REVIEW ARTICLE

WHAT IS THE OLD TESTAMENT SAYING FOR THE CHRISTIAN?

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God with Us: A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament
Christoph Barth
edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley
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This book fills a need which exists in English language studies of the Old Testament for the theological student. There are surveys which introduce the student to the Old Testament as a variety of literatures or books. There are histories (and sociological studies) which reconstruct Israel's life according to presuppositions, critical or otherwise, about the nature of the biblical literature and the extrabiblical evidence. There are also critical introductions which provide the student with a perspective on what scholars are saying about the Old Testament's origins and purposes.

Barth's book is none of these, nor is it an Old Testament theology in the traditional sense of the word. It does not set up some systematic theological categories and collect the relevant Old Testament data under each one. It does not try to reconstruct Israel's religious history using the latest critical methods. It does not incorporate existentialist or other philosophical world views and read the Old Testament from their perspective. Nor does it survey the work done in Old Testament theology. In fact, it is characterised by a lack of interaction with recent scholarship.

What then does Barth do? He has written a book which follows the contours of the canonical structure of the Protestant canon of the Old Testament in tracing God's

acts and revelation to his people. In so doing, he avoids choosing a few themes and tracing them through the Old Testament, as so many popular works have done. Indeed, the text which Eerdmans has published is a condensation of four volumes which Barth produced before his death (with a final section completed by his widow). It is an academic text, but one which provides the reader with a clear understanding of the progression of revelation in the Old Testament, rather than a discussion of a variety of theories about the matter.

Barth's perspective lies firmly within orthodox Lutheranism, with its emphasis upon the themes of the Word of God (appropriate for Karl Barth's son) and of God's absolute freedom and sovereignty in selecting and relating to Israel. As a result the work always remains close to the biblical text, incorporating a vast variety of biblical data without losing a perspective of moving through the Bible's record of God's dealings with Israel.

Given the unique significance of Barth's work, it seems of value to consider each chapter separately and systematically to progress through the book with attention to the highlights and with a few remarks on strengths and weaknesses. The introduction provides a defence of Barth's approach and his organization of the book.

Chapter 1, 'God Created Heaven and Earth', stresses that this is a derivative theme in the Old Testament. God's creation of Israel is primary, that of heaven and earth is secondary and dependent on the former. Thus creation by the Word of God is also to be seen as God's Word of love for his people. In creation, God is victorious over evil powers, pictured as the ocean, the desert, and the darkness. Although Barth's linkage of these with some sort of mythological forces of chaos must now be questioned (*cf.* D. T. Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2*, Sheffield, 1989), the parallel between this creation and the acts of God in the Exodus is clear. Israel saw God's 'perfect world' as in the process of being revealed. God's creation of heaven and earth imply that he

is above and sovereign over both. God's concern for humanity's creation reveals the importance of the person. This is true on the basis of God's revelation, rather than because of any good observable in humanity. Barth argues that the 'soul' is not immortal and supports this with references to the death of the soul. However, the flexibility and wide usage of *nephesh* (*cf.* H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology and the Old Testament*, London, 1974, pp.10-25) call into question any such conclusion without a more comprehensive investigation into life and death in the Old Testament. Barth defends an order to male and female in God's creation; one which gives leadership to males. However, he insists that woman is not a servant but a companion. The image of God signifies rule over all of creation. Like God, people create people; but only with God's help. Barth downplays original sin in favour of personal guilt. However, he finds God's saving purpose revealed in figures such as Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abram.

Chapter 2, 'God Chose the Fathers of Israel', provides a biblical perspective for the election of the patriarchs. These fallible individuals were not chosen because of their merit but because of God's free decision. Although real people, they were also representatives of God's people Israel. Aware that the patriarchs worshipped at what have been identified as earlier Canaanite cult centres and that they applied names to Israel's God which may well have had Canaanite origins, Barth argues that this was not due to any identification of Israel's God with Canaanite deities; but that it was permitted by God as an example of despoiling other deities of their names and sanctuaries. The ambiguity of some theophanies, for example the one in Genesis 18, is evidence that the emphasis of the author is upon the word itself rather than upon the form of revelation. At the centre of God's choice of the patriarchs are his promises in which, in complete contrast to vassal treaties, the overlord grants favours without requiring something in return from the vassal. The fulfilment of the promises provides orientation to the future.

