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Old Testament Theology

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I

Most Christians probably read the Old Testament to learn about God. They expect it to tell them what God is like, what he has done and what he requires of them. But those who approach the OT in this way are soon disappointed. They find that the God it shows them is, at best, something of a mixed blessing. Although at times he is loving, gentle and trustworthy, at others he seems capricious, harsh and unfeeling. The things he is said to have done include not only bestowing miraculous blessings (chiefly on the people of Israel), but also destroying whole nations without pity; and the conduct he demands, though it puts a high value on justice, often seems to lack compassion. The information about God we get from the OT seems fairly ambiguous, and we would be hard put to it to recognize in it the God in whom Jews or Christians now believe.

In one way the critical study of the OT described in the previous chapters alleviates the discomfort. A critical approach shifts the emphasis away from reading the OT to discover what God is like, and on to studying it in order to discover what the ancient Israelites *thought* he was like. Instead of learning what God has done, we learn what the authors or the communities who produced the various OT books *believed* he had done; and by applying historical methods we can sometimes discover what the actual events were that they interpreted as 'acts of God'. Rather than extracting from the Bible a catalogue of moral duties, we try to understand how ideas about ethics developed in ancient Israel. Because this puts us at one remove from the assertions the text itself makes about God, the problem of the more 'scandalous' parts of the OT becomes that much less acute. We are not being

asked to say that God actually did or said or commanded what the OT says he did; only that people thought he had done so. OT study becomes the study of the history of Israelite religion, social life, and institutions. Since this makes no direct claims on our own religious allegiance, we can be much calmer and cooler about it than we could if we thought the OT was a source of direct information about God that had to be believed by religious people, just as it stood.¹

But the loss here may be as great as the gain. In gaining an objective knowledge of religious beliefs in Israel, we seem to lose the Bible as a book of faith. The OT ceases to be a problem by becoming, from the believer's point of view, an irrelevance. The history of the religious beliefs of the ancient Israelites is an interesting subject for scholars to study, but it is not clear why students of theology — still less ordinary believers — should concern themselves with the OT, if this is all it can inform them about. If the OT is to continue to be important for theology, its usefulness will need to go beyond what merely historical study can offer. It is the attempt to provide this that is usually described as Old Testament Theology.

II

One possibility for reuniting the OT with Christian theology may be called the 'winding quest' approach.² This says that the OT does not give us direct information about God; but by showing us the various stages through which the religious awareness of the Israelite people passed, it enables us to see how they were prepared for the fuller 'revelation' of God brought by Jesus. The OT is the record of various attempts to understand God, which were all more or less imperfect but which none the less were necessary steps on the path that eventually led to Christianity and the theology of the New Testament.

Thus the 'religious quest' of ancient Israel can be seen as a *gradual progress* towards the truth. The blood-thirsty religion and morality of the book of Judges, for example, represents an early stage of religious awareness that was gradually left behind as higher insights into God's nature made themselves known through the teaching of the prophets. The four-source hypothesis of the Pentateuch can be fitted well into such a theory of progressive revelation. The sources (J, E, D and P) derive from

distinct phases within the history of ancient Israel, characterized by different types of religious thought, with J (the earliest source) reflecting an early and anthropomorphic idea of God, and P (the latest) a much more refined, transcendental and monotheistic faith.

So the OT bears witness to an enormous variety of religious insights and convictions, many of which strike us as crude or unacceptable but which were all necessary in paving the way for the pure monotheism that lies at the root of both Judaism and Christianity.³ Without the warlike spirit exemplified in Judges, people would never have come to a serious awareness of the holiness of God, nor of his total and exclusive commands – however wrong they may have been to think that these demands meant destroying those who worshipped other gods. Without the ritualistic religion of temple and sacrifice, we should never have come to see the costliness of religious allegiance. And without the prophets, interpreting all the events of history as God's judgement or as his blessing, we should never have arrived at the belief that one God controls the entire course of the world according to principles of justice and mercy. All these types of OT religion were more or less flawed, but they represent essential stages through which human religious awareness had to pass if it was to lead, in the end, to the religious faith of modern believers.

