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The Role of Old Testament Theology in Old Testament Interpretation

Four Interpretive Phases

In a summary way, it is possible to distinguish in scholarship four rather distinctive phases of critical study, each of which hosted theological interpretation in a way peculiar to its horizon.

The Reformation Period

It was in the Reformation that "biblical theology" became a distinct enterprise, as theological interpretation was undertaken apart from the sacramental system of the church, and to some extent outside the conventional categories of the dogmatic tradition.[1] In that context, "biblical theology" had as its role the attempt to voice the fresh, free, live word of gospel, completely uncontained and unfettered by any hegemonic categories of established church tradition. Different traditions in the Reformation, of course, gave different accents to this newly "evangelical"

1. It was Luther's intention to interpret the Bible and its Gospel apart from the interpretive controls of the church. Thus "biblical theology" became an enterprise distinct from church theology. It is instructive that Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments*, 6–24, begins his study of biblical criticism with the rubric *sola scriptura*.

interpretation, best known in Lutheran *grace* and Calvinistic *sovereignty*. In all these cases, however, the effort was made to deal directly with "the things of God" in the text, without mediating forms and structures that worked toward domestication and containment. Thus "biblical theology" had a distinctly "evangelical" impetus.

Enlightenment Historicism

While the forms and cadences of Reformation "biblical theology" persisted into the seventeenth century, the notion of unfettered witness to the things of God was exceedingly difficult to maintain. In both Lutheran and Calvinist circles (not to speak at all of Trent), the great claims of unfettered gospel were eventually reduced to new scholastic formulation, surely as domesticated as the scholastic formulations against which the primal Reformers had worked.[2]

In that context, the move from *dogmatic* to *historical* questions was an attempt to emancipate biblical interpretation from the deep domestication of Scripture. It is exceedingly important to recall that the emergence and appropriation of "the historical" was an effort to maintain the free availability of scriptural claims against the new theological scholasticism. It is common to cite the lecture of Johann Philip Gabler in 1787 as the decisive articulation of this new approach, whereby Gabler insisted that Old Testament study was primally an historical and not dogmatic enterprise.[3] As Ben Ollenburger has shown, however, Gabler's intention is more subtle than the simple categories of dogmatic–historical may indicate.[4]

Focus upon "the historical" brought with it the subsequently developed notion of "God acts in history." But the primary energy released by this new category was devoted to historical criticism and the effort to situate every text according to its date and recoverable context. This movement culminated in Wellhausen's great synthesis that is aptly titled *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*.[5] That is, the documentary hypothesis,

2. See Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modem World*.

3. Gabler's decisive lecture is available in its pertinent parts in English by Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology."

4. Ollenburger, "Biblical Theology." See also Knierim, "On Gabler."

5. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*.

for which Wellhausen is widely credited and blamed, is a preparation for doing *history*.

Historical criticism, perhaps inevitably, focused upon the history of Israelite religion, thus situating each religious practice and implied theological claim in a specific context, understanding each practice and claim as context specific. The outcome was to relativize every practice and claim, to permit a developmental scheme by which every practice and claim was eventually displaced (superseded!) by another. As a consequence, every practice and claim is pertinent only to its immediate historical context. In that enterprise that stretches, as we conveniently put it, from Gabler to Wellhausen, the study of the history of Israelite religion almost completely displaced Old Testament theology, and the latter continued only in a subdued way as a rearguard action to maintain the "constancies" of "orthodoxy." It is of particular interest that whereas "biblical theology" in the Reformation period was emancipatory, in the period of high Enlightenment it was, where it was undertaken at all, not so much emancipatory as conserving and consolidating, an attempt to resist the vigorous enterprise of relativizing historicism. Such an approach to the text was distinctly against "the spirit of the times."

The Barthian Alternative

The dominance of a history-of-religion approach, with its relativizing consequences, inevitably evoked a response. But no one could have imagined that the response would be as forceful, bold, and demanding as that offered by Karl Barth in his *Römerbrief* in 1919.[6] Barth's effort was to interpret the text in a boldly and unembarrassedly theological, normative way, without yielding anything to historical relativism and without reducing faithful practice and theological claim to contextual explanation.

