

TACKLING OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Elmer A. Martens*

Several recent books set the agenda for Biblical theology, an agenda that includes such questions as the relationship of history and faith, the unifying theme of OT theology, and the relationship of the OT to the NT, as well as the question of methodology generally.¹ This paper selectively addresses itself to two questions. One is the issue of method, and the other is the issue of substance. Following a summary analysis of each, some suggested options for each will be elaborated.

By Biblical theology I mean that approach to Scripture which attempts to see Biblical material holistically and to describe 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 interrelationships. Biblical theology is an attempt to get to the theological heart of the Bible.

Biblical theology should be distinguished from exegesis on the one hand and from systematic theology on the other. Exegesis revolves around single units of Scripture, even if the unit be the entire book, and asks for the message that arises from these single units. Biblical theology asks for *the* message which is extrapolated from all the books, and so is dependent on exegesis but not identical with it. Biblical theology should not be confused with systematic theology. Both are systematic, and each works with Scripture texts; but systematic theology operates within philosophical categories, such as being, nature, or process, whereas Biblical theology attempts to work within Biblical categories, such as sacrifice, land, or kingdom of God. Customarily, systematic theology asks about the nature of God and answers in ontic categories by listing attributes. Biblical theology answers the question, What is God like? with such rubrics as creator, warrior, judge, shepherd. Biblical theology is not the antithesis to systematic theology, however. Rather, Biblical theology is prior, chronologically, to the formulations of systematic theology. Biblical theology therefore can be understood as a descriptive discipline that stands between exegesis and systematic theology.

I. A METHODOLOGICAL QUESTION: FROM EXEGESIS TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Part of the reason for the dissimilar conclusions in Biblical theology lies in the variety of the presuppositions that govern exegesis itself.

*Elmer Martens is professor of Old Testament at Mennonite Brethren Seminary, Fresno, California.

¹G. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), and bibliography there.

A second reason lies in the ill-defined way in which one proceeds from exegesis (the part) to Biblical theology (the whole).

The basic posture of American scholarship is one that adheres to the results obtained through the historical-critical method. Edgar Krentz affirms: "Today historical criticism is taken for granted; we cannot go back to the precritical age."² He quotes R. P. C. Hanson: "At least in Western Christianity . . . the battle for the acceptance of historical criticism as applied to the Bible has been won."³ The effect of this method on Biblical interpretation is not totally salutary, as Hasel has noted: "But the historical critical method claims to begin from the outset by excluding the revelatory-divine aspect."⁴ Ladd concurs: "The simple fact is that the historical critical method has no room for salvation history."⁵ While such comments point to the history-faith issue, they are also significant for exegesis.

One of the results of the historical-critical method is acceptance of the documentary hypothesis, though now modified, which becomes a grid for the interpretation of individual Biblical texts. Since Biblical theologians frequently elaborate their major themes on the genetic model—i.e., the origin and development of these themes—the basic structure for such a development becomes crucial. For example, exegetical presuppositions affect interpretations of the messianic material. A study of *māšīaḥ* which presupposes that the material in Leviticus is from the priestly editor (fifth century B. C.) concludes that the notion of anointing is initially associated not with the priest but with the king and that it is royalty which basically informs messianism. Adherents to an early dating of the Pentateuch elaborate the priestly functions as constituent for the *māšīaḥ* concept, though they also take into account the later monarchical functions. Emphases in OT theology will continue to fluctuate partly in accordance with the fortunes of critical exegetical methodology and its conclusions.

But given the basic grid historically, one still faces a problem of making the transition from exegesis to Biblical theology. Brevard Childs speaks of the gap between exegesis and theology, one prime example of which is the format and design of *IB*. After reviewing the ferment of the 1940's, Childs says, "It remains a puzzlement that Biblical Theology and exegesis did not establish a better union."⁶ To work from details toward generalizations requires a synthesis. But how does one compare, synthesize, correlate? Some reach for Biblical cross-referencing, a method that is essentially premised on a flat book approach. J. Barton Payne, who holds to progressive revelation and would not

²E. Krentz, *The Historical Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 33.

