



37958797

STATUS: PENDING 20071219

REQUEST DATE: 20071212

BORROWER: BTA

RENEWAL REQ:

LENDERS: MNA, MNA, *MNE, MNE, MNT

NEED BEFORE: 20071226

RECEIVE DATE:

NEW DUE DATE:

OCLC #: 1774838

SOURCE: ILLiad

DUE DATE:

SPCL MES:

CALL NUMBER:

LHR SUMMARY: 1-8:3; 12:2-(1971-1978; 1982-)

TITLE: Biblical theology bulletin.

ISSN: 0146-1079

ARTICLE: Roland Murphy: Once again 'the center of the OT'

VOL: 2001

NUM: 3

DATE: 2001

VERIFIED: OCLC

SHIP VIA: Ariel 140.88... SHIP TO: ILL/Bethel Seminary Library/3949 Bethel Drive
St. Paul, MN 55112 or Ariel 140.88.146.20

BILL TO: same

MAXCOST: 0.00

COPYRIGHT: CCL AFFILIATION: ATLA, CLIC, MTLA, MINITEX

ODYSSEY: 206.107.42.83/BTA

FAX: 651-638-6006

EMAIL: btill@bethel.edu

BORROW NOTES: IF NEGATIVE, PLEASE GIVE REASON. IF YOUR CHARGES EXCEED OUR MAXIMUM COST, PLEASE GIV...

PATRON: Ferris, Paul

LEND CHARGES:

SHIPPED DATE:

SHIP INSURANCE:

aviable

Once Again—The “Center” of the Old Testament

NOTICE: THIS MATERIAL
MAY BE PROTECTED BY
COPYRIGHT LAW.
(TITLE 17 U.S. CODE)

Roland E. Murphy

Abstract

The search for the “middle” of the Old Testament is ongoing, as it were a quest for the holy grail. Two more solutions have been proposed recently: Shekinah, a post-biblical term for divine dwelling or immanence, and “steadfast love” (*hesed*). This article critiques both and points to the paradox: the search fails, but it produces fruitful, if partial, insights.

The center has formed an interesting pivot of discussion in biblical circles over the last thirty years, especially in German scholarship. There seems to have been little or no concern over the *Mitte* (“middle” or “center”) of the New Testament. Rather, one spoke freely about the theology of Paul or of John, etc. The discussion has concentrated on the Old Testament, *die Mitte des Alten Testaments*, where it became a favorite subject for books and articles.

It is not immediately obvious why the question of the center should be raised specifically for the Old Testament, unless it is ultimately due to the dichotomy of Law and Gospel. The tripartite division of Jewish tradition into Law, Prophets, and Writings does not favor a midpoint, or at least has not led to a discussion of center, despite the importance of the Torah. The question becomes very complicated because it is addressed to a literature composed over several centuries and under significantly differing historical circumstances. A convenient recent summary of the situation is to be found by consulting the many references for “Centre for OT theology” in the index of the *CONCEPT* by J. Barr (1999: 708). There is no corresponding entry for the New Testament or for the entire Bible. This suggests that the search for the center is a particularly Christian issue. On the one hand, Jon Levenson (1993) has pointed to several reasons why Jews are not interested in a center, or specifically “biblical theology,” at least in the form it assumed in the last century. On the other, it was implicit in the Christian canon of the Bible from the beginning, once the Testaments were joined together in Christian belief. The problem was really at the heart of Marcion’s attempt to realign the Bible according to his view of Christian belief. But it was also felt by the patristic and medieval writers. Their preference for the allegorical and typological was one way of unifying the Testaments for themselves. This was never formulated as a search for the “center,” but it approaches the idea, and it came to be

expressed in the famous medieval distich of *Littera gesta docet* (Murphy 1998: 116). A sharper expression derived from Martin Luther: *was Christum treibet*.

I do not know who was the first to use the term *center*, but it is safe to say that the idea became dominant among both scholars and popularizers in the aftermath of the publication of W. Eichrodt’s *THEOLOGY* (1961–1967) with its emphasis on the covenant. Several “theologies” appeared, all of them proposing a center (or its equivalent) that differed from covenant, as can be seen usually in the title or subtitle of their works. For example, S. Terrien centered his interpretation on the idea of presence (1978), W. Zimmerli, on the name of God (1978), H.-D. Preuss on election/obligation (1991–1992), and many others chose various themes.

