film in a new way. But the film also deserves to be appreciated by an act of imagination that puts one back into the personal and cultural context of the 1960s. The Old Testament is a collection of works that God was happy for the chosen people to live with for a while. Eventually they would come to know about Jesus, but God could relate to them without that. James Barr has suggested that when faith comes to be "centred in a person sent from God as mediator with humanity, who is crucified and risen," this makes such a difference that a theology without this focus must be of a quite different character.¹⁹ I see the force of this argument in theory but do not feel it in practice. I hope that this is because there is more underlying unity in the two faiths than it implies, but it may be that either I read the Old Testament through Christian eyes, or that I fail to take the New Testament seriously enough. To adapt a phrase of Rolf Knierim's, I want to give the Old Testament its own say in the conviction that it will tell us something that is in the spirit of Christ.²⁰ I expect that Christian conviction will nevertheless sometimes skew what I see in the Old Testament, like my reluctance to decide that the Old Testament is simply wrong. I will be particularly interested to discover where, for instance, a Jewish reader—or an atheist reader—thinks this has happened.

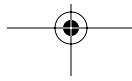
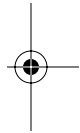
From a Christian perspective, then, Old Testament theology is a truncated exercise, but a defensible one. In contrast, New Testament theology seems not only a truncated exercise, but also an indefensible one. It deconstructs. One of the New Testament's own convictions is that the Old Testament is part of the Scriptures (indeed, *is* the Scriptures), give or take some questions about its boundaries, and that the Old Testament provides the theological framework within which Jesus needs to be understood. The New Testament is then a series of Christian and ecclesial footnotes to the Old Testament, and one cannot produce a theology out of footnotes.

The logic of these considerations is that I should write a biblical theology. A narrative approach to biblical theology, in particular, could hardly stop at the end of the First Testament.²¹ I have therefore included a chapter that reads the

¹⁹Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, p. 186.

²⁰Cf. Rolf P. Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich./Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 310. Knierim says "in the hope that it will tell us . . ." though I suspect he may agree that this is a matter of conviction and not just hope.

²¹Cf. Paul D. Hanson's comment in connection with his more historical approach, *The People Called* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), p. x.





New Testament story forward in the light of the Old Testament rather than backwards in the light of Christian doctrine. In addition, to push the earlier metaphor, I occasionally provide the body of the work with some New Testament footnotes.

Following the Old Testament's Own Agenda

In this volume I shall not pay much attention to the way the New Testament uses the Old Testament. That usage emerges from the New Testament's distinctive concerns. It especially wants to understand the significance of Jesus and the significance of the church, and that determines the lenses it brings to the Old Testament. Its approach to the Old Testament therefore need not influence an attempt to work out the inherent theological significance of the Old Testament—indeed, we must resist its doing so. That is not what the New Testament is seeking to do.

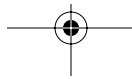
A “biblical theology of the New Testament”²² has the potential to redress an imbalance in Christian understanding of the story of Jesus and the beginning of the church. It can help Christians in that task of reading the New Testament story in light of where it came from and not merely where it led (e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity), with the problem of reading subsequent Christian beliefs and experience back into the New Testament. But a biblical theology of the New Testament still works back from the New to the Old and feels free to “make distinctions in the same way New Testament authors themselves did.”²³ We need a more systematic theological reading of the Old Testament in light of which to read the New. The agenda for Old Testament theology is set by the Old Testament as a whole and the agenda for biblical theology is set by the Scriptures as a whole, not just those parts of them that especially link with the New. One can see much of the New Testament as a collection of sermons on Old Testament texts. One does not use later sermons, even divinely inspired ones, as the privileged lens through which henceforth to read their text. It is inappropriate to describe the New Testament as the “authoritative interpretation” of the Old without adding that the Old Testament is the authoritative interpretation of the New,²⁴ especially as the New shows more signs of recognizing the authority of the Old than of reckoning it has authority over it.

So my aim in this *Old Testament Theology* is to discuss the Old Testament's

²²See, e.g., Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1992, 1999); *How to Do Biblical Theology* (Allison Park, Penn.: Pickwick, 1995).

²³Peter Stuhlmacher, *Reconciliation, Law, and Righteousness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. xiv.

²⁴Contrast the Evangelical-Catholic statement *Your Word Is Truth*, ed. Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, Mich./Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 4.





own theological content and implications, working with the assumption that the Old Testament is Act I to the New Testament's Act II (or Acts I-IX to the New Testament's Act X!). We can use the opening acts to illumine the final act, and I will do that in chapter eleven, but we owe the divine dramatist the respect of paying close attention to the earlier acts and not just to the end. Even a cursory look at them shows that the dramatist had a broader range of interests than people think when they only watch the last act. It is quite logical that the Christian church ignores most of the Old Testament and then thinks that Jesus is all that matters, because a main significance of the Old Testament is to show us that God has a broader agenda than we think when we focus exclusively on Jesus. On the Emmaus road Jesus interprets to his companions things about himself in all the Scriptures (Lk 24:27), but there are many other things in those Scriptures that do not relate to him anywhere as directly.