³Ibid.

⁴Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 40 n. 18.

⁵G. E. Ladd, "The Search for Perspective," *Int* 25 (1971) 49.

⁶B. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 54; cf. p. 79.

subscribe to the flat book approach, nevertheless selects Scriptures from hither and yon in order to support his statements, sometimes in the strangest pattern.⁷ Even belief in propositional revelation does not provide license for dismissing the context of a text.

Correlation, as part of the synthetic process necessary for using exegetical material as building blocks in a Biblical theology, proceeds appropriately on three levels. At the textual level one examines quotations of a text elsewhere in the Bible. Thus Habakkuk's utterance, "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (2:14), can be correlated for wording and context with Isa 11:9, from which it was apparently taken. Or the covenant passage of Jer 31:31-34 can be correlated with the quotation of it in Heb 8:8-12. Childs, who urges a canonical approach to Biblical theology, suggests textual correlation as a beginning point.

Secondly, it is possible to correlate themes. If Jeremiah's covenant passage is taken as an example, the themes of covenant, law, spirit and obedience can be fruitfully correlated with other pericopes where these subjects are prominent. Although this method offers certain controls, it can also be easily misused. For instance, one can discuss the "day of the Lord" and not be sensitive to the fact that in various Scriptural texts this concept functions in different ways.

The third and possibly the most acceptable method of correlation is that of correlating the intention of Scripture pericopes. Here one establishes the thrust of a given unit and correlates this thrust with other units that have a comparable thrust. For example, the song of the vineyard with its message that divine investment justifies God in bringing judgment when his people fail to produce the desired fruit (Isa 5:1-7) has its corollary, in terms of its message, in the NT parable of the fig tree that was given additional attention by the gardener so that it might produce fruit (Luke 13:6-9). Its corollary is not with the parable of the vineyard growers to whom the owner sent servants (Mark 12:1-11), even though Jesus initiates the parable by quoting verbatim from Isaiah 5. Should not a Biblical theology proceed very self-consciously in method? And should not correlation of intention be a guiding principle?

Though David Aune's critique of G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, is perhaps unduly sharp, one is inclined to agree with Aune's summary: "... the book is methodologically unexplicit and structurally inchoate."⁸ The first comment underscores the problem of moving from exegesis to theology via Ladd's historical-theological method. Aune's second comment, his remark about structure, suggests the second problem, to which we now turn.

⁷J. B. Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 485, a description of God regathering his own.

⁸D. E. Aune, *Int* 29 (1975) 427.

II. A SUBSTANTIVE QUESTION: THE UNIFYING THEME OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Debate has continued for some years around the question of whether there is a unifying theme in Biblical theology, or even of whether there is a unifying theme in the OT. Von Rad is arresting, to say the least, for he denies a unifying theme for the OT. He resorts to traditions and their re-adaptations as the fabric for his synthesis. Evangelicals have assumed that there is a unifying theme in the OT, though recent studies seem increasingly suspicious of such a possibility. Hasel says, "The problem remains whether or not any single concept should or can be employed for bringing about a 'structural unity of the OT message' when the OT message resists from within such systematizations."⁹

Those who have maintained the possibility of a single unifying theme as center have reached for a variety of options: covenant (Eichrodt), God's sovereignty (Jacob), communion (Vriezen)—to mention only a few. If one focuses on recent evangelical spokesmen, additional centers come in for consideration: testament (Payne), revelation (Vos, Lehman) and promise (Kaiser). Each of the evangelical scholars in the latter list has reached beyond a strictly OT theology to an encompassing Biblical theology. Without detracting from the contribution of these scholars, one may yet raise the question about the adequacy of the unifying themes they propose.