These few examples at least suggest how captivating the question of the center has been, even though it has not received an accepted answer. If the term *quest* is usually used to designate New Testament studies concerning Jesus, it can be easily transferred to the effort of scholars to determine the center of the Old Testament and its theology. The search has recently been continued by two scholars whose studies were quickly published in English. B. Janowski (2000) is explicit in his discussion of the center. H. Spieckermann (2000) approaches the question only indirectly by pursuing a well known Old Testament theme from a Christian point of view—a total biblical theology, embracing both Testaments.

Roland E. Murphy, S.T.D. (Catholic University of America), a member of the Carmelite Order, is George Washington Ivey Emeritus Professor of Biblical Studies at Duke University, now residing at Whitefriars Hall, Washington, DC 20017. His most recent book is *EXPERIENCING OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGE* (Hendrickson, 2001).

The Shekinah

Bernd Janowski (Tübingen University professor and editor of the prestigious *JAHRBUCH FÜR BIBLISCHE THEOLOGIE*) offers new factors to the discussion of biblical theology, especially the notion of divine indwelling or Shekinah (2000). He admits the ambiguity of “biblical theology”; does the phrase mean theology contained in the Bible (theology of the Bible) or theology that agrees with the Bible? He finds the views of J. Levenson (1993) fruitful, and he intends to propose a foundation for a dialogue with Judaism, mindful that the Tanakh or Old Testament remains the Bible of Judaism. First he makes the point that different trajectories have been followed in Judaism and Christianity. The Jewish canon found its “center” in the Torah (304), interpreted by the Prophets and the Writings, and its trajectory led to the Mishnah and Talmud. Christianity did not “christianize” the Old Testament; it simply placed it alongside its own Scripture. The Christian trajectory led to a continuation of the Old Testament into the New. He finds a “canonical continuity,” defined as “the entirety of all divine revelations that have, until now, been disclosed” (306). Such continuity is exemplified by the use of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 in Acts 8, and the use of the Psalms in the Passion narrative (Mark). He does not use the phrase, but this view seems to be very close to the traditional *sensus plenior*, or the meaning derived from reading a biblical text in the light of later revelation.

As for the relationship between the Testaments, Janowski recognizes that there is both continuity and discontinuity—but he stoutly affirms “one God of the two Testaments” (309). He deliberately chooses an example of continuity: the “Shekinah” or indwelling of God. The word does not occur in the Bible, but in Jewish tradition it indicates the divine presence. It comes from the biblical root *škn*, which “became in Priestly usage a technical theological term to designate the presence of the transcendent god in his sanctuary” (Cross: 245–46), and is derived from *miškan* (tent, tabernacle, and eventually Temple). In an earlier study (1987: 186–91) Janowski had argued that a special theology of the Lord’s presence with his people Israel emerges with the exile. With the Temple in ruins, pre-exilic Temple theology became Shekinah theology (divine presence among the people, not the Temple). This momentous change in mentality is reconstructed on the basis of the tenuous evidence in Exodus 29:43–45, Ezekiel 43:7–9, and the insert by a late deuteronomistic redactor in 1 Kings 6:11–13.

More important than the verb itself, however, are the nouns that indicate the presence of the Lord. It is the *Glory* of God in a cloud that Solomon describes in the

Temple (1 Kgs 8:11–13). In the Deuteronomistic tradition it is the *Name* that dwells there (e.g., Deut 14:23–24). Ezekiel sees the *Glory* of the Lord returning to the Temple, and he hears a voice giving out the consoling promise: “I will dwell [*škn*] among the Israelites forever” (Ezek 43:4–7). In the Hellenistic period the indwelling is marked by the divine birth of Wisdom, created before all else, and finding delight with human beings (Prov. 8:31). Then Woman Wisdom relates the command she receives from God to “pitch tent” (Sir 24:8, *kataskēnōson*) in Jacob/Israel. And it is from the holy tent that she ministers to the Lord (Sir 24:10).

Thus far, the development of the divine indwelling is well known in the biblical sources. In the New Testament it culminates in John 1:14 (Sir 24:8!) with the “pitching of a tent,” as the Logos takes up a special form of residence with the people. Janowski describes briefly the rabbinic version of the Shekinah theology as “a legitimate heir to the Shekinah tradition contained in the Old Testament” (315). That may very well be, but one must keep in mind that the term *Shekinah* is post-biblical, and in the Bible the divine presence is expressed by several terms, such as *Name* or *Glory*.

