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The Flowering and Floundering of Old Testament Theology

Elmer A. Martens

Like a nation's economy, which has its downturns and upturns, so the discipline of Old Testament (OT) theology has in the last two hundred years seen both good and bad days. Especially in the twentieth century, OT theology has by turns been riding the crest or has plunged, about to disappear, into the proverbial watery trough. Even the term, "Old Testament Theology," is under attack; a substitute designation is "Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures" (for discussions and assessments cf. Sanders, 1987; Hasel, "The Future of Old Testament Theology," 373-83; Moberly, 159-66; Smith, 64-69). The purpose of this essay, however, is not to chronicle the history of OT theology. Such overviews have been written (cf. Hayes and Prussner, *Old Testament Theology*; Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, 10-27; Hogenhaven, 13-27; Ollenburger, "From Timeless Ideas to the Essence of Religion," 3-19; Reventlow, 1985; Smith, *Old Testament Theology*, 21-24). The purpose instead is to sketch the dynamic that accounts for the oscillation of this discipline's fortunes, a dynamic inherent in the issues surrounding it. Specifically, disagreements have persisted about goal, orientation, and methodology.

Biblical theology attempts to embrace the message of the Bible and to arrive at an intelligible coherence of the whole despite the great diversity of the parts.

Biblical theology provides a theological synopsis of the biblical material. Or, as I have elaborated elsewhere:

(Biblical theology is) that approach to Scripture which attempts to see Biblical material holistically and to describe

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this wholeness or synthesis in Biblical categories. Biblical theology attempts to embrace the message of the Bible and to arrive at an intelligible coherence of the whole despite the great diversity of the parts. Or, put another way: Biblical theology investigates the themes presented in Scripture and defines their inter-relationships. Biblical theology is an attempt to get to the theological heart of the Bible (Martens, 1977, 123).

Other definitions have been proffered (cf. Dentan, 122; Ebeling, 84; Scobie, 50). Biblical theology is a capsule description of the Bible theologically; it summarizes the exegetical results so as to help the faith community in its self-understanding.

In the early decades of the twentieth century Otto Eissfeldt (20-29) questioned the legitimacy of biblical theology as a scientific discipline. At mid-century Brevard Childs wrote *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Critics such as James Barr (1988), British scholar R. N. Whybray (1987), and other detractors have pronounced the enterprise misguided and floundering. These sniper attacks were augmented by an armored attack by H. Räisänen (*Beyond New Testament Theology*). However, Scobie rightly remarks, "For many the whole concept of Biblical Theology is dead; but it is just possible that in true biblical fashion it will rise again" (61).

DIVERGENT OBJECTIVES

If there is some disarray to the discipline at the end of the twentieth century, it is because the goals of the discipline have varied over the past two hundred years. Concise treatments of the discipline are offered by Stendahl, Barr (1976), Hanson (1985), and Zimmerli (426-55).

Goal: A "Pure" Theology

Johann P. Gabler gave a lecture in 1787 at the University of Altdorf, near Erlangen, on the distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology. Even if Gabler's address is too simplistically hailed as the beginning of the discipline of biblical theology, it is nevertheless a helpful starting point for a discussion of its objectives. Gabler was dissatisfied with a church dogmatics too much overlaid with church tradition. A true son of the Enlightenment, he intended to return to the roots by examining the source book, the Bible, and suggested a two-step process. First, material on a subject should be gathered from the Bible, noting and comparing the historical settings. From this historical interpretation would emerge a *true* (read, accurate) biblical theology. Second, these results should be subjected to a sorting process at the bar of reason, thereby establishing a *pure* or universal theology. This pure theology, with the particularist nuances of an

Israelite history removed, would become the grist for a dogmatic theology.