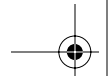
I therefore do not focus, for instance, on the Old Testament as "witness to Christ."²⁵ The New Testament does occasionally speak in these terms (Jn 5:39; Acts 10:43; Rom 3:21), but the image is used only in a severely metaphorical sense. As the New Testament more often assumes, witnesses are people who have seen something happen and are in a position to talk about it to other people who have not. Jesus' disciples are witnesses to Jesus more often than the Old Testament is. It antedates Jesus and never mentions him, and it more characteristically witnesses to Yhwh, especially in the narrative books (by their nature). It is this more central witness to Yhwh that I want to reflect on.

I do not focus on the way the Old Testament "points to Christ," which is another way of saying the same thing. The one who pointed to Christ was John the Baptist, who could do so because Jesus was there to point to (e.g., Jn 1:29, 35-36). The Old Testament points beyond itself in the sense that it expresses hopes that are not fulfilled within its pages, but one cannot work out from the Old Testament who it points to—as is reflected in Jesus' disciples' difficulty in seeing how it pointed to him. He is over the horizon when one stands within the Old Testament. Yet in writing as a Christian, I do so as one who can see important ways in which Jesus is the person who fulfills its job descriptions or its promises, as Jesus sought to show his disciples that he did—even if others also fulfill those job descriptions or the promises. For instance, Paul sees himself and Barnabas as fulfilling the vision of the servant of Yhwh (Acts 13:47), and it seems churlish to deny that the Jewish people as a whole has also fulfilled aspects of this vision.

I do not focus on the Old Testament as prophesying or predicting Jesus.

²⁵So classically, e.g., Wilhelm Vischer, *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ* (London: Lutterworth, 1949); cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress/London: SCM Press, 1992), pp. 74, 91.





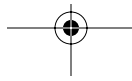
Again, the New Testament occasionally speaks in these terms, though not as prevalently as Christians do, nor with the same implications. According to 1 Kings 13, a man of God once declared that a descendant of David, "Josiah by name," would one day defile the altar that the Ephraimite king had erected at Bethel. Three centuries later, a descendant of David called Josiah did so. There are no analogous prophecies that a woman called Mary would give birth to a baby called Jesus. Christians know that Jesus is the means whereby God began to fulfill the promise of a descendant of David who would live up to the Old Testament ideal of kingship, and that Jesus was the embodiment par excellence of the vision of a servant of Yhwh who suffers to put things right between people and God. But this does not make Isaiah 11 or Isaiah 53 prophecies or predictions of Jesus. If they become that, this happens only in light of their fulfillment.

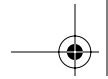
I do not discuss the way what is concealed in the Old is revealed in the New.²⁶ In declaring that the hidden things belong to Yhwh our God, but the things that are revealed belong to the Israelites and their descendants forever as they put Moses' Teaching into effect (Deut 29:29 [MT 28]), Moses suggests that his teaching, and the Old Testament by extension, is not a repository of concealment but a repository of revelation. The New certainly assumes that there are things that are revealed in the New, but that is not a basis for reading them into the Old. They are new. They add to the Old; they are not a basis for a de facto abandoning of the Old. What is concealed *from* the Old is revealed in the New. What is revealed in the Old is taken for granted in the New and then forgotten in the church.

I do not focus on the Old Testament as foreshadowing the New. Events such as the exodus and practices such as sacrifice indeed provided the New Testament with the means of understanding Jesus, but they thus came to be seen as "types" in light of their proving to have that capacity. In the Old Testament events such as the exodus and practices such as sacrifice have significance in themselves, and I want to focus on what we learn from that.

I do not see the Old Testament as law that is succeeded by the gospel. The dynamic of Old Testament faith and New Testament faith is similar. In both, God reaches out in grace to a people who in no way deserve such an initiative. In both, God sets up a relationship with this people for reasons that emerge from within God. In both, God acts with energy on this people's behalf. In both, God's gifts include teaching on the nature of the life God seeks from the people. In both, the possibility of living that life is both God's gift and an obligation emerging from God's reaching out to people. The contents of the life outlined by God in the two

²⁶So Augustine, e.g., *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed*, chap. 4, section 8.





Testaments complement each other in a variety of ways, in the areas of life they cover and the allowances they make for the human failings of the people to whom the teaching is given. "Gospel" does not come into being only with the coming of Jesus. In speaking of Jesus' story as "gospel," the early Christians were thinking of his story in terms that had already applied to Israel's story.

Narrative, Faith and Ethos

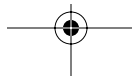
I divide my study of Old Testament theology into three parts and thus into three volumes, to reflect something of the Old Testament's own literary and theological nature, and in the conviction that the literary and the theological are related.

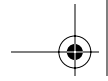
Old Testament faith expresses itself initially in a narrative. The main bulk of the Old Testament is a narrative account of Israel's story and of God's involvement with it. Its narrative form corresponds to its substance, and theological reflection on its gospel needs to work with its narrative form. In the present volume, then, I treat the Old Testament as the story of God's relationship with the world and with Israel. Volume one concerns the Old Testament's gospel, or how things were, or what God and Israel have done. It is a work of narrative theology.