Moreover, the importance of Shekinah theology in rabbinic sources is exceedingly modest when compared with the role of Torah theology in the Hebrew Bible. The Shekinah does not link Christianity with rabbinic Judaism. Rather, Christian belief is linked to the Old Testament data, to the general theme of the divine indwelling. On the one hand continuity exists between the Old Testament and later Jewish tradition. On the other hand there is continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. But one cannot claim that “Christianity’s specific intensification [what is meant is the Incarnation] grows on the soil of Judaism” (316). Rather, it grows on the soil of the promises of the Old Testament, not on rabbinic sources. It receives a particular emphasis in the wisdom literature (Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon, both excluded from the Tanak), which Christianity took to itself.

Perhaps the most striking element in Janowski’s view is his insistence on a center of the Old Testament, described as appearing to be “as essential for Christian theology as it appears to be problematic for Judaism” (316). He accounts for the failure of scholars to find a center by dismissing the geometrical metaphor. Instead, the Old Testament in its theological themes witnesses to “the material and effective center of an event” that lies beyond the social, political, and religious diversity. This central biblical event is contained in the formula, “God’s presence and activity in Israel” (319). More precisely, the covenant formula (YHWH the God of Israel; Israel the people of YHWH)

"represents the central theme of the entire Old Testament" (320). Once more there is a fatal equivalence between center and theme, which has dominated previous research in this area.

Janowski concludes by returning to the twofold character of Scripture: it is both Christian and Jewish, and yet the unity of the two Testaments is to be maintained. He names this "a unity of contrast" (322); the Christian must read the Old Testament in a "dialectical" relationship to the New Testament. He concludes with a plea that theology be concerned with the twofold witness to the one God (324).

Steadfast Love

Hermann Spieckermann (Göttingen University professor of Old Testament) delivered a lecture on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, significantly titled *God's Steadfast Love: Towards a New Conception of Old Testament Theology* (2000). He is well aware of the risk in writing about Old Testament theology; he has participated in the more recent discussions of the subject (305, n. 1). He is not concerned precisely with the "center," but with the union between the Testaments. He offers a new conception of Old Testament theology by making the New Testament the starting point. Opposed to the more limited view of a history of religion approach to Old Testament theology (e.g., that of R. Albertz), he adds to this complicated subject two stubborn facts: the Septuagint translation was the Bible of the early Church, though differing in many ways from what was finalized as the MT; and within the Christian churches there exists a variety of canons.

These remarks are merely preliminary to his "new conception." He proceeds to develop the theology of *hesed*, "steadfast love," in Exodus 34:6-7 (God's "self-determination"), in the Psalter ("God's saving presence"), in the Prophets ("everlasting love"), and in the New Testament ("God's steadfast love in Jesus Christ"). Spieckermann's point is that the Christian Bible (the Septuagint and the New Testament) forms a preferred position from which to illumine a central theological issue, the divine *hesed*. He concludes (327): "It is the task of a Christian Bible's theology—and of an Old Testament theology being a part of it—to pay attention to this theme [God's steadfast love] in the manifold forms and situations witnessed in the scriptures."

The basic principle of Spieckermann seems to be that "the truth of Old Testament theology can only be established by considering New Testament theology" (308). That thesis seems incapable of proof. There is surely some truth to Old Testament theology apart from the New. His beautifully articulated expression of "steadfast love" in the

Torah, Psalms, and Prophets could have been written just as easily by a non-Christian, or at least by anyone who might be simply unaware of Christian premises concerning the God of the Bible. This is not to say that there would be universal agreement on every specific aspect that Spieckermann discusses, but his exposition is not all that unique, or inspired uniquely by a Christian perspective, in the history of exegesis. What is new about the "new conception of Old Testament theology"? Apparently it is the *explicit* starting point, the New Testament perspective. Proceeding from New to Old is not the usual path for Old Testament theologians to pursue, although they cannot escape entirely their presuppositions, Christian or otherwise. This orientation may have the advantage of bringing both Testaments together and forming a *biblical* theology. But it is not clear that the Christian Bible presents a necessary perspective for a "new conception of Old Testament theology." It does provide a new context for expanding the Old Testament data as described by Spieckermann.

Spieckermann's article, absent the thesis of the role of the New Testament, is an example of what "biblical theology" at its best can do—and has done in fact. It can trace the various changes and developments of certain terms and concepts throughout either Testament singly or preferably both together. But this procedure does not lead to a unified theology that constitutes a "center." Rather, one finds in the article a series of sharp exegeses and careful conclusions in pursuing an idea through several differing literary media.