It is difficult to overstate the decisive contribution of Barth in turning the interpretive enterprise and in freshly legitimating theological interpretation that dared to treat theological claim in the text as constant and normative. Barth enlivened and legitimated nearly a century of theological interpretation, including the most important work in Old Testament theology; but of course from the perspective of scholars who, for personal or intellectual reasons, fear and resist such claims of the "normative," Barth is to be regarded as an unfortunate digression in the discipline.

6. It was presented in English translation as *The Epistle to the Romans* (1933).

While Barth's theological eruption already in 1919 is taken as a decisive break in Enlightenment historicism, it is not possible to appreciate the impact of Barth apart from the later context of his work, with particular reference to the challenge of National Socialism in Germany and the articulation of the Barmen Declaration in 1934. The mood and tenor of the work is profoundly *confessional*, an assertion of *normative* truth that had practical consequences and that implied personal and concrete risk. That mood and tenor of confession did not bother to make itself persuasive to "cultural despisers," who, by historical criticism, managed to tone down "evangelical claims" for God, to make matters compatible with Enlightenment reason. The daring claims made in a Barthian posture stand in deep contrast with the consolidating, even reactionary function of biblical theology in the earlier period of historicism. Barth's dominance is a primal example of the ways in which context presents questions and challenges that push biblical theology in one direction rather than another. It is unmistakable that the crisis of the twentieth century both required and permitted biblical theology in ways neither permitted nor required in the earlier period of high historicism.

The legacy of Barth may be said to have dominated the field of biblical theology until about 1970. In the center of that period is the magisterial work of Walther Eichrodt who took *covenant* as his mode of normativeness, and the even more influential work of Gerhard von Rad, whose definitive essay of 1938 surely echoes the credo-orientation of Barmen.[7] While the normativeness and constancy of Barth's perspective can take different forms, both Eichrodt and von Rad sought to provide a place of normativeness in which to stand in the face of the huge barbarisms of the twentieth century, for it was clear that the domestications of historical criticism provided no standing ground at all. More than Eichrodt, von Rad continued to attend to and be puzzled by the unmistakable dynamic of historical change reflected in the faith of Israel, but he finally does not yield to it. In the United States, moreover, the odd juxtaposition of normative theological claim and historical vagary was handled

7. The pivotal essay for von Rad, surely reflecting the confessional crisis of Barmen, is "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch." The belated English translations of the more comprehensive works are Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.); von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.). See Brueggemann, "Introduction," as an overview and critique of von Rad's contribution.

with remarkable finesse and, for the moment, in a compelling way by G. Ernest Wright in his influential *God Who Acts*.[8]

It is to be noticed that while this essentially Barthian enterprise of "the Short Century" might provide credible ground for faith midst the brutalities of history, it is also the case that the interpretive movement out of Barth was vigorously hegemonic, providing in various ways a summary account of the faith of ancient Israel that was exclusionary in its claims and allowing little room for alternative reading.[9] While such an assertiveness can well be understood in the context of brutality whereby interpretation was an emergency activity, it is also important to recognize that such a hegemonic posture evokes an inescapable response at the end of its domination, a response of considerable force and authority.

The Coming of Post-Modernity

It is now common to cite 1970 as the break point of what came to be called (pejoratively) "the Biblical Theology Movement," that interpretive enterprise propelled by Barth and especially voiced by von Rad and Wright. The "ending" of that monopolistic interpretive effort was occasioned by many factors. It is conventional to cite the work of Brevard Childs and James Barr as the decisive voices of the ending, even though it is clear that Barr and Childs come from very different directions and agree on almost nothing except their critique.[10] Also to be fully appreciated, from inside the movement itself, are the insistence of Frank Moore Cross (a colleague of Wright) that Israel is enmeshed in ancient Near Eastern culture and is not as distinctive as had been urged, and Claus Westermann's (a colleague

8. Wright, *God Who Acts*. See also Wright, *The Old Testament against Its Environment*.

9. On "the short century" see Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*. The "short century" refers to the time from the outbreak of World War I to the fall of the Soviet Union. The nomenclature is pertinent for our topic that was dominated by a certain set of assumptions growing from Barth. The exclusion practiced by what became "the Biblical Theology Movement" is easy to spot in retrospect. On the positivism related to the enterprise, see now Long, *Planting and Reaping Albright*.

