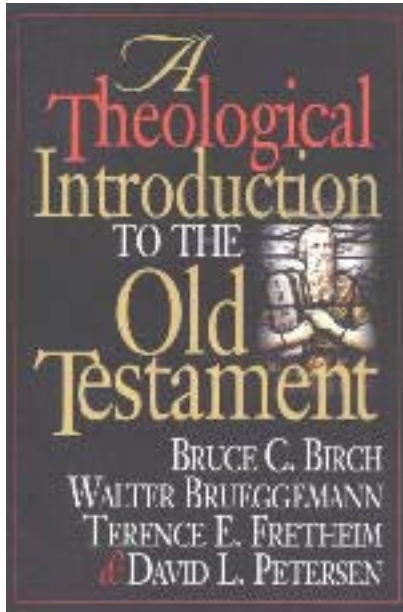


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**Birch, Bruce C., Walter Brueggemann,
Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen**

A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament

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This volume is an important new resource written specifically as an introductory work for Christian students enrolled in programs of theological education. As such, it will also be of interest to many others who are seriously interested in recent trends in biblical studies. The authors are established Old Testament professors at four prominent north American seminaries (Wesley, Columbia, Luther, and Iliff/Candler). They have joined together to write this theological introduction in large part because of common frustrations that they have experienced with current textbooks. In their judgment, many of them simply do not do justice to the Bible as a theological resource for contemporary confessing communities. While affirming the quest for what texts meant in ancient times, the authors want also to affirm the equally important task of asking what canonical texts continue to mean for people today.

A distinctive feature of this volume is the specific hermeneutical approach adopted by all four authors. In Christian interpretation, the hermeneutical task has always involved the question of how one allows New Testament writings and the early Christian witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ to influence or shape one's reading of the Old Testament. To what degree, for example, is it appropriate to affirm the prooftexting tendencies of Matthew, the christological focus of Paul, or the allegorical methods of Origen to

influence contemporary reading of the Hebrew Bible? Should there be a special hermeneutic for Christian readers of the Old Testament? These authors recognize the importance of such questions but purposely seek to understand and respect the original meaning of Old Testament texts apart from and before considering the implications of the later New Testament witness.

On the one hand, they suggest that they are not thinking only about a Christian audience. The authors express respect for contemporary Jewish concerns and scholarship. In their preface, they state that they are resolved “to author jointly a book that introduced the Old Testament both as the witness of ancient Israel and as a witness to the church and synagogue through the generations of those who had passed these texts on as scripture” (11). They declare further: “we reject the destructive implications of any form of supercessionism [*sic*, 19, 21] and affirm the ongoing debt and necessary relationship of the Christian church to Judaism, both ancient and modern ... convinced that the commonalities between Christians and Jews in reading these texts are more important than differences” (19).

On the other hand, it is quite clear that this work is written specifically for people who already are part of Christian communities of faith. In their common approach, the authors declare that “every reading of an Old Testament text involves at least two different audiences: the audience to whom the text was originally addressed and the audience supplied by the reader and the context that informs the reader. To read the Old Testament as scripture is to suggest that the ancient story intersects our contemporary stories in ways that inform and transform lives and communities. To read these texts as scripture is to expect such informing and transforming power”(18). No significant attention is devoted to the Talmud or to rabbinic studies, yet we sense that a Jewish scholar reading this work can appreciate the honest attempts to focus on the original audience and historical meaning of a text.

The authors are well grounded in historical-critical scholarship, but in keeping with patterns of recent canonical theology their overall approach appears almost quite conservative and traditional. In their outline, they follow for the most part the chronological order and the general portrait that is preserved in the Hebrew Bible, including essays on “The Created Order and the Re-creation of Broken Order” (Gen 1–11), “Promises Made, Threatened and Fulfilled” (Gen 12–50), “Bondage, Exodus, Wilderness” (Exod 1–18), “Structures of Covenant Life” (Exod 19–40), “The People of the Land” (Joshua, Judges), “The Rise of the Monarchy” (1–2 Samuel, 1 Kgs 1–11), “Kings and Prophets in the Divided Monarchy” (1 Kgs 12–2 Kgs 13), “Prophecy and Reform: From Jeroboam to Josiah” (2 Kgs 14–25 and preexilic classical prophets), “Collapse/Exile/Hope” (Jeremiah, Lamentations, Nahum, Habakkuk, Ezekiel, Isa 40–55),

“Wisdom, Order, Protest” (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes), and finally “New Life, Renewed Community, New Crises” (1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Isa 56–66, Song of Songs, Daniel, Ruth and Esther, and selected psalms).