Conclusion

What insights can be drawn from these two recent explorations of biblical theology? There are some very welcome features. For both scholars, the two Testaments are part of the theological enterprise; theirs is a biblical theology. Janowski is particularly concerned with the recognition of Jewish tradition as continuing the thrust of the Tanak, parallel to the way in which the New Testament completes the Old. As indicated above, however, this parallelism is somewhat awry. The Mishnah and Talmud are part of the oral Torah of Judaism; it incorporates the oral version of the original Mosaic teaching; this is really unique to orthodox Jewry. The only possible, but inexact, parallel is Christian tradition. There is something asymmetrical about Janowski's lining up of the sources: Tanak (OT)/Mishnah & Talmud on the Jewish side, as opposed to the OT/NT trajectory on the Christian side. He leaves no room for Christian tradition, which is at least comparable to the rabbinic tradition. Is this imbalance due to a certain discomfort with the role of Christian tradition? There is, of course, a trajectory from the Tanak to the beliefs and practices of Judaism, but as J.

Neusner has clearly stated, there is also a gulf: Judaism is not the religion of the Old Testament (1986: xi).

The drive for the unity of the biblical writings fails because the literature has no middle, or unity.

The two German scholars differ in their understanding of what constitutes the “Old Testament.” For Janowski, it is the Tanak; but Spieckermann argues for the Septuagint:

Old Testament theology necessarily depends on New Testament theology and on the Bible in which the realization of Christ has been perceived, namely in the Greek version of the Old Testament, roughly speaking, in the Septuagint [307].

Presumably Spieckerman is concerned here with more than merely the canonical extent (the inclusion of the deuterocanonicals). At least implicitly he is presupposing the “inspiration” of the Septuagint, a position taken in modern times by the French Dominican school (D. Barthélemy, P. Benoit). This is a kind of twentieth-century revival of Augustine’s understanding, due to the extensive role played in the New Testament by the Septuagint. This is not the place to pursue that difficult topic, but it is certainly a minority view at the present time.

It is fairly obvious that in the past decades most scholars have at least implicitly identified the middle/center with some theme of biblical theology. The approaches of both Janowski and Spieckermann exemplify this tendency: the Shekinah approach, and the theme of God’s steadfast love. The views of both scholars are welcome, for there is great value in their expositions. But the fundamental difficulty remains. They have presented analyses of certain themes, but they have not touched the ever-receding “center” of either or both Testaments. Let it not be thought that this is merely quibbling about the meaning of the term *center*. The extraordinary amount of literature on this subject demonstrates otherwise. And the search for the center has produced a wide range of profitable studies on key themes that appear in the Bible. All this is to the good. But the issue remains: is there a center? Is the question of the center rightly posed? Does biblical literature have a unity that can be described by a center? Or is the striving for center propelled by another factor, the use of a criterion or standard drawn from a different area of theology?

The key problem for both scholars is the illusion, a chimera, that the Bible has what could be realistically described as a middle, or even a central theme. The basic

fact is that neither Testament, nor, consequently, both together, has a distinct middle or center. A Christian might urge Jesus Christ as the center of the New Testament at least. But this literature cannot be reduced to Jesus Christ as “center,” without making a mockery of it. One might as well say that God is the center of the Bible, as has been claimed (Hasel: 168)—but this solves nothing. Literature is literature, and theology is thematic. The Old Testament in particular is far too diversified to be curtailed to an essential center/theme, no matter how broad (e.g., presence), or how important (e.g., covenant). The drive for the unity of the biblical writings fails because the literature has no middle, or unity. It was composed over a period of centuries, and reflects the most varied circumstances. It is rich in its diversity. The plan of God, the historical design of the God worshiped in both Testaments, is not the same thing as the literature spawned by the people of God. The unity of divine design is not the unity of the literature that gives witness—a variegated witness (Torah, Prophets, Wisdom) to the design itself (Murphy 2000: 81–83). The concern for center may be linked to the idea of the primacy of Scripture—*Scriptura sola*, even in the sense of David Steinmetz’s *Scriptura valde prima* as final norm (Steinmetz: 462)—not simply because the majority of the biblical scholars gripped by the question come from a Reformation background, but because of a very human desire to unify what is considered to be the key source of revelation.

