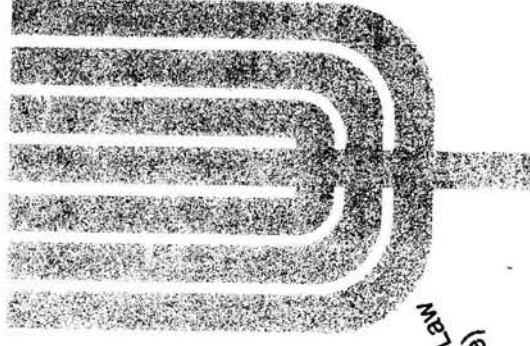


Toward an Old Testament Theology

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content with talking about the different theologies of the OT. Consequently, the idea of an OT theology as such must be permanently abandoned. Not only would it be necessary to acknowledge that there was no unity to be found in the OT, but the search for the legitimate and authoritative lines of continuity with the NT would need to be abandoned as well.

Of course, this latter eventuality will not come as a surprise to some, for already they have decided that this state of affairs does exist. Thus, while retaining the traditional terminology of OT theology, the focus of most OT theologies shifted from unity to variety, from developing lines of continuity to competing trends of diversity. That is also the judgment of Rudolf Smend. In an important essay in which he surveys the last 150 years of OT theology, he begins by saying, "The confidence with which one has postulated the existence of a center (*Mitte*) of the Old Testament, has steadily become less and less."¹

Even the very terms by which we referred to this phenomena remained elusive. Most referred approximately to a central core of events and/or meanings in the OT which provided some type of unifying center for the welter of detail. Georg Fohrer spoke of a "*Mittelpunkt*"² while Rudolf Smend, as we have already noted, chose "*Mitte*" and Günter Klein used "*Zentralbegriff*."³ Other terms have included "central concept,"⁴ "focal point," "essential root idea," or "underlying idea."⁵

In spite of the terminological variations, a similar note is sounded in all these terms. Perhaps the word "center" is the most useful, but it also has certain drawbacks. It does stress the desire traditionally located in OT theology of identifying the integrating points in the entirety of the testament, but that word does not indicate any linear historical building of materials within that center. Hence, there still is a need for some term that has both a dynamic aspect of the growth of revelation yet contains a unifying point of reference to it. So far, such a term has not suggested itself;

¹Rudolf Smend, "Die Mitte des Alten Testaments," *Theologische Studien* 101(1970): 7.

²Georg Fohrer, "Der Mittelpunkt einer Theologie des AT," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 24(1968): 161-72.

³Günter Klein, "Reich Gottes' als biblischer Zentralbegriff," *Evangelische Theologie* 30(1970): 642-70.

⁴Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1961), pp. 13-16.

⁵Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, 2nd ed. (Newton, Mass.: Charles T. Branford Co., 1970), p. 150.

Chapter 2

The Identification of a Canonical Theological Center

No discipline has struggled more valiantly to fulfill its basic mission but with such disappointing results as OT biblical theology. Inherent in its very name is the presumption that an inner unity which can bind the various OT themes, concepts, and books will be found. But, alas, to judge from the available literature, that inner unity or central concept appears to have remained hidden and perhaps buried beneath all the variegation and diversity of form and content in the OT.

THE ISSUES INVOLVED

Simply stated, the real problem is this: Does a key exist for an orderly and progressive arrangement of the subjects, themes, and teachings of the OT? And here is the most crucial and sensitive question of all: Were the writers of the OT consciously aware of such a key as they continued to add to the historical stream of revelation?

The answer to these questions will literally determine the destiny and direction of OT theology. If no such key can be demonstrated inductively from the text, and if the writers were not deliberately writing out of such an awareness, then we shall have to be

nevertheless, the idea is clear enough from the several terms which approximate the concept from different angles.

Various analogies have also been suggested for this unifying but developing concept. One epigenetical concept uses the relation of the seed acorn to the full-grown oak tree. Just so, the central idea matures as revelation progresses into the NT era. Another analogy uses the successive folds of a road map. Again the emphasis is on unity with plenty of provision for expansion and development. Only this kind of dual emphasis will simultaneously respond to the demands of a *theology* of the OT (with its implied unity) and the requirements of a revelation in *history* (with its contribution of development, progress, and enlargement).

THE CURRENT RELUCTANCE TO ADOPT A CENTER

Traditionally, it has been commonplace among biblical theologians to find the justified warning against the all-too-prevalent temptation to impose one's own philosophical grid or theological framework over the testament. Such externally formulated structures cannot, of course, adequately serve as a key to the systematic ordering of the content of the OT. The procedure is to be faulted both on methodological and on theological grounds.

The problem in methodology is that it denies the priority of the results of careful exegesis. Instead of inductively deriving one's center from the testament, a grid foreign to the form and content of the text is slipped hastily and often carelessly over the material, resulting in the obstruction of the text's own point of view; and large amounts of intractable material are left dangling outside the imposed system.

When one joins to this fact the further complication that all alien grids fail to reproduce or share in any derived authority which could have been borrowed from the text had the form of its presentation more closely approximated that of the very text it was investigating, the theological problem has been faced. The writers of the text claimed to possess the divine intentionality in their selectivity and interpretation of what was recorded. Consequently, if biblical theology does not aim at reproducing the author's truth-intentions in its general theological shape and content, then that generation of interpreters will necessarily suffer a corresponding loss of authority from that word and a demise of confidence from their theological descendants.