It was in the form of presenting a historical interpretation that the first OT theology (as distinct from a full-blown biblical theology) was produced by Bauer (*Theology des Alten Testaments*) in 1796, subtitled *A Summary of the Religious Concepts of the Hebrews*. Such a work corresponded to the first step of Gabler's program, namely establishing the *true* biblical theology. Some years later (1835) Vatke provided an extended philosophical preface to his treatment of OT theology. The filter for a purified biblical theology in the mid-nineteenth century was the reigning philosophy of Hegel with its notion of development and progress. Vatke, while mindful of the OT's historical character, was also attentive to the philosophical dimensions. Not so subsequent scholars. They were enamored of the historical character of the Bible and left largely neglected Gabler's second philosophical-related step toward a pure theology.

Goal: A Scientific "Critical" Theology

Vatke himself made a contribution to the historical reconstruction of Israel's history by hypothesizing that the legislation found in the Pentateuch came after and not before the prophets. Once the "criticisms" (source, comparative, textual) were entrenched as the acceptable procedure for biblical research and once the development of Israel's religion was reconstructed, two results for biblical theology followed. First, Israel's faith development was compared with that of her neighbors. Biblical theology went into eclipse. In the latter part of the nineteenth century scholars focused almost exclusively on the history of religions—Israel's and those of surrounding peoples. A second result of the burgeoning of the criticisms was to put into question whether a biblical theology could at all operate within a scientific critical method.

This second issue came to a head in the 1920s with the debate between Eissfeldt and Eichrodt. Eissfeldt distinguished between knowledge and faith, and hence between the history of religion and OT theology. In Eissfeldt's view the history of religion can be objectively researched and therefore established as knowledge. However, statements of faith, which deal with what is timeless, while legitimate for theologians, are largely determined by confessional (denominational) perspectives. Faith assertions, being of a subjective nature, are not amenable to rigorous "scientific" research.

Eichrodt disagreed, arguing that the tools of historical criticism are indeed germane to biblical theology. Through scientific investigation one can penetrate to the essence of a religion. By defining the essence of religion as the deepest meaning of the religious thought world that his-

torical research can recover, Eichrodt can be credited, whether for good or ill, with keeping OT theology within the sphere of historical scholarship. The goal now became, not the determination of pure theology, as Gabler had proposed, but the formulation of the essence of Israel's religion, as Ollenburger (1992) has explained.

Debate on whether a biblical theology can be formulated on the basis of historical criticism continues. Collins (1-17) is of the opinion that confessional perspectives have too much influenced the work of biblical theologians such as von Rad, Wright, and Childs. He affirms the "hermeneutic of suspicion." Function rather than fact is paramount. For Collins, a biblical theology critically derived is possible, but the resultant theology is a functional construct in which God-talk helps to regulate religious piety, which is the heart of religion. Collins signals a change in the objective of the discipline—a functional tool informing conduct—rather than an attempt, as earlier, to delineate a structure of faith, or, somewhat later, to define the essence of a religion. There continues to be a difference of opinion about the intended outcome for a biblical theology.

Goal: A "Christian" Theology

One of the recurring questions has been whether the aim of the discipline is to set forth the faith structure of the OT independent of the New Testament (NT) or in connection with it. Is the goal of an OT theology to situate it within the Christian faith? Already in Eichrodt's formulation of an OT theology (*Theology of the Old Testament*), one of the aims was to show how the OT bridged to the NT. At issue, in part, was the nature of the unity of the OT. If that unity consisted in the concept of covenant, then the connection with the NT was readily made. Von Rad (*Old Testament Theology*) had a similar agenda in mind, though he did not assume a conceptual unity within the OT. Both viewed OT theology as closely linked with the Christian faith, much as their predecessors (e.g., von Hofmann) had done.

That the function of an OT theology is folded within the Christian faith was also assumed by others. Jacob (12) asserted that a theology grounded in the OT as a whole "can only be a Christology, for what was revealed under the old covenant, through a long and varied history, in events, persons and institutions is, in Christ, gathered together and brought to perfection." Vriezen wrote at length on the appropriation of the OT by the Christian church. Baker has summarized approaches taken to relate the two Testaments (cf. Oeming).

Moreover, some attempts were made at a comprehensive theology that included both OT and NT. The list includes Burrows (1946), Vos

(1948), Lehman (1971, 1974), Terrien (1978), VanGemeren (1988/1995), and Childs (1986 and 1992).

