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The Problem of Old Testament Theology and the History of Religion

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NUMEROUS books and articles in recent years have indicated a growing interest in Old Testament theology as an essential part of the discipline of Old Testament studies. Nevertheless there remains in the scholarly world a considerable body of opinion which is suspicious of this interest and even opposed to it, and which continues to place the primary emphasis on the philological, literary and historical tasks. According to this approach the religious content of the Old Testament is material not for a theology of the Old Testament so much as for a critical account of Israelite religious history. The task of Old Testament scholarship would then be to provide the factual data; on these data a theology might be constructed by those concerned with it; but the task of construction itself would lie beyond the realm of Old Testament studies proper.

Of those works which have appeared under the title of "Theology of the Old Testament" and which have approved themselves to Old Testament scholars as responsible work, the criticism might be made that they are in fact, and perhaps in spite of their title, systematic exegesis.¹ Instead of the familiar consecutive exegesis chapter by chapter as presented in commentaries, the "Theologies" present a systematic exegesis, collecting the material under various themes, displaying under each theme the disparities and similarities of opinion in various passages, seeking to assess them as a whole, and relating the themes one to another. This criticism would seem to have a considerable amount of foundation. It is not in itself a criticism against the books involved, but rather a clarification of what they are really doing, and therefore of what is in this case involved in the title "Theology." If this is true, the "Theologies" do not form a radical break with the historical-critical discipline; they represent rather a different principle of organization. Within the synthetic organization of the "Theologies" there remains ample room for recognition of and attention to the separateness of sources and periods as discussed by historical-critical study, including the critical history of religion. The synthetic work accepts without any reservation the priority to itself of philological, literary and historical research. The synthetic principle of organization will be derived from the nature of the subject-matter, i.e. the totality of Israelite religious thought.

1. In a paper read to the Society for Old Testament Studies at Cardiff in July 1956, Prof. W. A. Irwin made the parallel criticism that the "Theologies" in spite of their name were in fact forms of history of religion. The writer does not know if this paper has been published.

The necessity of some such synthetic study can hardly be denied. Synthetic thinking about the Old Testament will in fact continue, whether we grant it a place or not, if only because no one reads a body of literature without forming some general impression of it. Unless, however, deliberate and careful study is made by informed scholars, there will be no interchange of responsible and fruitful criticism, and the impressions formed will be uncorrected and uncritical.

The questions must now however be stated: 1. Is it true that such "Theologies of the Old Testament" as have appeared have been works of systematic exegesis as described above? 2. Can and should Old Testament Theology go in any way beyond such systematic exegesis? In other words, has Old Testament theology been in fact, and should it be, a descriptive science, or should it be something more? Does it seek only to describe the intention of the texts, taken as a whole, as systematic exegesis would do?

It is clear that "theology" in the normal sense of the word, as used of "Christian theology" for example, goes beyond this descriptive function. It does not merely describe the opinion of the Bible on the nature of God or of man, but seeks with the Bible as a basis to grapple with the realities to which the opinion of the Bible is a witness. In theology in the normal sense the doctrine of God is more than a description of the Biblical statements about Him; it involves at the least a commitment to the reality of the God known in the Bible. This commitment involves some kind of authority of the Bible; on the other hand it allows theology to go beyond what is explicitly stated in the Bible and to formulate what it holds to be a true doctrine of God as implied or demanded by the biblical indications—a development beyond mere description which would not take place without the initial commitment to the God of the Bible.

There is not space here to discuss in detail the various "Theologies of the Old Testament" which have appeared and to determine whether they have in fact conformed to the type of a descriptive science or to the type of a committed science like Systematic Theology. It is always possible that they have intended the one and accomplished the other. Miller Burrows in the introduction to his biblical theology writes:² "History asks what the religion of the ancient Hebrews and early Christians was; biblical theology asks what was God's judgment on that religion, and what significance it has for us." This would appear to put biblical theology in the class of a committed science. But the main content of his book seems nevertheless to conform to the scheme of a descriptive science. What it tells us in fact is what the Bible in general thinks, and not what God thinks of it. It is not perhaps difficult for the reader to discern the committed theology, the views that Burrows himself holds of God and of God's judgment of Biblical religion; but the explicit discussion is a descriptive one. His work is of course a theology of the whole Bible, not of the Old Testament alone, but the principle would not seem to be different.