But can such a center be identified from the texts themselves? For some, this may just be a further example of another modern

"abstract divining rod" by which the OT is forced to yield some pleasant (or even not-so-pleasant) theological payload. It is one thing to wholeheartedly condemn all attempts to impose a key or system over the OT, but it is another to *inductively* derive such a core from the testament itself. This is precisely where most OT theologies have been wrecked. In an attempt to steer between the Charybdis of chronological ordering of the canon (which, as we have seen, often sadly resulted in nothing more than a purely descriptive treatment) and the Scylla of a topical arrangement (which also unfortunately simply adopted the categories of philosophy, systematic theology, or some system of covenants and dispensations), it frequently has suffered shipwreck on one or the other extreme. How can a discipline which by name and definition searches for the pattern, plan, person, and meaning of the record settle for a purely descriptive classification of the information and facts in the text? If this discipline is merely a descriptive science, should it be called "theology"? Should not the definition of biblical theology be closely linked with the *nature* of the Bible?⁶ On the other hand, how could it take normative categories *ab extra* from systematics and use these to unfold the pattern of meanings according to the canon's own way of saying things? Must not the particular purpose of every narrative and proposition in the Bible be understood first in the light that it contributes to the whole or total purpose and message?

But does a fair reading of the text lead one to such alleged single purpose? Ever since the second half of the eighteenth century, men of the Enlightenment and their intellectual descendants have found themselves compelled as men making decisions in research to press the case for the Scripture's multiplicity, variegation, and diversity. By and large, no internal coherence was possible since, in their estimation, the observed tensions amounted to contradictions. The same opinion continues to the present moment even in NT theology.⁷

More recently in OT studies, the prestigious voices of G. Ernest Wright and Gerhard von Rad have added their weight to a rising chorus that has decided that there is no unifying center to the OT. G. E. Wright rules out any single theme on the grounds that it would not be "sufficiently comprehensive to include within it all the vari-

⁶A. A. Anderson, "Old Testament Theology and Its Methods," *Promise and Fulfillment*, ed. F. E. Bruce (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), p. 8.

⁷E. Käsemann, "The Problem of a New Testament Theology," *New Testament Studies* 19(1973): 242; W. G. Kimmel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), pp. 15-17.

Definition and Method

ety of viewpoint."⁸ Von Rad, no less definite, asserts that the OT "has no focal point such as is found in the New."⁹ Interestingly enough, as already noted above, even the NT assurance has collapsed and also followed the lead of the OT field.

Gerhard Hasel has also joined in this denial saying that the biblical theologian "cannot and must not use a concept, fundamental idea, or formula as a principle for the systematic ordering and arranging of the OT kerygmatic message and as a key that determines from the start how he will present the content of the OT testimony."¹⁰ However, he does freely acknowledge that "the final aim of OT theology is to demonstrate whether or not there is an inner unity that binds together the various theologies and longitudinal themes, concepts, and motifs"¹¹ even though it is a "hidden inner unity."¹²

Still, the issue must be pressed: Is the unity all that opaque? Were the authors of Scripture merely diffident or even ignorant of any divine master plan behind the course of human events, authorial selectivity of what was to be included or excluded, and the claims for supramundane evaluations of what was recorded? Immediately, some will protest that this prematurely raises the dogmatic consideration as to whether God did, as a matter of fact, reveal Himself in human writings. And we concede the point that this could be construed in that light. However, we wish only to establish at this point that the writers *claimed* (whether we concur here or not is not the issue) that they felt themselves to be under a divine imperative. They were under a holy obligation to speak what was often contrary to their own personal interests and wishes (cf. Jeremiah's agony of soul in this regard); but speak they must.

What is more, not only does a fair representation of their claim attribute the content and selection of what they record to God, but it contains numerous patent and latent references to an accumulation of both promises and threats and persons, and programs which

⁸G. Ernest Wright, "The Theological Study of the Bible," *Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), p. 983.

⁹Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 2:362.

¹⁰Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 62. See also his study, "The Problem of the Center in the Old Testament Theology Debate," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 86(1974): 65-82.

¹¹Hasel, *Old Testament*, p. 93. Page H. Kelley came to the same conclusion: "The search for a unifying theme should be regarded as a valid one, else the Old Testament would be reduced to a collection of unrelated literary fragments, Israel's Tabernacle God." *Review and Expositor* 67(1970): 486.

¹²Hasel, *Old Testament*, p. 93.

preceded them. Further, they claim to be both in a direct succession to these earlier words and contributors in their further development of both the fulfillment and the enlarged promise for the future!

What, then, was the medium through which these claims were made known, and why has the scholarly community all of a sudden soured on the feasibility of finding such a unity if such a claim was consciously transmitted as argued here? Could such a recorded biblical history be the source of theological meaning and unification?

HISTORY AS THE MEDIUM OF MEANING

Up until the decade of the seventies, the principle which was held with greatest reverence among most biblical theologians was that history was the chief medium of divine revelation in the OT.¹³ What could be known of God was to be known primarily through history.

By this choice, OT theologians could, so they hoped, set off by way of contrast Israel's uniqueness from the neighboring peoples of the ancient Near East which invested the natural world with myriads of divine powers. They could also, if all went according to their expectations, bypass the *embarrassment of the classical view* that claimed revelation was to be located in the words of Scripture.¹⁴

Surprising as it may seem, it was not until 1967 that the basis for the oft-repeated assurance that history was the chief—indeed almost the only—medium of divine revelation was finally subjected to a thorough analysis in the light of the Bible's claims as over against those of the comparative material from the ancient Near East. It was Bertil Albrektson who did this in his book *History and the Gods*. To be sure, James Barr had already delivered a vigorous challenge to this new axiom of biblical theology in his 1962 inaugural address,¹⁵ claiming that verbal revelation had just as much a right to occupy the center of the theological stage as did history. It was only apologetically more convenient to quietly delete the propositional part of the biblical record from public attention, complained Barr. Even apart from this important neglect of the Bible's own system of meanings, it turned out that revelation was not centered in real history after all,

¹³G. E. Wright, *The God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM, 1952), p. 13; Vriezen, *Outline*, p. 189.

