

## OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY: THE HISTORICO-GENETIC METHOD

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Robert Pfeiffer of Harvard reportedly said to a student who was interested in studying the Bible with him: "I will tell you what it says, and you tell me what it means." This represents the attitude of a generation of scholars who viewed Biblical studies as purely a scientific discipline and left theologizing to others.

Assuming that our theology is based on the Bible, there is always the danger of theologizing before we have done adequate analysis. The Evangelical Theological Society, when compared to the Society of Biblical Literature, would certainly deny that it is more interested in theology than in the Bible. But there has been a tendency for us to over-synthesize and for them to over-analyze. Over-analyzing can lead to fragmentation, and over-synthesizing can lead to ignoring data and being selective. Biblical theology is the area where the Biblical disciplines should be brought together and made to serve their ultimate theological purpose. Since Biblical scholars have shown a renewed interest in theology, I propose to examine some important examples of this trend and suggest the path that evangelicals should follow.

One of the current fads is the politico-sociological understanding of the Bible. Sharing the presuppositions of the tradition-history school, W. Brueggemann<sup>1</sup> sees two streams of covenant tradition (the Mosaic and the Davidic) set in conflict, although he admits that the Biblical writers did not see it that way.<sup>2</sup> Behind the scenes he sees a politico-sociological conflict between these covenant traditions that may be traced through all the phases of OT history and involves a social ordering.

On the one hand the Mosaic covenant is characterized by political decentralization and social egalitarianism, and on the other hand the Davidic covenant is committed to urban centralization and social stratification with power in the hands of an elite following the Canaanite city-kings. The priesthood is explained in the same way: The Mushite priesthood was heir to the liberation faith rooted in Moses preserved among the northern tribes. Conversely, the Zakodite rootage belongs to a royal consciousness based in an urban context. It is "liberation faith versus a religion of legitimated order." In the exile the Deuteronomic legitimated order called for proto-Pelagian obedience in contrast to the poet of Job with his creation myth and theology of grace.<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann admits that the poem of Job

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<sup>1</sup>W. Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel," *JBL* 98, pp. 161-185.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 176-177. That different types of material in the OT express aspects of truth that are held in delicate tension is no reason to fabricate an elaborate socio-political power struggle.

cannot be linked conclusively with any Israelite historical situation but then accepts Terrien's view that it deals with the suffering of the exile. Deutero-Isaiah stressed the exodus tradition as a way to show that his own time was like that of Moses, but of equal importance it is the Davidic covenant that dominates Second Isaiah. Here obviously "the trajectories came together in a remarkably synthetic way."<sup>4</sup> One is forced to question whether the dichotomy may not be more imagined than real. But even so, Brueggemann has insights that are valuable since political and sociological forces are real and played an important role in every era. Nevertheless we have an obligation to object to any facile use of a method that reconstructs the historical context in a way that runs counter to explicit statements of the text.<sup>5</sup>

Brueggemann's approach shows that he is eminently concerned with making the Bible relevant for modern man. He even admits that a Marxist class reading of the Bible is not unrelated to this paradigm.<sup>6</sup> Such an open admission of presuppositions stands in sharp contrast to the questionable objectivity of the unbridled historicism that dominated Biblical studies a generation ago and succeeded in making the Bible irrelevant. James Smart wanted to close the gap between Biblical scholars and the Church by a recognition that the Bible is primarily a theological document for the community of faith.<sup>7</sup> He claims that an interpretation that does not speak to the community is no interpretation at all. But he finally concludes that the Bible has no unified theology. It is a pluralism of attitudes and ideas and is not in itself an authority to which Christians are intended to submit themselves. His is a typical neo-orthodox approach that leaves the Church without objective authority and no roots in real history.

In 1970 B. Childs affirmed that Biblical theology was in crisis—indeed, it was dead as a vital force and in need of resurrection.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after, B. W. Anderson declared that it was alive and well, though always in crisis.<sup>9</sup> A decade later (1980) Anderson again attempted to see some real life in the Biblical theology movement. This time he had to deal with the problems aroused by books like Harold Lindsell's *The Battle for the Bible* and James Barr's *The Bible in the Modern World*. Anderson quotes Barr: "The proper terms for the Bible would be word of Israel, word of some leading Christians"—but he himself can only admit the Bible to be the word of God in a secondary sense.<sup>10</sup> Bruce Vawter, in commenting on Anderson's 1980 article, says that Anderson "defines an acceptable sense in which the Bible may be termed the word of God without the sacrifice of historical

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>5</sup>See B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, pp. 74-75 for a similar objection to this type of exegesis.