Related to the claim that the literature has no unity, and thus is not subject to merely conceptual analysis, is the striking lack of attention given to wisdom literature. First of all, it is under-represented in the Hebrew Bible itself, which lacks Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. Second, with some exceptions in Sirach and Wisdom, it stands outside the dominant emphasis on *Heilsgeschichte*. When it is used, as in the case of Janowski’s discussion of the Shekinah, it is sparing, and limited to the personification of Wisdom. The existence of the diversified types of literature found in the wisdom books and the level of its anthropology and theology have been obstacles to any unification plan. They posed a problem to George Ernest Wright (1952: 103), as is evident from his statement that he could not really coordinate them in his view of Old Testament theology. There is a certain irony in this. From the point of view of a tidy unity or center, he was correct, but the failure to deal with wisdom should have been a sign to later “centrists” to exercise more caution.

Is it really feasible “to write an Old Testament theology on the basis of the Christian Bible” in the manner presented by Spieckermann? He grants that his is not “the only way,” but an “appropriate way” (327). It is appropriate for a Christian who can see God’s steadfast love incarnate in

Christ "as the leitmotif [this term is as close as he gets to the word *center*] of all scriptures" (327). But his approach resembles tunnel vision. It fails to deal adequately with the *diversity* of the Old Testament. His expert use of pertinent biblical texts that develop the notion of divine *hesed* is surely informative, and attractive, flowing from a hermeneutical stance governed by the Incarnation. From a Christian point of view the Incarnation crowns the Old Testament manifestations of God's love. Does this conclusion really differ from the traditional patristic and medieval insights? In the final analysis it is no different, except that the treatment of the Old Testament data is expertly done by a critical mind. His method is more sophisticated and refined, because it derives from historical criticism, and is able to catch more of the nuances of the Old Testament text. A clearer picture of the Old Testament data on the steadfast love of God appears, but not in virtue of the Incarnation. In lesser hands the approach might lead to a superficial analysis of the biblical data.

Continuity from the Old Testament into the New is only to be expected. But the Old Testament, and with it biblical theology, is short-changed when unity is reduced to one line of continuity. Moreover, the discontinuities are not to be dismissed; one thinks here of the significance of the Sabbath, divine and human, which Christianity has never really absorbed (Goshen-Gottstein: 632), or the dialectic of retribution, which is not to be solved by a simplified eschatology. There are many aspects of Old Testament thought that still call for exploration. The paradox is that a search for a unifying center fails, but it has produced a harvest of insights into the riches of the Bible.

Works Cited

- Barr, J. 1999. *THE CONCEPT OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: AN OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Eichrodt, W. 1961–1967. *THEOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press.
- Goshen-Gottstein, M. 1987. *Tanakh Theology: The Religion of the Old Testament and the Place of Jewish Biblical Theology*. Pp. 617–44 in *ANCIENT ISRAELITE WISDOM*, edited by P. D. Miller, et al. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.
- Hasel, G. F. 1991. *OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY: BASIC ISSUES IN THE CURRENT DEBATE*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Janowski, B. 2000. *The One God of the Two Testaments: Basic Questions of a Biblical Theology*. *THEOLOGY TODAY* 57: 297–324. The original appeared in unabbreviated form in German in the *ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR THEOLOGIE UND KIRCHE* 95 (1998), 1–36.
1987. "Ich will in eurer Mitte wohnen," *Struktur und Genese der exilischen Shekina-Theologie*. Pp. 165–93 in *JAHRBUCH FÜR BIBLISCHE THEOLOGIE*, vol. 2. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener.
- Murphy, R. E. 2000. *Questions Concerning Biblical Theology*. *BIBLICAL THEOLOGY BULLETIN* 30: 81–89.
1998. *What Is Catholic about Catholic Biblical Scholarship?—Revisited*. *BIBLICAL THEOLOGY BULLETIN* 28: 112–19.
- Neusner, J. 1986. *JUDAISM AND SCRIPTURE*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Preuss, H.-D. 1995–1996. *OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Spieckermann, H. 2000. *God's Steadfast Love: Towards a New Conception of Old Testament Theology*. *BIBLICA* 80: 305–27.
- Steinmetz, D. 2000. *The Intellectual Appeal of the Reformation*. *THEOLOGY TODAY* 57: 459–72.
- Terrien, S. 1978. *THE ELUSIVE PRESENCE: TOWARDS A NEW BIBLICAL THEOLOGY*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row.
- Wright, G. E. 1952. *GOD WHO ACTS*. London, UK: SCM Press.
- Zimmerli, W. 1978. *OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY IN OUTLINE*. Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark.