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## USING SCRIPTURE FOR THEOLOGY: UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

### *The Old Testament as a Hermeneutical Problem*

J. G. McCONVILLE

A special aspect of the question whether it is possible to do Christian theology is the question whether it is possible to do Old Testament theology. Indeed, there is a sense in which the possibility of the former depends upon the possibility of the latter. This is because the task of interpreting the Old Testament as such has been considered a distinctive part of the church's theological endeavour throughout its history, and indeed is arguably its central, most difficult hermeneutical task. Broadly speaking, the church's attitude to the Old Testament has been one of determination to keep it (*malgré* Marcion), from a sense that the roots of the Christian gospel are there, without having established, with any degree of unanimity, quite *how* it continues to address the church as the Word of God. The 'problem' of the Old Testament is caught in its very name - the 'Old' Testament, as distinct from the 'New' - and in the implication in the contrast that, because of the 'new' event witnessed to in Matthew-Revelation there is something *passé* about Genesis-Malachi (Chronicles).

Now, Marcion's was not the only kind of threat to the voice of the Old Testament in the church. If we may risk a generalization, the medieval church coped with the Old Testament by supposing that it did not teach anything which the church *could* not teach (*'scriptura non asserit nisi fidem catholicam'* - Augustine), and produced the powerful axis of *magisterium* and allegorical method.<sup>1</sup> The Reformation articulated new principles, which could be a basis for a genuine hearing of the Old Testament. Only a brave man would claim,

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1. A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*, London, 1978, pp. 40-42.

however, that the Reformation 'solved' the problem for good and all. For one thing, there continued to be 'rejections' of the Old Testament (notably in the nineteenth-century belief that it was essentially the literature of an alien and sub-Christian religion).<sup>2</sup> More fundamentally, however, the Reformation did not constitute a single or agreed solution. The approach of Luther is significantly different from that of Calvin, and I would suggest that in their different approaches we see the origins of the debate over the Old Testament as it is still carried on today. Let me say word or two about each.

Calvin (again at the risk of generalizing) tends to unify. That is to say, the Old Testament - and the Bible - is understood in terms of the over-arching concept of covenant. A coherent saving activity of God is revealed by the unified witness to it in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Thus the Scriptures as a whole have an equal standing and dignity. Now, it will immediately be seen that any approach in terms of system, or an overarching concept, may be open to the same kind of criticism as the medieval *magisterium*.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, although a return to the 'plain sense' of Scripture opens it up in principle to be heard in all its richness and diversity, it may be in practice that it will only ever be heard in terms of covenantal theology. (And, indeed, the Reformation did not put an end to allegorizing interpretation either.)

Luther's approach to the Old Testament, as is well known, is based on his criterion that Scripture is only edifying inasmuch as it glorifies Christ. This hardly seems antithetical to Calvin's interests, but it does have the effect of bestowing unequal degrees of authority upon different biblical books, and Luther's views about Esther (a piece of Jewish propaganda) together with James (which seemed to contradict the doctrine of justification by faith) are familiar. These are not mere

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2. *Ibid.* pp. 142 ff.

3. Cf. D. Nineham, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, London, 1976, pp. 45-59.

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exceptions. Luther's whole hermeneutical method depends upon discerning polarities. The best-known is that of law and gospel. This is more subtle than a simple opposition of the Old Testament to the New, since law and gospel stand in (dialectical) tension with each other within each Testament, though law is more to the fore in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> The effect of this method, rather than a mere devaluing of the Old Testament, is to initiate an eclecticism in the study of biblical texts, of which Luther's attitude to Esther and James is an example. If Calvin's unifying approach to the Bible can result in our not hearing certain voices in the Old Testament, so too can Luther's polarizing approach. In this clash of opinions between the Reformation's two greatest theologians we have the seeds of the modern problem. That is, do we begin our reading of the Old Testament on the basis of a 'given' scheme? Or do we look at it first of all in its manifold character? I do not suggest that Luther and Calvin are the direct fathers of these two opposing modern approaches. Indeed, when modern scholars begin from diversity the claim usually is that their concern is to hear *all* that the Old Testament has to say, without the strict criterion of theological worth that Luther had, and clearly there have been many other influences upon modern scholarship in the intervening period.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, both Luther and Calvin are certainly (among the) ancestors of modern approaches, and we shall have cause to notice this influence from time to time. Their case is also instructive because it illustrates that a basic problem of method does exist, and requires a solution.