In reading the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, when we come to the (Latter) Prophets we reach something more like the discursive thinking that has characterized theology since that meeting of Christian thinking with Greek thought. My second volume will start from these books and from the Wisdom Books and the Psalms, and will be the nearest to traditional theology in this work as a whole. It will concern the Old Testament's faith and hope, or how things are and will be, or who God is and who we are.

In volume three, the Psalms and the instructional material in the Torah will then provide the starting point for considering people's relationship with God and their lifestyle, their worship and their ethics, their spirituality and their community life. Volume three will thus concern the Old Testament's vision of life or its ethos, or how things can be and should be, or what God calls us to.

The three volumes are not simply three separate theologies, of Narrative, Prophets and Writings. Gospel, faith and lifestyle or spirituality appear in all the parts of the Old Testament. Indeed, in beginning with creation in this volume, I will begin from material in Psalms, Job and Proverbs that talks about the beginnings of the cosmos (as opposed to its nature as it is), and subsequently I will consider allusions to Israel's story that appear, for example, in the Prophets. I am writing a theological midrash, and midrash does bring together texts that have a relationship of substance if not a historical relationship. But the different parts of the Old Testament provide the framework and/or starting point for the three parts of the study.

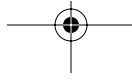
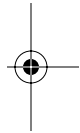


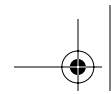


1.3 Old Testament Gospel

Neither ancient nor modern books about theology and spirituality regularly work by telling the story of a people and God's workings with it. Modern books about spirituality focus more on the inner life of the individual human being. Middle Eastern peoples in the ancient world were often inclined to tell stories about events in heaven rather than events on earth. The Old Testament itself utilizes various ways of doing theology—for instance, by overt personal reflection (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes), by sharing ways of speaking to God (Psalms) and by overtly talking about the way God sees the present and the future (the Prophets). But the dominant way it expounds the nature of its faith is by telling Israel's story. It might not have been the case that Israel had a story or that this story expounded the nature of its faith. Humanity might have accepted God's commission to fill the earth and subjugate it, to serve God's garden and guard it. As one of *Christianity Today's* "What if . . . ?" cartoons once imagined, suppose Eve had said "no" to the serpent? Linearity might then almost end with Genesis 2, the world might have lived happily ever after, and happiness might have had no story.

As it is, the Old Testament begins with a huge narrative extending from Genesis to Kings. Although this narrative presents itself to us as a sequence of separate books, none is complete on its own (except Ruth, to prove the rule, for it comes elsewhere in the Hebrew order). Genesis only half answers the questions it raises: it introduces a plot line that does not find completion in Genesis, issuing a promise of land to Abraham and Sarah and their family that does not come to fulfillment. Exodus continues that plot line without completing it, and also adds elements to the plot that do not find completion in Exodus: God gives instructions about the ordination of a priesthood, but this does not come about before the book ends. This process continues through the succeeding books. Jewish tradition separates off Genesis-Deuteronomy as "Moses' Teaching" from Joshua-Kings as "The Former Prophets." Even while thus emphasizing Moses' fundamental status, this partitioning of the complete story in Genesis-Kings draws attention to the incompleteness of the story of Israel in Moses' day. At the end of Moses' story Israel stands poised at the edge of the promised land; perhaps this reflects the community's position in the exile or afterwards, living outside the land or possessing only a foothold within it. Joshua gives some initial appearance of closure as it relates the fulfillment of that promise in Genesis, except that it does not conceal the ambiguity of its account. The people's possession of the land is incomplete. The narrative continues into Judges, which again raises issues it does not resolve, for in its days people did what was right in their own eyes because there were no kings in Israel, but kings do not appear until 1 Samuel. So the story again continues without finding closure. Formally the





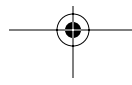
narrative that began in Genesis comes to an end only with 1-2 Kings. When we open the next Hebrew scroll it turns out to be Isaiah; when we turn over the next Greek or English page it turns out to be 1 Chronicles 1. Instead of continuing the previous story, the Old Testament in its Greek order thus goes back to the beginning and opens a second version of the story from creation to the exile, which terminates in an analogous way to Genesis-Kings until Ezra-Nehemiah kick-starts it again. In the contrasting arrangement of the Hebrew Bible, Ezra-Nehemiah-Chronicles appear in that order at the end, so that the two narrative sequences Genesis-Kings and Ezra-Nehemiah-Chronicles form a bracket round the whole. More than half the Old Testament thus comprises long narrative works that form successive sequences in the Greek and English and embrace the whole in the Hebrew. It also includes short stories about Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel and his friends.

