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What is Old Testament Theology?

Roger W. Uitti¹

When I interviewed for the position of Associate Professor of Old Testament at the Lutheran Seminary in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in 1980, I was asked if I had any qualms about teaching any of the courses listed in the required curriculum for Old Testament. “Yes,” I said, “I am a bit uncertain about teaching the required senior course ‘Old Testament theology.’ What is it?”

After arriving in Canada, I started out teaching this course by sharing insights from the library copy of *Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzugen*, as Prof. Claus Westermann seemed to know what Old Testament theology was about.² His effort, written in a popular style, seemed a creative and refreshing step up from von Rad, his fellow German Lutheran. His work made some attempt to link the OT up with Jesus Christ.

After some years of fiddling here and there I finally arrived at what I thought Old Testament theology might and should be about. For what it is worth, such is what I should like to share with you the reader.

The historical quest for the definition, task, and scope of Old Testament theology has been aptly set forth in a number of articles and comprehensive surveys by Christian scholars,³ and has even generated response from a few Jewish observers.⁴ This historical quest has indeed proved to be both challenging and elusive.

My own personal quest crystallized as threefold in dimension. First, from its name alone, I came to recognize that Old Testament theology should be a Christian enterprise, where the individual scholar’s task ought to be to produce an idiosyncratic theology setting forth a comprehensive vision of the contents of the Old Testament under some specific theme or motif that would be useful for Christians. Second, ever respectful of internal detail, this

¹ Roger W. Uitti is Emeritus Professor of Old Testament at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon.

² Claus Westermann, *Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzugen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978). Dr. Martin W. Leeseberg, my immediate predecessor in OT at the Lutheran Seminary, had used Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

³ Emil G. Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955); Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen, 1956/69); Rolf Knierim, “The Task of Old Testament Theology.” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 6 (1984) 25-57; John H. Hayes and Frederick Prussner, *Old Testament Theology: Its History and Development* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985); George Coats, “Theology of the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, eds. Douglas A Knight and Gene M. Tucker (Philadelphia/Chico: Fortress/Scholars, 1985) 239-262; H. Graf Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Jesper Høgenhaven, *Problems and Prospects of Old Testament Theology*, Biblical Seminar (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988); Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basics Issues in the Current Debate* (4th rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); W.E. Lemke, “Theology (OT),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D.N. Freedman et al. (New York/London/Toronto: Doubleday, 1992) VI, 448-473; James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); B.C. Ollenburger, E.A. Martins, and G. Hasel, eds., *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004).

⁴ Matatiah Tsevat, “Theology of the Old Testament – A Jewish View.” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 8 (1986) 33-50; Jon D. Levenson, “Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology,” in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (New York: Yale, 1993) 33-61. See also Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985).

discipline ought to involve a meaningful dissection of the whole of the Old Testament under some generally agreed-upon core categories, with a material outcome of use to Christians, Jews, and perhaps even Islam. But third, in what has been the most neglected of all in most hitherto Old Testament theologizing, the full range of Old Testament theology, I thought, also should make some attempt at capturing just how and where the Old Testament has been valued and has functioned within and during subsequent centuries, yes, right into more recent times. This last dimension, in short, would help underscore the historic and ongoing relevance of the Old Testament.

Classic Old Testament Theologies

The very first goal in the seminary class over the years was accomplished simply by a review of a number of classic Old Testament theologies written by representative Christian scholars. These classic Old Testament theologies, many in translation, were arranged and presented to the class in the sequence of their original dates of publication, to underscore the time line of development. The chosen representative presentations involved both addressing the substance as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the individual works selected. The choice of representative OT theologies commenced with W. Eichrodt's three-volume classic centering on the "covenant" theme (1933-39), followed by the works of E. Jacob (1955), G. von Rad (1957/60), G. Knight (1959), C. Westermann (1978), R.E. Clements (1978), W.C. Kaiser (1978), B.S. Childs (1985/92), H.D. Preuss (1991/92), W. Brueggemann (1997), perhaps the best textbook to this day to accompany the course, and the more recent contributions of L.G. Perdue (1994/05) and J. Goldingay (2003/06/09).⁵ The limitations imposed by course time and space, obviously, meant leaving a sizeable number of other OT theologies out in the cold.⁶

⁵ Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J.A. Baker, vols. 1-2., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961-67); Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock (New York/Evanston: Harper & Row, 1958); Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65); George A.F. Knight, *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament* (Richmond: John Knox, 1959); Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982); Ronald E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978); Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978); Brevard S. Childs, *OLD Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989); *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Horst D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. Leo Perdue, vols. 1-2, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995-96); Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstruction Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology after The Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005); and John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 3 vols., Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003-09)