### Modern Unifying Approaches

The *doyen* of those who, in modern times, have interpreted the Old Testament on the basis of a given scheme is W. Eichrodt,<sup>6</sup> who saw 'covenant' as a controlling concept. The striking resemblance to Calvin here (which is not as thoroughgoing as

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4. Gunneweg, *op. cit.*, pp. 51f.

5. Gunneweg traces the interpretation of the Old Testament from the Reformation to modern times, *ibid.*, pp. 43-95.

6. *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., London, 1961, 1967.

may appear at first<sup>7</sup>) does not mean that modern scholars have found any simple or obvious way of following the great Reformer into a unitary view of the Old Testament. On the contrary, the sad story of the search for a 'centre' in Old Testament theology suggests, by the very profusion of alleged 'centres', that the goal is elusive.<sup>8</sup> The objection to covenant in particular is that it does not deal with all the material in the Old Testament (*e.g.* Proverbs; Song; the non-historical material).<sup>9</sup> Most modern writers, in pronouncing the search hopeless, say that the idea of a centre can be maintained only in terms of concepts which are so bland as to be not very helpful (*e.g.* Hasel, having ruled out all other possibilities, opts simply for 'God'<sup>10</sup>). However, considerations like this have not prevented some scholars, even in the wake of criticism of Eichrodt, from writing theologies which are essentially systematic. Examples are W. Zimmerli<sup>11</sup> and, among evangelical scholars, W. Dyrness and W. J. Dumbrell.<sup>12</sup> These, indeed, are satisfactory in different degrees,<sup>13</sup> and Dumbrell's, which is an excellent apology for 'covenant' as the controlling concept, does not actually claim that his work

7. As has been observed by J. E. Goldingay, *Diversity and Unity in Old Testament Theology*, *Vetus Testamentum* 34 (1984), p. 155, there is full acknowledgement of the diversity of Old Testament statements in Eichrodt. That may render his insistence on imposing a scheme the more striking.
8. Cf. G. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, Grand Rapids, 1972, pp 78ff.; H. Graf Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century*, London, 1985, pp. 125ff., for accounts of the search for a centre.
9. Hasel, p. 79.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 99-103; and cf. Gunneweg's criticism, *op. cit.*, p 140.
11. W. Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, Edinburgh, 1978, and see J. E. Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, Leicester, 1981, p. 28-9.
12. W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, Exeter, 1984. W. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology*, Exeter, 1979.
13. Dyrness's hardly does justice to the forward flow and ever-changing face of the Old Testament.

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constitutes an Old Testament theology as such. Nevertheless, the sense that the Old Testament is characterized by unity and has an organizing concept or concepts may not be finally contradicted by the lack of unanimity over the latter. And indeed it is highly questionable whether an irreducible 'centre' - namely 'God' - is as 'bland' as is alleged. Even Gunneweg, who is eloquent in his hostility to 'centres', comes back to a position which is not so very different, in the end, from Hasel's, for he justifies the Old Testament ultimately because it makes a basically similar assessment of *God and Man* to that of the New Testament. God is transcendent, yet meets man.<sup>14</sup> I believe that an adequate hermeneutic of the Old Testament must resort to concepts which control and unify. I hope this will emerge further as we look now at approaches which begin from the belief that the Old Testament is fundamentally characterized by diversity.

