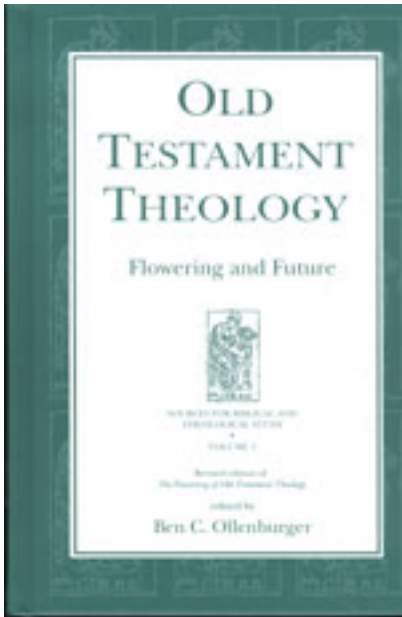


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***Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future***

Revised edition

Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 1

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*Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future*, edited by Ben C. Ollenburger, is a revision of *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology, 1930–1990*, edited by Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel. Although less than fifteen years has passed since the publishing of the earlier volume, this period has witnessed both new perspectives emerging (half of the new selections are from after 1990) and to a greater degree a new appreciation of previously marginalized voices (half of the new articles predate 1990). Ollenburger provides a brief introduction and notes before each of five major divisions in the collection. In an appendix Johann P. Gabler’s 1787 inaugural lecture as Professor of Theology at the University of Altdorf, “An Oration on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each,” which marks the beginning of the modern discipline of Old Testament theology, is presented.

Old Testament theology (as well as biblical theology in general) is a field of study that has been marked from its inception by a lack of methodological clarity. Thus much that has been written in the field focuses on what Old Testament theology should properly be trying to do. What is the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (for Christians, as the vast majority of Old Testament theologians have been)? How

objective or scientific should Old Testament theology be, as opposed to reflecting the practitioner's confessional stance? Should it aim to describe the theology of the Israelites (or various subsets of them) in each historical period (a more diachronic approach), or should it take a cross-section (a synchronic method)? In either case, is there a central theme or themes that should be lifted up around which the rest of the material can be related? Additionally, should Old Testament theology focus on the Masoretic Text, earlier forms of the text, or other versions of the canon? Is the term *theology* limited to what the ancient Hebrews said about God, or should it include theological reflection on everything that they thought and did? And for whom should Old Testament theology be written: the church? the academy? ordinary people? oppressed people? No consensus has emerged on any of these questions despite over two hundred years of debate and many thousands of pages of text. Although any number of introductions to the field are available, this volume (updating its predecessor) is the best compendium of primary texts available for the reader who wants to sample the field directly.

Part 1, "Background," includes Ollenburger's comments on "Old Testament Theology Before 1933." Short essays by the German scholars Otto Eissfeldt (1926) and Walther Eichrodt (1929) follow. Eissfeldt maintains that the historical (knowing or objective) and theological (believing or subjective) approaches must remain separate, though they are ultimately compatible. Eichrodt, on the other hand, argues for an Old Testament theology that is placed within empirical-historical Old Testament scholarship. The remaining parts 2–5, comprising over 90 percent of the volume, focus on biblical theology after 1933. Thus, the primary interest of this anthology is in Old Testament theology of the last three quarters of a century.

Part 2, "Old Testament Theology's Renaissance: Walther Eichrodt through Gerhard von Rad," includes a longer essay by Walther Eichrodt on "Covenant" (1961) as a central focus of Old Testament theology; the Dutch Reformed Theodorus C. Vriezen's "The Nature of the Knowledge of God" (1958), which focuses on the relationship between God and humanity (from a Christian perspective) as a key theme; the American Presbyterian George Ernest Wright's "God the Warrior" (1952), in which he emphasizes God's activity within history generally and God's role as the ultimate foe of evil in particular; and the German Gerhard von Rad, who also emphasizes God's saving acts within history. Unlike many Old Testament theologians, von Rad did not try to find a single central theme around which to organize his theology but instead emphasized retelling the story, although this is not evident in the selection presented in this anthology.