But not all have been of the mind to write an OT theology so as to connect it with the NT. McKenzie wrote as though the NT did not exist. Others argued for a free-standing OT theology since the rabbinic writings represent a sequel to the OT (cf. the nomenclature, "Theology of Hebrew Scriptures"). Eichrodt (*TOT*) and von Rad (*OTT*) were criticized for their "anti-Judaism" bias (Hayes and Prussner, 276). Clements acknowledged the place of law in the OT and so validates the emphasis found in Judaism, but he also sketches the promise motif, a motif elaborated in the NT. Jewish scholars, while traditionally disinterested in an OT theology, are now entering the field (cf. the works of Jon Levenson, e.g., *Sinai and Zion*).

The on-again, off-again fortunes of the discipline are due, indirectly, to a debate on whether one of the goals is to treat the OT as free-standing or to see it theologically within a framework that includes the NT. For most Christians, the answer is the latter, often in the form of a biblical theology (cf. Hasel, 1994). The debate then soon turns to the methodology by which the two Testaments are best related, e.g., by typology, the promise-fulfillment schema, or tradition history (cf. discussion in Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*).

Goal: Descriptive or Normative Discipline?

A question not yet resolved is whether biblical theology is merely descriptive or whether its results are to be normative. Gabler argued for normativity. A biblical theology, though initially describing the belief system of ancient Israel, has for its ultimate goal a definition of what the faith community should now embrace theologically.

On the other hand, a strong case for limiting the task to description only was made at mid-twentieth century by Stendahl, who distinguished two steps in treating a biblical text. First, interpreters must establish what the biblical text *meant* (in the past). The second step, not within the mandate of biblical theologians, is to explain what the biblical text *means* (now). Biblical theology's occupation is only with the first step, to describe what ancient Israel believed. For Barr (1988, 11) biblical theology is a descriptive and not normative or prescriptive task. Knierim (38) asserted: "As soon as we ask the legitimate question of its meaning 'for our time,' we are no longer dealing with Old Testament Theology but with Old Testament Hermeneutics." Knierim (16), however, envisions the function of an OT theology as adjudicating theologies found in the OT.

Stendahl's position has been challenged, partly because it assumes

that the scholar can rather objectively define what the text meant (e.g., Ollenburger, "What Krister Stendahl 'Meant'"). Hanson (1985, 1062) has insisted that biblical theology cannot be reduced to "a strictly descriptive discipline or to an attempt to proceed in a positivistic manner." Brueggemann (1977, x), as an editor in the *Overtures to Biblical Theology* series, states that "the yearning and expectation of believers will not let biblical theology rest with the descriptive task alone."

Traditionally it is systematic theology that has offered a "normative" understanding of the faith. Those who view the task of OT theology as going beyond the descriptive to the constructive (and so invade the "space" of systematic theology) have offered a variety of suggestions. Hasel ("The Relationship Between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology") describes a "historical-theological" approach, which, while acknowledging the historical particularities, will nevertheless advocate a normative-like theology. Scobie refers to biblical theology as an "intermediate" discipline. Perhaps both biblical and systematic theology have reason to orient themselves to the biblical text as well as to the current agenda. Granted, each discipline will do so with different concentrations (cf. Martens, 1991; Ollenburger, 1991; and other essays in Ollenburger, ed., 1991; also Ollenburger, 1995).

The question is, "Is a biblical theology normative for the current believing community?" Leaving aside quibbles about definition, the answers range from a categorical "No," to a guarded affirmative, to an assured "Yes."

SHIFTING ORIENTATIONS

Perspectives with which scholars work often depend on the reigning cultural paradigm. If, as in the nineteenth century, the governing lens was history, then the biblical material was interrogated for scientific precision, stages of development, and theology arising from event. Over the decades, fresh angles of vision have sometimes either stimulated the discipline or brought near gridlock to the enterprise.