A number of objections can be raised to this, even on the historical level. Against the idea of progressive revelation it can be pointed out that many of the ideas of early Israel were by no means dead in NT times. For example, the ideal of Holy War as set out in Joshua had enjoyed a resurgence in the second century BCE, in the days of the Maccabees. Christians have often thought that Judaism after the Exile regressed rather than made progress. Where the pre-exilic prophets had denounced Israel and threatened that God would destroy his own people for their sin, post-exilic prophecy and apocalyptic writing often confirmed the nation in its nationalism and were smugly complacent about God's grace towards it. We have seen that the four-source theory can be fitted into a framework of progressive revelation; but Wellhausen, who gave this theory its classic expression, did not at all see it in this way: he thought that P marked a decline into the narrow legalism and ritualism that would be condemned by Jesus and St Paul.

Even on the winding quest view, there are byways of OT faith and practice that cannot easily be seen as *necessary* preconditions

of Judaism or Christianity. But there is also a more fundamental problem. If we are now at the end and goal of the quest, why should we concern ourselves so much with its earlier stages? If Israel's religious quest leads up to and is fulfilled in the religious systems of Christianity or Judaism, would we not do better to concentrate on the fulfilment, rather than to spend time on what it was a fulfilment of? Even if the OT is mainly of value as showing us how we got to where we are now, it is not clear that this answers the question why anyone concerned with religious *truth* in the present should still be interested in it. And this is a crucial question; for after all, it is the OT itself that is part of the Bible, not the reconstructions of stages in the religious awareness of ancient Israel that we can make from it. And it is presumably therefore the OT, not the reconstructions, that should be important to the modern believer.

III

So 'OT theology' will have to be distinguished rather more sharply than this from the 'history of Israelite religious thought' if it is to be useful to us today. Perhaps a hopeful place to start is by noticing a feature we can easily fail to see when we are engaged on detailed, piecemeal study of the texts – a case of not seeing the wood for the trees. This feature is the obvious *family likeness* among the many different texts that make up the OT. Admittedly, the OT does not have the inner coherence of a collection of works by a single author, and there are a few books in it that strike even a casual reader as swimming against the current, or even as contradicting much that is said elsewhere – Ecclesiastes is the most obvious case. But we have only to try to imagine how the OT would strike someone brought up in a Far Eastern religious system, such as Hinduism or Taoism, or even a modern secular humanist, to realize that it is unmistakably the product of a single religious tradition with characteristic insights and emphases. The very fact that we feel Ecclesiastes is swimming against the current is a sign that there *is* a current, and that we have some idea of the direction it flows in.

Thus those who adopt the winding quest approach are clearly right in thinking that there is a certain unity in the religious thought of ancient Israel, even if what they build on this idea is less convincing. The OT may not be one book, but it is more

than a random collection of 'texts from the world's great religions'. The texts composing it hang together with some coherence. And if we try to reconstruct the religious milieu these texts came from, we shall find that it looks like a reasonably unified religious culture. The books of the OT obviously do not come from a series of unrelated cultures that practised completely different religions. At one level, and for some purposes, we shall want to insist that all OT books are different – just as all English people are different, so that sweeping generalizations about an 'English mentality' are a travesty. But taking a longer view, it does make sense to talk of 'OT religion', just as it makes sense to generalize about 'the English' if we want to compare them with the Americans or the Japanese.

Beneath the assertions OT books make about what God is like, what he has done or what he has commanded – which vary a good deal – there are in fact a number of shared assumptions. The family likeness among OT texts owes as much to what is taken for granted as to what is positively asserted. One of the ways in which a system of belief can be identified is by noticing the points on which its adherents agree even when they are engaged in debate or disagreement with each other. Thus even when the prophets stress that God intervenes actively in human affairs (e.g. Amos 8.9–10), while Ecclesiastes denies that he does (e.g. Eccles. 1.9), they are working with the shared assumption that God is a being distinct from the world and transcending it, of whom it would at least make sense to say that he had or had not intervened. They are both equally far from a system such as pantheism, in which God simply *is* the world. In such a system, God cannot 'intervene' because he is not distinct from the world in the first place; to say he had intervened would be simply meaningless.

So instead of valuing some parts of the OT more highly than others, or following the development of Israelite thought reconstructed as lying behind it (as the winding quest approach does), we might try to identify its distinctive or characteristic features. This means looking for beliefs held in Israel, and attested in the OT, that can explain the family likeness shared by so much of this material.