Moving beyond the 1950s and 1960s, part 3, "Expansion and Variety: Between Gerhard von Rad and Brevard Childs," presents excerpts of seven scholars' work who come from diverse traditions (including Roman Catholicism) published during the 1970s and early

1980s. “Life Before God” (1978), by the Swiss scholar Walther Zimmerli, continuing the German tradition in response to von Rad’s students, focuses on the revealed name of God, YHWH (which he vocalizes), as the center of Old Testament theology. YHWH acted in the exodus, thus making it clear that a political dimension is involved; additionally God provided a law by which the people could live before the divine, in obedience, awe, and faith.

In contrast with most of the Protestant Old Testament theologians, John L. McKenzie, an American Roman Catholic, writes in “Cult” (1974) that the Israelites experienced God first in the cult (worship), second in revelation, third in history, and then in nature, wisdom, and political and social institutions. McKenzie focuses solely on the Old Testament, while Ronald E. Clements, a British Baptist, in “Law and Promise” (1978) is aware of the reception of the Old Testament by both Jews and Christians. He sees Torah, law or more accurately instruction in moral, cultic, and social obligations, and promise, as two themes that permeate the entire Old Testament and that both communities have interpreted in varying ways, with Christians emphasizing the theme of promise and Jews of law.

The American evangelical biblical scholar Walter C. Kaiser Jr. views “Promise” (1978) alone as the central theme. Of all the biblical theologians presented thus far, Kaiser is the most explicitly focused on the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Christ of the New Testament. Samuel L. Terrien’s theological perspective was shaped in the French and Swiss streams of the Reformed tradition. In “Presence in Absence” (1978) he sees God’s presence as the central theme of the Old Testament and suggests paradoxically that when humans try to grasp God, God hides, but God’s very hiddenness in these moments reveals the nature of God’s presence.

Claus Westermann was a pastor in the Lutheran Church and a colleague of von Rad’s on the faculty at Heidelberg. Because the Old Testament is largely a narrative, he writes that biblical theology must be verb-based rather than concept-based. His excerpts are entitled “God’s Judgment and God’s Mercy” (1979–82) and focus on God’s judging and mercy, on the one hand, and on the human response, on the other. The final Old Testament theologian presented in part 3 is Elmer A. Martens, who has been associated with the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in California for much of his career. He is thus the first scholar related to the historical peace churches in this collection. Martens suggests that Exod 5:22–6:8, the text in which God gives the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) to Moses, is a pivotal text. This text shows God’s design as fourfold: salvation, the covenant community, the knowledge of God, and the gift of the land. Thus Martens is also the first of the Old Testament theologians presented in this volume who sees the gift of the promised land as central.

Part 4, "From Brevard Childs to a New Pluralism," contains excerpts from seven Old Testament scholars active in the 1990s. Brevard Childs, who studied under both Eichrodt and von Rad and has taught at Yale Divinity School since 1958, is best known for his canonically centered criticism, that is, for biblical theology that is based on the received canonical text, and thus the excerpts from his work are entitled "Canon" (1986–92). Rolf Knierim studied under von Rad, taught in Brazil, and is Professor Emeritus at Claremont School of Theology. The title of the excerpts from his work, "Cosmos and History" (1995–2000), indicates one way in which he differs from his teacher, in that he is interested not only in a diachronic theology of the Old Testament (history) but also in a synchronic one (cosmos). The theme of justice also plays a significant role in his thought.

Horst Dietrich Preuss produced the first full-length Old Testament theology in German after von Rad's work. "Exodus and Election" (1995) describes his conviction that God's election of Israel for communion with God's world and Israel's (and the nations') expected response are the twin central themes of the Old Testament. Walter Brueggemann, one of the most prolific and well-known Old Testament scholars of the latter part of the twentieth century, studied under James Muilenburg at Union Seminary and is a United Church of Christ minister. His work shows strong postmodernist influence. In "Israel's Testimony" (1997), using an idiom drawn from the law court, Brueggemann suggests that the proper focus of Old Testament theology is what Israel said about God in the biblical texts rather than what happened, which we cannot know.