10. See especially Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*; and Barr, "Revelation through History in the Old Testament and Modern Theology"; Barr, "The Old Testament and the New Crisis of Biblical Authority"; Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*; and Barr, *Holy Scripture*. In addition, it is important to mention Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language."

of von Rad) urging that the horizon of creation was as important as the "historical recital" for the faith of Israel.[11]

More broadly the rise of feminist and liberation hermeneutics and the failure of mono-interpretation have produced, since 1970, an interpretive context that is by many styled "postmodem," that is, after the hegemony that had dominated the twentieth century.[12] Coming to the more important features of this development of scholarship that has put the work of Old Testament theology in some disarray, we may notice three.

Pluralism. Von Rad has already taken seriously the pluralism of the theological claims of the Old Testament text. But now the awareness of pluralism is much deeper and more seriously noticed, so that the text seems to admit of no single, grand formulation. Indeed the text not only offers a plurality of God-claims, but when read closely, the several texts themselves are plurivocal, open to a variety of readings. The quality and character of the text, moreover, is matched increasingly by a plurality of readers, reflecting a diverse community of interests, so that no single synthetic reading is any longer possible.[13]

Ideology. It follows from a full-faced acknowledgment of pluralism, that one can readily see that every offer of normativeness is in some sense ideology. Most benignly this means it is an advocacy for a certain perspective and not a given. Thus, even the hegemonic approach held in common by Barth, Eichrodt, von Rad, and Wright is seen to be not a stable foundation, but rather an advocacy on offer to the larger interpretive community that must be received and adjudicated by interpreters who occupy other ideological perspectives.[14] Behind this collage of interpretive adjudications among advocacies, we are able to see more clearly that the pluralism in the text itself concerns the things of God, a collage of competing advocacies

11. See Brueggemann, "The Loss and Recovery of Creation in Old Testament Theology," and the references there to Cross, Westermann, and Schmid.

12. I have no special concern for the label "postmodern," except that it is a convenient way to reference the quite new interpretive context in which we are now placed. See Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*. For a vigorous and important resistance to postmodernity, see Watson, *Text and Truth*.

13. For an insistence upon a unified reading that resists pluralism in faithful reading, see Watson, *Text and Truth*, and his earlier *Text, Church and World*.

14. It seems evident that long-standing theological hegemony turns out to be ideological advocacy, as does skepticism that assumes the ideological claims of Enlightenment rationality. None is immune from an ideological insistence, so that we must work midst our competing advocacies.

that made it into the text, advocacies that are not done (we may assume) in bad faith, but that are not easily or quietly compatible.

Speech as Constitutive. Emphasis upon the`` power of rhetoric, when considered in the context of pluralism and ideology, makes clear that speech about God is not simply reportage on "what happened" in history or "what is" in ontology, but the speech itself is powerfully constitutive of theological claim as it is of historical "past."[15] Thus the new, postmodern world of theological interpretation is powerfully focused on utterance, a concrete utterance offered in the text, and on *interpretive utterance* offered in contemporary conversation. Insofar as utterance is taken as mere utterance, it may indeed be shaped either by the dogmatic claims of the ecclesial community or by the requirements of Enlightenment reason. But it is also in the very character of utterance that it may be a novum, that can be recognized in some quarters as a claim of truth beyond the fetters of church or academy.[16] Thus it is the *appropriation and reception of utterance* and *the critique of utterance* that I take to be the work of Old Testament theology. In our present context, this reception, appreciation, and critique of utterance takes place in the loud and dissonant presence of many voices. But this accent on utterance as the offer of new truth also has important continuities with the Reformation accent upon the word, and with the insistence of Barth, even though that reception, appreciation, and critique must now be done in a quite different form.

The Marks of Old Testament Theology

The location of Old Testament theology in a postmodern situation sets some severe limits on what is possible, but also yields some legitimate place for such demanding, important work. Both the severe limits and the legitimate place, however, are freshly situated in a new cultural, interpretive context in which old practices must indeed be relinquished. Indeed, the case is readily made that from our present vantage point (that also must not be absolutized, as has been a recurring temptation for every vantage point), Old Testament theology has been much too often imperialistically

15. On the constitutive power of public speech, see Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise*, 1–28. A more rigorous discussion of mine would appeal to the work of Foucault.