The study invites us to reflect on the questions of how we gain proper perspective for understanding the Hebrew canon. The authors incorporate perspectives from a variety of recent areas of study: rhetorical criticism, study of the social world of ancient Israel, study of ancient political structures and ideology, and especially feminist hermeneutics (23). Most of all, the authors are concerned to allow the many (polyphonic) voices of the Old Testament to be heard and to move beyond the typically monochromatic views often seen in traditional Christian studies in systematic or dogmatic theology. Special tribute is paid to the contributions of Childs, Sanders, and Rendtorff, who have focused on canonical shaping and final form of a text. As a central affirmation, the authors declare: “we understand our task as the presentation of interpretive readings that are honest to the religious experience given witness by ancient Israel and accessible to encounter by contemporary Christians. It is not appropriate to attempt to make these readings conform to any particular pattern of church doctrine. The goal is not conformity but open and honest encounter with the church’s doctrinal traditions” (26).

While affirming the plurality of witnesses, the authors see the unity of the theology of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in four different patterns of continuity: a continuity of witness to God whose power, love, justice, redemption, judgment, compassion, and faithfulness are evident in both the Old and New Testaments (32); a continuity of God’s world, the same gift to every generation (33); a continuity of God’s people, boldly proclaimed in the New Testament to include more than people of Jewish descent; and finally, a continuity of God’s work, seen in the witness of God’s activity in the world in the Old Testament and as “a resource that empowers us as God’s people for our own faithful response to the needs of a broken world” (34).

As an introductory survey of the entire Old Testament, the volume naturally has certain limitations. Many of the descriptions are quite brief and simply do not begin to do justice to the material designated for a particular chapter. This is particularly apparent, for example, when the entire corpus of preexilic prophetic classical writing, the book of Deuteronomy and 2 Kgs 14–25 are all introduced in chapter 9. The summary statements at the end of chapter 8 (280–81) are simply too general to be helpful for seminary students attempting to get a grasp of prophetic theology. Understandably, the authors have limited their use of endnotes, but at points there are glaring omissions. Much research has simply gone undocumented. In chapter 6, three well-known theories or understandings of the conquest are described in some detail without any suggestion for further study; references at least to the works of Albright, Noth, and Gottwald would

seem helpful (181–82). The final chapter includes a brief but good discussion of postexilic Messiah references, including the fact that two messiahs, one royal and another priestly, were evident at Qumran, but again an endnote directing a student toward further study would here seem most appropriate.

Earlier, the discussion of the preexilic Messiah tradition in chapter 9 demonstrates the hermeneutical care of the authors. The presentation is both interesting and refreshing, with the familiar texts of Isa 9:2–7 and 11:1–9 discussed in light of the lesser-known text of Isa 32:1–8. There, Israel’s bold vision of hope for a future ideal king who will rule with righteousness and justice are declared. In chapter 11, there is a particularly fine discussion of Job as a work of dramatic fiction set in juxtaposition with the worldview of the book of Proverbs (384–407). Without question, the most challenging essay in this volume is chapter 6, devoted to the difficult questions of land, understood as gift, summons, and seduction. Here, Walter Brueggemann’s distinctive mode of rhetorical analysis is evident as he (and certainly the other three authors as well) struggle with questions ancient and modern about theological and ideological claims of people to particular land. This chapter clearly calls all of us to reflect on “greed for land,” whether that involves pioneers who felt justified in taking land from Native Americans or contemporary Israelis justifying the occupation of Palestinian lands. One cannot help but ponder the prophetic word preserved in Amos in which the Lord asks: “Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir” (9:8)? Could it be that all peoples on earth are intended to enjoy the security of a homeland?

Faculty in theological seminaries, clergy, and interested laypeople as well will find this new work to be of significant help in introducing the canon of the Old Testament. I suspect that the volume will prove to be a good companion for study of the texts appointed for each chapter. From my own experience, I suggest that it might be helpful to begin use of this volume with chapter 10, both to introduce the exilic and postexilic eras, when we believe that the canonical texts were given definitive shape, and as a helpful point of reference for remembering earlier eras of Old Testament history. I am convinced that the statement that appears at the conclusion of chapter 10 points to the exilic and early postexilic eras as a starting point for study of the Hebrew Scriptures: “the exile is the overwhelming experience of Old Testament Israel and the defining reference point for ongoing Jewish imagination” (368).

The exilic experience shaped and influenced future writings and commentaries within the postexilic community. It became the lens by which people from that era on read and understood earlier biblical texts. It was also the lens by which they gave theological witness to events in their own past history and sought to discern direction, meaning, and

hope for the future. One cannot help but ponder the degree to which the Shoah has come to serve as a similar lens today for contemporary Judaism. The suggestions at the end of chapter 10 prompt such reflections and call Christian readers to move beyond traditional thinking about Christology and patterns of promise and fulfillment to ponder contemporary questions of suffering, hope, our modern world, and trust in the life-giving promises of God.