IV

Most modern approaches to OT theology have begun from approximately the point of view just outlined. They have rejected the simple distinction between the OT as a text (just as it stands) and the history of Israelite religious belief (as reconstructed by critical study of the OT). Instead, they have seen the two as inextricably bound up together. It would, indeed, be strange if the family likeness these books exhibit rested on a quite different basis from the family likeness that characterized the religion of the ancient Israelites; the study of the two things has to march in step. But identifying the basic features that make up the likeness is no easy task. One can often sense the distinctive atmosphere of a body of literature or of an historical period, but it is hard to analyse and describe this in a way that will satisfy others – even though they, too, may be convinced that there is indeed something distinctive about it. We shall consider the two most influential attempts at writing a 'Theology of the Old Testament' in the twentieth century, those of Walter Eichrodt⁴ and Gerhard von Rad,⁵ and then go on to examine the contribution made by the Biblical Theology Movement, whose influence is still important in many (especially popular) presentations of the subject, before going on to look at more recent developments.

Eichrodt published his *Theology of the Old Testament* over the years from 1933 to 1939; von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* appeared much more recently, in 1957–60. But they are alike in concentrating on what we have called the family likeness of the OT texts; at the level of what their writers explicitly said about God and Israel and the world. Eichrodt and von Rad both set out to present the faith of Israel, the body of beliefs that all who claimed to belong to the people of God in OT times were committed to (even though it changed and developed to some extent over time). This faith united the people of Israel, and it also united all or most of the writers of the OT, who were part of that people.

Both these scholars organized their presentation of the faith of Israel by taking one particular theme as the clue to the likeness among the majority of OT books. In Eichrodt's work the organizing principle is the covenant between God and Israel. The Israelites believed in a covenant-God, that is, a God who had chosen them from among all the nations and entered into a

binding agreement with them that had the character of a contract. God promised to keep his side of the bargain, to continue the blessings he had begun in his act of choice – a choice Israel owed purely to his grace, and had done nothing to deserve. Israel, for its part, was under an obligation to maintain the contract by loyalty to God, exclusive worship of him, and obedience to his commands. These commands were summarized in law-codes (especially short digests such as the Ten Commandments), and also communicated from time to time through accredited prophets. It is the basic covenant-pattern that explains the common flavour of large tracts of the OT, and it was the Israelites' shared allegiance to the God of the covenant that kept the tribes united through their long history, and enabled them (alone among the nations of the ancient Near East) to live on as a religious community even after their national independence had been lost.

Von Rad's organizing principle is the saving history (or salvation history – *Heilsgeschichte*). For him, the distinctive and characteristic feature of the OT is a conviction that God directs the history of his people. He acts on their behalf, in accordance with a pattern of saving action first established when he led their ancestors out of their slavery in Egypt and gave them the Promised Land as their home. Passages such as Deut. 26.5–9, which von Rad believed to be very ancient, sum up the essential events that are the key to the way Israel's God acts. It was because they allowed this pattern to interpret all their experience that the Israelites were able to give coherence and meaning to the varied events that befell them in their long history. The same pattern provides the basic shape of the crucial first six books of the Bible, Genesis–Joshua (often called the Hexateuch). All the historical accounts of ancient Israel have the shape of the saving history: they are the record of God's acts with and for his people, guiding them and delivering them from their enemies.

It is important to see that in the work of these two scholars, and indeed in most OT theologies, we are not being asked to believe that the OT speaks with a single and unambiguous voice. A theology of the OT, as Eichrodt and von Rad understood it, is about the main stream of faith in Israel; and in a work as large as the OT, any attempt to identify this main stream is likely to run into a certain number of exceptions. But so long as the great bulk of the OT material seems to make sense when read from this point of view, the attempt is broadly justified. Both Eichrodt's

and von Rad's theologies – still the most important theologies so far produced – do enable readers to find their way through the OT and to feel its characteristic atmosphere. Although they repay detailed study, both also lend themselves to being read fairly quickly so as to pick up the main thread of what is being said. Both, in different ways, present a picture of ancient Israel's faith that owes a lot to the book of Deuteronomy; and a good way to start work on the theology of the OT is to read Deuteronomy, perhaps with a straightforward commentary,⁶ in conjunction with either Eichrodt or von Rad.

