

A THEOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT—IS IT POSSIBLE?

The last thirty years have seen an efflorescence of *Theologies of the Old Testament* far outstepping any similar attempts in the New Testament field. We have had such 'theologies' from Eichrodt (1933-39), Sellin (1933), Vischer (1934-42), Kohler (1936), Heinisch (1940), Baab (1949), Vriezen (1949), Procksch (1950), van Imschoot (1954-56), Jacob (1955), von Rad (1957-60), most of which are now available in English translation. English scholars themselves have not been idle, even if their work in general has not had the same comprehensiveness as those of Continental scholars. We possess A. B. Davidson's *Theology of the Old Testament* (1904), the partial studies of H. W. Robinson, *The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament* (1913) and his more seminal 'The Theology of the Old Testament', in *Record and Revelation* (the 1938 SOTS symposium), the various investigations of aspects of Old Testament thought by H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of the Bible* (1941), *The Rediscovery of the Old Testament* (1946), *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (1950), *The Unity of the Bible* (1953) and *The Faith of Israel* (1956). We have further *The Bible Today* (1946) by C. H. Dodd, J. Phythian-Adams trilogy (especially *The People and the Presence*, 1942) and the works of A. G. Hebert. And then George Knight attempted a full-scale theology in 1959 with his *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament*. Such a roll call does not include the innumerable monographs and articles dealing with either the principles involved in such a theology or with specific topics in the religion of Israel. It is offered simply as background to discussion as to how scholars have gone about their task of constructing such a theology.

I have tried to show elsewhere¹ that a quest for a biblical theology—whether of the Old or New Testaments—must needs be a long and laborious process and the end is nowhere in sight, despite the imposing efforts of Old Testament scholars in particular.

Four main problems enmesh the subjects, the first for biblical theology in general, the other three with regard specifically to the Old Testament. There is the thorny path between dogmatic and biblical theology to be cleared up; the question of the employment of the concept of 'salvation-history'; the inquiry into tradition as a determining factor in the transmission of the sacred teachings and writings; lastly, the obscurity surrounding the editorial manipulations behind books and parts of books in the Old Testament.

Since the famous inaugural lecture of J. P. Gabler in 1787, *De iusto discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae*, the distinction which he drew

¹ In 'Encounter and Theology in the New Testament', *Clergy Review*, Vol. L, (February 1965), 91-102.

between biblical and dogmatic theology has been accepted as self-evident among non-Catholic theologians.² It is still something of a novelty among Catholic ones who have always tended to regard 'theology' as primarily speculative, and thus dogmatic and systematic. And even though *Divino Afflante Spiritu* called upon exegetes to open up the theological content of the whole Bible, the term 'biblical theology' is not to be found in the encyclical.³

It is outside my present scope to enter at any length into a discussion as to the legitimacy of such a dichotomy of theology. We are aware of the present tension between dogmatic theologians and exegetes (various aspects of which are examined in *Dogmatic v. Biblical Theology*, edited by H. Vorgrimler—the German title is less uncompromising: *Exegese und Dogmatik*; there is also the interesting essay of Heinrich Schlier, 'Biblical and Dogmatic Theology' in the Sheed and Ward Stagbook, *The Bible in a New Age*, edited by L. Klein). We are being constantly reminded, too, that our whole theology and catechetics should be biblically orientated—stemming from the Bible, biblical in cast, influenced by a daily liturgy derived from the Scriptures and leading to a greater appreciation of them—a 'kerygmatic' theology in which the Word is proclaimed rather than propounded. This is to affirm that any subordination of the Word of God to conceptual forms—such as found in any philosophy—is indefensible. And yet the message of the Scriptures has to be made over to men of different periods, of differing mentalities and the thought-forms of their times can be usefully employed as vehicles of that message. Biblical revelation cannot be entirely isolated from human speculation. Perhaps the relation between biblical and dogmatic theology is well expressed in the Rahner-Vorgrimler *Concise Theological Dictionary*, under the entry 'Biblical Theology':

A relatively independent science of biblical theology is necessary in present-day Catholic theology, not only for the sake of an orderly classification of the sciences but also on the basis of the specific, unique position of Holy Scripture itself. . . . Biblical theology, in the strict sense of *theological* exegesis, not exegesis in terms of the

² G. Ebeling, 'The Meaning of "Biblical Theology"', in *JTS* 6 (1955), 216f says that this dichotomy is traceable to A.F. Busching in a 1756 work, though popularized by Gabler.