A People with a Story

It is of the essence of Israel to be a people with a story. In the Old Testament, a "people" may be a group with a common religion and/or covenant and/or territory and/or government and/or kinship and/or literature.²⁷ Yet most of these visions deconstruct. The people does not adhere to its religion. It exists before it has a land, and then loses it. It breaks its covenant. It is ambivalent about its monarchy. It welcomes other people into its midst and undermines its kinship base. But irreducibly it is a group that has a common story, and the Old Testament story is the one that identifies Israel as Israel. It is a people defined by promise, deliverance, meeting, commitments and migration, and later by political development, political division, religious apostasy, geographical dislocation and the attempt to rebuild. The Old Testament tells us who God is and who we are through the ongoing story of God's relationship with Israel.

Much twentieth-century Old Testament scholarship was concerned with establishing what was unique about the faith of Israel, with the implication that the Old Testament's significance lay here. If particular Israelite beliefs were the same as Canaanite beliefs, they seemed less important. One of the ways scholarship articulated Israel's uniqueness was by describing biblical faith as linear rather than cyclic. In reality, there are cyclic aspects to biblical faith as there are linear aspects to other faiths. A faith needs to combine the two if it is to resonate with human experience. The lives of individuals, societies and communities have a time line, a beginning and a middle and an end, but human experience also has cyclic or recurrent features such as the daily round of night and day and the yearly round of the seasons. Yet whether or not bib-

²⁷Cf. Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 6.





lical faith is uniquely and thoroughly linear, it is certainly intrinsically and characteristically so. Linearity is an essential and central feature of it. It believes that certain events in the past were determinative for the present of the people who wrote and read the Scriptures and for the present and future of the world itself. Understanding the nature of these events is therefore of key importance for the people of God and the world.

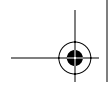
The significance of the Old Testament's story thus lies not merely in the fact that it *is* a linear narrative, whether or not this is a unique feature of Old Testament faith. It lies in the actual story it tells. The central feature of the Old Testament is that it tells Israel's story. Along the way, if aspects of Old Testament faith are the same as aspects of Canaanite faith, that does not make them of questionable or limited significance. Indeed, we might turn this argument on its head and suggest we would expect God not to have left other peoples unaware of the basic truths about God. People such as Amos and Paul certainly make some such assumption. But the specific Old Testament story is of unique and decisive importance for the whole world, not least because it is the story that leads up to Jesus.

The New Testament thus follows the pattern of the Old Testament and again kick-starts its story. The explicit New Testament core story is its "gospel" or good news that "the time is fulfilled: God's reign has drawn near" (Mk 1:15), or that "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16), though the latter is not actually described as a "gospel." The explicit Old Testament gospel is that "your God is reigning. . . . Yhwh has comforted his people, restored Jerusalem, bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations" (Is 52:7-10; it is from the Greek translation of this passage that the verb *euangelizomai* "bring good news" comes into Christian usage). Both are part of the biblical gospel, if we may use that term to refer to the macronarrative that may be inferred from the two Testaments as a whole. This gospel begins at the opening of the Old Testament and runs through its story into the New Testament. And "being a Christian or a Jew is not so much a matter of subscribing to one's community's core doctrines as of affirming its core story."²⁸ The biblical gospel is not a collection of timeless statements such as God is love. It is a narrative about things God has done.²⁹

²⁸Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians: Getting Our Story Straight* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), p. 15. Cf. William A. Beardslee's comments, "Narrative Form in the New Testament and Process Theology," *Encounter* 36 (1975): 301-15; see p. 301.

²⁹The narrative form of the Gospels makes this point evident, but a "narrative bedrock" also underlies the nonnarrative form of Paul's writings: See Bruce W. Longenecker, "The Narrative Approach to Paul" *Currents in Biblical Research* 1, no. 1 (2002): 88-111; see p. 89.

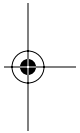


*God Involved in a Particular Sequence of Events*

The nature of the Old Testament's faith is to be a statement about God's involvement in a particular sequence of events in the world. It is for this reason that Old Testament theology has to be shaped by narrative. I have referred to one of the two great twentieth-century Old Testament Theologies, the work of Walther Eichrodt. In his own way the point about theology and narrative I have just been noting was an insight distinctively perceived by the other great twentieth-century Old Testament theologian, Gerhard von Rad. "Re-telling [*Nacherzählung*] remains the most legitimate form of theological discourse on the Old Testament."³⁰ The fact that more analytic forms of expression appear elsewhere in the Old Testament makes those forms of Old Testament theology also legitimate and necessary. The fact that the Old Testament opens with narrative and is dominated by narrative makes narrative form the appropriate starting point for Old Testament theology.

As a whole, this narrative tells how

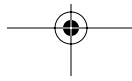
- God began
- God started over
- God promised
- God delivered
- God sealed
- God gave
- God accommodated
- God wrestled
- God preserved.

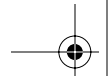


Christian theology has not regularly talked about God in narrative terms. The creeds, for instance, are structured around the persons of Father, Son and Spirit, and systematic theology has often taken God's trinitarian nature as its structural principle. Before the revival of trinitarian thinking in the late twentieth century, systematic theology often emphasized the fundamental significance of attributes of God such as omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence and perfection. The Old Testament narrative does incorporate equivalent statements about God's character, such as God's self-description in Exodus 34:6-7. But the kinds of statement about God that emerge more directly from the narrative itself are ones such as those I listed above. It is this narrative that nuances for us who the Father is, for example, or what omnipotence is, or what grace is.