16. Steiner, "A Preface to the Hebrew Bible," luminously makes the case for the ways in which the discourse of the Bible is originary. See also Kort, *"Take, Read."*

Christian, coercively moralistic, and vigorously anti-Semitic.[17] These critiques of past work must be taken seriously and count much more, in my judgment, than the easier contention that theological interpretation does not honor Enlightenment rationality and is therefore fideistic.

Old Testament theology in such a context, I propose, may have the following marks.[18]

1. "*Theo-logy*" is "speech about God." That is, it does not concern, in any primary sense, all that might be said of Israel's religion, but it is an attempt to pay attention to the God who emerges in the utterance of these texts, a God marked by some constancy, but a God given in a peculiar, even scandalous characterization. What ever else may be said of this God, it is clear that the God of the Old Testament conforms neither to conventional monotheism nor to flat dogmatic categories, nor to usual philosophical Enlightenment assumptions of the West, though it is equally clear that a monotheizing tendency is at work.[19]

2. *Speech about God* is given by human persons, reflected in human institutions, in human contexts, serving human, political agendas. This is no new insight and no threat to the enterprise. All the efforts to minimize "the historical," moreover, cannot eliminate the fact that human persons have made these utterances. Thus the God of Israel is given us *on the lips of Israel*, constituted through utterance, utterance no doubt deeply driven and informed by lived experience but in the end shaped by artistic, imaginative utterance.

3. Such speech about God is not idle chatter but is characteristically *intentional speech* and is so treated in the canonizing process. More specifically, we may say that *intentional human speech about God is testimony*, an attempt to give a particular account of reality with this God as agent and as character at its center.[20] And while we may notice the great pluralism in the text in God-utterances, we may also, perhaps more importantly, observe a family kinship of all these utterances when set over against alternative accounts of reality, ancient or modern. While close theological reading will attend to the differences in utterance, Old Testa-

17. See Levenson, "Why Jews Are not Interested in Biblical Theology."

18. For what follows, my more extended treatment is given in Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*.

19. See Sanders, "Adaptable for Life."; and most recently Sanders, *The Monotheizing Process*.

20. On "testimony" as the decisive genre for biblical theology, see Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 117–44.

ment theology in the end has a propensity toward that shared kinship, to see what is recurring midst the vagaries of testimony.

4. Old Testament theology treats of the text of canon and so takes human testimony as *revelation*.[21] One need not so take it, and many scholars preoccupied with "historical questions" would not make that move, even though what is claimed to be "history" turns out almost every time to be advocacy. Be that as it may, Old Testament theology, in its attention to what is recurring and constant in Israel's God-utterance, takes that God-utterance to be disclosing. I understand, of course, that the history of Christian revelation, with its deposit of dogmatic truth, has been profoundly coercive; here I use "revelatory" and "disclosing" to mean that the God-utterance of Israel seeks to *un-close* lived reality that without the generative force of Yahweh as character and agent is characteristically *closed* in ways of denial, despair, and/or oppression.

5. To take Israel's God-speech as revelatory means that it is utterance that seeks to speak about a *mystery* that attends to and indwells the world in which Israel lives. That mystery, according to Israel's utterance, is on the loose, wild and dangerous, often crude, inaccessible, unattractive, capable of violence, equally capable of positive transformation.[22] In its God-speech Israel does not set out everywhere to give us an attractive or appealing God, the stable God of church catechism or the winsome God of therapeutic culture. But it does seek to give an account of an agency of otherness who operates with intentional purpose and who refuses to be captive either to slogans of self-sufficiency or in the terminology of despair.[23] Israel's God-speech seeks to give an account of restless holiness that decisively redefines and resituates everything else about life.

6. Israel's God-speech, moreover, in a rich variety of ways, offers that this Other is *provisionally identifiable*. "God" in the Old Testament is

21. It is especially Brevard Childs who has insisted that when the text is studied as "Scripture," as the holy book of the ecclesial community, the shape and claims of canon are decisive for interpretation. Childs has rightly linked "Scripture" to theological intentionality of a quite specific kind. But whereas Childs's notion of Scripture tends to be stable and consolidating, Kort, *"Take, Read,"* offers a much more radical, lively, and serious notion of the reading of Scripture.

22. On the defining dimensions of violence in the text that is assigned to God, see Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*; and Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*.