### **Approaches Beginning from Diversity**

It needs no demonstration that diversity of some kind exists in the Old Testament. There are differences at the level of type of literature. The Old Testament contains texts which are poetic, prophetic, liturgical, narrative, legal, theological/speculative. These can overlap. But the point is that the Old Testament makes an immediate impression of variety, as opposed to system, in its statements about God. (Hence Barr's and Nineham's insistence that the Old Testament is simply not directly translatable into systematic theology.) This impression may be strengthened when we remember that the Old Testament came into being over a long period (much longer than that in which the New Testament developed), and in the context of a history which saw vast changes in the character of Israel (slaves in Egypt - loosely associated tribes in Canaan - monarchy/ies - exiles - weak imperial satrapy). This essential disparateness of the Old Testament was an important factor for G. von Rad in his Old Testament theology, often cited as the antithesis to

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14. *Op. cit.*, pp. 225f.

Eichrodt's. For him the Old Testament is the deposit of Israel's multi-faceted experience of God. His method is to describe the various and successive 'theologies' of the Old Testament, without any pretence that they amount to a unified witness. Now the implication of von Rad's approach is that the diversity in the Old Testament is more profound than differences of genre, date, *etc.* There are, for him, distinct theological currents within the Old Testament, which may resemble each other in certain respects, but strongly differ from each other in others. *E.g.*, different theological systems are represented by the Priestly and Deuteronomistic writings. Eichrodt, of course, would not dissent from this. The difference is that von Rad has made such differences the key to his method. The strength of von Rad is that he very much captures the forward flow of the Old Testament, rescuing it from a static, over-systematic approach. He seriously attempts to let *all* of the Old Testament speak. (For this reason his is often more text-based and just plain useful than Eichrodt.) The great weakness becomes manifest when we attempt to turn his observations of what Israel believed into something that the Church can confess. The most obvious reason for this is that the method fundamentally postulates important theological differences. What then should we believe? The situation is not improved when we bear in mind that, for von Rad, Israel's experience of God does not necessarily correspond to the history of Israel as it is reconstructed by the modern historian. Von Rad leaves us, therefore, even apart from the considerations of multiple theologies, without a way of believing what Israel believed that does any justice to a meaningful relationship between faith and knowledge. The inevitable suggestion of von Rad's work (though I think he intended the opposite) is that it is exceedingly hazardous to base any faith-position on the witness of the Old Testament.

Von Rad has probably set the tone in modern scholarly discussion. John Goldingay says of certain contemporary writers on the Old Testament that for them 'diversity is the starting-point, and unity or coherence or inter-relationship is a

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much more problematical question, if it arises at all'.<sup>15</sup> Goldingay himself, however, is concerned to 'acknowledge diversity, without canonizing arbitrariness'.<sup>16</sup> He does this by postulating 'trajectories' in biblical thinking about certain themes, that is, a range of opinions within the Old Testament on a given subject, encompassing opposing extremes and a point of equilibrium.<sup>17</sup> Thus, on the relationship between the activity of God and that of man, he sees apocalyptic at one end of the spectrum (emphasizing God's acts), Esther at the other (emphasizing human initiative), and Isaiah avoiding both extremes, recognizing both the call and will of God while functioning as a statesman beside the king. On this topic of faith Isaiah has the 'fullest insight' within an inner-biblical dialectic.<sup>18</sup> Goldingay goes further and appears to see polarity as belonging to the essential character of the Bible. In this he appeals to Ebeling's observations, taking his cue from Luther, of how polarity functions in biblical interpretations, Scripture indeed having essentially a polar structure which reflects 'its comprehensive relation to life'. The basic polar relationship identified by Ebeling is that of God and Israel, other associated tensions being election and universalism, Israel as a political entity and as a religious community, cultic piety and prophetic piety, individual and community, openness and distinctiveness, scepticism and confidence, judgement and grace, law and promise. Goldingay adds creation and redemption, exodus and exile, word and event.<sup>19</sup>

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15. J. E. Goldingay, *art. cit.*, p. 157.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

17. He thus follows J. M. Robinson and H. Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, Philadelphia, 1971.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 160-163, also citing P. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, Philadelphia, 1975.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 166f., G. Ebeling, *Luther*, London, 1970, p. 25; *ZThK* 77 (1980), pp. 276f., *The Study of Theology*, London, 1979, pp. 19f.