What makes this macronarrative a gospel? In a number of ways it might

³⁰Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd/New York: Harper, 1962, 1965), 1:121.





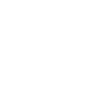
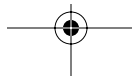
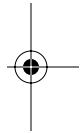
seem not obviously so. That outline draws attention to the wrestling that led to rejection, and the more positive headings conceal stories of rebellion and expulsion, failure and rebuke, unfaithfulness and chastisement. But the background to good news is often the possibility that there may not be any. In the Old Testament the densest concentration of occurrences of the term “good news” with its literal meaning comes in the story of Absalom’s rebellion, where men vie for the privilege of carrying the good news that the rebellion has been quelled (2 Sam 18:19-32). The background of good news is the threat or the actuality of bad news. This particular narrative also shows that the news itself may be more ambiguous than the messenger realizes, though that is another story. The background of the good news in Isaiah 40—55 is the bad news of rejection, destruction and exile. In Paul’s gospel the background of the revelation of God’s righteousness is the revelation of God’s wrath (Rom 1:16-18).

The good news is that bad news has neither the last word nor the first word. It stands in the context of a purpose to bless that was set in motion at the Beginning, and a purpose to create that persists to the End.

An Incomplete Story

We must be careful of speaking in terms of the macronarrative coming to an end, as it never quite does so. We will hardly be satisfied with the closure eventually achieved by 2 Kings, which leaves Judah in exile; its king is released from prison at the end, but that acts more as a tease than a substantial closure. More overtly than Genesis-Deuteronomy, Joshua-Kings reflects the situation of a people whose story seems to have come to an end, and not in a positive sense. While Ezra-Nehemiah takes the story further, it ends in a row of dots. Subsequently, Daniel promises completion with the downfall of the fourth empire, but that downfall does not come within the Old Testament story and anyway does not bring the End. Something similar is true in the New Testament. The Gospels once again set the story going and promise the End, but the story does not come to an end. One symbol of this is the way Mark originally terminated with its famous “they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid” (Mk 16:8) which anyone could see was not a real end—so people hastened to provide it with one (or rather, several). Another is Luke’s need to write a second volume. The church could separate it from his first, but could not suppress it, with its presupposition that the End still lies ahead. Acts then ends with Paul preaching for two years in Rome—so what happened next? Speculation that Luke intended a third volume testifies to the biblical story’s final lack of such narrative closure.

The biblical story comprises a beginning and a development but no end. That reflects and testifies to the location of the people who write, read and live within the story. They live after the exodus, or after Sinai, or after the oc-





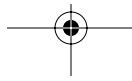
cupation of the land, or after David, or after the signs that exile will end, or after the rebuilding of the temple, or after the achievements of Ezra and Nehemiah, or after the fall of Antiochus, or after Jesus' coming, or after his resurrection, or after he has been proclaimed around the Mediterranean, but none of these events has turned out to be the End. Each brings an implementation of God's rule and generates a proclamation of good news. Each generates a narrative in whose light people may live their lives. But none ultimately suggests that the story is over. The moments of achievement turn out not to signal consummation. The moments of calamity turn out not to preclude hope. The narrative invites its community to own the fact that the story has never (yet) come to an end, and it inexorably insists that its community lives within this story.

This links with the fact that it is in a broad sense a historical narrative.³¹ Novels and films commonly offer closure, and individual biblical stories such as Ruth or Job do that. Such "complete" stories assure us that there can be such a thing as closure and that there will be closure for the incomplete story of the world, of Israel, of the church, of our society, of our community, of our family, of our individual lives. The "historical" narratives provide the grounds for such a conviction, rescuing it from being a groundless leap of faith. It is the fact that God did bring Israel out of Egypt, seal a relationship with Israel at Sinai and so on, that provides the basis for believing that the story of which these events form part will reach closure. We can trust the story the more because it does not pretend that this end has been reached. When books such as Daniel or Revelation speak about the End, they too are open about the fact that it is an end not yet reached. It is part of the biblical macronarrative, but not part of the narrative.

Calling Israel's Scriptures "the Old Testament" or "the First Testament" identifies them as a Part One that has a Part Two. The terms "Old Testament" or "First Testament" indeed presuppose a Christian theological judgment on the significance of Israel's Scriptures. This does not imply that the New Testament story is the manifest or necessary continuation of the Old Testament. On the penultimate pages of his *History of Israel*, John Bright notes that Jews and Christians have different views regarding where Old Testament history finds its continuance, and as a Christian he describes Jesus as "the destination of Old Testament history."³² This might seem to imply the belief that this history "moved in a natural and necessary course towards a fulfillment in

³¹In this book's postscript "Old Testament Theology and History," I consider the broadness of the sense in which this is so.