But do such statements of the theology of the OT help us find a use for the OT within theology? They still seem to be essentially historical statements about the beliefs of ancient Israelites, even if they are at a higher level of generality and sophistication than piecemeal studies of the theology of this or that biblical writer. But Eichrodt and von Rad both claimed that their work constituted 'theology' in a more profound sense than this. They were not trying to provide merely descriptive, historical statements of what ancient Israelites 'happened' to believe, leaving aside the question of truth or falsehood; they were trying to show what kind of God the OT bore witness to if it was read as a coherent whole. They were convinced that this God was congruous with the God witnessed to in the NT, and was indeed the true and living God, no mere creation of the human 'religious quest'. With these theologies we are back to reading the OT in order to discover the truth about God (or, better, to encounter God). If we read the OT with the interpretative categories of Eichrodt and von Rad, it will prove (they believed) to be a vehicle through which God is revealed as he truly is.

Of course the people in the days of the judges who thought God took pleasure in 'Holy War' and the ruthless destruction of Israel's enemies were mistaken. But this was not because they had a mistaken idea of what God was like. It was because they drew the wrong conclusions from an idea about God that in itself was perfectly true. What they read out of their religious belief in a God of covenant-loyalty, or a God who acted in the nation's saving history, was wrong – because they had not realized that such a God could not possibly demand violence and bloodshed. But the content of their belief, the idea of God's character to which Israel was committed, was and remains true. God really is a God who stands in a relationship of covenant to his people, giving and demanding loyalty; God really is committed to

saving his people in their history.⁷ So what the OT writers were positively trying to convey – the faith to which they were committed – is still true. What must be abandoned are some of the corollaries of this faith, some of the false conclusions people drew from it. But these do not detract from the truth of the faith itself.

For several reasons it is hard to feel completely happy with these approaches. It may be true that people in Israel perceived God in the way Eichrodt or von Rad believed; and it may be true that the way they perceived God is the way God really is. But one does not necessarily imply the other. Even if Eichrodt or von Rad gives us a completely satisfactory historical account of what 'Israel' believed, that still leaves wide open the question of what we ought to believe ourselves. Study of the actual assertions the OT makes about God, and of the family likeness between them all, seems to have reached the limit of its possibilities in the magisterial work of these two scholars. But it still leaves us unable to answer the question we began with – the question of what we can learn from the OT not about what people in biblical times thought about God, but about what God is actually like.

V

Eichrodt and von Rad, for all their differences, began from what the OT says explicitly about God and his relation to Israel, the human race, the created world. But there remains the possibility of concentrating more on the assumptions underlying what the various biblical writers say. This area was the main concern of a number of biblical scholars of the 1950s and 1960s, whose work came to be known collectively as the Biblical Theology Movement.⁸ In many books from this movement, the unity of the OT was perceived as being less a matter of agreement among all its writers in what they asserted, and more a feature of their underlying thought-patterns.⁹ For example, 'biblical theology' agreed with von Rad in placing 'history' at the centre of the OT witness. But von Rad saw 'saving history' as a way in which Israel deliberately gave a shape and pattern to its existence; it was part of Israel's faith, something to which Israelites consciously committed themselves. For biblical theology, on the other hand, the ancient Israelites simply saw the world in terms

of historical movement, and their God was a God whose whole mode of being was historical, whose nature was to be actively involved in human history. The idea was simply embedded in Israelite thought processes. The fact of Yahweh's involvement in history was presupposed throughout the whole OT.

Sometimes scholars from this school of thought went so far as to argue that a distinctively Hebraic way of thinking was built into the structures of the Hebrew language itself. For example, it was pointed out that the word we translate as 'truth' in the OT derives from a Hebrew verb that usually has the meaning 'be firm', 'be steadfast'. From this it was argued that 'truth', for the Israelites, was not a matter of intellectual conviction or objective proof, but of personal commitment and confidence.¹⁰ 'To believe' in the OT would then mean not to think that some statement is true (to believe that . . .), but to commit oneself to something or someone, to put one's trust in something (to believe in . . .). Often the point was made that there was a great contrast between, on the one hand, Hebrew culture and Hebrew assumptions about reality – which tended to highlight personal commitment and involvement – and on the other hand western philosophies (deriving ultimately from Greek thought), with their emphasis on intellectual knowledge and objective, rational thought. 'Truth' was one of a number of terms that seemed to fit this distinction; 'love',¹¹ 'time',¹² and 'body',¹³ were others.

Biblical theology, then, was a way of understanding the OT and its importance for the Christian reader that looked behind the text, and tried to grasp the basic ideas and categories of thought with which Israel worked. The Christian was supposed to learn to 'think Hebraically'. This did not mean trying to accept all that the OT asserted about God – for instance, it did not mean believing all the details of the exodus as the OT describes them. But it did mean seeing the world in the way Israel saw it, and in that way encountering Israel's God, who is still the God Christians worship.