In OT theology, a crucial and stubborn factor in establishing a unifying center has been the corpus of wisdom literature. For example, can wisdom be properly integrated into Eichrodt's proposal that covenant is the center of the OT message? G. E. Wright, who advocated an OT theology focused on a God who acts, was himself frustrated by the wisdom block and described it as a cul-de-sac.

Wisdom material can therefore in some sense serve as a test case for the adequacy of "center" proposals. "Clearly the challenge is this: either relate wisdom theology to the rest of OT theology or cut bait and recognize a competing but approved mode of thought within the canon."¹⁰ Geerhardus Vos organizes Biblical theology around the subject of revelation. Arranged in three parts, his book addresses first the Mosaic epoch of revelation, secondly the prophetic epoch of revelation, and thirdly Biblical theology and the NT.¹¹ If one checks the index, one finds six references to Proverbs and four to Job. Chester Lehman, who self-consciously builds on his mentor, Vos, likewise organizes his text around the subject of revelation: Part I, God's revelation to Moses; Part II, God's revelation to the prophets; and Part III, the hagiographa.¹² The symmetry is broken with Part III, which omits

⁹Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 79.

¹⁰W. C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34," *JETS* 15 (1972).

¹¹G. Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948).

¹²C. Lehman, *Biblical Theology* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1971) I.

the word "revelation." Is this an oversight in the editorial process? Or is the absence of the word suggestive of the difficulty of fitting wisdom material into a rubric with revelation as the unifying category? E. J. Young defined revelation in the Biblical sense as "the communication of information."¹³ If revelation is understood as God's disclosure of truth, and that in a manner which could not otherwise be known, then wisdom is only awkwardly included, if at all, in revelation, for much of wisdom material (Proverbs, for example) is existential in nature. Wisdom literature comes from experience or observation and not as evidently a divine word from heaven. Thus a man who lives with a nagging woman concludes, "A constant dripping on a day of steady rain and a contentious woman are alike" (Prov 27:15)—a conclusion quite independent of divine revelation! Wisdom raises questions for those who define revelation narrowly and thus calls into question the adequacy of revelation as an overarching rubric.

There is yet another problem with the revelation paradigm. If Biblical theology is to proceed in terms of Biblical categories, then it must be asked whether "revelation" is appropriate. There is no doubt that revelation occurs, but it is not a category in terms of which the OT makes distinctions. There is not a clear-cut term in the OT for "revelation."¹⁴ If "revelation" is a category important for western thought, is not its use a foreign import into attempts to formulate a Biblical theology?

The promise-fulfillment theme, advocated by Walter Kaiser, as well as the concept of testament suggested by J. Barton Payne, tend to run aground on wisdom material. The promise-fulfillment theme is without question a powerful motif. Kaiser claims: "The promise of God is one of the greatest unifying themes running throughout the various books of the Bible and binding them into one organic whole."¹⁵ That promise, although broad and programmatic, proceeds specifically through the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. Inasmuch as this promise theme is closely related to *Heilsgeschichte* (the story of the redemptive acts of God in human history), it shares with *Heilsgeschichte* the stumbling block represented by the wisdom material (Job and Proverbs), for in this literature one does not find God's acts in history, nor is there an appreciable stress on the salvation or promise motif. J. Barton Payne, who stresses the testament, is in similar straits because wisdom, which deals not with Israel but more broadly with people universally, is difficult to incorporate into testament.

Upon weighing these three models—revelation, covenant, and promise-fulfillment—on a scale with wisdom, we find the models deficient.

¹³E. J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 41.

¹⁴R. Knierim, "Offenbarung im Alten Testament," *Probleme biblischer Theologie*, H. W. Wolff, ed. (München: C. Kaiser, 1971) 228 ff.

¹⁵Kaiser, "The Old Promise and the New Covenant," p. 12.