2. Millar Burrows, *An Outline of Biblical Theology*, (1946), p. 4.

Eichrodt seems in his first sentence to state a descriptive task: "The task is to gain a comprehensive picture of the world of faith of the Old Testament."³ That Eichrodt is also interested in the Old Testament's "essential connections" (Wesenszusammenhang) with the New Testament⁴ does not invalidate this, for those connections with the New Testament are there set in parallel with "the consideration of the religious environment" of the Old Testament. The subject is still the depiction of the Old Testament's world of faith, but special attention is to be given to its relation to the religious environment on the one hand and the New Testament on the other. For Eichrodt plainly the central problem is to find a synthetic presentation as well as the dominant analytic presentation of Israelite religion; the study remains a descriptive one. The suggestion of Eissfeldt⁵ that Old Testament theology involves a special kind of knowledge peculiar to those who have faith and therefore a special method, was rejected by Eichrodt⁶ and has not widely approved itself. Even those volumes which adopt a committed Christian starting-point, like those of Vriezen⁷ or Procksch,⁸ seem to work in fact by a descriptive method in their presentation of the material.

It is probable that where opposition to the idea of an Old Testament theology continues to exist, it is because of a suspicion that the theologies, whatever their protestations, do in fact go beyond the limits of systematic exegesis. In some cases also perhaps there is the feeling that even systematic exegesis must by its own nature be inexact and that however hard it tries to preserve the historical contexts it cannot fail to uproot the texts to some extent from their original setting. In general the word "theology" is in itself the main stumbling-block, for it suggests to many the committed and normative discipline of dogmatics. In this respect the discussion of Old Testament theology seems to suffer from remnants of the nineteenth-century controversy between "science" and "dogma." In the terms of that controversy all that is not empirically demonstrable is either mere subjective opinion or externally imposed dogma. It should be observed however that Old Testament science is in its nature, as a study of a literature, more akin to the humanistic studies than to the purely "scientific." No one expects an education in the Latin classics to be confined to pure linguistics, to detailed historical research, or to a genetic study of the Roman religion; nor is a teacher of Greek philosophy regarded as "unscientific" if he goes beyond the presentation of the historical influences acting upon Plato to consider the living values of Plato's thought or its abiding truth. A literary education

3. Eichrodt, *Theologie des alten Testaments*, 1939, vol. 1, p. 1.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

5. Eissfeldt, *Israelitisch-juedische Religionsgeschichte und alttestamentliche Theologie*, (Zeitschrift fuer die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft) (ZATW) 1926, pp. 1-12.

6. Eichrodt, *Hat die alttestamentliche Theologie noch selbstaendige Bedeutung innerhalb der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft*. ZATW, 1929, pp. 83-90.

7. Vriezen, *Hoofdlijnen der Theologie van het Oude Testament*, 1949; for the problem of method see especially pp. 76-8.

8. Procksch, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 1950.

is an aesthetic and philosophic education. The sense of the Old Testament is however overwhelmingly religious and so the advance beyond the exact historical brings to the mind the threat of the normative dogmatic, as the aesthetic and the philosophical do not do; and the defence against this threat leads to the assimilation of Old Testament study to the "exact" sciences, and in particular to historical research. Yet even in historical research it is now clear that, as soon as a wider scope than minute detail is taken, exactitude in the sense of positive proof is no longer possible, so that historical study itself stands with the humanistic studies. But in such studies the absence of exact proof does not give a free rein to subjectivity. Progress is made in this realm not by exact proof but by continual criticism. A retreat from the task of Old Testament theology would mean a refusal to engage in such fruitful criticism because exact proof is not available.