¹⁴J. Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), p. 62ff.

¹⁵James Barr, "Revelation Through History in the Old Testament and Modern Thought," *Interpretation* 17(1963): 193-205.

i.e., events as they "actually" or "really" happened. Instead, the arena of God's action in scholarly reconstruction resulted in something less real than events which occur in space and time; but, as if to compensate for that loss, we were assured that they were "kerygmatically" more useful!

It was von Rad, more than anyone else, who sharpened a contrast between the two versions of Israel's history. For him, there were "no *bruta facta* at all [in the OT]; we have history only in the form of interpretation, only in reflection."¹⁶ Now there were two types of history: the one obtained from the reconstructions of the modern historico-critical method, the other from Israel's credal confessions supplied from the traditio-historical method. The former yielded the "critically assured minimum" while the second tended "towards a theological maximum."¹⁷

In this dichotomy, the old ghost of Immanuel Kant was still haunting academia. Von Rad, like his predecessor in 1926, Eissfeldt,¹⁸ had managed to divide reality into two parts: there was the phenomenal world of the past (available to us from historico-critical research), and there was the noumenal world of faith. Israel's faith, like biblical theology, was to have as its object, not the real acts of God in real history, but that which the people of ancient times confessed to have happened in spite of modern critical doubts about its factual status. These credal confessions (e.g., Deut. 26:16-19) about a minimal number of alleged events in Israel's past redemption were reenacted in the cult; and as such, the "re-telling" of these events constituted at once the kerygma and a theological interpretation of the OT. Handled in this way, this second version of Israel's history was naturally subject to various forms of adaptation, reinterpretation, reflection, and even actualization.¹⁹

In the meantime, another group of scholars was contending just as vigorously for the other alternative: faith in the historical events

¹⁶Gerhard von Rad, "Antwort auf Conzelmanns Fragen," *Evangelische Theologie* 24(1964): 393; *Old Testament Theology*, 2:416, as cited by Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Problem of History in Old Testament Theology," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 8(1970): 29, to whom I am indebted in several places in this section for his fine analysis. He, in turn, acknowledged the incisive analysis of Martin Honecker, "Zum Verständnis der Geschichte in Gerhard von Rad's Theologie des Alten Testament," *Evangelische Theologie* 23(1963); cf. Hasel, *Old Testament*, chap. II.

¹⁷Von Rad, *Theology*, 1:108.

¹⁸Otto Eissfeldt, "Israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte und alttestamentliche Theologie," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 44(1926): 1ff.

¹⁹Hasel, "Problem," p. 34, for documentation in von Rad.

reconstructed by source criticism. Franz Hesse²⁰ rejected von Rad's case for making the confessional level of history the object of faith. How could such erroneous history be the object of real faith? he queried. Faith must rest on what happened, he concluded, and only modern historico-criticism can tell us what actually took place and did not take place in the OT tradition.

But which historico-critical theory? There were at least three available: the so-called Baltimore School of William Foxwell Albright and John Bright; the A. Alt and Martin Noth axis; and G. E. Mendenhall of the University of Michigan. Especially critical were the assessments of these three schools of the "historical minimum" of the prepatristal through the conquest eras. There was no scientific history of Israel to be had—especially on the basis of the premises found in the historico-critical method.

Roland de Vaux also vigorously disagreed with von Rad's locating the object of Israel's faith and ours in a subjective and often fallible estimate of history. His challenge was direct: either the interpretation of history offered is true and originates from God, or it is not worthy of Israel's faith and ours. Further, such a view not only is unworthy of our attention, it is devastating in that it attacks the foundation of all faith: "the truthfulness of God."²¹

De Vaux's solution, like Wolfhart Pannenberg's argument, is to stress the "internal" or "intrinsic" connection²² or unity of events and their meanings.²³ For de Vaux, the connection was in the God who ordered both the events and interpretations. Pannenberg, on the other hand, stressed the "context" of the original happening with its accompanying interpretation.

To the extent that these two men insisted on the legitimacy and the necessity that the connection of history and its canonical significance be the proper starting point for biblical theology, we concur. It was precisely this original unity of the historical events with their attached meanings in the text which provided the possibility for overcoming the post-Kantian dualism and the positivistic tendencies of modern historiography. Not only had new canons of history and historiography which were antithetical in their premises to the whole Christian faith appeared, but a tyranny of the particular (in its

²⁰Cited by Hasel, *Old Testament*, pp. 31-34.

²¹Roland de Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, trans. Damian McHugh (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), p. 57.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 58.

²³Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Revelation of God in Jesus Christ," *Theology as History: New Frontiers in Theology* 3(1967): 127.

isolation from the whole) had also arisen as a supporting pre-occupation.

Events, facts, or statements were viewed in their individuality, uniqueness, and separation from their contribution to the totality or the multiplicity of the whole context or situation. Even if the event was retained in its wholeness (which was rare), the attached words were neatly cut off from the happening.

It was here, more than anywhere else, that the unity of the Bible was lost. Rather than starting with the organization and plan claimed by the canonical writers themselves, a principle of natural development or of a Hegelian dialectic was laid over the texts. When the results turned out to be disappointingly sterile in theology—even to the most resolute of all of the modern historiographers—the resulting vacuum was filled with new categories of “history,” existentialism, or secularity.