## Kinds of Diversity

The approach adopted by Goldingay we have seen to owe something to Ebeling, and perhaps in turn to Luther. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, as with Luther, different parts of Scripture, on this view, speak with varying degrees of theological acumen (and therefore authority?).

Do we, then, have diversity in the Old Testament? The question can only be met by another question, namely, what is meant by diversity? Goldingay seems to speak about different kinds of diversity without alerting us to the fact that he is doing so. That is, he speaks on the one hand about the simple disagreement between biblical authors over given issues, and on the other he leans on a rather sophisticated idea according to which polarity is somehow a necessary feature of biblical language about God. We must, therefore, set the discussion on a sounder basis, and can do so, I suggest, by identifying two kinds of diversity which exist in the Old Testament.

First, there is a class of polarity which is inherent in the theology of the Old Testament. The undergirding one in this category is that of God and Israel (mankind), but along with this come such others as law and grace, God known and unknown, ritual (cultic) and spontaneous (prophetic) religion. All of these have been treated by at least some Old Testament scholars in terms of conflict and polemic. Modern treatments of Deuteronomy illustrate the point. It is common today for Deuteronomy to be seen as a succession of literary 'layers', each characterized by its own theological attitude in terms of the relationship between law and grace. Thus von Rad discerned in Deuteronomy 'a declension from grace into law',<sup>20</sup> meaning that the earliest form of the book had essentially a theology of grace, while later expansions were increasingly legalistic.

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20. G. von Rad, 'Promised Land and Yahweh's Land', in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, Edinburgh & London, 1966, p. 91.

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Some detailed treatments of Deuteronomy have attempted to work this out more or less verse by verse.<sup>21</sup> The thinking may be illustrated by Deut. 7:11,12, each verse expressing the need for obedience to God, the former, however, motivating it in terms of gratitude for God's love and faithfulness (as in vv.6-10), while the latter seems to make obedience the prerequisite of God's covenant-keeping. For scholars such as L. Perlitt, this is a jarring juxtaposition which is only explicable by appeal to secondary, legalistic expansion.<sup>22</sup> Now the whole approach is open to the criticism that it has failed to comprehend the character of the rhetoric of Deuteronomy. Others have shown more acuteness here, and recognized that such juxtapositions belong precisely to the heart of Deuteronomy's message, and indeed that such tensions are frequently held together in Deuteronomy by means of complex literary structures such as extended chiasmus.<sup>23</sup> In other words the rhetoric of Deuteronomy profoundly matches the complexity of its theology. Law-keeping is not only response to God's grace, but it also oils the wheels of the continuing relationship between God and Israel. Deuteronomy thus deals in its own way with an antinomy inherent (I think) in all religion, and which the New Testament takes up at various points too (Romans 6; James). The tension between law and grace, then, is not to be seen in terms of conflict, confrontation, polemic (the way of Hegel) but rather as that which belongs to theology, and which the Old Testament can present as such. If one 'pole' is

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21. The most recent standard commentary on Deuteronomy is A. D. H. Mayes (New Century Bible), in which this kind of concept is fundamental.
  22. L. Perlitt, *Bundestheologie in Alten Testament*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969, p. 61.
  23. N. Lohfink, *Das Hauptgebot: eine Untersuchung Literarischer Einleitungsfragen Zu Dt. 5-11*, Rome, 1963, p. 240, insists on the integrity of 7:12 in its context.
  24. See Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, Vol.1, pp. 286-8, for his synthesis - in antinomy - of those characteristics of God which make him distant (holiness, wrath) and those which bring him near (righteousness, love).

sometimes more in view than the other, that too is in the nature of the case, since imbalance must be corrected by counter-balance (as a high-wire walker who leans too far one way will compensate by dipping his balancing-pole the other). Thus it is that in certain situations there can be an emphasis on the preaching of law (*e.g.* Amos) while in others there is an emphasis on grace (Isaiah 40-66). Even here, however, the one-sidedness of the preaching can be overemphasised. There is no prophetic book which lacks the element of grace and promise. The widespread denial of Amos 9:11-15 to the prophet Amos is arguably only tenable in terms of a theory of divergent theologies.