III. FROM EXEGESIS TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: A SUGGESTION

With the contours of both these problems of methodology and of an OT "center" as background, a description of a proposed model can be sketched. Exod 5:22-6:8 will serve as a key pericope to illustrate the transition from exegesis to Biblical theology and also as a grid to facilitate arrival at a "center."

The chapter break before Exod 6:1 is unfortunate, because the pericope is a dialogue with the initiating question in Exod 5:22 answered in the passage that terminates in 6:8. Moses asks God, "Why have you sent me?" (5:22), and continues with a reproach. The narrative twice introduces the Lord's speech (6:1-2), although there is no literary need to do so. But the two replies correspond to the two parts of Moses' speech. The first short reply underscores the readiness of Yahweh to follow through on the action against Pharaoh and so is an answer to Moses' complaint. The second speech is longer and is the reply to the earlier question, which might be formulated, "God, what are you up to?"

The intention of Yahweh is given almost at once in four statements: (1) "I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (v 6a); (2) "I will take you for my people, and I will be your God" (v 7a); (3) "You shall know that I am the LORD your God" (v 7b); and (4) "I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham" (v 8a). Significantly, the answer is bracketed by the self-identification formula: "I am Yahweh." Both initiative and guarantee for the announcements so bracketed lie with Yahweh.

Full exegesis of the text cannot be undertaken here. In a brief compass of ten verses, however, one has a succinct reply to a pressing question by Moses, the leader-elect: "What is it all about?" Accepting the Mosaic authorship and a second-millennium dating for the material, I regard this text as significant for its possible programmatic outline of God's activity with his people and with the world generally.

Several observations are pertinent to our problem of proceeding from exegesis of one unit to a more broadly-based theology. Earlier the process for this transition was described by the word "correlation." Correlation of this pericope or parts of it on the textual level is possible since the phrase "You shall be my people; I will be your God" and its variations is found more than twenty times in the Bible (e.g., Lev 26:12; 2 Sam 7:24; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 31:33; Ezek 14:11; 36:28; Rom 9:25-26; Rev 21:3).

At the second level, that of correlation of theme, there is ample room for investigation. The redemption theme is sounded. An enslaved people is to be freed from bondage through an act of power in history. Broadly similar redemptive acts occur in the times of the judges (e.g., Gideon) and kings (e.g., Hezekiah). Redemption in other contexts, such as guilt, and through other means, such as cult, is properly an extension of the redemption motif. God intends for people to be free. The correlation of the second motif, "You shall be my people, and I will be your God," is essentially a covenant formula, and correlation can be estab-

lished not only with precise terminology but also with the concept of covenant wherever it appears. As for the third statement, "They shall know that I am God," Zimmerli has discussed the concentrated use of this motif in Ezekiel,¹⁶ a discussion that could serve as a springboard for correlation efforts. The fourth aspect of purpose, the gift of the land, receives frequent mention in historical books and becomes a theological consideration of importance again in conjunction with Israel's exile. Restoration to the land is prominent in Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

The correlation could be executed with profit by limiting the process to the Pentateuch alone. In so doing one would observe that this fourfold outline becomes the outline of the events described for the remainder of the Hexateuch. Freedom from bondage is secured (Exod 6-12); Israel is God's people (19:1 ff.); Israel knows Yahweh through the exodus event and through cult, but also through the wilderness experience (Leviticus, Numbers); entry into the land of Canaan (Deuteronomy-Joshua) concludes the narrative strand that began initially in Genesis 12.

To move responsibly from exegesis to theology involves a third level of correlation, namely the correlation of intention or thrust. From the basic structural analysis, genre and word study, the statement of intention of the Exodus text can be formulated as follows: God's design arises out of and is vouchsafed by his own person through his salvation name.