⁶ L. Köhler, *Old Testament Theology* (1936/53/57); O.T. Baab, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (1949); W. Vischer, *Witness of the Old Testament to Christ* (1949); G.E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (1952); *The Old Testament and Theology* (1969); O. Procksch, *Théologie des Alten Testaments* (1950); P. van Imschoot, *Théologie de l'Ancien Testament*, vols. 1-2; *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (1965); P. Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament* (1955); Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (1949/58/66/70); G. Hebert, *The Old Testament from Within* (1962); W.H. Schmidt, *The Faith of the Old Testament* (1968/83); G. Fohrer, *Theologische Grundstrukturen des Alten Testaments* (1972); J. L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (1974); W. Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (1972/78); S. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Towards a New Biblical Theology* (1978); W. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (1979); E.A. Martins, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (1981); R. Gnuse, *Heilsgeschichte as a Model for Biblical Theology* (1989); R.L. Hubbard, Jr./R.K. Johnston/R.P. Meye, eds., *Studies in Old Testament Theology* (1992); O.

Old Testament Theses

In the effort to fulfill the proposed second task of OT theologizing, the following core categories were set forth: 1. YHWH's Name/Person/Uniqueness; 2. YHWH's Manifestations/Perfections; 3. YHWH's Revelation/Hiddenness/Word/Spirit; 4. YHWH and Heaven/Sheol/Mythology; 5. YHWH and World; 6. YHWH and Israel; and 7. YHWH and the Individual.

As should be clear from the many theses shared within the seminary classes over the years, there was much borrowing and modifying of the insights of a great many other co-laborers in the field. Someone in my family once quipped: "Share the fruits of your labors, not all of your labors." For the purposes here, time and space and such great wisdom allow me to share for review only a little fruit.

1. YHWH's Name/Person/Uniqueness

While God is known and confessed under many proper names and epithets in the Old Testament, the name "YHWH, the God of Israel" is God's most distinctive and special name, the name of the One who initiated the covenant relationship with the people of Israel (Gen 12:1ff.; Exod 3:7ff.; 20:2; Deut 7:6; 10:15). The Tetragrammaton, YHWH (YAHWEH), the name revealed to Israel, occurs 6,823 times in the Old Testament. In addition, the Digrammaton, YH (YAH) occurs 50 times when the phrase "Hallelu-Yah!" is considered.

In the Old Testament God is known and addressed primarily in terms which relate him to society and to history. The language of nature is distinctly secondary. The Old Testament focuses less on God's being per se and more on God's activity, i.e., God's being for us. Israel's God is not indifferent to what goes on in the world. Israel's God is fully a Person who freely reacts and acts, who rejoices over, suffers with, and interacts with the people of Israel. The furtherance and success of God's announced goals decidedly involve the unexpected and near impossible. While occasionally adaptable to situations what remained unchangeable was God's love and commitment.

2. YHWH's Manifestations/Perfections

YHWH was manifested as the God of both blessing and deliverance. Yet it is not enough to say this. What is crucial is the kind of God acknowledged to bring salvation and blessing to Israel and us. The fullest expression of the kind of God YHWH stands articulated in Exod 34:6-7. This confession embodied in Exod 34:6-7 is restated in abbreviated form throughout the OT (Num 14:18; Neh 9:17b; Ps 86:15; 103:8,17; 145:8; Jer 32:18-19; Joel 2:13b; Jonah 4:2b; Nah 1:3a), and in numerous related texts (Exod 20:5-6; Deut 5:9-10; 7:9-10; 2 Chron 30:9b; Neh 1:5; 9:31; Ps 106:45; 111:4; 112:4b; Micah 7:18-19; Lam 3:32; Dan 9:4b). YHWH alone determined who was declared a righteous person. A righteous person was a person in a right relationship with YHWH.

3. YHWH's Revelation/Hiddenness/Word/Spirit

What YHWH revealed was understandably always tied up with why YHWH revealed. In YHWH's self-revelation one received far more than mere information or insight; one got

Kaiser, *Der Gott des Alten Testaments: Theologie des Alten Testaments, 1: Grundlegung* (1993); 2: *Wesen und Wirken* (1998); P.R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (1998); C. Barth, *God with Us: A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (1991); B.W. Anderson, *The Contours of Old Testament Theology* (1999); E. S. Gerstenberger, *Theologies of the Old Testament* (2001/02); and B. Waltke and C. Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (2006).

an assignment or commission. YHWH's sharing with Israel revealed as much as it concealed. Thus even in the Christian faith the cross of Christ at Golgotha is a moment of the fullest sharing as well as the place of most profound concealment. YHWH's Word in the OT was not primarily understood on the basis of its content but as an event taking place between God and persons. The OT knows little of an abstracted, objective word of God. That is why the word of God never became a doctrine.