23. It was, of course, Barth who focused on the "Wholly Other." The notion of alterity has been more fully and helpfully developed in Jewish interpretation, stemming from Martin Buber and given classic formulation by Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. See also Steiner, *Real Presences*.

identifiable, known by characteristic actions that are recognizable from one context to another, known by direct utterance treasured and passed on, known by moves that can be placed in the text and on the lips of the witnesses. Because that Other is genuinely *other*, however, Israel itself knows that all such identification is provisional and not final or certain.[24] And so there are "many names," many metaphors and images, many songs, poems, and narratives, all of which attest differently.[25] There are crises of naming when the name is displaced (Exod 3:14; 6:2), and there is a withholding of the name (Gen 32:29).[26] In the end, moreover, there is the inscrutability of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH), Israel's final resistance to idolatry and Israel's defiant notice to check both church theologians who know too much about this Other and academic theologians who work apart from this Other.

7. In a postmodern context, it is important to accept that these voices of God-talk are all advocates in the debate about how to voice provisional identity of the undoubted, unaccommodating Other. Thus "J," Second Isaiah, Job, and Ezra each advocate differently. At the most they advocate but they do not finally know. They are witnesses and neither judge nor jury.[27] They propose and offer, but do not finally comprehend. Insofar as all these witnesses agree (which is not very far), their shared utterance is also advocacy and not certitude. In our postmodern context, it can hardiy be more than advocacy.

I am, however, quick to insist that there are many scholars who discount the God-speech of Israel in the name of "disinterested" scholarship, who refuse theological questions on the ground of "history," who are themselves advocates and not more than advocates.[28] We have arrived at the odd situation in which the *resisters* to the God-utterances of Israel posture themselves as more certain than the *practitioners* of Old Testament theol-

24. On the problematic of God's name, see the representative, rather conventional discussion in Braaten, ed., *Our Naming of God*. Kort, *"Take, Read,"* 133–38, has important suggestions about the scriptural deconstruction of patriarchy that dominates Scripture.

25. See Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow?*, especially ch. 6.

26. As is often remarked, it is important that the name of YHWH is withheld in the long poetic exchange of the book of Job until chapter 38. Such a withholding is surely intentional and strategic for the book.

27. On the witness and counter-witness, see Brueggemann, "Life-Or-Death."

28. Skepticism is not particularly high ground in intellectual activity. It simply advocates Enlightenment rationality, an increasingly doubtful stance for interpretation. See, e.g., the odd use of the term "disinterested" by Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?*, 1.

ogy dare to be; but in fact the resisters also are only advocates of Enlightenment rationality, bespeaking old and long wounds from ancient theological coerciveness, preferring a self-contained, self-explanatory world to one of hurt-producing theological authoritarianism. A postmodern Old Testament theology, so it seems to me, dare not be coercive and need not be coercive. For in our present context, Old Testament theology is proposal and not conclusion, offer and not certainty. Interpretation stands always in front of our deciding and not after. For the *otherness* of reality given us on the lips of Israel makes our deciding always penultimate and provisional, always yet again unsettled by new disclosings.

Attending to the Testimony

Given the history of the discipline, and given a postmodern situation with no agreed-upon "meta-narrative,"[29] we may now consider the role of Old Testament theology in the discipline, a role that must respect both the critical foundations of the discipline and the postmodern options that at the same time limit and permit.

I purpose that the primal role of Old Testament theology is to attend to the testimony out of which lived reality was then and may now be reimagined with reference to a Holy Character who is given us on the lips of Israel, who exhibits some constancy, but whose constancy is regularly marked by disjunction and tension.[30] The act of imagining alternatively is what these witnesses are doing in the text-world itself, and the ongoing option of imagining alternatively is kept alive by continual attentiveness to this testimony.[31] That Holy Character on the lips of the

29. On this characterization of postmodentity, see Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

30. On such a characterization of God, see Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament*.

31. To *imagine alternatively* seems to me a fair notion of what biblical theology is about. Brevard Childs is frequently worried that my emphasis on imagination is to assign too much to human initiative. It is surely the case, however, that any fruitful, faithful interpretation is indeed an act of imagination. See van Wijk-Bos, *Reimagining God*; Davis, *Imagination Shaped*; and Green, *Imagining God*. And even such a conservative perspective as that of Watson, *Text and Truth*, 325, yields the verdict: "At the very least, the interpretative tradition that is here in process of formation is an expression of a *creative theological imgination* that has learned to see the scriptural texts in the light of Christ, and Christ in the light of the scriptural texts" (my emphasis). One must of course make differentiations, but to resist imagination in principle is impossible.