While more difficult, this intention of the pericope can and must be correlated with similar thrust points of other pericopes. The synthesizing principle around which the text is built—its aim or focal point—has its counterpart in other texts. The thrust of Exod 5:22 ff. ties in with salvation announcements in the prophets. Hos 2:18-23 is an example, for there redemption, covenant, knowledge of God and gift of blessing are similarly woven together to reiterate God's design. Another passage that mirrors the Exod 5:22 ff. pericope even more closely is Ezek 34:20-31. Here the familiar elements are found: deliverance—"I will save my flock, they shall no longer be a prey" (v 22); community—"I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; . . . I will make with them a covenant of peace" (vv 24-25); experience of Yahweh—"They shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them. . . . And they shall know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord GOD" (vv 27, 30); land—"They shall be secure in their land" (v 27). Most striking is the fact that the intention of the passage in Ezekiel is identical with that of Exodus, namely that God presents his design and makes clear that the initiative and guarantee is his own wonderful action.

Correlation of texts, themes and thrusts enriches our understanding of the given text (Exod 5:22-6:8). Correlation is obviously a service-

¹⁶W. Zimmerli, "Erkenntnis Gottes nach dem Buche Ezekiel," *Gottes Offenbarung: Gesammelte Aufsätze zum AT* (München: C. Kaiser, 1963).

able device for integrating Scriptural material, a specific task in Biblical theology.

IV. THE UNIFYING THEME IN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

The foregoing represents an attempt to move deliberately and self-consciously from exegesis to theology. As a tree grows out from the roots, so must a Biblical theology grow out of historical exegesis. Still, one must be alert to a problem, for it is possible that having identified the themes, as one would isolate branches, one is yet a distance from the trunk. OT theology is concerned with the sturdy center of the trunk by which the branches are supported, energized and integrated.

Is the Exodus pericope such a trunk? An immediate query can be anticipated: Why should the Exodus pericope and not some other be chosen as the port of entry to an OT theology? In reply, several considerations should be noted. In a formal way these early chapters of Exodus and this pericope in particular inaugurate the history of the people of Israel with which the OT deals. The event of the exodus, of which this pericope is a part, is foundational to Israel's history. It is also appropriate that one should find in Scripture an overall sketch or preview of what God intends to accomplish. Further, the pericope stresses the identity of YHWH, about whom the OT material revolves. That name, in its new meaning derived through the exodus, is crucial to the OT, and this pericope *in nuce* outlines its significance for the families of the earth. One should add that the question of the OT theologian, namely under what rubric all the material is to be understood and assimilated, is virtually posed in the opening query of the pericope: "God, what are you up to?" It is unlikely that any other single pericope has quite the internal determining dynamics that inhere in Exod 5:22-6:8, so that this pericope is a pericope par excellence for launching an OT theology.

The adequacy of divine design as center for the OT would require a full explication of OT material on the grid as identified from Exod 5:22-6:8. But the lines along which such an explication would go can be summarized here.

First, it can be shown that design is a constituent concept for the OT. A look at the creation narrative with its repeated refrain, "God saw that it was good," leads already at the very outset to the possibility that divine intentionality is an important factor. The story of Joseph, which has been characterized as belonging to the wisdom genre, scores a similar point when Joseph concludes: "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring about this present result to preserve many people alive" (Gen 50:20). Here history, quite apart from a covenant people, is viewed as a follow-through of God's design. The wisdom material in Job and Proverbs both affirms and wrestles with the question of order and meaning in the world. If any one thing characterizes wisdom, it is the notion that order is basic to human community. People are called on to fit into the divine scheme of things, and that quite apart from covenant language or cove-

nant history. The divine purpose, easily seen in the prophets through such expressions as "day of the Lord," is also discernible, though in different ways, in wisdom material. In the notion of divine design three streams—history, wisdom and prophecy—come together.