The Historical Angle of Vision

For centuries, it seems, a helpful and virtually dominant way of study and analysis was via the grid of history. In 1828 Baumgarten-Crusius notes (as quoted in Ollenburger, *Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, 4), "The idea and the execution of biblical theology are joined essentially with historical interpretation, and each of them has developed in recent times in relation to the other." Vatke (1835), though keenly cognizant of historical dimensions, infused his presentation of theology with a healthy dose of Hegelian philosophy. Von Hoffman (1841-44)

and the Erlangen school, more dubious about the place of philosophy in the whole enterprise, stressed strongly the historical character of the OT. That history, under God's superintendency, was aimed at redemption; hence the telling term, *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history).

Writing a century later, G. E. Wright, an archaeologist as well as a theologian, held that OT theology is best constructed through the prism of history. Wright not only captured a major biblical emphasis, but served to reassure a religiously disillusioned post-war America about God's ways. While there remained ambiguity about the way such a theology was to be appropriated by the contemporary church, the inspiration brought by Wright's version of OT theology was considerable. F. Hesse, on the other hand, is one of a few who has categorically dismissed *Heilsgeschichte* as a legitimate notion.

The question of how a theology is to be derived from narrative is a vexing one. The debate heated up around the question: How is theology to be fashioned from historical accounts? In what ways are events revelatory? R. Rendtorff (1968) gave large significance to the event itself. Zimmerli's study of the recognition formula in Ezekiel, "They (you) will know that I am LORD," was a significant tributary that fed into the larger discussion. Zimmerli emphasized that "knowledge" of God comes through "event-interpreted-through-word"—events in and of themselves are not the carrier of revelation. Summaries of the debate are given by Robinson (1967) and Childs (1992, 196-207). Some biblical theologians, such as Wright, have attended maximally to the rubric of history; others, such as Clements, have largely downplayed the category of history (cf. Perdue for discussions about the role of history; cf. Adam; Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, ch. 3; Martens, 1994).

Von Rad (*OTT*) shared Wright's view on the importance of Israel's faith as being rooted in Yahweh's acts in history—but with a twist. Since Israel's confessed history differed from the critic's reconstructed history, he was faced with a choice. He remained with Israel's confessed history—a decision for which he has been both censured and lauded—but emphasized the transmission of traditions (patriarchal, Exodus, settlement traditions) as well as their appropriation through time (cf. Eichrodt, *TOT*, 2:512-20). Gese (*Essays on Biblical Theology*) has capitalized on this approach by following the trajectories of traditions into the NT.

Another twist, still history related, has to do more broadly with the history of religions, especially that of Israel's neighbors. With archaeological discoveries in Mesopotamia and Egypt in the late-nineteenth century, scholars became intent on sorting out the development of religious

ideas. But describing the unfolding of a religion and setting out a theology are not the same thing. For more than a quarter of a century, fascination with writing Israel's religious history eclipsed work on biblical theology. That scenario is somewhat echoed at the end of the twentieth century with fresh attempts to write the history of ancient Israel. Albertz (16), commenting on OT theology, says, "I cannot disguise the fact that in the present situation I regard the history of religion as the more meaningful comprehensive Old Testament discipline." It may well be, then, that the relationship between the history of Israelite religion and a theology of the OT will again become an agenda.

The Sociological Angle of Vision

Contextualization is a term that sociologists and anthropologists relish. The lens (of sociology) complements the lens of history more than replaces it. In the social-scientific paradigm the OT is subjected to a fresh barrage of questions. Now various social dynamics are said to account for the shape of the material. Gottwald, using the conflict model of social theory, contends that ideologies were in the service of those in power. So, for example, the conflict in Jeremiah's time between the "autonomy party" and the "coexistence party" was an ideological struggle. Jeremiah, as part of the "autonomy party," looked for theological grounding to the intertribal traditions of the God of the Exodus who had entered into covenant with Israel and brought them to the land of Canaan. The "co-existence" party, by contrast, was rooted in the David-Zion complex of traditions (cf. discussion by Perdue, 97-98).