The Biblical Theology Movement itself is now largely dead in the academic world, but its influence lives on in all sorts of subtle ways. The contrast between Hebrew and Greek modes of thought, and the conviction that Christian theology should prefer the former, is still widespread. It is still suggested that the main function of the OT in theology is as a source of 'concepts', 'ideas', or 'themes'. Biblical studies are sometimes taught, at both school and university level, in terms of 'biblical ways of

thinking', and this owes much to the 'biblical theologians'. Sometimes the OT is referred to as a 'resource' from which ideas such as covenant, divine action in history, righteousness or faith can be drawn out and used in formulating Christian theology or grounding Christian ethics. Because it is difficult for Christians to turn directly to what the OT says as a source of information about the nature or will of God, people want to find other ways in which it can nevertheless continue to be fruitful for theology. Biblical theology provided the means of doing this, because it suggested that the real focus of revelation or religious truth within the OT lay in the Hebrew mentality to which it bore witness; and it recommended that modern believers should adjust their own way of thinking to fit in with this.

Again, however, we may feel uneasy. It is not clear why religious truth should be sought at the level of underlying assumptions or concepts rather than at the level of conscious belief. One way of putting this is to say that biblical theology helps us to dig in the OT, as in a mine, for styles of thinking or basic concepts that might be useful in constructing a living faith; but once the concepts have been extracted, the texts themselves are discarded like slag. Biblical theology shows us how to *process* the OT text, but not how to *read* it. It sees the theological value of the OT as located in underlying thought-patterns, rather than in the actual books of the OT as we now have them.

There is a problem in any suggestion that religious truth is to be found at the level of concepts rather than of assertions. In itself, after all, a concept such as 'divine activity in history' is religiously neutral. What interests the believer is not so much *that* God acts, but *how* God acts. It is small comfort to be told that it is God's nature to do things, if we are not told what sort of things he does. We are faced with a familiar problem: it is of no use to commend certain categories as 'biblical' or 'Hebraic', or to insist that the 'real' meaning of the OT belongs at a level below that of propositions, when what the ordinary reader of the OT is looking for is theological *truth*. It may be the case that we shall understand the theology of the biblical writers better by grasping the difference between Hebrew mentality and modern thought-modes, but that does not help us to know whether or not the biblical writers were correct in what they actually said about God. The OT cannot provide its own validation; we need to know what authority it has, before our improved interpretative tools will take us any further towards using it in the quest for

knowledge about or of God. Biblical theology is quite defensible in principle as another way of looking at the text, but it is no more of a solution to the problem we began with than are the OT theologies of Eichrodt or von Rad.

VI

There have been important developments since the work of von Rad. One has been the emphasis on the 'canonical' shape of the OT that we find in the work of Brevard S. Childs.¹⁴ For all their interest in finding a system in OT theology, Eichrodt and von Rad (and still more the biblical theologians) seem to Childs too historical in their emphasis. They work not with the text exactly as we find it when we open a Bible, but with reconstructed entities lying (or thought to lie) behind it: hypothetical sources, the 'authentic' utterances of prophets, social institutions whose existence is inferred from the text. Childs argues that we should turn away from all these historical hypotheses and interpret the text as it is, since it is the text as it is that the synagogue and the Church have 'canonized'. In church we hear readings from 'the book of Isaiah', 'the first book of Kings', not from 'oracles many scholars think go back to Isaiah' or from 'a partly historical account of the reign of Josiah'. OT theologies, for Childs, should not join in the reconstructive work of biblical historians, but should concentrate on the Bible in its canonical shape. Theology is communicated through the way the canon is arranged and articulated, not through the results of literary excavation, as it were. By contrast with historical criticism, Childs thinks it makes sense to ask what 'the Bible' says about this or that theological or ethical issue: in some ways this seems like a return to a 'pre-critical' approach to the text, but it is really a sophisticated attempt to be 'post-critical' – to learn from what biblical criticism has discovered, but insist that beyond it there remain questions about the authority and meaning of the Bible for Christians today. Childs' work is like that of Eichrodt and von Rad in that it sees the Bible thematically, with themes – covenant, Messiah, law – cutting across the various types of literature in their different periods. But the themes are those that emerge from the text itself on a careful reading; they are not concepts lying beneath the surface of the text and needing to be dug out by historical criticism.