³²John Bright, *A History of Israel*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), p. 452 (emphasis added).





the New."³³ But Bright's view is more equivocal than that. His perception that Jesus is the destination of Old Testament history issues from the recognition that Jesus is the Christ. It is "after [the Christian] has said this" that Old Testament history gains a new meaning "as a part of the redemptive drama leading on to its conclusion in Christ."³⁴ Any conviction that the project God began at creation takes more decisive steps forward in Jesus than it does in rabbinic Judaism comes by considering the story of Israel in light of the story of Jesus rather than vice versa. Christian history provides evidence that the story of Jesus does *not* take forward the Old Testament story as well as evidence that it *does* take it forward—that is, the Christian church's story often looks to be no advance on Israel's story. The claim that it does take the story forward still awaits more conclusive justification. Perhaps it must await it until the End, or perhaps the End cannot come until Christian history becomes less equivocal.

Thus it is not the case that a story that is inherently incomplete in the Old Testament is complete in the New Testament. Judaism does not find the story in the Tanak incomplete in the sense of coming to a decisively unsatisfactory end. If it had ended with the people in exile, then it might indeed seem to be an account of the failure of God's plan³⁵—as Christians tacitly think of it. But the story ends with the people back in the land in covenant commitment to Yhwh, even if still under Persian authority, and the openings of the Gospels take up the positive side to this picture as well as the negative side.³⁶ Further, insofar as the Old Testament story *is* incomplete, we have noted that the New Testament story does not bring it to an end. It too is incomplete.

1.4 Old Testament Story

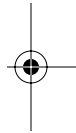
So it is the nature of its faith that constitutes one major reason why the Old Testament is dominated by narrative. But the narrative is far longer than it needed to be in order simply to expound the significance of this sequence of events as a gospel. It is discursive and sprawling in nature. Further, it does not merely give a consistently relaxed, lengthy account of its gospel story. It is uneven in its discursiveness. Something similar is true of the New Testament. The Old

³³See Ronald E. Clements, "Messianic Prophecy or Messianic History?" *HBT* 1 (1979): 85-97; see p. 96; cf. Patricia K. Tull, "'Isaiah 'Twas Foretold It,'" in *Strange Fire*, ed. Tod Linafelt (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press/New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 192-207; see p. 193.

³⁴Bright, *History of Israel*, p. 453.

³⁵Cf. R. Bultmann, "The Significance of the Old Testament for Christian Faith," in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (New York: Harper, 1963/London: SCM Press, 1964), pp. 8-35.

³⁶Cf. Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, "Christian Old Testament Theology," *JES* 18 (1981): 76-92; see p. 90.





Testament's narrative discursiveness suggests further significances attaching to its narrative form.

Taking Humanity Seriously

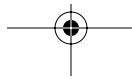
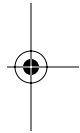
First, it reflects the fact that God takes humanity with great seriousness. The Old Testament story is not merely God's story. From the beginning it is the story of God and humanity, a story in which humanity has a key role to play in the achievement of God's purpose in the world. It becomes in particular the story of God and Israel. It is a story that could not exist without God's initiatives and responses (positive and negative) but also could not exist without Israel's responses and initiatives (negative and positive). In its continuation in the New Testament, God's concern with the whole world again comes into focus, and Israel again contributes in paradoxically complex ways to its frustrating and outworking.

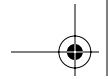
The negative side to the human and divine acts makes the path toward the achievement of that purpose tortuous. The Bible could have been much shorter if God's purpose in the world had found fulfillment by sovereign fiat, independently of humanity, but this was not God's approach (because the nature of that purpose made this impossible?). Theological significance thus attaches to humanity's role in the Old Testament story and not only to God's role. While this human role is often negative, as when Eve says "yes" to the serpent, it is not always so. It had been designed to be positive, and often becomes so. God works through and with human beings as well as despite them. An account of the Old Testament's plot thus needs to be augmented with the part the human beings play:

- God began.
- Humanity turned its back on God's instructions, and God started over.
- God promised, and a family grew.
- Israel cried out, and God delivered.
- God sealed, and Israel imperiled.
- God gave, and Israel took.
- Israel equivocated, and God accommodated.
- Israel turned away, and God wrestled.
- God preserved, and Israel turned back.

Portraying the Specificity of Life with God

Second, the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and his wives, Joseph and his brothers, or of Saul or David illustrate a significant form of this discursiveness in portraying the specificity of human beings living with God. They comprise stories about people facing the challenges, potentials, questions, achievements, ambiguities, puzzles, disappointments, demands and failures that are



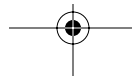
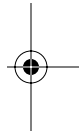


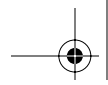
intrinsic to life with God. They thus invite their hearers to reflect on the equivalent specificities of their own lives in light of the stories' implicit convictions about who God is and what human life is. Such reflection needs the help of narrative with its concreteness and specificity.