I have used law and grace as an example of the kind of polarity which is inherent in Old Testament theology. The other polarities which were named in this category (God's knowability yet unknowability,<sup>24</sup> ritual and spontaneous religion<sup>25</sup>) could have been treated similarly. We might also mention here the poles of individual and community,<sup>26</sup> and even faith and doubt/scepticism. This latter is sometimes treated as a deep divide within Old Testament religion, the way of scepticism even being seen as an 'alternative to Yahwism' by one writer.<sup>27</sup> Seeds of scepticism are seen, for example, in a Psalm such as 73, contrasted with the more serene confidence

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25. It has often been held that the Old Testament 'outgrows' ritual religion and thus initiates a trend which continues and is completed in the New Testament. Passages in the prophets (*e.g.* Isaiah 1:11-17; Jeremiah 7:1-5,21-23; Micah 6:6-8) and in the Psalms (Pss. 40; 50) are cited as evidence. However, moderating voices are also to be heard, *e.g.* J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, New York, 1965, pp. 56f. See also my 'The Place of Ritual in Old Testament Religion', *IBS* 35 (1981), pp. 120-33, for an argument for the complementarity of ritual and non-ritual dimensions of worship in the Old Testament (and beyond).

26. For a critique of the old idea of corporate personality see J. W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament*, Oxford, 1978.

27. J. L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: an Introduction*, London, 1981, p. 208.

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of Ps. 37. It can be seen indeed as a topic of the lament Psalms in general (Why hast thou cast us off, O Lord?), but comes to a head in Ecclesiastes. Here too, however, faith and doubt should be seen as so closely related as to be implied by each other. This indeed is always the context in which doubts are expressed in the Old Testament, and they function - whether explicitly or implicitly - to put faith on a sounder basis.<sup>28</sup>

So much then for diversity that is in the nature of the case. The second broad category is that which arises from the fact that the Old Testament tells a story of God's dealings with man (Israel) which develops and moves through many phases. There are many examples: i. *Creation and Redemption*. The dialectic here is precipitated by historical events, namely disobedience, with one archetypal act of disobedience at the fountainhead. Redemption, therefore, is always restoration of the former played out in history. ii. *Politics and Religion*. This too is a product of God's historical dealing with mankind, this time in election, because in the course of his redeeming work he calls out a *nation* within which to teach religious devotion. Both politics and religion are necessities (not necessarily antithetical, as Isaiah shows) which co-exist as long as the nation does. The prophetic critique of the political leadership in its actual corruption never implies the impossibility of religion being cultivated within such structures, not that the religious community cannot also be political. (Of course the community, by way of an historical contingency, does become more religious and less political at a point in time.) iii. *Election and Universalism*. These come into severe conflict in Deuteronomy and Joshua, where the nation which is elected in order that the nations in general might be blessed by it (Gen.12:3) is mandated to destroy nations in order to occupy their land. Election can thus appear to be self-serving in Deuteronomy, and no doubt later exclusivistic nationalism appealed (and appeals) to this. I

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28. Goldingay, *art.cit.*, is not far from this position, and indeed his analysis of the faith-doubt relationship (based on W. Brueggemann, 'Psalms and the Life of Faith', *JSOT* 12 (1980) pp. 5-16, 24-30) is illuminating.

have argued elsewhere that the paradox of election for the nations' salvation is worked out in history in conjunction with the theological topic of due punishment for sin, and in a context in which 'nationalism' (of which 'Israel' is necessarily a manifestation) is part of a less-than-ideal, fallen world and consequently fragmented humanity.<sup>29</sup> Other opposites such as judgement and mercy, exodus and exile only become problematic if each pole is raised to an absolute (as 'exodus' has been in Liberation Theology), rather than being seen against a shifting historical background. (The corporate-individual tension thus has an historical dimension too, the 'individualism' of Ezek. 18 being rather an insistence in the context of exile - the apparently final cataclysm - that each generation remains morally responsible before God.)