Unless biblical theology is freed from the tyranny of the particular and the shackles of an imposed philosophical-historiographical grid of modernity which takes precedence over the text, no hope remains for any theology of the OT. Neither the so-called scientifically assured minimum nor the theologically devised maximum will take us anywhere. Both systems, whether in the name of objectivity or of faith, vaunt themselves over the texts which have a deserved right, whether it is among those claiming inspiration or not, to be first heard on their own terms and in their own canonical and contextual wholeness. Then when any measuring devices of truth, actualism or validity of interpretation are applied (as they must) to the total contexts (which is another must), they should not be those which provincially reflect the parochial interests of a generation which has an axe to grind for or against any special outlook on life. Instead, all criteria should approach the issue in a similar fashion to the American system of jurisprudence: a text is innocent until proven guilty by known data provided by sources whose truthfulness on those points can be demonstrated or which share the same general area of contemporaneity as the texts under investigation and whose performance record of producing reliable data has been good.

Given this approach, history can again be consulted in the wholeness of its context of the times and the context of its attached interpretation. In this way, history can conceivably again be a medium of meaning along with unity of its context.

Did biblical history exhibit a divine plan then? Or must we once again sink into generalities about the importance of history without the benefit of a good inductive study of the terminology or pattern of thought claimed by the texts?

Fortunately, Bertil Albrektson has made a preliminary study of the Hebrew terms connected with a divine plan in history.²⁴ In his survey he found that there were ten passages where *‘ēṣāh* (usually translated “counsel,” “advice,” but also meaning in these passages “purpose” or “plan”) was used in a nominal verbal form. They are Psalms 33:10-11; 106:13; Proverbs 19:21; Isaiah 5:19; 14:24-27; 19:17; 25:1; 46:10; Jeremiah 49:20; 50:45; and Micah 4:12. In two other passages, *maḥṣābāh* (“thought,” “purpose”) is used for the divine plan: Jeremiah 29:11; 51:29.

In addition to these two terms, two more are added by Albrektson. They are *m’zimmāh* (“a hostile plan”) in Job 42:2; Jeremiah 23:20; 30:24; 51:11 and *derek* (“way,” “path”) in Psalm 103:7; cf. Exodus 33:13; Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 18:31; Isaiah 55:8-9; 58:2.

When Albrektson completed this survey, he disappointingly concluded that he found no single divine intention as would demonstrate that God has a fixed plan for the history of Israel and/or the nations from one end of time to the other. For him, the words are imprecise and wide ranging in that they refer to a number of divine intentions but not to one single plan. What is more, distribution of the passages is rather limited since they seem to group themselves around Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah, and the Psalms.²⁵

Now we agree in part, most of these passages are an expression of an individual application of God’s intention to a particular situation in Israel or the nations. But how can such a disclaimer be made for a text like Micah 4:12? Does not the prophet clearly state that the pagan nations do not know Yahweh’s thoughts; they do not understand His plan? Is this not in the context of a plan which involves many nations simultaneously? Likewise, in Psalm 33:10 the “counsel [plan] of the nations” is set in juxtaposition to Yahweh’s plan which “stands forever” and “from generation to generation” (v. 11). Surely this type of speaking commits the writer to claiming that God does have some long-range planning which counters the moves and planning of the total world community.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of Albrektson’s line of argumentation is that it adheres too closely to a lexicographical approach. While he does acknowledge that the *matter* could still be present even when the *word* for a plan was not, he does not discuss one of the grandest claims of all made in Isaiah 40 and the following chapters. The divine challenge repeatedly comes: “Who is like Me?”

²⁴Albrektson, *History and the Gods*, pp. 68-77.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 76-77.

Who declared it from the beginning so that we might know, or ahead of time so that we might say, he was right!" (Isa. 40:25; 41:26-28; 42:9; 44:7-8, 26-28; 45:21; 46:10-11; 48:3-6).

Even more important is the connection between the claim of God to have already announced, long before anything happened, the course of events from start to finish and the fact that all this was in accordance with His "plan" and "purpose." The context which obviously and explicitly unites these two themes is Isaiah 46:9-11: "I am God . . . who declares the end from the beginning . . . who says, My plan shall stand, also, I will accomplish all My purpose [note singular 'purpose'] . . . I have formulated it, indeed, I will accomplish it." God is willing to stake, as it were, His whole character and claim to be the one unique God on the fact that He is able to speak and declare the future. The pagan's god can do neither. Furthermore, God's announcements are not random ad lib comments on this or that, here and there. They follow a premeditated plan which encompasses the start and finish of the parts and the whole! All will take place as He has said.

Such talk, apart from any considerations of a unified center for OT theology, takes us back to the original obstacle for most modern biblical scholars: prediction! Indeed, Albrektson verges on saying as much when he introduces the key verse in Genesis 12:3. For him the choice is clear: Does Yahweh here survey past history from the aspect of the achieved result where "all nations of the earth bless themselves"? Or does Yahweh project a divine plan for events yet to come all within a universalistic framework where "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed?"²⁶ The issue revolves around the translation of the crucial word *nib'r kû*. We concur: the results of this study cannot be of a small interest to the whole progress of OT theology.

Now we have already anticipated this point by arguing in the last chapter that the passive sense is not only possible ("all nations shall be blessed") but is the required translation which fits the single truth-intention of the author. Albrektson freely conceded that if the passive translation were correct—and he recognized it did carry a great deal of contemporary support from O. Procksch, S. R. Driver, G. von Rad, and H. W. Wolff—then the passage did claim that God had a plan in which Abraham was selected as His instrument of divine blessing and by which He would reach all the nations of the earth.²⁷

However, many interpreters assume that the reflexive transla-

²⁶Ibid., p. 78.