Barth observes the theme of chapter 3, 'God Brought Israel out of Egypt', to be the most important one among those which he studies. All of God's other acts in the Old Testament are influenced by this. Israel's freedom is both from imposed slavery and from worship of other forces which those enslaving nations worship. God releases and accompanies his people, redeeming them according to his free will. Israel is released to serve God in an act of worship which already begins before leaving Egypt in the form of the Passover. God's gift of freedom to Israel provides a standard for the freedom of all peoples everywhere. Barth understands the name of Yahweh as unique and therefore one way in which God reveals himself as unique and as the God of the Exodus. The issues of the origins and etymology of the divine name continue to be debated (*cf. e.g.* my 'References to the Divine Name Yahweh in Late Bronze Age Sources?', *Ugarit Forschungen* 23 (1991) forthcoming). The plagues and the Passover form two stages of the victory which are remembered and repeated at other points in the Old Testament. Barth balances God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart with Pharaoh's self-hardening of his heart. He compares Pharaoh's stubbornness with the obduracy of Israel and of Moses. Ultimately, this is not completely satisfying since the issue of whether and how God could cause Israel to sin is not explicitly addressed. Also unaddressed are the implications for Moses' role if Aaron is his prophet. What does it mean for him to function in such an exalted office?

Although chapter 3 may be the key theme in Barth's introduction, chapter 4, 'God Led His People through the Wilderness', represents a significant study on an important, although often overlooked, theme. God's revelation to his people in the form of his saving deeds meant their preservation in this threatening world. Despite its complaints, Israel retained its faith as God's people. This complaining was a confession of the nation's inability to live up to its calling. Although there is a

distinctive emphasis in Exodus on mercy and in Numbers on judgement, the two themes occur throughout these accounts. God led the people by means of his presence in cloud, fire, pillar and ark. The tent of the presence arose after a crisis in which God's holiness could no longer be tolerated among the people who worshipped the golden calf. However, God was able to act freely to continue to meet his people through Moses. The tabernacle, on the other hand, demonstrates that everything which Israel needed for worship was already present in the wilderness. Barth stresses the sense of 'not yet' in the wilderness journey. It had an aim and a goal. Thus the generation that rejected God and died in the wilderness lost its aim. But the new generation carried the hope. Even in the land, the continuing pilgrimage of God's people was kept alive by the Rechabites, by the holy days, and by the Sabbath.

Chapter 5, 'God Revealed Himself at Sinai', studies an act which formed a key part of Israel's faith. Even so, the narration in the Pentateuch is brief and the event is not mentioned in Israel's credal confessions. Barth understands only one covenant between God and his people. This single covenant was progressively revealed throughout Israel's history. It included the revelation at Sinai. There God manifested his glory on the mountain and proclaimed his will in the law. He also motivated the people to a free assent by their participation in various acts. The law was revealed by God only to Moses and only at Sinai. The laws sanctified (religious, sabbath, purity), liberated (slave, oppressed), and united (festivals) Israel. Barth looks at the tabernacle sacrifices, the priesthood and the Levites from the perspectives of reconciliation and of God's freedom to choose.

At this point the reader has come almost halfway through the book. Thus Barth's primary focus on the Pentateuch and its revelation is clear. Such an emphasis is not uncommon in theologies. It provides the reader with a firm understanding of the institutions and covenants which

Barth sees as influencing the remainder of the Old Testament.

Despite a later comment which balances the perspective (*cf.* p. 235), Barth seems preoccupied in chapter 6, 'God Granted Israel the Land of Canaan', with arguing points to oppose Zionism. Because of this bias, some of his least satisfactory observations are found here. These include the view that the Bible does not clearly define Canaan's borders, and a stress upon the uncertainty of the land's continued possession or any right for Israel to continue to possess it. The latter point is especially important. It is accomplished through selective word studies which, even by themselves, do not disprove the idea of the land as a permanent possession. Barth also ignores the implications of these covenants and their blessings as given 'for all your generations'. This is not to argue that such matters have any relevance for the political existence of a secular state such as modern Israel. It is merely to note that such matters could be treated with a greater balance. Barth accepts that there was a conquest and goes on to make helpful observations on the morality of the extermination of the Canaanites. In addition to observing their spiritual danger to Israel, he argues that force was necessary since the Canaanites resisted Israel and that, as a whole, the Canaanites were permitted to live in an area conquered by Israel so long as they abandoned idolatry and immorality. Barth concludes the chapter (as the book of Joshua concludes) with a discussion on Israel's covenant renewal as a manifestation of the nation's worship and community.