### Unity, Diversity & Exegesis

In the foregoing I have been suggesting that where diversity exists in the Old Testament it does not always have the kind of significance which some writers attribute to it. We have observed particular diversities, and found that they could be explained either by the complexity of the business of depicting the relationship between God and man or by the historical vicissitudes through which Israel passed. The question still remaining is whether there is a kind of diversity in the Old Testament whose *essence* is discord or conflict? Are there competing beliefs, ideologies, attitudes among which we, as those who seek to confess a biblical faith, are compelled to select some and reject others? A complete answer to this could only be provided by an exegesis of the entire Old Testament (which we can hardly attempt here! - though Keil and Delitzsch attempted it over 100 years ago). We can say, however, that the answer lies in the direction of exegesis.

Of course it is not just as simple as that, since there is no *agreed* exegesis of the Old Testament. Sharp disagreements on

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29. In *Evangel* 13:1 (1985), pp. 2-5.

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particular points can occur even among those who are broadly in sympathy, more profound disagreements among those who are not. And this idea of 'sympathy' points us to the fact that exegesis is for no-one an independent exercise, objectively extracting *the* meaning of a given text. This is so because all interpreters work with a concept of what it is that they are doing, which in turn involves belief of some sort about the Bible. And even where that 'belief' is 'believing', agreement remains outstanding because of divergent opinions as to what biblical authority means in practice. The point has nothing to do with obscurantism. Indeed, exegesis and theology, hermeneutics and biblical authority go inextricably together. These dualities are not in conflict. The best understanding of 'systematic theology' is not the static rationalism caricatured by scholars such as D. E. Nineham,<sup>30</sup> but articulation of the counsel of God in still-learning submission to all that the Scriptures have to say.<sup>31</sup> True biblical interpretation is a dialectic between understanding of the letter (the jot and tittle) and understanding of the whole. Now with this idea of the 'whole', I have re-entered a debate which I touched on earlier, namely the question of canonicity. Is the extent of the canon 'up for grabs' (in the manner of Luther) or is it an immutable datum of hermeneutics (in the manner of Calvin)?<sup>32</sup> The former view is always likely to result in some sort of 'canon' within a 'canon', since 'inconvenient' books/passages/texts can be dismissed or at least devalued. The availability of this recourse can mean that exegesis is not pushed to its limits, answers are too quickly arrived at, conflicts too readily postulated. The idea of 'dialectic' in Scripture can become so powerful that texts in general are viewed as being the result of conflict or polemic

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30. *Op. cit.*

31. As championed by J. I. Packer.

32. Obviously the question is raised whether any one of the ancient 'canons' can be taken to be the 'true' one. Current critical orthodoxy tends to hold that the canon was in a fluid state at the birth of Christianity. However, see now R. T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church*, London, 1985 (And Protestantism) was well established by the turn of the eras.

between competing views (one, or some, of which, therefore, must be rejected). An example is Deut.18:1-8, often seen as the deposit of a long struggle between rival groups for recognition as the legitimate priesthood, a postulate which close examination reveals to be totally unnecessary.<sup>33</sup> In my view, then, this (Lutheran) view of canon leads to a kind of exegesis which makes insufficient demands of itself. Only a rigorous view of the authoritativeness of the whole canon of Scripture (understood to be represented, as regards the Old Testament, in the Hebrew Bible) releases the interpreter from the danger of subjectivity, and requires that any text be understandable in terms of all of Scripture, even if that means modifying slightly what one believes 'Scripture says'. A canon which can in principle be abbreviated, on the other hand, leads to the postulation of 'diversities' which are in fact illusory.

