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INTRODUCTION

I have discussed some introductory questions about writing an Old Testament theology (such as why I refer to “the First Testament”) in the first of these three projected volumes,¹ but some introduction is appropriate to this one.

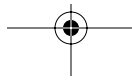
1.1 Narrative and Theology

If we wanted to help other people understand a person and what he or she stands for, there are at least two ways we might do that. We might tell the story of his or her life or make a film of it, and we would then discover the person through seeing him or her acting and being acted on in different contexts. We would see how different issues arise in different contexts. We would see what plot emerges from the person’s life—what he or she sought to achieve and did achieve. But another way of seeking to help other people understand that individual would be to try to describe the person as he or she essentially is, to analyze traits, to portray qualities, to discern what makes the person tick, to identify the priorities that have concerned him or her. We would be standing back from the story of an individual life and asking what themes run through it or what emerges from the whole.

Neither of these approaches is better than the other. Each achieves things that the other could not. The story would have implications for an understanding of the person, and the description would depend upon the story of the person’s life. The understanding of the person would be impossible without the material contained in the story, and the description would aid understanding of the story, but they would not be capable of being collapsed into one.

The Scriptures fulfill something like these two roles for God and for Jesus. Each Testament opens with long narratives that help us understand God or Jesus by telling their story. These long narratives (Genesis to Esther and Matthew to Acts) help us see what they were seeking to achieve, and portray them acting in and reacting to different situations. Each Testament then follows the narratives with material addressing people more directly with an account of who God and Jesus are and what their significance is for us. In the First Testament the Wisdom Books and the Prophets do that; so do the Psalms, though for the most part they are formally addressed to God rather than to Israel. In the New Testament, the Epistles and Revelation follow this precedent.

¹See *OTT* 1:15-41.



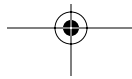
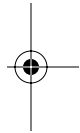


I write this Old Testament theology in the conviction that this is not merely an aspect of the formal nature of the Scriptures, but that the form gives expression to something of substance. "Christian theology is poised between the poles of narrative and metaphysics, and both are required for an adequate theological method."² It is not surprising, then, to find them in dialogue in Scripture. "The story-teller comes first," but the metaphysician follows.³ Given that each Testament goes on from narrative about what God has done to discursive statement about how things are and how they will be, it is appropriate that an Old Testament theology should do the same, and in my first two volumes I am following this twofold pattern. Volume one worked through Israel's story as the First Testament tells it, considering how "God Began," "God Started Over," "God Promised," "God Delivered" and so on. I reckoned that there was a theology in those verbs—a gospel theology, a good news theology—and a theology in the plot line that they formed. I also found in reflecting on the story that many other theological questions surfaced on the way along in different contexts: For instance, what is the nature of the people of God? How does history work? How does Israel experience God's presence? In focusing on the First Testament narrative, I made occasional reference to other parts of the First Testament, but generally kept to the narrative in order to seek to do justice to what we see by sticking to that focus that the Scriptures themselves press upon us.

In volume two I reverse this approach, again in following the Scriptures' pattern, in focusing on material that directly speaks of who God is (as opposed to what God has done), who Israel is (as opposed to what Israel has done), and so on. I thus begin from the way the Wisdom Books reflect on the nature of faith, the way the Prophets make it a matter for exhortation and the way the Psalms make it a matter for praise and prayer. Such statements about who God is and who Israel is are implicit in its narrative, and they are sometimes explicit there—for instance, in the classic formulation of Israelite systematic theology first stated in Exodus 34:6-7. I thus make some reference to the story that puts flesh on the bones of this speech (and I make some cross-reference to volume one), but I concentrate on what the books that work this way actually say. Volume one concerned Israel's gospel, the good news story that the First Testament tells. Volume two concerns Israel's faith, the understanding of God and us that emerges from the First Testament: not what Israelites actually believed, but what the First Testament suggests they should have believed.

²Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 9, summarizing the work of Nicholas Lash: see "Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy," *Why Narrative?* pp. 113-37; see p. 117, reprinted from his *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), pp. 95-119; see p. 99.

³Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, p. 117 = *Why Narrative?* p. 136.





1.2 Diversity and Unity in Old Testament Theology

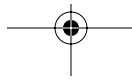
Our postmodern context does not make it more difficult to affirm the supreme authority and entire trustworthiness of the Scriptures; perhaps it makes it easier. It does mean that we work out the implications of that affirmation in different ways and in light of different questions. Like some theology of the premodern period, we recognize that we perceive only the outskirts of God and of God's ways. As well as the importance of narrative, a second aspect of our postmodern context that seems significant for Old Testament theology is thus our recognition that our insights into the truth are partial and fragmentary. In keeping with this, at the beginning of his *Theology of the Old Testament* Walter Brueggemann notes that the Old Testament is characterized by a "pluralism of faith affirmations" that makes it impossible now to go back to the idea of "a singular coherent faith articulation in the text." Consequently "it is impossible to fashion a coherent statement concerning theological substance or themes in the Old Testament unless the themes or substance be framed so broadly or inclusively as to be useless."⁴ My own starting point is in effect to grant the truth of this first sentence but deny the inference expressed in the second.⁵ We cannot identify a single faith articulation in the text, but we might be able to construct one out of its diversity, even if we find ourselves leaving some ambiguities and antinomies, and even if we still grant that the end result needs to recognize once more that we see only the outskirts of God's ways. At least, it is this that I attempt in the present volume.

Norman Gottwald once suggested that "a proper beginning point for a theology of the Hebrew Bible is to take account of everything that the Bible says about God, everything that God says, and everything that people say to God. This would be to follow radically and faithfully the course of the text. . . . Unless and until this is done, . . . theological criticism will continue to build very selectively on narrow bases of God-talk."⁶ He later acknowl-

⁴Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), pp. xv-xvi.