So far we have made as if to accept the suggestion that Old Testament theology is in fact a descriptive science. Those who are suspicious of it may however be right in feeling that even where the terms are laid down as for a descriptive science there is a motive behind the movement towards Old Testament theology which in itself carries it beyond the limits of a descriptive science. In fact it must be clear that the demand for an Old Testament theology is at least in part a search for meaning. This search was stimulated by the dominance of the approach through history of religion. Especially where history of religion had an evolutionary bias, nothing had meaning except as a stage in the long process of development. Each fact was merely a product of the influences acting historically upon it, and it had no relation to any other fact except through their historical connection along the line of this process. The theology of the Old Testament was a movement to regain a realm of meaning where facts had significance as part of a recognizable whole. Even a descriptive organization of the material does not obscure this difference of purpose from that underlying purely historical investigation.

The search for meaning has not however been confined to the movement towards Old Testament theology. That form of history of Israelite religion which was characterized by a strong evolutionistic approach also believed itself to discern elements of meaning. Its evolutionism was not merely imported because it was a prevalent presupposition, but also because the evolution of the higher from the lower seemed in itself to be an adequate and indeed a fascinating sphere of meaning. To admire "ethical monotheism" and to contemplate the evolution which led to it was to discern meaning at its richest. The decline of evolutionism may be ascribed to a double cause; firstly a sense that "meaning" as evolutionism saw it is in fact no meaning; and secondly a realization that the evolutionist construction did not correspond to historical fact.

In so far as the movement towards Old Testament theology involves explicitly or implicitly a search for meaning, meaning to be found through synthetic comprehension, it may be held that it goes beyond a descriptive

science and must do so. It should be observed however that with the decline of evolutionism the situation in the history of religion itself has altered. Evolutionist historicism is giving way to a kind of phenomenology in which it is recognized that a religion is at any given time a totality which is more than the sum of the historical and environmental influences acting upon it. This totality is constantly changing and historical study investigates these changes as before; but historical treatment requires a respect for the existence of the totality as a living consciousness rather than its fragmentation into facts which are merely a stage on the way to something else. In this respect the study of religion seems to lie closer today to the synthetic interest of Old Testament theology than it did in the past. This fact has undoubtedly been an encouragement to the interest in Old Testament theology; but it raises in a new form the question of the distinctiveness of that theology from the study of religion. There is a danger that the nature of Old Testament theology should be understood in terms of its contrast with a form of history of religion which has in fact become obsolete, and thus lose living contact with progress in the latter study.

It is a commonplace that the Old Testament lays a unique stress upon history and upon the acts done by God in history. This fact is not, as seems sometimes to be supposed, a divine charter giving sole rights to the nineteenth-century conception of history. It is the source of a whole realm of problematic within the study of Old Testament religion, which would not appear if the essential content of that religion were a system of timelessly valid teachings or a spiritual otherworldly mythology. The problem can be condensed into the contrast between the two statements:

1. Israel believed God had acted in history.
2. God has in fact acted in history.

The truth of the first of these is universally acknowledged by any approach to Israelite religion. Is it possible to go farther and grapple with the problem of the second statement? To do so would clearly be to go beyond a descriptive function.

It would seem that the recognition of the distinction here involved, or at any rate treatment of it beyond the mere recognition of its existence, lies beyond the sphere of the history of religion. That study is able to do a great deal by calling attention to the fact that Israel's religion was a faith in God's actions in history and by contrasting this with other forms of religion. Perhaps this is all that can be done. The question will none the less remain whether that faith is in general a mass of illusion. To point at the "spiritual values" of a faith centred in acts done in history, while obscuring the question of the reality of any such acts, is at this point to pull wool over our eyes.

It is hardly possible to discern by purely historical investigation whether God acted in history or not. Jeremiah maintained that God had given Jerusalem into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. We can trace the historical

movement which led to the fall of Jerusalem without finding evidence of divine action. Even if we proved the substantial accuracy of narratives like that of the Exodus or the fall of Jericho we would still lack clear historical proof of God's action. Indeed in its extremest aspects nineteenth-century historical method made it *a priori* impossible that divine action in history, in the sense in which the Old Testament writers conceived it, could have occurred at all, so that the question was settled before the investigation began; and from evolutionistic schools a certain vague impression was left that the true divine action in history was the benign smile with which the Deity observed the evolutionary process.