²⁷Ibid., p. 79.

tion ("all nations shall bless themselves") is to be preferred since the same message as the passive usages of Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 28:14 is given in the *hithpael* form of the verb in 22:18 and 26:4. The known *hithpael*, so it is argued, will set the range of meanings for the disputed *niphal*. But such a procedure is contested here. In addition to the linguistic arguments in chapter 1, it is of more than passing interest that we note also the passive rendering of the Septuagint text and that of Acts 2:25 and Galatians 3:8, which follow the Septuagint. Furthermore, Genesis 12:2 had said that "he" (i.e., Abraham or "it," the nation) "would be a blessing"; it was left to verse 3 to say to whom and how.

Perhaps the most balanced assessment of Genesis 12:2-3 is to be found in C. von Orelli's work on prophecy and God's kingdom.

First of all (vv. 2,3) the divine blessing is attached to Abraham's person, of whom it is said expressly *weh'yêh b'râkâh* ["and he shall be a blessing"] which by no means signifies merely that he himself will be blessed (Hitzig), or that his name will be a formula of blessing, but extols him as the medium and source of divine blessing (cf. Prov. 11:25: *nephesh b'râkâh*, a soul that finds pleasure in blessing, from which accordingly, streams of blessing to flow). How Abraham himself, in virtue of his special relation to God, was a mediator of blessing to those about him, is shown in Gen. 20:7; that his people in the same way were to convey the divine blessing, the dispensation of God's grace to the whole world, see in Isa. 19:24; Zech. 8:13. In the present passage the import of the brief saying is expounded in verse 3, according to which God's relation to men depends on their attitude to Abraham (cf. 20:7), and the Lord will deal well with those who wish well to him and do homage to the divine grace revealing itself in him; and, on the other hand, will make him feel His displeasure who despises and scorns one whom God has blessed. The singular number here is significant. It can only be single-handed sinners who so misunderstand one who is a source of blessing to all about him, as to condemn and hate him, and in him his God. The world, as a whole, will not withhold homage, and will therefore enjoy the benefit of this source of blessing . . . We are certainly of the opinion that the *niphal* here [v. 3] must have a meaning of its own, distinct from the *hithpael* (so also Tuch, G. Baur, Hengstenberg, Keil, Kautzsch, etc.). In distinction from the *piel* (48:20) and *hithpael*, it expresses more the *objective experience* of the divine blessing. Only, even where the *hithpael* is used, the significant position of the word at the end of the promise requires even there more than a mere ceremonial honour is meant. The distinction therefore is not material. The act of blessing is no mere formality, for which reason also the name of God or of a man used in it is of high importance. The former shows *from whom* the highest good is to be expected, the latter in *whom* it is to be found, and through whose mediation it may be attained. Therefore it is not something

trifling that is affirmed, even in the reflexive sense. Not merely will Abraham's good fortune be proverbial throughout the world, but all nations of the earth will see that in Abraham the highest good is to be found; and thus *he will be the priestly mediator of salvation between God and the world*, since Abraham's blessing will bring to those farthest off the knowledge of the true God, and in praying for such blessing they will use the name of Abraham who prevailed with God. They would not do the latter [pray for blessing] (hithpa'el), *unless the blessing and virtue of his person and name* had been attested to them (niph'al) [italics ours].²⁸

It is not for us to protest over either the text's universalism so early in the history of revelation or over the announced futurity of its development. Only philosophical and historico-critical biases could subvert the obvious intention of the author on both of these scores. Again, let us take the text on its own terms and assume it is innocent until *proven* guilty. Nothing in the text implies that Genesis 12:2-3 and its parallels are "retrojections" from the days of blessing under David and Solomon as H. Gunkel, W. Wolff, and others would have it. On the contrary, David himself expressed surprise and confused delight when he was told that he and his sons were to stand in a direct line with this earlier blessing (2 Sam. 7:18-20). In his prayer of response, he referred to the promise given to the patriarchs and repeated in Deuteronomy so as to show that this was already accepted as part of the ancient word of revelation. It was not a contemporary "retrojection" or reevaluation of the faith of the ancient fathers!

Therefore, we respectfully submit that just where Albrectson finally turned down the possibility that there might be a unifying plan of God which governed history and the string of authorial estimates as to what these things meant, there the plan of God was revealed. It was the plan, not only for history, but for all of biblical theology.

CANONICAL PRECEDENCE FOR A CENTER

OT theologians have missed the only way for safe passage through these treacherous waters. That way must be an *inductively* derived theme, key, or organizing pattern which the successive writers of the OT overtly recognized and consciously supplemented in the progressive unfolding of events and interpretation in the OT. If amidst all the variety and multiplicity of the text there does, as we

²⁸C. von Orelli, *The Old Testament Prophecy of the Consummation of God's Kingdom Traced in Its Historical Development*, trans. J. J. Banks (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), pp. 107-8.

contend, exist an eye to this storm of activity, it must be *textually* demonstrated that it is the canon's own "starting point" and *textually* reconfirmed in the canon's united witness that it is its own ubiquitous concern, central hope, and constant measure of what was theologically significant or normative!

Such a textually derived center, what the NT eventually was to call the "promise" (*epangelia*), was known in the OT under a constellation of terms. The earliest such expression was "blessing." It was God's first gift to the fish, fowl (Gen. 1:22), and then to mankind (v. 28). -

For men, it involved more than the divine gift of proliferation and "dominion-having." The same word also marked the immediacy whereby all the nations of the earth could prosper spiritually through the mediatorship of Abraham and his seed: this, too, was part of the "blessing." Obviously, pride of place must be given to this term as the first to signify the plan of God.