Understanding does require the direct, unambiguous affirmations of teachers, prophets, philosophers and systematic theologians. Such affirmations on the part of teachers and prophets provide the implicit framework for the Old Testament's narratives. They are the framework that the storytellers took for granted, or that the people who came to treat their works as Scripture took for granted that they took for granted. Occasionally it is explicit that such statements are this framework—so for Abraham's life (Gen 17:1) and for Yhwh's self-revelation (Ex 34:6-7). But by their nature the direct, unambiguous affirmations of teachers, prophets, philosophers and systematic theologians cannot provide the means for reflection that appear in narrative. Nor can they have the authority that attaches to such narrative. The kind of claims the Old Testament implies about what it means to live before God cannot be made without the specific and concrete portrayal that books such as Genesis and 1 and 2 Samuel make possible. The direct affirmations are subordinate to the narrative, and require the narrative to give them their meaning.

In the Old Testament as a whole, the fact that narrative precedes the direct affirmations of prophets and teachers itself hints that "the particular is in some sense prior to general rules and principles."³⁷ Exodus 34:6-7 constitutes a retrospective systematic theological reflection on the narrative beginning in Exodus 32. Nor is the particular merely a means to the end of making general rules and principles, so that once the particular has yielded the generalization, it can be left aside. If anything, the opposite is the case. A framework is essential to a building, a skeleton is essential to a person, and a frame is an asset to a painting, but we concentrate on paintings not frames, on bodies not skeletons, on buildings not frameworks. The particular is posterior to the general as well as prior to it. The fact that the Old Testament in its Hebrew order ends in narrative (Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles) as well as beginning in narrative is a symbol of that. In the chapters that follow, I combine narrative reflection with systematic reflection, the particular with the general, but the usefulness of the chapters will hang on whether they take readers back to the narrative particularities of the Old Testament and of their own lives. The author of a standard treatment of the history of Israel's religion comments that "in many Theologies little comes over of the lively religious

³⁷Martha Nussbaum's comments regarding the novel in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 165; see also p. 139 and elsewhere in the book. The following paragraph similarly adapts comments on pp. 141-45.



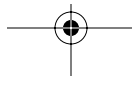


life or the exciting theological disputes, and . . . they often have an effect that is remarkably static, lifeless, and at times also boring."³⁸ The Old Testament's narrative particularity is one of the features that make it interesting and illuminating, and the reduction of it to generalities sacrifices these.

A further feature of these narratives is significant in this connection. The terms "omniscient author" or "omniscient narrator" suggest that a story's author or narrator is in a position to tell us about all the inner workings of the minds of its various characters, even God. In the Old Testament, at least, authors or narrators do manifest out-of-the-ordinary knowledge—on occasions they tell us what people thought or what God thought or they make value judgments. And when they do so, I assume they know what they are talking about. But they do so relatively rarely. They give no indication of believing they know *everything* about what people thought or God thought. Indeed, they are rather reticent about such matters (actually writers in general are more reticent than talk of their omniscience implies). Often we might like to know what the narrator or God makes of particular acts of people such as Abraham, Moses, Ezra or Nehemiah, but the narrator does not tell us. The narrator does not even tell us what Abraham makes of his acts. Sometimes the narrative implies a judgment without making it explicit—it shows rather than tells. Again, I then assume the narrators know what they are talking about. But often they seem to tell their story without implying a judgment. They thereby drive us to do our own reflection on their story. The books of Kings sometimes point out how history works out in a fair way, but sometimes do not pretend to do so, and we are not surprised that they make no such pretense, because events do often seem to work out unfairly. And that reminds us that our own knowledge about such matters is also fragmentary, whether we are asking about Abraham or about ourselves. Abraham is something of a mystery to the narrator and to himself and to us (and to God?). We are something of a mystery to ourselves (and to God?).

Study of the Old Testament in the context of modernity often assumed that particular periods were high points and low points. The time of the ancestors, or the exodus and the time of Moses, or the premonarchic twelve-clan covenant community, or the "Solomonic enlightenment," or the eighth-century prophets, or the Deuteronomists, or Second Isaiah might be high points, while the postexilic period was certainly a low point. I seek to avoid such assumptions. All these periods and all these stages in the story make it possible to see some things but also encourage us to miss others.

³⁸Rainer Albertz, "Religionsgeschichte Israels statt Theologie des Alten Testaments!" in the symposium *Religionsgeschichte Israels oder Theologie des Alten Testaments? Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 10 (1995): 3-24; see p. 12, as translated in Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, p. 118.





Doing Theology by Means of Narrative

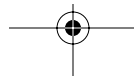
A third further significance of the Old Testament narrative's discursiveness emerges when we consider its treatment of the story of Israel itself. Like the Israelites' own story, the Old Testament's telling of that story does not take the most direct route from A to B. The narrative of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, for instance, sometimes proceeds quite briskly, as in the account of the people's journey from Egypt to the Red Sea. But it sometimes gives us a much more detailed version of events: For example, the main story line does not require the account of Moses' signs and portents in Egypt and the closing of the king's mind, but the narrative provides such an account.