It would not seem then that any direct answer to our second question, whether God indeed acted, is possible. But it may be that Old Testament theology should be a science which would be continually open to the problems and possibilities which lie here. To questions of truth it would have no preconceived or committed answers; indeed it would not aim at the production of answers at all. Its organization would however be such as to present the material in a form which would assist those who would ask and wrestle with the problems of truth as a part of their exegetical task. It would have no dogmatic principle other than the recognition of the possibility of truth.

In this it would not work by a special "theological" type of knowledge or method, as Eissfeldt suggested. Its method would remain the systematic or synthetic exegesis of the texts for what they claim to be, taking seriously but not accepting dogmatically their claim to know of divine acts or divine revelation. It would not be an assimilation to dogmatics, for there would be no attempt to produce doctrinal norms or formulations, nor would it be committed to any view of biblical authority. It would remain an exegetical science which would not allow dogmatic doctrine to force it to a result or any *a priori* conception of historical method to deny the possibility of a result.

Although most of the volumes of Old Testament theology already written have been the work of Christians, the science as outlined above is not in any sense a special preserve of committed Christian scholars. Christians recognize it as an essential part of the biblical discipline within Christianity. But other scholars, and Jewish scholars in particular, have the same right to pursue it. This does not exclude the possibility that from the dogmatic standpoint there may be such a thing as a Christian or a Jewish view of the Old Testament; but this is a different thing from the exegetical science, although it may have fruitful relations with it.

It is worth remarking perhaps that there is a task here for the believing Jew or Christian which is not satisfied by dogmatic theology as such. Dogmatics does not seek a doctrinal formulation for the content of all the particularities of the Bible. It has a doctrine of God but not a doctrine of what happened in 587 B.C. or of the meaning of the laws of ritual purity. In the important article already quoted⁹ Eichrodt used the distinction of relative

9. In *ZATW*, 1929, p. 85.

and absolute to separate between the empirical-historical sciences (including Old Testament theology) and the sciences of value, philosophy or dogmatics. Historical study can see events and quantities only in relation to others, i.e. relatively. But "The judgement over true and false, over the claim to absolute validity and invalidity, remains fundamentally reserved for the science of values, philosophy or dogmatics." Eichrodt's main point, that Old Testament theology is not a part of dogmatics, seems correct to the writer. But to wrestle with the question of true and false in relation to individual texts and events of the Bible is not to seek a decision in terms of absolutes. As dealing with particularities it remains relative. It is only a fundamentalist dogmatic which ascribes absoluteness to the particularities of the Bible. The terms "absolute" and "relative" do not in fact do full justice to the problem, for a revelation in history cannot be subsumed under them.

It has commonly been held that the task of Old Testament theology involves a selectivity towards the subject-matter. Eichrodt¹⁰ speaks of a "separation between essentials and non-essentials" which will make visible the total structure of the Old Testament's world of thought. Professor Rowley writes,¹¹ "Here, then, is a clear distinction between a history of Israelite religion and an Old Testament theology. For the former every religious idea and practice which marked any period of the story demands full consideration. For the latter all that is not of the essence of the faith of Israel is irrelevant." Dentan¹² prescribes a limitation to "*normative* Old Testament religion." For him, "The Old Testament theologian will make use of merely popular religion and superstitions only in so far as they seem to him in some way to illuminate the basic inner core of Israel's faith." What is normative is to be determined by the standards firstly of persistence or pervasiveness, secondly of distinctiveness.

In some ways it is this principle of selectivity which to the opponents of Old Testament theology seems most unscientific and subjective, and their criticism at this point is not without foundation. A basic distinction should be made between the limits of any one treatment of a subject and the limits of the subject itself. Any treatment of any subject by a writer involves a certain selectivity in choosing what seems to him essential, and the subjectivity of such a selectivity is, as Eichrodt has remarked, fruitful and creative, and in any case inescapable.¹³ It is quite another thing to maintain that there are limitations to the total scope of a subject, so that only part of the total data are relevant to it. Presuppositions will no doubt always exist; but when they are allowed to control the data by a scheme of limitation they destroy the scientific character of the work.