But to identify design as a unifying factor in OT theology is still to be working at the level of considerable abstraction. Scripture, however, articulates that design with more precision. The Exodus pericope, characterized by design language, identifies the specifics. First, God's announcement to bring Israel out of bondage is in keeping with the announcements throughout Scripture that God desires freedom for people everywhere. As with Israel, so with Paul: Genuine freedom is a gift that cannot be viewed apart from responsibility. But it is salvation that God intends. Secondly, the phrase "I will take you for a people" points to the importance of community and the Lordship of Yahweh. Thirdly, to know God, when understood in OT context, is a matter of knowing by experience and not merely accumulating intellectual data. Fourthly, the promise to bring people into the land picks up the frequent promise-fulfillment motif in the Bible as well as the theme of blessing and good that God intends for people.

Formulation of the unifying theme of the OT in this way is amenable to what scholars have sensed and stated, namely that in some way Yahweh is the center.¹⁷ But to say this is to remain in the field of generalities, for it is not to say anything very definitive. The question is, How or in what way is God the center? The proposal advanced here is more specific in that God's design is not an abstract philosophical datum but represents an articulated design with a fourfold aspect. Although the emphasis here is on divine design as the unifying center of OT theology, one could accommodate Hasel by pointing out that the fourfold design is in keeping with his call for a multi-track approach to the question of unity.¹⁸

If other proposed unifying themes tend to be smashed by wisdom material, how then does this proposal of divine design fare? First, as has been suggested above, the concept of design is fully at home in the sapiential ethos, since in wisdom material the notion of order is so prevailing. Understanding the OT as focused on divine design means that wisdom is not a cul-de-sac; nor, to change the figure, is it a stepchild of OT theology. Indeed, wisdom contributes to and underscores the orderliness and purposefulness of Yahweh. In the close details of that design as articulated according to Exod 5:22-6:8, however, wisdom material is not equally vocal at every point. Man's freedom, the space in which to live and work, is basic to the numerous admonitions and counsels. The isolation of a peculiar people as God's people represented in "You shall be my people; I will be your God" is not visible

¹⁷G. von Rad says, "Certainly, it can be said that Yahweh is the center of the OT. This is, however, simply the beginning of the whole question: what kind of Yahweh is he?", *TLZ* 88 (1963) 406, quoted in G. Hasel, "The Problem of the Centre in the OT Theology Debate," *ZAW* 86 (1974) 75 n. 72. Cf. W. Zimmerli, "Zum Problem der Mitte des Alten Testaments," *EvT* 35 (1975) 97-118.

¹⁸Hasel, "The Problem of the Centre."

in wisdom literature, though the community concept is integral, and peoplehood on a broad scale is acknowledged (cf. Prov 25:15-23). Knowledge of God, an important aspect in the Exodus pericope, is prominent in wisdom as exemplified in the phrase, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." The promise to bring Israel into the land, where Israel is to experience a rich quality of life and blessedness, has its corollary in wisdom material where the manner and quality of life is a dominant concern. True, this quality of life is linked with ethics and lifestyle; but so is life in the land of Palestine, as Deuteronomy specifies. The common denominator, then, for the land in Exodus and the ethical injunctions in Proverbs is the quality of life.

The remarks of Childs, although not intended to support our specific thesis, may nevertheless be quoted in conclusion: "Although there is a history of revelation which includes a past and a future, the theocentric focus on God's initiative in making himself known tends to encompass all the various themes into the one great act of disclosure. *To know God's name is to know his purpose for all mankind from the beginning to the end.*"¹⁷

To sum up, the object of this paper has been to review the problems one faces in working toward an OT theology and to pose some options in their solution. One problem is that of moving properly from exegesis to theology, a problem made more complex because of the presuppositions evangelicals hold about exegetical method. A second problem is one of establishing a unifying center, assuming that there is one. It has been suggested that a more self-conscious method is one that involves correlation at the textual, thematic and thrust levels. A more encompassing grid for the formulation of an OT theology has been proposed from the Exod 5:22-6:8 pericope, on the basis of which the unifying factor is described as Yahweh's design.

¹⁷B. Childs, *Exodus: a Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1974) 119.