A rather similar motivation lies behind the attempts made in recent years to present a theology of the whole Bible, Old and New Testament alike, which in the heyday of historical criticism was felt to be impossible because the material in the two Testaments was too disparate.¹⁵ The work of Hartmut Gese has shown that there are still interesting possibilities for a 'pan-biblical' theology: indeed, he wants to include the Apocrypha within the Bible and see it too as fruitful for theological enquiry. Partly, however, this represents a continuing historical interest, for his rationale for including the Apocrypha is that it contains books that bridge the historical gap between the Old Testament and the New, rather than (though this would also be a valid reason) that the apocryphal books are part of the canon for the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Gese has rightly seen that some of the connections between Old and New Testaments discovered by the biblical theologians have lasting validity, showing that there is to some extent a biblical 'thought world'. The OT and the NT must not be forced into the same mould, but equally there is no reason why genuine resemblances between them should not be registered.

The last decade has seen particularly strong attacks on the enterprise of OT theology, from two different points of view. Some Jewish biblical scholars have denounced it as a forcible Christianizing of the OT. Jews, they argue, are not interested in the 'theology' of the Bible, if this means theological constructions based on biblical texts that can be shown to interconnect with themes in the NT.¹⁶ It is not clear whether a Jewish 'Hebrew Bible Theology' would escape this attack, or whether it would be seen as a Jewish capitulation to the Christian belief that there is 'theology' in the text, where Judaism has more commonly seen 'Torah' (ethical teaching). In any case, few Jewish scholars have ever felt the need to produce such a theology. There can be little doubt that the classic theologies of Eichrodt and von Rad do have a Christian agenda, even though their treatment of the OT text is not a deliberate reading in of Christian ideas. Writing an OT theology on the hypothesis that the NT had never come into being would be an interesting academic exercise, and one that might well uncover previously unnoticed themes in the OT. It could also have a useful 'ecumenical' dimension.

The other main attack on OT theology has come from Rainer Albertz, who maintains that it is time for the discipline to give way to the study of the history of Israelite religion, and has tried

to demonstrate this in a major two-volume study.¹⁷ Religion in ancient Israel of course had 'theological' elements — people believed certain things about the God (or god or gods) they worshipped. But it is only one element alongside social and historical aspects of the practice of religion, and should not be elevated to a crowning role in our study of the OT. Furthermore, in many periods of Israelite history we are simply ignorant of the beliefs people held, and in every period we must remember that the same set of beliefs is unlikely to have been held by everyone. Albertz is not against a sketch of the 'family likeness' within Israelite religion, but is strongly opposed to synthesizing attempts that overlook the minute historical detail to which the OT bears witness. In his view there is a certain naivety in much work on OT theology, and any future theology of the OT will have to take his sharp criticisms into account.

VII

Can we make any progress in thinking about OT theology? We could ask: What is the *goal* of OT theology as a branch of biblical study? Perhaps we should think of it not so much as a matter of extracting information from the OT, or of summarizing its theological content, but more as providing explanations that will help us to read and use the OT with more understanding. The OT is not primarily a source of *information*, either about God or about other people's ideas of God; it is primarily a collection of various kinds of *literature* whose main themes and subject-matter are religious. And with literature, which in this respect is very different from a textbook or a catechism, we cannot extract the 'message' and then discard the wrappings; the message is inextricably bound up with the way in which it is presented. The role of OT theology is to help us to understand this particular collection of literature by explaining the various concepts it uses, the kind of God it presupposes, the ways in which its authors thought this God had acted, and what they believed he had commanded. There should be no thought in our minds that the author of a theology of the OT tells us what the OT *really* means more clearly than the text itself does. The task of OT theology is the purely ancillary one of helping us to understand the categories and ideas with which the OT text works. No reading of critical literature can be a substitute for reading the OT text for ourselves;

and when we do read it, this is not in order to 'extract' information from it, but to come, through it, to grasp the realities of which its authors speak.