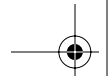
Much human interest attaches to these stories, but much human interest could also have attached to the account of the journey from Egypt to the Red Sea. The particular significance of the stories about signs and marvels in Exodus 4—14 is to provide a narrative discussion of theological issues that do not exclusively relate to the once-for-all sequence of events that takes Israel from Egypt to Sinai. Narrative makes it easier to discuss a complicated issue such as the interrelationship between divine sovereignty and human free will, especially an issue that seems to require us to make a number of apparently conflicting statements—as this one does.³⁹ The account of events at Sinai in Exodus 32—34 (and Exodus 19—40 as a whole) brings this use of narrative to its apogee, not least because it uses narrative to interweave exploration of two such issues: What do we mean by talking of God's presence with us? What stance does God take to the sin of Israel and how does God seek to handle that reality? Its focus on such questions makes it "more of a theological treatise than a literary narrative."⁴⁰

Exodus 32—34 is episodic and overlapping, and hard to interpret as a sequential narrative. Each scene may be coherent in itself but the links are missing and/or it is difficult to see how one scene follows from the preceding one. For instance, how is it that the people are "running wild" when Moses had just sobered them up by making them drink the powdered remains of the gold calf (Ex 32:20, 25-29)? How is it that there is a tent where Yhwh and Moses meet in the sight of all the people immediately after Yhwh's declaration that Yhwh cannot stand being among the people (Ex 33:1-11)? There are ways of handling such questions (e.g., perhaps Ex 32:20 anticipates later events and Ex 33:7-11 recalls earlier ones), but they involve a tour de force—it can be done, but it re-

³⁹Cf. Carol A. Newsom's discussion of "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *JR* 76 (1996): 290-306.

⁴⁰Horst Dietrich Preuss makes this as a comment on the J element in Ex 19, but his subsequent comments indicate that he would extend this description (*Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox/Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995, 1996], 1:66).





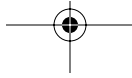
quires an ingenuity that alerts us to the possibility that the story as a whole has a concern other than providing a coherent linear narrative. Source criticism provides one way of explaining jerkiness in the narrative, but it has produced no agreed account of the narrative's prehistory, and it anyway leaves us with the task of interpreting the narrative Israel eventually compiled, accepted and read. I suggest that the main coherence of the chapters is thematic rather than linear. They represent a series of semi-independent but complementary discussions of the way God, leaders and people may handle the problem of the rebelliousness of leaders and people, with the series also interweaving reflection on what we mean by talking about God's presence with us. Later, the account of the end of Israel's stay at Sinai, in Numbers 1—10, suggests a number of models of what it means to be the people of God, and it is thus suggestive for our reflecting on what it means to be Israel or what it means to be the church.

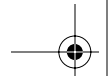
There are modern understandings of the way the narrative in Exodus or Numbers incorporates a number of understandings of the closing of Pharaoh's mind, or of the nature of God's presence, or of the way God responds to sin, or of the nature of Israel. Thus Thomas Dozeman sees the complex insights on God's presence expressed in Exodus as reflecting a series of redactions of this story. These expressed what we might call a sacral, a verbal and a sacramental understanding of God's presence, associated with the names Zion, Horeb and Sinai. Exodus then combines these understandings without attempting to turn them into a single unified theology of divine presence. The biblical writers "talk round" the subject, because the shortcomings of language make it impossible to formulate a single view on the matter.⁴¹ Although we cannot know whether such redaction-critical theories are historically correct and we would be unwise to base theological construction on them, such study is of significant heuristic value in enabling us to perceive aspects of the text we have.

Rainer Albertz offers an attractive imaginative picture of the Pentateuch coming into being as a compromise conflation of the works of two theological commissions in the Jerusalem community after the exile, a lay commission and a priestly one. It is this process of compromise that generates the Pentateuch's discursive and diverse picture.⁴² Perhaps it did, but in the context of postmodernity it is the result that is interesting. It is a characteristic of postmodernity to be aware (to put it most positively) that our insights are partial. Reality is complex, and the fact that Scripture is divine revelation does not make it less so. Rather the opposite—our theological statements tend to be more univocal

⁴¹See Thomas B. Dozeman, *God on the Mountain*, SBLMS 37 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), p. 174.

⁴²Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), p. 480.





than Scripture, and thus less true. Even God (especially God) cannot make truth less complex than it is. Like any cultural context, our postmodern setting blinds us to some aspects of Scripture, but it also opens our eyes to other aspects of Scripture, and one of these is the way scriptural narrative makes it possible to do more justice to the complexity of reality. It enables Scripture to make the variety of statements that need to be made about deep and complex questions. It can convey depth, complexity and ambiguity, as direct statement cannot.

While I am an enthusiast for investigating the historical context and process whereby the biblical documents came into existence, concerning such questions one can nowadays only rarely begin a sentence “most scholars agree that . . .” and by the time you read this volume even those few sentences may no longer be true. So I have generally not based theological inferences on scholarly theories concerning where, how and why biblical documents came into existence.⁴³ I try to infer the theological significance of the Old Testament narrative itself, to analyze its discussions of complex theological questionings, and to see what the stories tell us of who God is and who we are.

Our task is to tease out their theological significance without totally abandoning their narrative way of doing theology.



⁴³Again, see this volume’s postscript, “Old Testament Theology and History.”