³ The term 'biblical theology', according to C. Spicq, 'L'avènement de la théologie biblique', in *RSPT* 35 (1951), p. 561, n.1, was first used by M.K. Haymann in 1708; but Ebeling, *op. cit.* p. 214, attributes its introduction to C. Zeller in 1652. Haymann would have been the first to offer a book entitled *Biblische Theologie*.—In the last decades, there has been a marked Catholic interest in this notion and its development. Cf. Spicq, *op. cit.* pp. 561-74; *idem* 'Nouvelles réflexions sur la théologie biblique', *RSPT* 42 (1958), 209-19; S. Lyonnet, 'De notione et momento theologiae biblicae', in *VD* 34 (1956), 145; J. Van Der Ploeg, 'Une "théologie de l'Ancien Testament", est-elle possible?', in *ETL* 38 (1962), 429; R. A. F. Mackenzie, 'The Concept of Biblical Theology', in *Proceedings Cath. Theol. Soc. America*, 1955, pp. 48-73.

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development of religion, or in terms of mere historical philology, must of course, like all dogmatic theology, interpret Scripture in the Church according to the "proximate rule" of the faith as actually preached by the ecclesiastical magisterium which Christ commissioned . . . Consequently when dogmatic theology as a whole listens to God's written word in and with the authoritative Church, which itself is bound to listen attentively to Scripture, something totally unique occurs. Here and here alone, dogmatic theology is directed and does not direct, listens without really passing judgement as it does in its other functions ("historical" and "speculative").

There must, then, be a distinct science of biblical theology and this has the office (what Rahner has elsewhere called the 'critical function') of correcting dogmatic theology via the sources of Scripture. Should it not be that once the biblical theologian has uncovered the manifold content of Old and New Testaments, he makes way for the dogmatic theologian who must communicate the findings of his colleague within the contemporary situation in the Church, using a framework of more universal concepts for a wider audience than that first immediately envisaged in the texts? It is common knowledge that such an undertaking is yet to be adequately accomplished. Our manuals of dogmatic theology are outdated in both perspective and matter and Catholic biblical theology—largely monographs—seems to shun contact with any *developed* thought on what tradition and the magisterium have evolved from the data of revelation. Perhaps we shall find a lead in the better type of non-Catholic 'systematic theology' where, to an exposition of biblical thought, a reflection on the contribution of the past has been brought to bear. Yet the problem still remains: how is that basic biblical theology to be pursued which must lie as the foundation of a dogmatic theology, granted that it merits the status of an independent science, designed nonetheless to subserve dogmatics.

But our present concern is specifically with the problem of that biblical theology which centres round the Old Testament. We may now move on to note the three other aspects involved.

As to the question of salvation history and the theology of the Old Testament, we have to recognize how the character of Israelite revelation was firmly historical, even if such elements as mythology and idealization played their part in the interpretation of events. The call of Abraham, the liberation of the Exodus under Moses, the conquest of Canaan, the establishment of the Israelite nation with its theocratic monarchy, the successive subjugation under foreign powers, the catastrophe of the Babylonian exile, the restoration—such events were the matter for comment and interpretation by the moral and spiritual writings of the prophets, in the legislative and ritual collections of the priests, in the personal prayers of the psalmists, in the reflective literature of the Israelite humanists. Religious teaching was never isolated from

history—and this important fact has to be borne in mind for any attempted theology of the Old Testament. The encounter of God and man was inscribed on the hard surface of human existence, of human history.

And then in the transmission of such accounts, traditions we well know, were subject to a process not easily justified today. Truth was seen as a common community possession and thus open to the continuing reflection and development of that community. Past events were dressed with present preoccupations of the community. Tradition, oral and written, underwent the transforming influences of each crisis in the social, political and religious life of the people. Consequently it will often be difficult for us to isolate precisely event and interpretation, the time, the place, the *dramatis personae* of the acts of the drama we are watching. An Old Testament theology, even if it is aware of the rundelying saving history it is using as source, must not ignore that perspectives have often been inextricably fused.