But there were other terms. McCurley²⁹ counted over thirty examples where the verb *ḏibber* (usually translated "to speak") meant "to promise." The promised items included (1) the land (Exod. 12:25; Deut. 9:28; 12:20; 19:8; 27:3; Josh. 23:5,10); (2) blessing (Deut. 1:11; 15:6); (3) multiplication of God's possession, Israel (Deut. 6:3; 26:18); (4) rest (Josh. 22:4; 1 Kings 8:56); (5) all good things (Josh. 23:15); and (6) a Davidic dynasty and throne (2 Sam. 7:28; 1 Kings 2:24; 8:20,24-25; 1 Chron. 17:26; 2 Chron. 6:15-16; Jer. 33:14). Also note the noun *dābār* ("promise") in 1 Kings 8:56 and Psalm 105:42.

To these "promises" God added His "pledge" or "oath," thus making the immediate word of blessing and the future word of promise doubly secure. Men now had the divine word and a divine oath on top of that word (see Gen. 22; 26:3; Deut. 8:7; 1 Chron. 16:15-18; Ps. 105:9; Jer. 11:5).³⁰

The case for this inductively derived center is even more wide-ranging than the lexicographical or vocabulary approach traced so far. It also embraced several epitomizing formulae which summarized that central action of God in a succinct phrase or two. Such was what we have called the tripartite formula of the promise. This formula became the great hallmark of all biblical theology in both testaments. The first part of the formula was given in Genesis 17:7-8 and 28:21, viz., "I will be a God to you and to your descendants after

²⁹Foster R. McCurley, Jr., "The Christian and the Old Testament Promise," *Lutheran Quarterly* 22 (1970): 401-10, esp. p. 402, n. 2.

³⁰Gene M. Tucker, "Covenant Forms and Contract Forms," *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): esp. pp. 487-503, for the use of "oath" with promise.

that God Himself would freely do or be something for all men, nations, and nature, generally.

Consequently, the revelatory event and/or declaration was frequently an immediate "blessing" as well as a promissory "word" or "pledge" that God would work in the future or had already worked in some given event or situation. God had done so in a way that significance had been given to man's present history and by this, simultaneously to future generations, also.

KEY OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES ON THE PROMISE

The two pivotal characters were, no doubt, Abraham and David. Their respective covenants are initially recorded in Genesis 12:1-3 and 2 Samuel 7:11-16 (cf. 1 Chron. 17:10-14). The Abrahamic promise and blessing immediately captured the attention of that original audience, as it did all subsequent readers, by the exalted nature of its content and the sheer repetition of its provision in Genesis 12:50. Likewise, the Davidic promise became the bright hope in most of the writing prophets and the chronicler.

Perhaps it is not too much to point also to a prophetic consensus on the "New covenant" announced most prominently in Jeremiah 31:31-34. If one takes into account the dozen-and-a-half references to the same covenant elsewhere in Jeremiah and the other prophets under such rubrics as the "everlasting covenant," the "new heart and new spirit," "covenant of peace," or just "My covenant," then the expectation of a new work of God along the lines of the Abrahamic-Davidic covenant is broadly based.³² As if to underline the importance already placed in the New covenant, Hebrews 8 and 10 quote it, and it becomes the longest OT passage quoted in the NT.

Here, it would appear, the modern consensus ends. But any faithful discussion of the canon's own view of things would necessarily include a discussion of key passages or central moments in the history of revelation as indicated by the writers of Scripture. Especially of seminal importance are Genesis 3:15; 9:25-27; and 12:1-3.

Genesis 3:15

There can be no doubt that this passage was intended as a pivotal interpretation on the first human crisis. Far beyond God's cursing "the serpent" (always with the article and thus, no doubt,

³²Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:34," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 15(1972): 14, nn. 14-17.

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you." When Israel approached the eve of nationhood, again God repeated this word and added a second part, "I will take you for My people" (Exod. 6:7). Thus Israel became God's "son," His "firstborn" (Exod. 4:22), "a distinctive treasure" (Exod. 19:5-6). Finally, the third part was added in Exodus 29:45-46 in connection with the construction of the tabernacle: "I will dwell in the midst of you." There it was: "I will be your God; you shall be My people, and I will dwell in the midst of you." It was to be repeated in part or in full in Leviticus 11:45; 22:33; 25:38; 26:12,44,45; Numbers 15:41; Deuteronomy 4:20; 29:12-13; et. al. Later it appeared in Jeremiah 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1,33; 32:38; Ezekiel 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:27; Zechariah 8:8; 13:9; and in the NT in 2 Corinthians 6:16 and Revelation 21:3-7.

Another formula, found in Genesis 15:7, "I am Yahweh who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans," was matched by an even greater work of redemption: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (found almost 125 times in the OT). Still another formula of self-prediction was, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." All such formulae stress a continuity between the past, present, and future. They are parts of God's single ongoing plan.

As the record progressed, an accumulation of various metaphors and technical terms began to emerge. Many of these focused around the Davidic descendant. He was the "Seed," "Branch," "Servant," "Stone," "Root," "Lion," etc.³¹ More often than not, the text had a backward glance to previous contexts which contained parts of the same metaphors and technical terms.