Thus, for example, an OT theology can help us to understand what idea of God is presupposed by the Psalms, and can list the attributes the psalmists saw him as possessing: power, glory, uniqueness, transcendence, mercy, and so on. It can make these ideas more precise than would be possible on a simple reading of the text, and can fill them out by showing how they are dealt with in other parts of the OT, and how they differ from modern ideas that may seem similar. But a psalm is not rightly seen as designed to 'teach' us these things, for a psalm is a text the worshipping community sings *to* God, not a communication addressed to the worshipper, either by God or by anyone else. The only proper way to 'use' a psalm, in the end, is to sing it, not to study it as a possible source of information. Similar things might be said about the narrative texts that make up more than half the OT. Studies of the theological beliefs of ancient Israel will help us to read them with understanding, but they were not written to provide information about these theological beliefs; they were written in order to tell a story or recount a history. In this sense the theology of the historical books is a secondary concern. Although God figures in the stories, and they do not make sense except on the basis of various beliefs about him, they are not designed to tell the reader things about God, but rather to narrate events from a particular point of view. We discover what their authors are trying to say by reading their account, not by abstracting the theology embedded in it and discarding the framework.

The practical effect of these suggestions is to make rather more than is made in the OT theologies discussed so far of the distinction between the OT text on the one hand, and the life and culture of ancient Israel that constitute its background on the other. It does not make sense to distinguish them in such a way that the OT is read in a sort of vacuum. It must be read against its background. Much recent OT study has rightly stressed that most books in the OT were in any case not produced by authors in our sense at all, but are the crystallization of the thinking of the community at large. But we still ought to keep in mind that there is a distinction to be made between the OT text and those who wrote it on the one hand, and the great mass of Israelites on the other (this is the point made so sharply by

Albertz). Important though it is to be aware of the context of ancient Israelite life and belief against which OT books make sense, it is equally important to remember that they may not be merely an expression of beliefs held commonly or widely in Israel. The OT is, in effect, the official version of ancient Israel's life and thought, the classic formulations of the community's faith that it chose to hand on to future generations (one of the points made by Childs). The task of elucidating the background of religious belief that enables us to make sense of this text is therefore not the same as the task of expounding the text itself. The OT theologian can be usefully employed in the first of these tasks – and the latter part of this book will be given over to OT theology in this sense. But the second task, the exposition of the text, is (like all exposition of texts) not a matter of an expositor constructing a system. Its aim is to enable the reader to hear the text itself. On this level, biblical scholarship does not provide raw materials for systematic theologians to use by extracting the theology from the OT text. Instead, it enables systematic theologians (or religious believers) to hear more clearly what the text is saying, and to construct their theology, or practise their faith, as those to whom the Bible has been enabled to communicate its own message in its own way.

VII

So there are two purposes a book on the theology of the OT could usefully serve. One is to provide us with all sorts of background information that will help us to understand the religious tradition within which the OT writings belong. Because these texts come from a rather remote culture, we need expert help in understanding the shared assumptions with which they work, and in terms of which they make sense. As a matter of fact, it is at this level that Eichrodt's *Theology* functions best, even though it claims to do something rather different. It reconstructs the religious thought of the ancient Israelites (for which, of course, the OT provides the great bulk of evidence), and thereby prepares us to read the text with more understanding; for more up-to-date accounts of the historical data, Albertz provides an indispensable addition.

Another way in which we can approach the matter is by trying to analyse the actual theological statements made in various OT

books, and to find ways of describing their theological atmosphere. Then we can go on to synthesize the results (if it proves that the family likeness among the various books is strong enough to justify this), so as to produce a summary of the theological impression a careful reading of the whole OT is likely to make. This comes nearer to what von Rad was attempting (and Childs, in some ways, is his heir). Either way of writing an OT theology is likely to be useful to the student, and both seem to be legitimate approaches. Our discussion has suggested a few pitfalls, however, and we will conclude by saying a little about them.

First, the distinction between the two kinds of project needs to be kept clear, even if in practice we want to say that the results of each are congruent with those of the other. A description of the religious beliefs of Israel in different periods is not the same as an analysis of the leading themes or topics of the OT, and there is no direct line from one to the other. Both Eichrodt's and von Rad's works – and this is also true of books produced under the influence of biblical theology – tend to suffer from a failure to be clear which of these two things they are talking about. Both are needed, but they need to be kept distinct.

