

Foreword

The decision of Cascade Books (U.S.) and James Clarke (UK) to republish *Moses* by Gerhard von Rad is a most welcome one. Gerhard von Rad is likely the most important Old Testament interpreter of the twentieth century, one whose influence in critical study and in theological exposition continues even now in powerful ways. This little book, first published in 1940 and first translated into English in 1960, is a gem that brings together in quite accessible ways samples von Rad's daring interpretation and his courageous faith.

In this book von Rad appeals to some of his most important critical studies that made him a defining force in the discipline. He makes that appeal to his earlier work without calling attention to it and without making matters especially complex. When we consider that the book was first published in 1940, we are plunged into that dangerous context in which von Rad did some of his most important work. In the wake of the Barmen Declaration of 1934 and in the midst of the Confessing Church in Germany that stood opposed, as best it could, to National Socialism, von Rad had to work out a way to continue to teach and interpret

the Old Testament in a political context where hostility to anything Jewish was broad and deep. In 1938 he published his programmatic essay, "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch," in which he proposed that the theological *Leit-motif* of Genesis–Joshua was the theme of God's promise to Israel that was fulfilled in the gift of the land of promise. That is, he saw a connection in the tradition between the promise of Genesis to the ancestors and the tales of conquest in the book of Joshua. Behind that sweep of promise to fulfillment was von Rad's defining hypothesis about the "credo" in which he identified a succinct statement of the faith of ancient Israel that centered in the events around Moses, most especially the Exodus and the land promise, traditions that were filled out by the covenant of Mt. Sinai.

Many of the critical assumptions with which von Rad worked are no longer sustainable, especially since current scholarship is in a mood to date everything in the Old Testament quite late, whereas von Rad, in an earlier scholarly context, had assumed an earlier dating for the text. But even if his critical assumptions are no longer persuasive, the theological insight he had about the faith claims of the text continue to shape much of the discussion in Old Testament studies concerning the faith of ancient Israel.

Because he was a Lutheran, it is not surprising that von Rad focused on the theme of "law and gospel" a topic that for a Lutheran is unavoidable in the Sinai tradition. Because von Rad wanted to preserve and affirm the cruciality of the Old Testament for Christian faith, he could not treat "the law," that is the commandments of Sinai, as simply a foil for the gospel according to the popular temptation to equate Old Testament–New Testament with "law–grace."

Rather he judged that the God of Israel is the God of “holy freedom” who repeatedly “reveals that his name is a name of inviolable freedom.” He is able to affirm, moreover, that the God who speaks the commandments of Sinai is “the God of grace.” He said that with reference to God’s self-disclosure as “the God of the exodus” as a premise of the first commandment. Thus the commandments are treated by von Rad as for the emancipatory impulse of God over against the economic oppression and coercive “naturalism” of Pharaoh. There is no doubt that his exposition is a fine exegetical offer, and von Rad is to be recognized as a first-rate reader of texts. But the point is even sharper when we recall that his focus is on commandments 1 and 2: “No other gods, no grave images.” He offered that exposition of the commandments in the context of German National Socialism that was making an idol of the state and of the “Aryan race.” Thus in context von Rad shows the way in which the commandments constitute a ground for resistance to the ideology of National Socialism, a resistance that is also implied in his credo hypothesis of 1938, for he understood the “credo” as a place to stand against the dominant ideology of the state.

Von Rad was, at the same time, attentive to the danger of preempting the Old Testament for Christian faith and thus overriding its clear Jewish formulation and intention. But he did not overstep that boundary by imposing the Christian gospel on the Old Testament, but saw that the God of Israel who saves is indeed the God of good news who enacts emancipatory victories against coercive powers in the history of Israel.

All of which is to say that we should not read this little book “innocently.” It sparkles and snaps with strong interpretive impulses that reflect on von Rad’s courage and his clear-headedness about the appeal to its radical promises and its equally radical claims. Whatever we can now say about the “historicity of Moses,” a matter now greatly vexed in Old Testament studies, von Rad understood well the continuing contemporaneity of the traditions that cluster around Moses, both as promise and as demand (*Gabe* and *Aufgabe*). These are radical invitations to be in the world differently. There is, of course, no obvious one-to-one correlation between the dangers that von Rad faced in Germany in his time and the dangers now faced by twenty-first century readers of his words. Nor is there an obvious one-to-one correlation between the ancient dangers of Israel and our contemporary dangers, and von Rad clearly understood that one cannot easily slide from one to the other. His own work shows the difficult way of interpretation in connecting from one context of danger to another that requires interpretive skill and grace. In his work von Rad makes and implies connections between “then and now” for his own day, even as his book suggests connections between “then and now” in our contemporary day of reading von Rad again. His little book, read knowingly, invites the reader to faith and risk and resolve.

Thus he wrote of the Jubilee Year:

Man thinks he can treat the land as his own possession; he grasps at all the mysterious powers of the fertile soil, at the treasures of the earth, and he forgets God, who gave all this to him. He regards the land as his own domain, which he can

exploit in all directions exactly as he pleases. He can buy land and sell it; he can let it for a longer or shorter period, exactly as circumstances demand. But over against man's arbitrary assertion of his claim to possession of the land, God sets up his claim to be the true owner of it.

Von Rad explicated that ancient subversive mandate in the midst of the German reach for *Lebensraum* at the expense of other peoples, precisely because the land could be regarded as a "possession." Now we read von Rad in the midst of military adventurisms and insatiable expansionism accompanied by a deep environmental crisis that seems to have no limit. We continue to regard the land (and its oil!) as a legitimate "possession." The force of such an ideology continues as does—von Rad would surely say—the promise of an alternative. The reappearance of von Rad, through this book, in the midst of our interpretive work is a welcome one—attention must be paid!

Walter Brueggemann
Columbia Theological Seminary
April 4, 2011