An example of an OT theology sensitive to social dynamics is Hanson's *The People Called*. Hanson asks in what way the Israelite community was distinguished from other communities and answers via the triadic notion, viz., that Israel was a people of God differentiated from others in their attention to worship, righteousness, and compassion. Hanson's work generally illustrates an agenda shift. One need only compare the work of G. E. Wright in the 1950s with Hanson's: for Wright the angle of vision on theology is via history, while for Hanson it is sociology.

The emphasis on sociology and related disciplines extends into the doing of theology in still another way. The focus on social location and dynamic is important not only for the ancients, but for the contemporary theologian. True, the shape of a theology will arise from the nature of the material. But increasingly it is recognized that the shape of any theology will be heavily influenced by the "spin" put on the material as a result of the social context of the theologian. Perdue (32) is of the opinion that John Bright's interpretation of Jeremiah, not as an "ethical

preacher and religious innovator in the style of old liberalism” but as a neoorthodox preacher who proclaimed the acts of Yahweh and applied normative tradition to current events, has been shaped by John Bright’s own position in the community as a theologian in the neoorthodox tradition. Bright (1953) stressed history as an avenue of revelation, the importance of historical criticism, the unity of the Bible in Christ, and the authority of Scripture—all elements of neoorthodoxy. It should not be surprising, the argument goes, to learn that Eichrodt (*TOT*), of the Reformed tradition, latched on to covenant, or that W. Kaiser, in the evangelical tradition, should concentrate on promise. It is congruent with this perspective that feminist and liberation theologians each offer distinctive angles of vision on the OT.

If, then, the shape of biblical theology differs from theologian to theologian, even were the methods identical, their respective social locations and hence their underlying agendas would significantly affect the result. The privileged position of the social sciences in doing OT theology has both recast the results and disclosed the bias in arriving at the results.

The Literary/Linguistic Angle of Vision

The shift from an historical to a social-scientific paradigm is continuing with a further shift to the literary/linguistic paradigm. The historical paradigm had focused on the events behind the text and the social-scientific paradigm on the community and text interplay; the literary/linguistic paradigm now focuses more singularly on the text as text. This angle of vision follows three streams. One stream is that of the narrow literary or linguistic approach; a second is the canonical construal of the literary text; and a third is to invoke features of literature, namely, story and metaphor.

(a) A venerable, though also controversial, approach was quite strictly linguistic. Theological elaborations centered on Hebrew and Greek vocabulary and word studies. Word studies have included research into etymology, cognates, semantic fields, and statistics of usage. E. Jacob treated the understanding of God, for example, by explicating the Hebrew terms employed for the attributes of God. The heyday of the word-study approach was represented in Gerhard Kittel’s multivolume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)* and those in its genre (*TWAT, THAT, TDOT, TWOT*). The word-study approach as theologically productive has been properly challenged by pointing, for example, to some fallacies of assumptions about etymology and the limitations of an exclusive linguistic approach (e.g., Barr, 1961; for a recent approach, see Cotterell’s essay “Linguistics, Meaning, Semantics, and

Discourse Analysis," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [NIDOTTE], vol. 1).

(b) A second literary-related stream highlighted not the constituent terms of a text but the canonical framework (see the essay by Richard Schultz, "Integrating Old Testament Theology and Exegesis: Literary, Thematic, and Canonical Issues," *NIDOTTE*, vol. 1). Sanders pinpointed the importance of the literary development of a biblical text in its interplay with community dynamics. Childs, known for his canonical approach, spearheaded a move to focus on the canonical text (rather than on events or on social dynamics) as a locus for biblical theology. At issue for Childs was not the stages by which the biblical text was formed, but the way in which the present text, in an arrangement, contributes to an articulation of theology. Parts of the canon are regarded as in dialogue with other parts. An individual text is to be interpreted in the context, not so much of history, but of the canon (cf. the exposition of Childs' approach by Perdue, 155-75, and the critical but sympathetic appraisal by Brett; cf. also Rendtorff [1993]; Sailhammer). An example of this canonical angle of vision is the proposal that a key to the theology of the Psalms lies in its first two Psalms. The Psalms have a didactic intent (Ps. 1) and an eschatological perspective (Ps. 2). Compatible with the canonical approach is the emerging method of intertextuality.