witnesses through whom lived reality is construed differently is often given as a characteristic assurance; but on many other occasions this same Character is rather a deconstructive force who moves against every settlement, every certitude and every assurance. Or, as Jürgen Moltmann has said of more belated, Christian claims for faith, the God given on the lips of witnesses is both "foundation" and "criticism," both *the power for life* who is profoundly generative and authorizing, as well as summoning and dispatching, but who is also *a critical principle* who stands as a check upon what these witnesses may say against this Charcter.[32] Or more summarily, this testimony to God is a claim that at the core of lived reality there is a mystery invested with transformative energy and with durable purposiveness. The witnessing community endlessly relearns, however, that embrace of that transformative energy and durable purposiveness does nothing to minimize the inscrutable Otherness of the Character who inhabits such mystery.

The role of Old Testament theology as attendance upon the testimony conceming this Character varies as we consider the various "publics" addressed by such study. We may be guided by David Tracy's identification of three publics that concern us—the academic, the ecclesial, and the civic.[33] Of any work in Old Testament studies, it may be especially Old Testament theology that reaches beyond the limits of the discipline of Old Testament study itself to address those other publics.

Old Testament Theology within the Academic Community[34]

There is no doubt that Old Testament theology is related to and much informed by many different kinds of critical study, literary and historical.[35] It no longer pertains, moreover, that these several modes of critical study are conducted in the service of theology, as might have been the case when theology could claim to be the "queen of the sciences." In a

32. The subtitle of Moltmann, *The Crucified God* is *The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*.

33. Tracy, *The Analogical Imgination*, 3–46.

34. I am aware that by "The Public of the Academy" Tracy refers to the entire university community. Here, because of my particular topic, I refer more explicitly to the guild of Old Testament studies.

35. I take "historical" here broadly to include more recent developments of "social-scientific" methods.

postmodern setting, it is clear that very much critical study is taken as an end in itself, without any reference to theological issues, or in some quarters critical study is undertaken precisely to defeat theological interpretation and eliminate the questions it purports to address.

Old Testament theology, in the present context of scholarship, has no leverage or need to be taken seriously by the guild of scholarship, and has no mandate to insist upon its own claims. Nonetheless, those of us in the field who take up the work of theological interpretation sense that critical study that is singularly preoccupied with historical or literary questions, or that proceeds according to positivistic rationality that in principle nullifies Israel's testimony to God, has in fact failed to pay attention to the text or to the claims that are expressed and that invite the hearer's engagement. In the end, it seems clear that the Old Testament text is not preoccupied with historical questions nor even with literary finesse-though both historical and literary issues are fully present—but with the strange, sometimes violent, sometimes hidden, often unwelcome ways of this Holy Agent in the midst of life.

Very much historical and literary study, taken in and of itself, while perfectly legitimate, is conducted in a way that is "tone deaf" to the voice of the text. Thus Old Testament theology, if conducted in a way that is not reductive or coercive, may be an invitation that could keep the academic discipline from being turned in upon itself, preoccupied with greater and greater intensity on issues that matter less and less. In the end, so it seems to me, the history of ancient Israel that can be recovered by positivistic categories does not seem to go anywhere that would interest the witnesses themselves, for when the Holy Character is deleted from the calculus of meaning, not much that matters remains.[36] In the same way, attentiveness to literary and rhetorical elements of the text seems to indicate the artistry of the sort of folk who are always pointing beyond the artistry itself to the true Subject of the artistry who defies critical decoding. It seems to me inevitable that the core claim of Old Testament theology, witness to the Character, will continue to live in discomfort with a kind of positivistic criticism that resists its very subject. Nonetheless, its work is

36. On the limits and inadequacy of positivistic history for our purposes, see Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*. Said another way, what concerns Old Testament theology must to some extent be concerned with an "emic" approach to the text in distinction from a more conventional "etic" approach. On the distinction, see briefly Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*.

to keep before the more general discipline the central Character without whom much of the rest of our study ends up being trivial.