⁵Cf. Mark S. Kinzer's remarks (*Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2005], p. 39) regarding Richard S. Hays's analogous comments about different New Testament texts that stand in fundamental tension with each other in their attitude to Judaism (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996], pp. 408-9).

⁶Norman Gottwald, "Literary Criticism of the Hebrew Bible," in *Mappings of the Biblical Terrain*, ed. Vincent L. Tollers and John Maier (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press/London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 27-44; see p. 39. Gottwald also notes the significant diversity of the literary forms in which the First Testament's God-talk appears, with which I have tried to work. His threefold account of the Bible's subject matter (what it says about God, what God says, what people say to God) overlaps with Rolf Rendtorff's "In the first part of the canon *God acts*, in the second *God speaks*, and in the third part of the canon *people speak* to God and of God" (*The Canonical Hebrew Bible* [Leiden: Deo, 2005], p. 6). And my own threefold structure overlaps with both.





edged that this was a task of some magnitude.⁷ I have tried to work with the spirit of Gottwald's ideal, in the interests of his crucial "unless and until," and I have reread the entire First Testament more than once in this connection. The way I have structured the volume emerged from the reading of the First Testament that I did while writing it. I have sought to let the categories of thinking be ones that emerge from the First Testament itself. Like the authors of classic Old Testament Theologies such as Walther Eichrodt,⁸ Edmond Jacob⁹ and Theodorus C. Vriezen,¹⁰ I present it as an approach to structuring the faith that emerges from the First Testament in such a way as to do justice to its own dynamic (again, our postmodern setting means we are past the day when anyone would claim that their way of articulating this faith is the only way).

I begin with what the First Testament tells us about who God is and who Israel is (chaps. 2-3). I go on to the way it speaks of Israel's future, in warning of disaster and promising restoration (chaps. 4-5—volume one of course focuses on Israel's past). I then consider the nature of humanity in Israel and elsewhere (chap. 6) before letting the horizon broaden in keeping with the way the Scriptures' horizon does, so as to speak of the created world and the world of nations (chaps. 7-8). This structuring of the work by topics also happens to make it possible to be in dialogue with some major theological works such as those of Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann as well as with the world of Old Testament scholarship.

1.3 Biblical Theology of the Old Testament

I have also added occasional New Testament footnotes and closed each chapter with a reflection on what happens when First Testament faith is set in the context of New Testament faith to generate what one might call "A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament."¹¹

It is customary to see Christ as God's supreme revelation, and the New Testament as the record of that revelation. I do not object to that formulation, but its significance needs stating carefully. First, Christ did not come primarily to reveal something new. The First Testament already provided Israel,

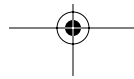
⁷Norman Gottwald, "Rhetorical, Historical, and Ontological Counterpoints in Doing Old Testament Theology," in *God in the Fray*, ed. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), pp. 11-23; see p. 12.

⁸Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (London: SCM Press, 1961, 1967).

⁹Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: Hodder, 1958).

¹⁰Theodorus C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (reprint, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962; 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell/Newton, Mass.: Branford, 1970).

¹¹For that expression, see, e.g., Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936-1969), I/2:79.



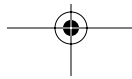


and even the world, with plenty of revelation. Israel's chief need, and the world's chief need, was not some more revelation. Christ came to do something, not to reveal something. He came to implement God's rule in the world. That fact is reflected in my focus on the biblical story in volume one. The First Testament is primarily the story of what God did to create the world and then put it right.

In acting to that end (for instance, in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, letting them generally live in a way they chose rather than the way they were told, letting their nation collapse and then bringing it back to life), Yhwh did indeed indicate what God was like, but that was not the main point; arguably they could have known most of that in the Garden of Eden. Likewise, when Christ joined in God's acting to that end (for instance, in healing people and expelling demons from them, and then in letting people kill him and having God raise him to a transformed life), he did indeed reveal God, but this did not mean revealing something that was previously unknown. Yhwh had always been the Lord of life and death, the sovereign over powers of chaos and disorder, the God who submitted to people's rejection but insisted on coming back for more. Christ provided a visible embodiment of the self-revelation that God had already given Israel. Hebrews 1:1 does not say that God spoke in many partial ways to our ancestors through the prophets but has now spoken to us more fully through a Son. It says that God spoke in many different ways to our ancestors through the prophets, but has now spoken to us through a Son. The distinction lies in the form of the revelation—a huge distinction indeed—not in the content of it.

So did Jesus say nothing new? If that had been so, there would have been nothing to be ashamed of, precisely because he came to do something, not to reveal something. There is one point at which he claims to be saying something new, the sequence of sayings introduced by "But I say to you" (Mt 5:21-48). But those sayings relate primarily to Israel's life, not to Israel's faith. They concern what people need to do in light of what God has done, not what God has done or who God is. In general, Jesus avoids giving the impression of saying something new. The New Testament is utterly vital to Christian faith because it tells us the story of Jesus. In this story First Testament faith finds its ultimate expression. But the New Testament makes less difference to that faith than people think.

To rework my opening metaphor from Acts 1:1, my image for the Scriptures is to think of them as a photograph album. What the New Testament does is provide us with a new set of pictures. Their subject is the same as that of the preceding set, but they are not identical; they are taken from some new angles in some different light with some different lenses. They therefore tell us more and fill out the picture. But they do not offer a revolutionary new revelation.





And thus we can study the theology of the First Testament separately from that of the New Testament without losing too much—and certainly without losing as much as we do if we follow the church’s practice of studying the New Testament separately from the First Testament, which it allegedly regards as Scripture.