(c) Toward the end of the twentieth century, the literary angle of vision diverged into a third stream that highlighted the importance of metaphor and story. This interest in the "new literary criticism" may be due to several reasons: disenchantment with historical criticism, a shift away from the paradigm of history, a pervasive *Zeitgeist*, and a post-modern interpretation of reality as language-based (cf. the writings of Stanley Fish, Jacques Derrida; see esp. Jean-Francois Lyotard). Whatever the reason, doing biblical theology largely by means of metaphor is increasingly championed and practiced. The fascination with narrative, metaphor, and symbol has been fueled through the writings of scholars such as Hans Frei, Paul Ricoeur, and Phillip Wheelwright (cf. pertinent works by R. Alter, F. Kermodé, and T. Longman). Attention is on the artistry of the text but especially on symbolism (cf. L. Perdue, chs. 6, 8, 9, on metaphor, story, and imagination). While traditional descriptions of God have been largely cast in patriarchal language (God is suzerain, lord, king, father), feminine writers point out that religious language is metaphorical in content and includes female imagery (e.g., Trible, McFague). But exploration of metaphor extends beyond the work of feminine scholars. Longman and Reid, who incorporate both OT and NT, are but one example among increasing presentations.

The shift to the literary paradigm in doing OT theology gives rise to a series of questions. If the literary approach complements the historical, what weight is to be assigned to the rooting of the Christian faith in history? Does the literary approach necessarily invalidate the focus on history? How are historical, sociological, and literary perspectives on biblical material to be integrated? Answers are in short supply. Meanwhile, the dominant paradigms or angles of vision infuse the discipline with vigor, though admittedly also with some confusion. Proposals for proceeding follow different routes (e.g., Perdue; Sailhammer; Knierim; Hasel; and Hubbard). In this situation it is not easy to determine whether OT theology is cresting or waning.

AMBIGUITY ABOUT METHOD

To some extent much of what has been said about goal and orientation impinges on the method of formulating a biblical theology. Some specifics on method, most of which relate to structuring an OT theology, can be identified. Davidson, working in the early part of the twentieth century, organized his research around the traditional dogmatic scheme of God, humanity, and salvation. A similar scheme was followed by the Catholic theologians Paul Heinisch and Paul van Imschoot. Few, however, have followed that schematic; it seemed too confining. Nor did it greatly aid in understanding the essence of biblical faith. Suggestions for structuring an OT theology have taken other turns.

Diachronic or Synchronic

It was argued by some, especially when the category of history had a privileged position, that an OT theology must take account of eras or periods of Israelite history. Whether one spoke the language of progressive revelation or that of an evolution of theological insights, there were significant distinctions to be made between the early and later stages. Examples of OT theologies organized chronologically are those by von Rad (*OTT*), W. Kaiser, and W. VanGemeren.

A different viewpoint is that one should proceed synchronically, namely, by arranging the material thematically perhaps around an idea or set of ideas (cf. discussion on diachronic and synchronic in Sailhammer, 184-94). Eichrodt (*TOT*) presented his work under the three rubrics: (a) God and People; (b) God and World; and (c) God and Man. He described his method as a "cross-cut" method. He asked what fundamental understanding governed the OT, irrespective of time period. His answer was that the fundamental understanding was the establishment of the kingdom of God, a code word for which was "covenant." Others who have proceeded synchronically in order to display the essence of

OT faith are Vriezen, Clements, and Childs (1986) (cf. *God's Design*, where I intend to combine the diachronic with the synthetic).

Centered or Non-Centered

A vexed question for biblical theologians has been: Does the OT have a center? For the NT the answer is not really debatable: The center is Jesus Christ. One could say that God is the central figure in the OT, but that helps little in getting a handle on the material. The question of center is important, of course, for the structuring of an OT theology. But the question has a larger significance, for behind the question lies another: Is there unity in the OT, and if so, does it cohere around a theological center? Methodologically the question is whether the search for a theological center is legitimate, and if so, by what process?