Old Testament Theology in the Context of Ecclesial Communities[37]

Because Old Testament theology is here defined as speech about God, it is inevitable that reference will be made to those communities that intentionally engage in and attend to serious speech about God. There is, I take it, an unresolvable tension between academic study and ecclesial study, if the former is defined in positivistic categories. But to define academic study in positivistic categories is itself an advocacy of special pleading and is not a necessary assumption. How the interplay of academic and ecclesial references is adjudicated seems largely to depend upon the interpreter, but to begin with an assumption of total separation is a premise that in my judgment is not readily persuasive.[38]

But the more important ecclesial question concerns the tension and interplay between faith communities, Jewish and Christian, both of which look to these texts as Scripture.[39] It is now completely clear, especially through the work of Jon Levenson, that Old Testament theology historically has been an unashamedly Christian enterprise, or even more specifically, a Protestant enterprise. Such study, moreover, has been deeply marked by unthinking anti-Jewish interpretation, an outcome that is inescapable, I suggest, as long as work is done in isolation.

Moreover, Brevard Childs has made a powerful case that Jews and Christians read different Bibles, so that the theological interpretation among Christians and among Jews is different from the ground up.[40] This

37. By speaking of such communities in the plural, I refer to both synagogue and church. It is evident that my way of speaking concerns the church; but, mutatis mufflndis, the same issues pertain to the synagogue.

38. This large and important point is well urged by Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*.

39. The interplay of Jews and Christians concerning Scripture is as important as it is vexed. The problematic is already reflected in the different nomenclature for the texts, names that bespeak important issues. See Brooks and Collins, eds., *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament?*

40. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*. Clearly Watson, *Text and Truth*, agrees with Childs on this point. See Watson, *Text and Truth*, 209–19, for a reflection on the work of Childs.

same view is reiterated from the Jewish side by Jon Levenson.[41] While the argument has much to commend it, it is not one by which I am persuaded. It is my judgment, rather, that theological interpretation of these Scriptures can be and is better done by Jews and Christians together, who may part company in their reading only late, if at all. The ground for common reading is partly moral and historical, that Christian supersessionism and its consequent brutality require an alternative approach.[42] Beyond that and more important, however, is the generative, evocative character of the text and the Character dominant within it. It is evident that the Old Testament imagines toward the New, but it manifestly does not imagine exclusively toward the New. It is evident that Hebrew Scripture imagines toward the Talmud, but it does not imagine exclusively toward the Talmud.[43]

Rather the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures imagine vigorously, in pronouncedly polyvalent ways, an offer addressed to and received by both Jewish and Christian faith communities as authoritative for a life faith. But because the imaginative thrust of the text is richly generative beyond every interpretive domestication, it will not do for a subsequent faith community to construe itself as the exclusive receiver of that generativity. Thus it seems to me that it is not a mistake to see this text toward the New Testament, but it is a deep, substantive mistake to see this text *exclusively* toward the New Testament (and mistaken in a similar way to see it only toward the synagogue).[44]

The truth is that the ecclesial communities are summoned precisely to host this Character marked, on the lips of the witnesses, by inscrutable mystery, assertive will and energy, and inviolable purpose. And while that mystery, will, energy, and purpose may be provisionally linked to the Jewish community (in the claims of election and covenant) or to the Christian community (in the claims of Christology), the linkages are ideed provisional and contingent. As Old Testament theology may have

41. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible*, 80–81 and passim. He concludes: "There is no non-particularistic access to these larger contexts" (80).

42. See Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*.

43. Holmgren, *The Old Testament and the Significance of Jesus*, has shown how the communities of Judaism, Christianity, and Qumran all engaged in the same "creative/depth" interpretation of scriptural texts.

44. Clearly to move from the nonnative text to any of the emergent texts requires an immense act of imagination, surely imagination that is informed by the canonical community. On this kind of freedom and discipline in interpretation, see Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*.

as its work to summon academic scholarship away from trivialization and preoccupation with marginal matters, so Old Testament theology may summon ecclesial communities from certitudes that are excessive and exclusions that are idolatrous, by witnessing to the elusive but insistent reality of this Holy Character.

Old Testament Theology in Public Discourse

If Old Testament theology is *a practice of reimagining lived reality with reference to this odd core Character*, then Old Testament theology, in its furthest stretch, may speak past academic and ecclesial communities to be concerned for public discourse.