Reference to the "spirit of YHWH" or the "spirit of God" occurs nearly 50 times in the OT. This "spirit" was understood as an empowering, temporary, sporadic, charismatic divine gift (Judg 15:14; 1 Sam 11:6), a life-giving (Job 33:4) and life-ending (Gen 6:3); Eccles 12:7) presence, and, what is more, later became a more permanent, more democratic, eschatological prophetic endowment (Joel 2:28-29). In only two contexts does the fuller expression "holy spirit" occur (Ps 51:11; Is 63:10-11). However, except for perhaps 1 Kgs 22:21-23, the OT does not explicitly treat this "spirit" as an entity or personage independent of God in form or function.

4. YHWH and Heaven/Sheol/Mythology

The use of mythical material to witness to YHWH's activity for and toward Israel and the world was two-directional: the mythical was taken up and made into history (YHWH over Yam, Tannin, Leviathan, Rahab); on the other hand, the historical was occasionally reinterpreted and enhanced by the coloring and transformation of themes from the ANE world of myth (YHWH as warrior, Jerusalem as Mt Zaphon).

In the heavenly world, YHWH, enthroned as God and King, was surrounded by numerous subservient heavenly beings that honoured, praised, and served the Godhead (Ps 89:5-8). One unusual figure was named "Satan," cited in the OT in three contexts (Job 1-2; 1 Chron 21:1/cf. 2 Sam 24:1; and Zech 3:1-2. Satan in such contexts appears as a member of the divine assembly who worked as a kind of crown attorney or public prosecutor.

YHWH had control (Amos 9:2a) over Sheol (Ps 16:10; Ezek 26:20) yet did not bother much with the dead (Ps 6:5; 88:3-12; 115:17). Most often YHWH related rather to the living. There was little or no divine relationship with the "shades" or *repha'im*, the "weak" or "powerless" ones in Sheol (Is 26:14). Sheol was the subterranean abode of the dead, to which all, good and bad, faithful and unfaithful, kings and subjects, rich and poor descended (Gen 37:35b; 1 Sam 2:6; 2 Sam 12:23; Is 14:9-11; Ezek 32:18-32).

5. YAHWEH and the World

Not one of the many modes of YHWH's creative action in the OT can be shown to be unique to Israel. Israel seems to share with her Ancient Near East neighbors at least four common modes of creation: 1) creation through birth or by succession of births (Ps 139:13,15-16); 2) creation as a result of a struggle, battle, or victory (Job 26:12-13; Ps 74:12-17; 89:9-10; Is 51:9-10); 3) creation by making or action (Gen 2:7; Ps 24:2; 119:90); and 4) creation through word utterance (Gen 1:2ff.). The witness to God's creative work is not confined to Gen 1 but is scattered through the OT (Job 10:8-11; Ps 8, 19, 104, 136, 148; Is 40-55; Amos 4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6. As such there is no one correct way to speak about YHWH's creative power. The one and only area of agreement is the universal doxology of praise due from humanity for such creative activity.

6. YAHWEH and Israel

YHWH promised Abraham and Sarah and their descendants a land, a seed, and, above all, a blessing that would envelope all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3,7; 18:18; 22:17-18; 26:3-4; 28:13-14; Is 19:24-25; Zech 8:13). Thus Israel was chosen, not as an end, but as a means to a greater end, i.e., the bringing of all nations into relationship with YHWH, Israel's God. The one question debatable is to what degree Israel was to be seen as a passive prototypical model or as an active agent in such a world transformation.