Nevertheless, neither the vocabulary nor the formulae and technical terms by themselves would make the case for a unified plan to the entirety of the OT progress of theology. The accent must ultimately fall where it fell for the writers themselves—on a network of interlocking moments in history made significant because of their content, free allusions to one another, and their organic unity. The focus of the record fell on the *content* and *recipients* of God's numerous covenants. The content remained epigenetically constant, i.e., there was a growth—even a sporadic growth from some points of view—as time went on around a fixed core that contributed vitality and meaning to the whole emerging mass. The content was a divine "blessing," a "given word," a "declaration," a "pledge," or "oath"

³¹Dennis C. Duling, "The Promise to David and Their Entrance into Christianity—Nailing Down a Likely Hypothesis," *New Testament Studies* 20(1974): 55-77.

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referring to a title) "above"³³ all cattle and all the beasts of the field and consigning his fate to "on your belly you shall go" and "dust shall you eat"³⁴ was the divinely implanted hostility: "I will put enmity"—an enmity between the serpent and the woman—"between your seed and her seed." Then comes the most important but also the most disputed passage of all: "He [not 'it'] shall crush to pieces your head, and you shall crush His [not 'its'] heel."

Now clearly the pronoun translated "he" or "it" ("she" in one translation!) is a masculine singular independent personal pronoun in Hebrew. But the problem comes from the fact that Hebrew employs a grammatical gender agreeing with its masculine antecedent, "seed" (*zera'*) whereas English employs the natural gender. The contention, therefore, is that the only proper translation of Hebrew *hū* would be "it" or "they." That is the question then: Are the "seed" and "he" collective, or is either singular?

The question, we contend, is misdirected, especially if the divine intention deliberately wished to designate the collective notion which included a personal unity in a single person who was to obtain victory for the whole group he represented. That such an interpretation is not a Christian retrojection from a NT *peshet* or midrash can be seen in the pre-Christian Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Greek boldly used the masculine independent pronoun *autos*, which failed to agree with the Greek neuter antecedent "seed" (*sperma*). R. A. Martin, in a brilliant note on this phenomena, concluded that of the 103 times where the Hebrew masculine pronoun is used in Genesis, "in none of the instances where the translator has translated literally does he do violence to agreement in Greek between the pronoun and its antecedent, except here in Genesis 3:15."³⁵ Far from being a mere coincidence or some sort of oversight, Martin argues that the quality of the Greek translation of the Pentateuch is much more carefully done in comparison to

³³Hebrew *min* is a particle of distinction and eminence, not a partitive ("any of the cattle"); rather, it is the comparative form ("above the cattle"). In this curse, "the serpent" is distinguished from other divine creations, viz., the animals, and marked off for greater rebuke. The same particle is seen in Judges 5:24: "Blessed above women" (*minnāšim*)—blessed like no other woman (cf. Deut. 33:24).

³⁴A reference not to the diet and locomotion of "the serpent" but of his humiliation and subjugation (cf. Ps. 72:9; Isa. 49:23; Mic. 7:17). Creeping on the belly, i.e., the posture of the serpent, came to be regarded as contemptible (Gen. 49:17; Job 20:14, 16; Ps. 140:3; Isa. 59:5). Also, "to eat dust" equaled "to descend to the grave" in Descent of Ishar 5:8; also, note Amarna E.A. 100:36. Consider that God had already made "creeping things" in His creation and had pronounced them "good."

³⁵R. A. Martin, "The Earliest Messianic Interpretation of Genesis 3:15," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84(1965): 427.

other books or sections. What is more important, in other instances where the same type of choice between literalness and agreement of the antecedent and its pronoun occurred in Genesis, the translator declined the opportunity to translate literally (as he did in Gen. 3:15). Instead, he freely used the necessary feminine or neuter pronoun—even when the Hebrew pronoun required a masculine—to agree with its grammatical antecedent. That makes the LXX choice to break this rule in Genesis 3:15 extremely impressive—especially when one considers the fact that the LXX was a third or second century B.C. translation.

But what of the Hebrew author's intention? The case for a singular unity of the collective group of descendants is strengthened by the singular suffix which refers to the seed's head, *hū' y'šūpkā rōš*: "He shall crush *your* [sg.] head." Further, if we understand the author's phrase in Genesis 4:1, Eve thought she had just such a deliverer when she bore Cain. Said she, "I have gotten a man, *even the Lord*." The Hebrew reads *'et YHWH*. Translating the particle as "with" doesn't make too much sense. Hence it must be a record, even as Luther seems to argue in his translation, of the mistaken hope of Eve that she had received immediate relief from her punishment with the birth of Cain.

Whatever the decision on Genesis 4:1 brings (and it is by no means decisive), it was plain from the subsequent history of revelation to Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants that a representative child continued to be both God's visible guarantee for the present and a pledge for the future. Also, he was representative of the interests and spiritual and material fortunes of the whole lot who were joined to him.

Genesis 9:25-27

We find the following comments of von Orelli³⁶ on this passage full of honest exegetical sense. Since our generation has for the most part lost contact with such exegetical methodology, we shall quote extensively from several sections of his treatment:

Instead of blessing Shem himself, the aged father [Noah], with prophetic glance at Shem's future salvation blesses (...) in the sense of praising ... [when] it has God for its object ... Yahveh, the God of Shem, whom he sees in intimate union with Shem. The oracle of blessing is thus turned into praise of Him who is the source of blessing, and has proved Himself such. Shem's highest happiness is that he has this God for his God. Here, for the first time, as Luther notes, we find the genitival combination common

³⁶C. von Orelli, *Old Testament Prophecy*, p. 98ff.

afterwards: *God of a man, nation, etc.* For when humanity parts into different branches, the universal Deity also is specialized. To one portion of humanity the true, living God stands in a relation of mutual possession . . .