In chapter 7, 'God Raised Up Kings in Israel', the reader learns that Israel had neither an absolute monarchy nor did it see kingship as absolutely good. David and Solomon represent all the kings in their successes and failures. God's Spirit chose and appointed Israel's kings. Human acts were secondary and complementary. Although Barth may be too positive regarding David, his roles as model king, as recipient of divine promises, and as sufferer are key aspects of the biblical account. God's election of some

kings and his rejection of others remains a divine mystery. The election itself is a matter of divine grace. Barth divides the prophecies of a coming just king into four groups: those strengthening the present king, those looking for the replacement of a bad ruler, those looking for the reestablishment of David's throne, and those looking for a new Saviour. Of this last group, the Servant Songs of Isaiah 40-55 receive note with their progressively greater emphasis on suffering.

Chapter 8 is 'God Chose Jerusalem'. The selection of Israel's ancient capital provides opportunity for Barth to explore many of the psalms of Zion and to emphasize once more God's sovereign freedom, this time in the choice and defence of the city as a joyous place of God's presence and liberating rule of justice. Barth uses this subject as a pretext to introduce Wisdom and Wisdom literature. The teaching is international in its borrowing and influence, but it is also individualistic, moral, modest, and self-controlled in its character. The prophets critique human wisdom, however. Later Wisdom emphasizes the Torah and the fear of the Lord. Job and Ecclesiastes address problems of righteous suffering and of the apparent meaninglessness of life. Nine pages on a major body of Old Testament literature such as Wisdom is insufficient to address its theological contribution to the whole book. The study of the temple and its institutions permits consideration of Ezekiel's visions of God's glory and of the future temple. Worship was characterized by movement toward the sanctuary, by specific offerings and occasions, and by expressions of suffering and need, of thanksgiving and of praise. The people's coming together for worship bears witness to all nations. The chapter concludes with consideration of biblical texts which describe the present Jerusalem as sinful and the new Jerusalem as glorious and filled with God's presence.

The opening part of chapter 9, 'God Sent His Prophets', provides a useful survey of biblical texts which address God's selection, commission and equipping of his

prophets. Barth divides his survey of the messages of the prophetic texts between those announcing the judgement which was coming and those proclaiming God's salvation, compassion and renewal after the disaster of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. A final section considers the apocalyptic message of Zechariah 9-14, Isaiah 24-27, 35 and Daniel. It announces God's control of world history to bring it to the end which he desires, and to usher in the promised kingdom. Like so much of the book, the value of this material is less in its observations, most of which have been made before. Rather it lies in the organisation and presentation of material in a way which makes sense in detail and generality of God's work and message in the Old Testament. The 'Conclusion' is two pages which project some of the prophetic themes into the New Testament.

In summary, this volume represents sober reflection upon the Old Testament as a text of divine revelation which describes God's saving activity with his people over a period of nearly two thousand years. Although the all-too-brief conclusion might lead the reader to think of this study as irrelevant to the Christian, just the opposite is true. We can applaud Barth for his refusal to compromise the message of the Old Testament by reshaping it either into the moulds of critical and alien methodologies or into the categories of systematic theology. However, we also should appreciate his refusal to allow the Old Testament to become a series of illustrations of New Testament truths. The Old Testament deserves to be read and studied on its own for here are 'the very words of God' (Romans 3:2). It embodies the principles of God at work with his people, of God saving his people, of his people responding to or rejecting his grace and of God's blessing or judgement. Theology is not the only means of studying the Old Testament, but it is foundational for the Christian. Barth's approach is not the only possible theology, but it is a way of making sense of the whole biblical text. Without a full and careful study of

the Old Testament all study of New Testament applications of prophecy, and indeed all theological exegesis, carries the danger of distortion according to the perceived interests of the interpreter. Christians today do not need another book which lists proof texts from the Old Testament. We need to study both testaments, each in their own integrity. Barth provides us with a way through the Old Testament which lets it speak for itself.

As pointed out at the beginning, this is not a work from which students of Old Testament history, criticism, or theological methodology will draw much value. Instead, it is for the student who wishes to have a guide through the Old Testament providing some detail and laying a strong foundation for informed and balanced exegesis and exposition of this key part of God's revelation. The student who reads this work will have a clear understanding of the Old Testament and its message. The emphases and applications of the work reflect the mature wisdom of a lifetime of ministry, much of which was spent in Indonesia. This reviewer suspects that, for active ministers, this work will be consulted more frequently than any of the other introductions, surveys, theologies, *etc.*, mentioned above. It clearly provides the reader with a message for the book or passage which has a biblical and theological context.