<sup>6</sup>JBL 98, p. 183.

<sup>7</sup>J. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970). See chap. 7 and pp. 88, 89, 148, etc.

<sup>8</sup>B. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Westminster, 1970).

<sup>9</sup>B. W. Anderson, *TToday* 28, pp. 321-327.

<sup>10</sup>B. W. Anderson, *TToday* 37, pp. 3-4.

criticism or recourse to fundamentalism."<sup>11</sup> From this perspective the Bible is only a witness to the word of God, and theology has as its basis a critically reconstructed history and text. Since no one can fully agree on that history of text, authority is never clearly defined. Though much is made of the freedom of the Holy Spirit, tradition is all that remains objective.

It is this kind of uncertainty that has led Brevard Childs into his search for Biblical authority and to his conclusion that the final form of the text is Scripture and authoritative and hence the basis for the theological task. In his canonical criticism, Childs' announced intention is to find a way that the Bible can be read and studied as sacred Scripture with the hope of affecting thereby the life of the Church.<sup>12</sup> Childs saw the earlier Biblical theology movement as a failure because of the impression it gave about the Bible. He complains that "God's revelation in history" had to come from the "objective results" of historical-critical scholarship, and then "Christian theology" was added to make a bridge to the modern mind.<sup>13</sup> Childs no doubt derived his idea of "post-critical exegesis" from Barth, and like Barth he finds no problem with separating the historical data from the theological data in his exegesis. So while accepting the results of historical-critical method he sets them aside and bases his exegesis on the final text. Canonical shaping has left the final form trans-historical. The theological task moves in a nonhistorical dimension. The final (canonical) form of the text has relativized past historical events, lifting the text above the limitations of historical particularity so they speak with universal theological meaning, and therefore the Bible is Scripture. B. W. Anderson criticizes Childs for being "confusing and equivocal" because he limits the use of the word "history" to a history of encounter between God and man while there is no historical value in seeking for a real historical referent in a particular account. This removes all risks from historical studies and would be absolutely devastating to Christianity if applied to the historical particularity of God's revelation of Christ.<sup>14</sup> Childs leaves the purpose of text criticism vague, and even though literary criticism is supposed to produce signs or criteria for discovering the canonical shape and meaning of a given text this does not work when critical scholarship, for example, contradicts both the NT and the canonical view of the Davidic authorship of Psalm 110. This is an acute problem since Jesus in Matt 22:41-45 bases his teaching on this one point. Childs should give more attention to the NT as an instrument for understanding canonical shaping. While Childs has moved in the right direction regarding the canonical text, it is my judgment that his search for scriptural authority will be elusive until he is willing to face the issue of the integrity of Biblical history.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup>B. Vawter, *Old Testament Abstracts* 3/3, p. 175.

<sup>12</sup>Childs, *Introduction* 82.

<sup>13</sup>B. Childs, "Interpretation in Faith," *Int* 18 (1964), 437.

<sup>14</sup>Anderson, *TToday* 37, p. 105.

<sup>15</sup>We do not imply that the Bible is a book of history in the modern sense. The recorded events are highly selective redemptive history. But modern man since the enlightenment uses the presupposition that assumes any account that includes supernatural events has at the most only a core of history while the rest is fanciful embellishment of a later generation. It is this issue that we address here.

Some reminders and requirements regarding the evangelical path toward a Biblical theology are in order. G. Ernest Wright was correct in his strictures against dehistoricizing the Bible.<sup>16</sup> We must reaffirm our determination not to allow even a creeping dichotomy between history and theology. By this we refer not only to historicity but to the fact that God's revelation to man came about in a divinely conceived and controlled historical process. So Wright is right when he says "that in principle Israel's faith is grounded in a theology of history."<sup>17</sup> All the doctrines about God and man, about sin and righteousness are so vitally connected to the historical context that they cannot be understood as purely abstract ideas. There is an important correlation between this principle and the notion that we cannot separate what Scripture says from what it means. The Biblical author had a message that was always tied to its historical context. Even in highly literary passages like the Psalms, where the historico-cultural context is often not apparent, it is still important for correct interpretation.

When we are left only with words, sometimes it is difficult to reconstruct the life situation out of which they came. In the study of any written material this difficulty can create a vicious circle that moves between the words and their interpretation. This apparent impasse is always the experience of those who try to translate newly found ancient texts where the meaning is totally unknown. Like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, one cannot understand the meaning without understanding the words. But he cannot fully understand the words without understanding the meaning. Various tentative meanings must be tested until one is found that meets all the philological (not merely linguistic) requirements. In a larger corpus of literature what is true of sentences is also true of units and whole texts that come from the same cultural continuum. For years scholars have used this principle in working with the Ugaritic mythological texts, and we still have many lacunae.

In the OT we face the apparent enigma of determining what a passage means in the light of the message of the book and what the message is in the light of a multiplicity of sometimes diverse passages. It is too easy to assume that a passage that does not seem to fit is the work of a redactor or is a disturbed text instead of looking for rhetorical, grammatical, structural or historico-cultural clues that may enhance our understanding of the material.

Contrary to a prevailing view we must add that the mystery of the relationship between the human and the divine in Biblical authorship should not be set aside until exegesis is finished. It is just as much an error to emphasize the divine element at the expense of the human as it is to emphasize the human at the expense of the divine. The Bible's human setting and human authorship makes it imperative that we gather all knowledge possible to interpret a text from its historico-cultural perspective and let it speak in terms of its human setting. But throughout this exegetical task, not just after, we must seek out the message, the teaching, the ultimate meaning—that is, how the Holy Spirit has used this passage to reveal the will of God.

<sup>16</sup>G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* (New York: Harper, 1969). He accuses Bultmann of "Christomonism" in which Christ "is no longer an actual flesh and blood individual, but an abstraction, a concept of value, not for history, but solely for the individual's 'existential situation'. . . ." He claims that such reductionism creates a theology that is unable "to make any significant use of the Old Testament" (35-36).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

Here is where we must be careful not to confuse inspiration with interpretation. That calls for responsible exegesis so that our interpretation does not become a license to destroy the authority of Scripture or a legalism that sets up a narrow interpretation others must accept or be branded heretical. Where are the limits? The limits are determined by the combined witness of the Holy Spirit as expressed in the historic creeds of the Church. But it is the Bible that tests the creed, not the creed the Bible. The creed is a valuable expression of what the community of faith thinks the Bible teaches, but it is a secondary standard and must be constantly tested by the revealed Word.

This is the laudable goal of the Biblical theologian because we want our theology to derive from the Bible and not be superimposed on it. But it is equally important that anyone who does Biblical theology should openly announce his philosophical and hermeneutical presuppositions. There is no such thing as total objectivity, but we should admit that an attempt to be as objective as possible is desirable. A person will probably succeed in objectivity only to the extent that he acknowledges his presuppositions. Moreover, for anyone to understand Scripture he must at least provisionally take into account and agree with its faith assumptions. So the Biblical theologian must have a method that will enhance the authority that the Bible claims for itself rather than undermine that authority. We maintain that such authority must be granted as a presupposition based on the testimony of Christ and the apostles—a testimony that follows the Biblical paradigm of history, doctrine and experience. Paul encapsulates this paradigm in the way he refers to the cross: The word “cross” sometimes means the wood on which Christ died (history), or it may mean the gospel: that Christ died for my sins (doctrine), or it may refer to being crucified with Christ (experience).<sup>18</sup> Biblical Christianity must be rooted in history, expressive of doctrine and productive of a living experience. To miss any one of these elements produces a truncated theology. It is pure reductionism to change Biblical theology to Biblical history, whether it be the older history-of-religion school or G. Ernest Wright’s recitation of God’s acts in history, which explained away the supernatural elements in which Israel firmly believed. As stated, to separate Biblical theology from Biblical history is contrary to the very nature of the Bible (OT and NT). Yet von Rad did essentially this with his nonhistorical history of idealized traditions—a cycle of reinterpretations of sacred tradition based on Israel’s so-called sensitivity to divine acts of redemption. Von Rad’s observation of an historical process that continually projected future hope in the form of analogies of the past had merit. It formed the basis of his typological exegesis. But unfortunately his view of tradition-history separated *Historie* from *Geschichte* exactly the way NT critics separated the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith. F. F. Bruce avoids that error but claims that there is a legitimate historical approach to Scripture that can be separated from the theological approach. Bruce suggests such a hermeneutical disjunction.<sup>19</sup> When we look at the OT from an historical, source-material viewpoint a substantive distinction between the theology of the book of Judges and the theology of so-called Second Isaiah is evident, according to Bruce. Vriezen’s two books, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* and *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, illustrate the two approaches. Bruce points out that the latter was an attempt at

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Phil 2:8; 1 Cor 1:17-18; Gal 2:20 for typical passages.

<sup>19</sup>F. F. Bruce, *Tradition and Interpretation* (1979) 385-386.

objectivity but suggests that even such a purely descriptive approach to the OT has a perspective or presupposition that should not impose itself on the material. In his confessional approach Bruce maintains that there is one dominant OT witness to God and his interaction with man and that this is the essence of OT theology. This mainstream theological interpretation of Israel's history outlived all rival interpretations and persisted right through the OT and guaranteed the survival of Israel's faith resisting all assimilation. But is it right to separate OT theological studies from historical studies, each calling for a different methodology? Is the theology of Judges in conflict with the theology of Isaiah? Such a view implies that the author of Judges was approving of Israel's syncretism. How can we have Biblical authority if the Biblical authors present us with conflicting theologies?

Process hermeneutics has no problem handling divergent theologies even with a given context. A typical example is Paul Hanson, who explains the presumed contradictions on the basis of literary structure.<sup>20</sup> The *mišpāṭim* of Exodus 21-23 reflect village juridical praxis prior to insertion in the Book of the Covenant, while the higher "humane" laws had a connection with the cult and its covenantal theology. "Internal contradictions will not be explained away as a threat to the literature's integrity (or inspiration) . . . but explicated as carefully as possible as clues to that process of an unfolding socio-religious ideal."<sup>21</sup> Richard Clifford (in an unpublished paper entitled "A Hermeneutical Principle: The Bible [Old Testament—New Testament] Is a Single Book") sees contradictions in the OT and even between the testaments as part of the ordained theological balance. A distinction should be made, however, between aspects of the truth held in tension and real contradiction.

By means of the old proof-text method it is easy to handle these questions. One simply ignores the material that does not fit a preconceived or predetermined grid. Or one may do what Bruce has done: keep one's studies in airtight compartments and when treating the OT from the confessional viewpoint look for a mainstream of theology that has resisted assimilation.

Here we suggest that the right approach to Biblical theology is an historico-doctrinal track. In the Bible, theology and history are the warp and woof of revelation. Because revelation is an historically organic progression, Biblical theology should begin with the OT not the NT. In this organic unfolding of revelation the true unity between the testaments becomes clear. No one can question the fact that there are both theological and historical connections between the two testaments. The only question is whether the NT is the true conclusion of the announced incomplete history of redemption presented in the OT. Has God who acted in history now acted decisively in the historic person and work of Christ?

H. W. Wolff affirms that there are only three viable explanations of the OT.<sup>22</sup> The first claims that the OT can be understood only as a document of folk religion in analogy to the other cultures of the ancient Near East. The peculiar character

<sup>20</sup>P. Hanson, *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology* (ed. G. W. Coats and B. O. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 110-131.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>22</sup>H. W. Wolff, "The Hermeneutics of the Old Testament," *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (ed. C. Westermann; Atlanta: John Knox, 1963) 160-199.

of the second is grasped only in its historical connection with late Judaism and the explanations in the Talmud where it is also conceived of as canonical. The third is the NT, which Wolff says is "the obvious context where the total meaning of the Old Testament is first discovered." One would assume it is the responsibility of the OT theologian to decide which of these solutions is the correct one. But many avoid the issue. We must go first of all to the OT itself to make that decision. As Wolff says, "To find for whom and against whom the Old Testament raises its voice, to determine in which context it can express itself truly and fully—that is the final and decisive task of all scientific concern with the Old Testament."<sup>23</sup>

The OT is indeed a child of the ancient Near East, and there are many important parallels in detail. But in its essentials it cannot be understood in terms only of its environment. In his peculiar nature the God of the OT is not a figure of mythology. He does not live by the cultus, nor do the people live by the cult, but by the divine Word he has given and continually renews through the prophets. Yahweh not only creates man. He also creates history. What G. E. Wright with his presuppositions was forced to call a theological mutation we with our presuppositions call revelation.

Nor has the OT come to its goal in the synagogue. There the law has been absolutized and in so doing is torn from its context of God's saving deeds and his covenant with Israel. Judaism by insisting that everything was in the law sometimes ignored the historico-cultural context of some peripheral laws and made them into permanent institutions for ritual observance.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, they succeeded in separating God's covenant law from his covenant acts and sought to fulfill that law with legal casuistry.

It is only in the NT context that the "Israel of God" under a new covenant fulfills God's promise to bring blessing to all the nations.<sup>25</sup> Christ came to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The Gentiles were grafted in, and together they became strangers in the earth (like the OT people of God). It is true that Israel as a nation came to ruin by breaking the covenant law, but it is also true that for the "Israel of God" in both testaments life is provided by the obedience of Christ.<sup>26</sup> Christ comes as the last king and the ultimate priest—and even as the Prophet, the new Moses, who announces the law of the kingdom. That there is antithesis none should gainsay. The OT has promises and gifts that are material, national and temporal, while the NT's emphasis is spiritual, individual and eternal. But this should not be carried too far, for the two testaments cannot be fully understood by antithesis. The OT is full of spiritual gifts and hopes, and the NT is full of promises for this life, for the poor, for healing and for the joyous communal life of the Church.

So while the ancient Near Eastern environment and late Judaism can provide us with aids to understanding details, only the NT offers the analogy of the wit-

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>24</sup>As for example the law that forbids the mingling of milk and meat food, based on what may have been a pagan ritual forbidden in Exod 23:19; 34:26; Deut 14:21.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Gal 6:16; Rom 4:16-17.

<sup>26</sup>Rom 5:19.

ness founded on historical facts. This is not identity, indeed, but analogy, for in the Old there was Israel the theocratic state, while in the New theocracy is the new communion from Israel and the nations. The Old is the witness through many servants, institutions, and events and was largely provisional; the New is the witness through the Son and is permanent.<sup>27</sup>

But since the same God is Father of Jesus Christ this is not a forced analogy. Indeed, it is the same covenant fulfilled. And this analogy is supported by an historically unique relationship. The OT moves toward the NT, and the NT erupts from the OT at the arrival of that decisive moment of intensification.<sup>28</sup> The NT is in the context of the OT and as its historical goal reveals the total meaning of the OT. The NT writers themselves make clear to us the importance of the typological approach to the OT as an indispensable tool and exegetical method. They did not consider it as an arbitrary importation or as a way of ferreting out hidden meanings. They thought it supported what the authors had in mind.<sup>29</sup>

The NT writers in using type did not intend to replace the historical meaning of the text, but they felt that the historical events had a witnessing intent, a doctrinal intent. The most basic element of that doctrinal intent is that the OT account does not bear witness to a strange God but to the same God who is the Father of Jesus.

The difference between allegory and typology is that the former reads its NT knowledge into the OT while typology brings the OT and the NT together in a way that allows for a relevant listening to the proper witness of the OT. So the use of type creates an interest in the concrete historical facts of the OT and the testimony of the OT in its life situation. For example, a wholly moralistic interpretation of the OT often keeps the interpreter from hearing the proper self-assertion of the text. If we get sidetracked with the ethics of the destruction of the Midianites or of Ehud's deed, we lose sight of what these texts are teaching about God's holiness and salvific intentions. To fail to see a proper typological relationship between the testaments is to deprive the Church of a large portion of what the OT has to say about the history of salvation. We are calling, then, for an approach that affirms a historico-doctrinal connection between the testaments. The NT proclaims a two-pronged fulfillment of the long-awaited eschatological event: the historical culmination of God's covenant with his people tied inextricably to the final blossoming of the flower of divine revelation.

But what do we do with those parts of the OT that do not appear to fit this historico-doctrinal track? We should not attempt to make the OT of equal importance in all its parts, nor should we appeal to it mechanically. The OT theologian must be concerned with the diversity of the material and how it is to be brought to bear on the formulation of this structure of doctrine. As Bright notes, "Love your neighbor as yourself" in Lev 19:18 is followed in v 19 by these words: "Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed" and "Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Rev 22:16.

<sup>28</sup>Rom 1:2-4; Gal 4:4.

<sup>29</sup>Luke 24:27; Heb 10:1-7.

<sup>30</sup>J. Bright, *Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975) 54.



Certainly a line must be drawn between what is normative and what is not. But the challenge is how and where to draw the line. H. H. Rowley's simple rule was this: "All that we learn of God in the Old Testament that is not in harmony with the revelation given in Christ is not of God."<sup>31</sup> But what does he mean by "of God"? One might honestly question the notion that the OT teaches things about God that are not in harmony with the NT. Certainly some material that is "of God" is not meant to be normative—that is, binding on all generations. It is better to affirm the principle of the analogy of Scripture and formulate specific theological foci as the guide for determining what is normative.

If theological development of the OT was a God-given historical process, these theological foci may be inductively derived from the OT text. Gustav Oehler (1812-1872) was one of the first to present this important insight, which was further developed by Geerhardus Vos. Oehler called it the historico-genetic method. In speaking of the diverse forms in which the OT expresses its contents he says:

Biblical Theology . . . must comprehend these forms as members of an organic process of development. And since every such process can be comprehended only from the points of its culmination, Biblical Theology must view the OT in the light of the completed revelation of God in Christ for which is formed the preparation. . . , while the dogmatist forces the doctrinal contents of the OT into a framework brought to it from without . . . and the method of philosophical construction . . . cuts it critically until it can be fitted into a presupposed scheme of logical categories—the genetic method seeks to reproduce the living process of the growth of the thing itself. This method refuses, however, to find ripe fruit where only the bud exists; it aims to show how the fruit grew from the bud; it sketches the earlier stages in a way that makes it clear how the higher stages could and necessarily did spring from the former.<sup>32</sup>

Oehler was the first to admit that there are diverse forms of revelation in the OT and that these sometimes appear to be competing lines of thought. Some teachings are meant to be gnomic and hang in tension with others giving balance to the truth. Other difficult matters lie in the realm of God's sovereign freedom and therefore beyond our ability to judge. By no means should we create a canon within a canon by choosing what is authoritative on the basis of a set of external value judgments. Was the God of the OT a dirty bully, as a certain bishop used to say about the so-called genocide in the OT? It was a choice of evils between the demise of God's covenant people and the intrusion of consummation ethics<sup>33</sup> against an incredibly corrupt generation. The bishop set himself up as God when he judged this command of God as "sub-Christian." On the other hand one should not have a methodology that provides quick and easy solutions to such problems as the *mišpāṭim* of the Book of the Covenant, which are also presented as a divine command.

I would agree with John Bright that the normative element in the OT rests not in its polity and customs, its institutions and ancient patterns of thinking, but in its structure of theology, which undergirds each of its texts.<sup>34</sup> But Bright seems to

<sup>31</sup>H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1948) 33.

<sup>32</sup>G. Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1978) 41-42.

<sup>33</sup>M. G. Kline's term. See *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, pp. 154-164.

<sup>34</sup>Bright, *Authority* 156.

be confused about what is inspired as over against what is authoritative. We must not limit its inspiration only to what is doctrinally authoritative. The inspired text may present extended passages where the normative teaching must be gathered from an even wider context (Numbers 5; Job 3).

A special problem arises when such a passage appears to be a divine word. For example, we would expect the words of Yahweh in Job's theophany to be normative while we know that the words of Job himself sometimes were not. But what about Jeremiah's so-called anti-theology (Jeremiah 20)? Can we allow Job to doubt and not Jeremiah?