Paul R. House is the second evangelical Old Testament theologian presented in this volume. Although he does not try to find a single unifying theme for the Old Testament, he does believe that a number of focal points exist. He suggests such a central point for each of the canonical books. In "Ruth in the Canon" (1998) he proposes that the central message is that God extends mercy to the faithful. Bernhard Anderson is best known for his Old Testament textbook, first published in 1957 and still widely used in various editions and revisions. In "Royal Covenant" (1999) his Old Testament theology is presented as organized around the theme of covenant, first Abrahamic, then Mosaic, and finally Davidic. Erhard S. Gerstenberger studied at various schools in Germany and taught in both Germany and Brazil. In "One God, Changing Theologies" (2002) he criticizes canonical approaches to Old Testament theology, emphasizing instead the historical contexts from which all canons emerge and the reality that no form of faith is ever final.

The last section of this book, "Contexts, Perspectives, and Proposals," presents the work of eight scholars, including the only Jew and the first woman in the anthology. Hartmut Gese was another student of von Rad, but he focused on both the Old Testament and the New. His "Tradition History" is an excerpt from a 1977 publication. Phyllis Trible was

another of James Muilenburg's students; she became the mother of feminist Old Testament scholarship with her *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* and *Texts of Terror*. "Overture for a Feminist Biblical Theology" dates to 1989 and includes her suggestions that biblical theology begin with Gen 1–3, with the creation of male and female in the image of God, and that it include explorations into the presence and absence of the female in the Old Testament. Jon Levenson received his doctorate from and now teaches at Harvard. He is the only Jew to appear in this collection, and he has written on "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Old Testament Theology," though much of his work could be described as Old Testament theology. "Creation and Covenant," excerpted from one of his early books (1985), lifts up these two concepts as central ones in the Tanak.

John H. Sailhamer is the third evangelical scholar in the collection. In "Canon and Composition" (2002) he presents a more historically sensitive and nuanced approach to canonical criticism than is found in the work of Childs. Gunther Hermann Wittenberg's "Contextual Theology and Resistance" (1984) is excerpted from a *Semeia* article, "Old Testament Theology, for Whom?" Wittenberg spent much of his career in South Africa, where he became aware of the failure of academic Old Testament theology to dialogue with ordinary people, particularly the poor and oppressed. James Barr, a native Scot, wrote a long treatise on methodological issues related to biblical theology, *The Concept of Biblical Theology* (1999) from which "'Real' Theology and Biblical Theology" is excerpted. His central point is that the Old Testament contains little theology, as defined by systematic theologians, and that books of Old Testament theology are likely to contribute less to scholarship than more narrowly focused studies on various theological issues within the Old Testament.

R. W. L. Moberly, an Englishman, is more of a pan-biblical theologian than an Old Testament theologian in that his work spans the Old and New Testaments. In "The Bible, Theology, and Faith" he argues for an affirmative valuation of religious convictions on the part of the biblical theologian. The anthology concludes with Mark G. Brett's "The Future of Old Testament Theology" (2000). Brett's conceptualization of Old Testament theology is considerably broader than Barr's, encompassing theological reflection on the totality of Israel's experience. Like Wittenberg, he asks what purposes Old Testament theology serves and for whom it is written. He also suggests that beginning with the burning questions of today may be as reasonable as beginning with the biblical text.

*Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future* is a useful resource for students of Old Testament theology who cannot read all the primary sources at the outset of their study. It is understandable that Ollenburger has kept his introductory remarks to a minimum, both to allow the primary texts to speak for themselves and to limit the number of pages in this hefty tome. Nonetheless, a bit more guidance on the issues confronted in the excerpts

would have made it considerably easier for a new student to comprehend the sometimes inaccessible material, made even more difficult by its brevity and lack of context. In some cases different material from an author's work might have made it easier for the reader to grasp the major contributions and style of the author. Occasionally the reader finds more help in getting an overview of some of the authors from off-hand remarks by other authors in the collection than from the introductory remarks. In spite of these caveats, Professor Ollenburger and David W. Baker, the general editor of the series Sources of Biblical and Theological Study, are to be commended for providing this comprehensive anthology of Old Testament theology.