But the second hemistich *w'yiškōn b'āhōlē šēm* ["And he shall dwell in the tents of Shem"] is difficult. The chief question in dispute is, who is to be considered the subject of *yiškōn* ["dwell"]. Among moderns, von Hoffmann, Baumgarten, H. Schultz, after the example of Onkelos and other Jewish expositors, and also Theodore, have taken *God* as the subject, which would give an attractive and highly significant sense: Japhet gains the wide world, but Shem's distinction consists in this, that God dwells in his midst. *Škēn* is used specially of the dwelling of God (Num. 35:34). By the later Jewish theologians, His gracious presence is called directly the *Š'kināh*, a reminiscence of Onkelos. Nor is there any weight in the objection usually urged against this interpretation, that the parallelism requires Japhet as the subject in this verse since Shem has been dismissed in the preceding one; for, just as the curse on Canaan recurs, so the blessing on Shem may recur, and we should thus obtain the pleasing arrangement: 1. Curse on Canaan; 2. Blessing of firstborn Shem and its antithesis in the curse of Canaan; 3. The second blessing on the middle brother, with reminiscences of the higher blessing on the first and the curse on the third.

At this point, von Orelli falters in our judgment. He continues:

Nevertheless, the majority of ancient and modern expositors give up the reference of ["dwell"] to God, as it seems to us rightly. For it cannot be denied that in the first hemistich the emphasis lies on the repeated *ypt* ["Japhet" and "enlarge"], not on Elohim, on which account the harmony of style is best preserved by referring what follows to Japhet. An antithetical relation of the two clauses (*but He will dwell*) would of necessity have been noted in the language used. More especially we should expect to find the name Yahveh, seeing that God dwells in Shem's tents as Yahveh. The plural designation of place would also be strange, since God elsewhere always dwells in his tent; yet this might perhaps be explained by the indefinite generality of the oracle.

However, von Orelli, for all the propriety of these excellent questions, is also now in an exegetical impasse, for what could it mean to have Japhet dwelling in Shem's tents? He struggled with the options in this manner:

But supposing Japhet to be taken as the subject, his dwelling "in the tents of Shem" makes no less difficulty. Some, not without anti-Jewish tendency, have after Justin M. (c. Tryp. 139) understood a hostile occupation of the Shemitic country, which would introduce a quite incomprehensible infringement of Shem's birthright-blessing . . . The dwelling of this race in the tents of the

former seems to give the impression, if not of conquest, still of a crowding inconvenient to both in strange contrast with the ["enlargement"]. The use of the phrase to denote peaceful, hospitable relation cannot be proved . . . Nor does the uniform refrain, in which the *lamō*, ["to him," or "his slave"] was to be taken as a singular, favour any reference to Shem in this phrase.

Finally, von Orelli considers J. D. Michaelis's handling of *Shem* as an appellative: "*renowned tents*" instead of "tents of Shem." But this von Orelli also rejects because of the ambiguity it would cause with the use of the proper name in the preceding verse. He weakly concludes, after beginning so well, that Hebrew proverbs are fond of assonance, hence the "God of Shem" and "the tents of Shem" echo very similar sounds in Hebrew!

On balance, of the two options for the subject of "dwell," it would seem preferable to take the subject of the previous stich: Elohim. This is the most logical grammatical position to take. Certainly Japhet as subject makes very little sense at all, and the use of *Shem* as an appellative appears as a desperation move. The objections raised to this view have all been anticipated by what von Orelli had said prior to listing his objections except for his expectation that Yahveh should have been the subject of "dwell" and not Elohim. But in defense of Elohim, we can only note that the full revelation of the "tabernacling" or "dwelling" and the disclosure of the nature or character of Elohim as Yahveh had to wait for the Mosaic revelation of Exodus 6 and 29.

Genesis 12:1-3

Since we have already discussed the content and the importance of that disputed phrase "in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed," we might simply add here that the word has an obvious resumptive quality about it. The "seed" is still at the center of its focus while it adds many new features. The fact that it is repeated and renewed so frequently in Genesis 13, 15, 17, 22, 24, 26, and 28 also constitutes another reason why OT theologians should find it to be of great significance.

The passages of 2 Samuel 7 and Jeremiah 31 will be discussed later on, but for now the rudimentary points that go into the making up of the single plan of God have been made. The divine promise pointed to a seed, a race, a family, a man, a land, and a blessing of universal proportions—all guaranteed, according to Genesis 17, as being everlasting and eternal. In that purpose resides the single plan of God. In that single plan lies a capability of embracing as much variety and variegation as the progress of revelation and history can

engender. In that unity of goal and method unfolded a march of events which the writers described and in a series of interconnected interpretations they likewise boldly announced God's normative views on those events for that generation and those to come.

Chapter 3

The Development of an Outline for Old Testament Theology

An adequate treatment of the conceptual groupings of OT theology necessitates an awareness of the sequence of historical events in the life of Israel. Israel's theology—and ours—is rooted in history. Thus Hebrews 1:1-2 continued that sequence when it affirmed that "God, who in many and various ways had spoken to our fathers in the past by the prophets, had in these last days spoken to us in His Son."

Contrary to the prestigious opinion of Gerhard von Rad and his school, the OT did reflect on Israel's history according to a pre-announced principle of selectivity.¹ That principle by which historical incidents were included or rejected was the consistent prophetic statement: "Thus says the Lord."

This was far from being a mere syncretistic assimilator of traditions which mechanically or charismatically collated existing traditions and interpreted them in the light of the present day. Rather, there was a single principle, a single understanding of all revelation, which sorted things out for writers. It was God's revealed "promise"

¹Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 1:116ff.