In this regard we must clearly define what we mean by inspiration and by authority, for although all of the Bible is equally inspired it is not all equally binding or theologically normative. This is where great exegetical skill is needed, for every context has a message that is authoritative. Even those parts of the OT that are not a guide to practice are still a guide to faith when what is being taught is correctly understood. Israel's polity is not the Church's polity, but Israel's faith is. Many of Israel's life-norms contain within them faith-norms.<sup>35</sup> The faith principles inherent in ritual law, civil laws, holy war, etc., remain permanently valid.

The NT does not record a break with OT faith. Jesus said that he did not come to set aside the law and the prophets but to fulfill them. So the NT took over the theological constancies that national Israel rejected. In addition to the OT's position as the theological root from which arose the NT tree, the OT continues as part of Christian Scripture. In addition to the analogy of faith mentioned above, the OT must also be seen as preventing the witness to Christ from becoming philosophy about Christ. He comes as fulfillment. It also guards the Christian message from false individualizing. For example, Psalm 1 portrays a typical model of a member of the people of God. But not everybody who is good prospers. Job presents another model. The two stand in tension.

The OT also helps keep the Christian message from false transcendentalism—that is, a kind of spirituality removed from practical human relations, mere sentimental piety and subjective experience. We stress here the key words "false" and "mere," for the OT itself set a pattern that the NT follows concerning God's message. That pattern includes a vertical relationship between God and man on an individual as well as a community basis. Since the Bible claims that God is and that he reveals himself and his will to man, no Biblical theology can be complete that fails to account for this relationship. Ultimately Biblical theology cannot be only a description of what the Bible says and means. It must not be reduced merely to history or to theological abstractions about God and his relationship with man. But it must lead us to a knowledge of God, not just for man's sake but precisely because its goal must be the glory of God.

So then history, doctrine and experience must be given equal attention but never independently. The doctrine—that is, the structure of theology—finds its unity in the historical continuity of covenant renewal. The Mosaic covenant grew out of God's promise of a land and a people to Abraham (Exod 32:13-14; 6:4-8), and the Davidic covenant is rooted in the law of Moses (1 Kgs 2:3-4) as well as in God's promises to Abraham (1 Chr 16:15-18). The literal, historical, genealogical continuity is both promised and fulfilled from Abraham to David (Ps 105:8-10) and is renewed by God's promise of an eternal dynasty to David, which was to

<sup>35</sup>Again we are indebted to M. G. Kline for these terms (*Structure* 101-109).

have a literal historical fulfillment in the person of the Second David. At every historical juncture a new faith commitment was pivotal in the divine-human encounter.

The history of redemption, promise-fulfillment and covenant are not separate themes but three aspects of a single organically unfolding structure of theology. That it is real history is important, but that it is progressive redemptive history is equally important. This means that every doctrinal formulation is rooted in history and that Biblical revelation interprets that history. The theological meaning of God's acts in history involves both his supernatural acts and his acts of providence (the book of Esther is just as authoritative as the book of Exodus).

So we cannot correctly understand the meaning of the words, sentences, units or books, even when we use to the fullest a proper historico-grammatical approach, unless we constantly relate the material to the internal organic structure that informs every text. Richard Gaffin has put it succinctly in his introduction to G. Vos' *Shorter Writings*: "The redemptive-historical structure or framework established by Scripture itself is the contextual factor having the broadest bearing on a given text."<sup>36</sup>

The systematic theologian must use Biblical theology as his basis for formulating a system of doctrine taught in holy Scripture, relating its various themes to one another and interpreting their wide philosophical, moral and ethical implications.

But the ontological problem must first be faced. Is the Bible truth from the true God? A nonreligious approach can never give the full meaning of the Bible. Temporary intellectual acquiescence can never take the place of living faith, for you cannot fully define anything unless you experience it. We do not expect those born blind to define color. Each passage of the Bible has a message that calls for faith response. The OT is continually telling of various such responses, positive and negative. The NT not only completes the normative theology of the OT but also records the ultimate faith response to God and leaves as its legacy that compelling kerygma that allows for no neutrality.

<sup>36</sup>G. Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (ed. R. B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980).