A significant number of theologians have identified a center, but because the centers vary, the problem is not resolved but sharpened. Is the assumption that the OT has a center legitimate (cf. Hasel, 1991, 139-71)? Eichrodt (*TOT*) maintained that covenant was the center. Other proposals have been promise (Kaiser), the covenant formula, "Yahweh the God of Israel, Israel the people of Yahweh" (Smend), or the book of Deuteronomy (Hermann). For Preuss, election and obligation come together as a center.

The roster of those who questioned the possibility of a center begins with von Rad (*OTT*), who held that a series of traditions reappropriated through the centuries and not any one center accounts for the unity inherent in the thirty-nine books of the OT. McKenzie, skeptical of a center, organized his book around several themes such as cult, history, and nature. Hasel (1991) concluded that a search for a center was futile. His own proposal, advanced but never implemented by him because of his untimely death, was to consider a multiplex approach. Polythress proposed a multiperspectival approach.

Fohrer (1968; cf. 1972, ch. 4) suggested that, much like an audio cassette, the OT be viewed as an ellipse and so be construed as having a double center. The two centers he proposed were the rule of God and the communion of God with humankind. Roughly in the same camp are those who have proposed a dialectical approach. Westermann proposed an emphasis on salvation (interventionist activity) and blessing (sustaining activity). Terrien's portrayal of a God both present and absent is likewise dialectical, as is Brueggemann's structure legitimation and embrace of pain.

With this plethora of proposals, it is not surprising that some feel that the discipline is in some disarray and is floundering rather than flowering. But another reading of the situation is that the discipline, while

seeking stabilization as to methodology, has churned up a cornucopia of insights. The community of faith is the richer for struggling with answers to questions of methodology and center, and is the richer also for the additional dimensions of faith suggested by different starting points.

Scientific or Artistic

The ambiguity about method has continually plagued attempts to set out an OT theology. Can one clearly define procedural steps, as is customary in a science? Or is the task more akin to that of an artist dependent on imagination and intuition? The answer is not strictly one or the other, but both.

If one begins in a more limited way with the task of setting out the theology of a biblical book, one can follow some basic steps. The formal structure of a book needs first to be established and carefully pondered. The format of the book, including attention to the weight of component parts or climactic sections, can be expected to point to a theological substructure. It is helpful to ask and to answer the question, "What drives the book?" Perhaps the agenda is stated in the book itself. Attention to dominant metaphors employed may be a clue to the latent theology present in the book. A checklist of procedures is set out by Martens ("Accessing the Theological Readings").

But just as great literature cannot be circumscribed or explained via recipes, so the Bible, and especially its theology, cannot be reduced to recipe-like procedures. At work in formulating the theology of a book or a block of books such as the OT is a factor identified by Kelsey as "imaginative construal." When a biblical scholar is thoroughly conversant with a body of material and wishes to recast it in summary fashion, he or she must be open to—and even await—the so-called "aha experience." Quite inexplicably, meditation and probing reflection may yield a *Gestalt* by which to explicate biblical material. The theologian is both scientist and artist.

CONCLUSION

One way of analyzing the "fortunes" of biblical theology is to note stages of differentiation in its history. Biblical theology originated as a discipline when it became unhooked from dogmatic theology. Another burst of activity came when it was liberated from the history of religion. Still another significant chapter opened with some options beyond the historical paradigm: sociology and literature. The current fascination with the latter, while temporarily stimulating, may need to be superseded by a further detachment. In this new stage, one may envision biblical

theology to be more clearly a branch of *theology*, not of historical, sociological, or literary criticism.

Considering the vigor and rigor of research that this discipline has engendered, it would be shortsighted to write off the efforts of biblical theologians as unprofitable. Discussions between Christians and Jews, clarity regarding the relationship of OT and NT, a better understanding of limits and the contributions of philosophical theology, a sense of identity for the Christian community of faith, and a curiosity and inquisitiveness about biblical faith have all been facilitated by this discussion. One could wish that more of the uncertainties surrounding the discipline could be resolved, but in the meanwhile the enterprise is making a substantial contribution and is better characterized as flowering than as floundering. ✨

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