One or two illustrations may indicate the damage that can be done by the

10. *Theologie*, p. 2.

11. Rowley, *the Faith of Israel*, 1956, p. 17.

12. Dentan, *Preface to Old Testament Theology*, 1950, p. 57. See the whole discussion on this page.

13. *ZATW*, 1929, pp. 86-8.

principle of selectivity. Dentan's programme for Old Testament theology¹⁴ requires that only "Ideas," and not "History or Institutions" should be dealt with. To the present writer this seems certain to lead to distortion. Coupled with the exclusion of "Mere Archaeological Information" (for example no less a matter than "the details of the sacrificial cultus!") this would mean a great distillation or extraction process for the production of the ideas. The same writer, as quoted above, wants to ignore "merely popular religion." How this can work out can be seen in Koehler's study,¹⁵ where he maintains that the theological study of the Spirit of God must begin with Isaiah. The Old Testament contains references to the Spirit which are earlier than Isaiah. But these are "volkstuemlich und theologisch nicht greifbar." That is, one supposes, the kind of understanding of the Spirit in the Samson stories or in early prophetism has no theological value or content. Nor can a criterion be found by considering only concepts which are taken up in the New Testament; their absence in the New Testament might be as significant as their presence. Nor can we use distinctiveness alone as a criterion, excluding elements held in common with other religions; there are too many such elements in the Old Testament which are essential to its structure, e.g. those elements in the law of Israel which have close similarities with the law of other peoples. All such limitations of the material are without justification.

Professor Rowley¹⁶ is clearly aware of the danger here, and holds that a valid principle of selectivity can be found within the Old Testament itself. Certain practices and ideas exist in Israel but the Old Testament shows how they were progressively transformed, limited or abandoned, for example, blood revenge, polygamy, levirate marriage, and the massacre of conquered foes. Thus "the theology of the Old Testament must be based on those elements of Israel's distinctive faith which, incipient at first, were developed in her history, and on those ideas and practices which, even though of older or alien origin, were accepted permanently into her faith and made its vehicle." If in fact a principle of selectivity must be found, no doubt this is the best one. But the writer believes the whole idea of selectivity of data should be abandoned. Even on the instances quoted above, it seems that considerable theological importance remains to the levirate marriage even in late sources. The practice of the *herem* and of the holy war in general has, as von Rad has shown, enormous influence on the later religion, and is expressly treated in Deuteronomy; while ethically it presents serious problems which should not be avoided by Old Testament theology.

The principle of selectivity is an overstressing or a misunderstanding of the synthetic method of Old Testament theology. Old Testament theology has been too much attracted by the hope of finding a consensus rather like the phrase of Vincent of Lerins, *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus*. The task of Old Testament theology is not primarily the writing of

14. Dentan, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

15. Koehler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 3rd ed., 1953, p. 104.

16. Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-19.

books which will hope to come as near as possible to expressing this consensus. It is primarily an exegetical science and its reference is no narrower than the totality of the texts to be interpreted. In so far as each passage claims to speak of or from God, it sets a theological task. The synthetic method is required because this theological task cannot be adequately carried out on the basis of the individual text separated from all others of different date or origin. But the synthetic method is intended to bring us back to the particular text and draw out its own implications. The writing of complete "theologies" is a guide or tool for this task of exegesis, and not an end in itself.

In the writing of Old Testament theologies there has been much uncertainty over the principle of organization of the material. Attempts have been made to use the traditional organization into theology, anthropology and soteriology; others have worked with a central organizing concept like the covenant or the Lordship of Yahweh. If the account given above of the nature of Old Testament theology is correct, then it is not necessary that any final and perfect scheme of organization should be sought or found. The material itself must be the final judge whether any organization is adequate or not.