We return, in the light of these remarks, to Goldingay's 'trajectories'. In his discussion of the idea of human self-help in relation to the need for God's intervention he regarded the prophet Isaiah as most satisfactorily expressing the need to affirm both poles of the paradox, while Esther and Daniel (apocalyptic) leaned too far in one direction or the other. It is not clear from his treatment to what extent, or whether at all, Esther and Daniel may be read with profit (at least in connection with this theme). Yet there is in some sense a devaluation of these two books, which implies a certain view of canon. However, if Esther and Daniel are approached on the opposite assumption that they have some vital, distinctive role to play within Scripture, very different conclusions are likely to be reached. In fact the (very fashionable) view of Esther as a tract advocating self-help rather than reliance on God simply misses much that Esther has to say. It seems to me that Esther proclaims no 'other gospel' on the question of where to place one's trust. On the contrary, the book represents a firm belief

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33. For an exegesis based on an assumption of polemic see Gunneweg, *Leviten und Priester*, Göttingen, 1965. Against this see the present writer's *Law & Theology in Deuteronomy*, Sheffield, 1984, pp. 124-153.

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that proper human action fuses mysteriously with something lying directly behind events, which is well beyond human power to control. Why not say explicitly, then, that this power is God? This question is not answered by a rejection of the 'God-hypothesis', but rather initiates the search for other hermeneutical clues. My own view of the matter is that the absence of God's name in the book is, paradoxically, a kind of theodicy, a recognition that God often seems absent in the daily life of the believer, yet in reality is very present.<sup>34</sup> Here, then, we have something that Isaiah does not have, a message perhaps particularly pressing in certain situations, while Isaiah's (with his counsel against reliance on human institutions instead of God) is pressing in others.

Here I want to notice a paradox. The approach to the Old Testament which stresses diversity (wherever, that is, it retains an interest in hearing and using Scripture confessionally) can end in a flattening and a uniformity (as we have seen the Isaiah-Esther-Daniel spectrum reduced to the lowest common denominator of Isaiah). In contrast, where the unity of the Old Testament is regarded as the primary hermeneutical datum, the real diversity of the material can emerge, to the richer benefit of the believing community. This is important, for the unity I am advocating is not a ground for pan-harmonization. Nor should it be thought that harmonization at all costs is the way to do justice to the Old Testament's unity. The unity I am concerned for is one which is in contrast to the idea of competing theologies or ideologies. I would be less interested in pursuing a large-scale harmonization of Kings and Chronicles, for it seems to me that the significance of the presence of these two large books is as much explained by their differences as their similarities. The same could be said of the laws of Deuteronomy in comparison with those of Exodus-Numbers. In such cases the meaning of books emerges from the different ways in which they organize and present basically similar

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34. I have developed this in 'Diversity and Obscurity in Old Testament Books', *Anvil* 3 (1986), pp. 33-47.



materials.<sup>35</sup> Thus Deuteronomy in its laws about cult emphasizes such things as the brotherhood of the people, God's readiness to bless, the need for obedience, in general terms, to God's commandments; while laws on similar subjects in Exodus-Numbers relate more directly to holiness, understood ritually, and ritual instructions in general. These are obviously not mutually exclusive.

### **An Approach to Old Testament Theology**

It is clear from all that has been said that the Old Testament is marked by both unity and diversity. I have argued that all the difference in the world is made to exegesis depending on whether the interpreter begins with a concept of unity or a postulate of diversity. Having argued for the former approach, on the basis of a view of canon, I have maintained that, nevertheless, exegesis must do justice to the individuality of texts. I want finally to indicate three elements which I think must be present in any adequate Old Testament theology.

1. *A recognition of the forward movement, or historical character, of the Old Testament revelation.* We say that this factor in the Old Testament accounted for certain kinds of diversity which are found there. The 'historicality' of the Old Testament is, for von Rad, its primary characteristic and determines the way in which its theology should be written. Von Rad has seen something important. Because the Old Testament has so much material spread over so long a period there is a sense in which it can *only* be described chronologically. (Thus Old Testament theologies which are rigidly 'systematic' are under a great disadvantage.) Eichrodt actually does this also, except that he does it section by section in dogmatic categories. More important than this pragmatic

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35. See my *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy*, pp. 90f. Cf. p. 87 for an example of how one of Deuteronomy's laws (that of tithe) should be interpreted in context.

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consideration, however, is the fact that the Old Testament does point forward to and find its fulfilment in Christ.