Second, we need to know whether we are trying to describe what was believed in Israel or stated in the OT on the one hand, or to say what is in fact the case, as a matter of theological truth, on the other. Again, religious believers will see some correlation between the two, though different people will have different ideas about how close the correlation is. Any doctrine of scriptural inspiration will include a belief that it is somehow providential that we have the Scriptures we have, that God wants us to understand him by means of these particular texts. This will entail that the existence of various shared assumptions and beliefs in ancient Israel, which were necessary if those texts were to be possible, was also in some sense intended by God. (Spelling out 'somehow' and 'in some sense' here is the major task faced by any doctrine of inspiration.) But this is essentially separate from the purely empirical questions of what people in fact believed, or what the text actually says. Our answer to the first question must not be allowed to colour our reconstruction of OT theology, in either of the senses just discussed, so as (for example) to make us see this as a gradual development from worse to better ideas of God, if the evidence does not point in this direction. The type of material the OT contains is not

ideally suited to analysis in terms of the 'idea of God' it is trying to convey. It functions more obliquely than that, by telling stories, singing praises and speaking in aphorisms about life; and if it is to be fruitful for modern theologians and believers, then this will be more because these people listen carefully to what it is saying, in the way it chooses to say it, than because they can reconstruct from it the beliefs of its authors or the religious experiences of the community that lies behind them. A modern interest in 'using' the OT in Christian theology should not be allowed to influence our understanding of what it says, in its own right.

Third, nothing is gained by exaggerating the unity either of the OT or of the religious assumptions and beliefs of ancient Israelites. As we have seen, neither Eichrodt nor von Rad was trying to claim that the OT spoke with an absolutely single voice, though the Biblical Theology Movement did tend in this direction. But any synthesizing work on OT theology is apt to blow up the admitted family likeness of the material into a virtual identity of content, and to speak as though there were beliefs held by 'Israel' as such that remained constant throughout the 'OT period' – an idea against which Albertz has protested effectively. Against this it is surely right to say that the OT contains a variety of theologies, and attests a variety of religious perceptions and convictions, varying with period, with social group, even perhaps with geographical location. It is perfectly reasonable to look for unifying themes and common features that account for the fact that this is manifestly the literature of a single broad tradition. But sometimes OT scholars first locate what seems to them the 'centre' of the OT, or of the religion of Israel, and then reject certain parts of the text as 'not truly Israelite': the frequent treatment of the wisdom books as uncharacteristic of Israelite thought is the most striking case of this.¹⁸ When OT theology is written in this way, it ceases to be descriptive of what is actually the case, and starts to issue directives about what ought to be the case. Often we find that strains of theological thought are being described as 'central' to the OT because they chime in best with a particular scholar's own ideas of theological truth. When this happens, the discipline of OT theology ceases to serve readers of the Bible and becomes their master, forcing them to read the text from a standpoint artificially imposed upon it. The only remedy is for students to insist on reading the text for themselves, not accepting any generalizations about its central themes or

insights unless they can find evidence for them in their own reading.

NOTES

1. Rainer Albertz has recently argued that there should be no discipline of OT theology that tries to be anything more than the history of Israelite religion.
2. *Winding Quest* is the title of an excellent abridged OT for children by A. T. Dale (London, Oxford University Press, 1972; Wilton, Morehouse-Barlow, 1973). It does not put forward the approach I am describing here – its title simply provides a useful phrase. A winding quest approach is common in school biblical studies syllabuses.
3. A particularly clear discussion of this can be found in Gerd Theissen, *Biblical Faith: An Evolutionary Approach* (London, SCM Press, 1984).
4. W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London, SCM, 1967; Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1967).
5. G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1962–5; New York, Harper & Row, 1962–5).
6. For example, A. Phillips, *Deuteronomy*, Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1974).
7. As this implies, the theologies of Eichrodt and von Rad differ, but are not incompatible.
8. On 'biblical theology', see B.S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1970).
9. See N. H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London, Epworth Press, 1944; New York, Schocken Books, 1964); G.E. Wright, *God Who Acts* (London, SCM, 1958).
10. See the discussion of this approach in J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 161–205.
11. See for example the classic study by A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (London, SPCK, 1957).
12. See O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (London, SCM, 1957).
13. See J.A.T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London, SCM, 1952).
14. See B.S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis; Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984); *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London, SCM, 1992).
15. See H. Gese, *Vom Sinai zum Zion* (Munich, Chr. Kaiser, 1974); *Zur biblischen Theologie* (Munich, Chr. Kaiser, 1977); and the survey of 'pan-biblical' theology in M. Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische Theologien der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1985).
16. See J.D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1993).
17. See R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (2 vols, London, SCM, 1994).
18. Cf. H.D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1995).

FURTHER READING

- Albertz, R., *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (2 vols, London, SCM, 1994).
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