7. YAHWEH and the Individual

In the OT a universal relationship between the individual and God stands grounded in the pronouncement by the Priestly writer that each and every human being is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26ff.; 5:1b; 9:6b; Ps 8), hence God's ongoing activity with humanity dare not be restricted only to the people of Israel as a whole. YHWH is said to hear and acknowledge individual prayers of praise and lament. Individuals invoking God's name were assured to be heard in times of trouble (Ps 4:3; 17:6; 50:15; 81:7; 91:15; 145:18; 94:9). By their sheer number individual prayers of lament and declarative praise far outnumber their corporate counterparts. The content of the typical lament was threefold: 1) personal loss or suffering; 2) persecution and taunting by personal enemies; and 3) YHWH's seeming indifference. Even when some individual "fool said there was no God" (Ps 14:1/53:1) such an expression must properly be understood more as an expression of temporary defiance than anything to do with modern atheism. By contrast, wherever and whenever the individual believer encountered YHWH's gracious activity, the appropriate response was declarative praise. Declarative praise entailed a sharing with others, in narrative, of the details of the experienced deliverance, that came in response to lament. As the true source of all good, even the very impetus for such responsive praise and acknowledgment itself was deemed to come ultimately from YHWH himself (Ps 22:25; 40:3a). YHWH was truly worthy to be praised now and forever (2 Sam 22:4/Ps 18:3; 1 Chron 16:25/Ps 96:4; Ps 113:3; 145:3).

Theologies within the Old Testament

Old Testament theology entails, to be sure, a diverse and rich collection of diverse, individual theologies. In the seminary classes we covered this rich dimension via peer group discussions downstairs in the seminary cafeteria once each week. The student group round-table leaders were pre-chosen, and all got at least one chance to monitor discussions. The leader for the day was encouraged to provide his/her table group members with pastry, cookies, or donuts, as the group sat down for the hour in the corners of the cafeteria. Coffee or tea was the responsibility of the individual table members as well as clean-up. The leader might or might not begin the session with an appropriate OT reading or prayer. The leader was requested to ask each group member to indicate which reading or readings s/he read for the discussion topic set for the day and to make every effort to engage all members at the table in the conversation. The leader was to assist the table group to cover the title and nomenclature of the "theology" under discussion, to seek out the limits and extent of the material involved, note general structures, styles, and organizational patterns, flesh out defining characteristics and ideology of the material, pinpoint the historical period involved and issues addressed, solicit the theme, purpose, and message of each theology or history, and close out the session with possible contemporary relevance of the OT kerygma of the day for teaching, preaching, and Christian ministry today.

The rewarding and "God-only-knows-where-they-went" discussions centered in turn on the so-called Yahwist and the Elohist, the Priestly writers, the Deuteronomist, the Chronist/Chronicler, the pre-exilic, the exilic, and post-exilic prophets, OT apocalyptic, the Psalmist, the wisdom literature of the OT (both traditional and protest wisdom), and lastly, the diverse contribution of SRLE (the Megilloth). More major group discussions tackled the required course book, Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, touched upon readings involving Islam and the OT, and discussed both Bornkamm's *Luther and the Old Testament*⁷ (good background for persons preparing for Lutheran ministry) and Fretheim's *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*⁸ (a most engaging "read" out of the process theology perspective). Helpful to the students for the contrast within interpretive methodologies between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for table discussions was the reprint: "Abraham in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" obtained from the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.⁹

Perspectives on/Appropriations of the Old Testament

The final dimension of the course was, of course, the outgoing significance of the Old Testament. The choice of such perspectives, i.e., how the OT has been evaluated and used throughout the centuries, had to be by necessity most selective. Accordingly, the course dealt in turn with the Marcion/Harnack/Schleiermacher claims about the OT as of "No Relevance," followed by 1st century/later Jewish hermeneutics, Jesus and the OT, Paul/early Christian appropriations of the OT, early/medieval Christian interpretive methodologies, Islam (see above), the Christological (Luther/Calvin), R. Bultmann's existentialism, C. Hartshorne's process theology (see Fretheim), B. Childs' canonical approach, and post-modernism interpretation, liberation and feminist perspectives, and finally, as good Lutherans, "confessional Lutheranism," i.e., how the OT appears and is utilized rightly or wrongly within the Lutheran Confessions.

This is but one view of what the discipline of OT theology might or should be about. Old Testament theology is indeed a very full, lively, and fleshy plate. In summary, the suggestion here is that Old Testament theology should not be simply about what is in the OT but also on how, where, and why the OT lives on. The only other and definitely related appropriation worthy of inclusion in OT seminary education might be a course entitled, "The Old Testament and the Arts," but that is another subject for another time.

⁷ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. E.W. and R.C Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969; reprint available: 2nd English ed., Mifflintown: Sigler, 1997).

⁸Terrance E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 14 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

⁹"Abraham in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," in *Face to Face: An Interreligious Bulletin* 13 (Spring 1986) 1-35.