2. *A theological-unifying element.* This is what, on the face of it, Eichrodt has and von Rad has not, though Eichrodt is in fact just as ready to accommodate kinds of diversity which I have called illusory. Eichrodt, does, however, point in the direction of making statements about God (in the sense of systematic theology) on the basis of the Old Testament. This is, as surely as von Rad's, a correct instinct, for those at least who see the Old Testament as a basis (with the New Testament) for confession. It is possible to do this by looking for what the various biblical books have in common, explicitly or implicitly, in their view of God and man. When one begins from an assumption of unity, naturally, this common body of Old Testament 'opinion' will be the greater. (Again, however, I stress that the individuality of books must be respected.)

To say this, however, is not quite the same as saying that there must be a 'centre' of Old Testament theology. It may be, indeed, that to identify 'God' as the centre of the Old Testament is not as bland as some have suggested. It is probably better to postulate some complex of ideas or 'centres' as a way of doing more justice to the whole Old Testament. Yet perhaps the search for a centre has proved unsatisfying because the Old Testament is not ultimately a thing in itself but rather a part of the whole Bible, whose 'centre' is Christ. This is not to argue for a Christological exegesis of the Old Testament which pays little heed to the demands of an historical methodology (in the manner of Vischer). Rather it is to say that it is impossible to appropriate the Old Testament for Christian theology without recognizing its 'preparatory' character, and its complementarity with the New Testament in the life of the Church.

3. *An existential element.* I include this, finally, as a kind of corrective to the former two. It is meant to recognize the fact that the Old Testament is the deposit of people's actual experience of God in many situations over many centuries.

There was in that experience a 'nowness', albeit infinitely repeated and taking ever new forms, which did not necessarily see itself in terms of a grandiose 'forward movement'. The heritage of Israel's knowledge of God, in great expanses of time, flowed into daily living that was mundane, and provided a self-understanding and grounds for worship. Countless men and women were, in their own experience, the recipients of God's salvation, without any conscious reference to the fact that they were within some grand scheme (though their theologians may have had such a consciousness), or that *their* experience was only in some way preparatory, inferior to what was prepared for generations to come.<sup>36</sup> This is an element which theologies have often failed to accommodate. Von Rad could find no place for the Wisdom literature in his history-oriented scheme; and 'centre'-based theologies can struggle equally to do it justice. (It is not only in Wisdom that we glimpse the routine of Israel's life; cf. the Psalms.) The complete Old Testament theology will allow for the Old Testament as experience of God. That is to say, it will recognize that the Old Testament has an element that is neither strictly forward-moving, nor constitutive of 'theology', but creative of religious experience, worship and life-style, and continues to function in this way for the believer and believing community. (Song of Songs, Psalms and the Wisdom books may be specially mentioned in this connection, though the narrative books can function similarly.) Once again we can, of course, transpose this into a higher key, for in Christ Christians have the experience of salvation. (Note the 'wisdom' language, incidentally, of Colossians 2:3 - the riches of wisdom/knowledge in Christ.)

Christian experience of God and salvation is, therefore, qualitatively different from that of the Old Testament saint. The latter's, however, was equally real, and the Christological fulfilment does not abolish the 'usefulness' of the Old

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36. Gunneweg has rightly insisted, on this point, *Understanding the Old Testament*, pp. 230f.

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Testament in this respect. Indeed, biblical ethics must always lean heavily on the Old Testament. It seems to me that a knowledge of what God-likeness is cannot be read off the pages of the Gospels without some dialectic taking place between what we see in Christ there and what the Old Testament teaches and suggests about character. Vriezen's view that Calvin's unifying approach to the Old Testament inevitably issues in an allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs is misguided.<sup>37</sup> The two Testaments as a resource for the building of Christian character must be read both in their own terms and as they reflect upon each other.

All three of these elements could obviously be developed much further (into an Old Testament theology!). I have tried to indicate some of the problems, real and imaginary, which confront the Old Testament interpreter, and to outline ways in which they may be overcome in a manner which does justice to the unity of the revelation of God.

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37. T. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, Oxford, 1962, p. 8.