I do not imagine that Old Testament theology can contribute specifically and concretely to questions of public policy and public morality, as interfaces between old text and public issues are exceedingly complicated. But if the emerging dominant construal of reality in the global economy is the unfettered pursuit of private power by the manipulation of the "money government," then Old Testament theology as a witness to this Holy Character can indeed provide materials for an alternative imagination.[45] It seems evident that the more recent construal of the world in terms of privatized global economy is not one that will enhance our common life. Such a construal of the world, so it appears, ends either in self-sufficiency or in despair. In either case it offers a huge potential for brutality, either to fend off in active ways those who impinge and threaten, or simply by neglect to allow the disappearance of the non-competitive.

It may be that from some other source can come an alternative to this dominant construal of reality, perhaps from what Robert Bellah terms the "republican" tradition.[46] It can hardly be doubted that some alternative construal of social reality is urgent among us. And if we work from the ground up, it is entirely plausible that *lived reality reimagined out from this Character who lives on the lips of these witnesses* could offer such a wholesale and compelling alternative.

45. The phrase "money government" is from Reich, *Opposing the System*. See also Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*; Greider, *One World*; and Kuttner, *Everything for Sale*.

46. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*.

Naïve Realism

There is no doubt that Old Testament theology, in converstaion with any of these three publics, proceeds with something of a "naïve realism," prepared to take the utterance of the witnessing text as a serious offer.[47] Such "naïveté" may be only provisional and instrumental, as the interpreter withholds a serious personal commitment, or that "naïve realism" may reflect (as in my case) the primal inclination of the practitioner. Either way, so it seems to me, the practitioner of Old Testament theology must move between a credulous fideism and a knowing, suspicious skepticism, wherein the former does not pay sufficient attention to *the problematic* of the witness, and the latter is *tone deaf* to the core claim of the witnesses.

At the moment and perhaps for the foreseeable future, Old Testament theology must work its way between two determined challenges. On the one hand are those whom I would term "children of innocence," who are excessively credulous but who do not remain long with the elusive quality of the text, but immediately push the testimony along to the more reified claims of the ecclesial community—for example, in Christian parlance, to reduce the testimony to doctrinal categories. It appears to me that such innocence is so much powered by *anxiety* that old truths are in jeopardy and the world does not hold. The reduction of the testimony turns out to be a strategy for the recovery of a "lost coherence."

On the other hand, there are those whom I would term "children of coercion," who are exceedingly skeptical, but who do not linger long enough with the playful disjunctive quality of the Character, but immediately push the testimony to reified formulation that they then immediately are obligated to combat. It appears to me that such skepticism is rooted in *great rage*, not really rage at the text or even its claims, but rage rooted in old, hidden histories of coerciveness whose wounds remain endlessly painful.

Both such anxiety-rooted-in-innocence and such rage-rooted-in-coercion are serious, endlessly powerful postures that are not easily overcome. It seems equally clear, however, that neither *anxiety* over a world that is passing nor *rage* about a world that has injured is an adequate place from which to engage the Character who lives on the lips of the witnesses.

In a postmodern context where hegemonic claims of any sort are doubtful, Old Testament theology must play a modest role, not claim too much for itself, but stand in some interpretive continuity with ancient

47. It is, to be sure, a "second naïveté": see Wallace, *The Second Naiveté*.

witnesses who imagined and uttered with radical difference.While embracing an appropriate modesty, however, Old Testament theology must have its own say, voice its own offer that claims no privilege but is not to be confused with any other claim. It could be that, if done with authority but without any streak of arrogance, Old Testament theology could invite

- *the academic community* away from self-preoccupied triviality that is such a waste;
- *the ecclesial communities* away from excessive certitude that is idolatry; and
- *the civic community* away from brutality rooted in autonomy long enongh to engage this summoning mystery.

Anxiety and rage are real and legitimate. It remains to see if reading through them and past them is possible. The offer of these witnesses is sometimes as definite as "a God so near and a Torah so just" (Deut 4:7–8). Sometimes the witness is as open and inviting as a question, "Where shall wisdom be found?" (Job 28:12). Either way, the witnesses invite beyond anxiety and beyond rage to a mystery whose name we know provisionally.

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