Lastly, there is the problem of editorial processes at work in the formation of the sacred books. The interpretation and re-interpretation of the community of its history was echoed in the editing and re-editing, with elaborations, modifications, revisions of the sacred text. We rarely know who wrote what, who added to a writing; similarly we can be nonplussed with later events read back as earlier prophecies, with editorial work designed to tone down apparently unseemly passages of an outspoken sufferer, e.g. in Job. A progressive revelation within an historical context, made articulate by a living witness of the community which was derived from, or destined to, literary expression are all factors which point to an historical dialogue between God and man and between individuals in a community thus established. But they raise enormous difficulties when—careful to avoid introducing a static presentation of what has happened—we try to form these components into a theology of the Old Testament.

Such a variety of writers and editors, of readers, in different situations employing or accustomed to different thought-patterns, even living in different cultures, successive generations with a different dialogue—all these things reinforce the difficulty of 'composing' a comprehensive Old Testament theology. We may compare the acceptance of revelation by Hebrew, Israelite and Jewish groups. Even within such general groups, there were the contrasting traditions of the prophetic, priestly and wisdom movements, with their respective approaches from the moralistic and charismatic, cultic and institutional, humanist and personalist standpoints. Hence, as in the New Testament, there is a certain dialogue character noticeable in the majority of the Old Testament writings.

This gives rise to an extraordinary richness of theological positions in the Old Testament—though the voices we hear (as for the New Testament) represent only a fragment of life and thought from that distant past. We have only echoes of the dialogue conducted within Israel's long history. Whence the complexity, variations and mutual opposition of theological positions in the Old Testament Canon, even in the Old Testament revelation. The encounter between God and man was never static, but always dynamic. As in the case of a New Testament theology, I question if, in principle, such a theology of the Old Testament is realizable. This has not prevented, as I noted at the beginning of this article, the formation of expeditions to discover such a theology. We may compare four different teams which have gone to make up such search groups and even if their efforts have not proved so far, as successful as we would like, still there is much to be learned from them.

There are, first of all, those who attempt a *systematization* of Old Testament doctrine. This has followed two lines. There are those who seek to organize their material around a central idea. Eichrodt sees this as the 'Covenant' and follows the plan—God and the people, God and the world, God and man. Sellin chooses as archetechtonic structure the 'Holiness of God'; Kohler, 'God as Lord'. Others prefer the classical Theology-Anthropology-Soteriology synthesis—thus Davidson, van Imschoot and Heinisch (the two latter, Catholic scholars). A second group centres their Old Testament theology around *Christology*, the Old Testament being examined from the point of view of being a witness to Christ. Vischer states that because the central dogma of the Christian Church is that Jesus is the Messiah, he attempts to show how this fact binds the Old and New Testaments together: the Old tells us what the Messiah is, the New who he is. Procksch believes all theology is Christology since Christ is the centre of the coordinates of history and Christianity the universalization of what was previously particularized (throughout his work, Procksch evidences a tendency to express ideas in something approaching mathematical formulas). George Knight offers his *Christian Theology of the Old Testament* as a means to discover and present the total meaning of the Old Testament. He does not set out to analyze the progressive thought of Israel about God or about God's mighty acts. He seeks rather to discover the meaning of the Old Testament for the modern Church in the light of Christian revelation as a whole. We are getting a *kirchliche Theologie*. Thirdly, there are those who insist on a salvation-history approach to Old Testament theology as being the only realistic one—a line of thought pursued by a specifically British school: H. P. Robinson, C. H. Dodd, H. H. Rowley. They believe that history and revelation are so inextricably

bound up that revelation is brought down into the 'actuality of living' which must be recognized as a 'category of reality'—thought cannot be separated from fact. The historical element is fundamental since revelation of divine truth, expressed through the form of historical events, demands that a principle of succession in time be considered essential. The fourth and last school of thought was inaugurated by the Heidelberg scholar, Gerhard von Rad, and his is the most recent significant attempt at an Old Testament theology. Von Rad advanced a new methodology in this sphere: the recognition and application of traditions for such a theology. Volume I of his work was subtitled 'The theology of Israel's historical traditions' (English translation 1962, which included discussions found in the second German edition arising from reviews of the work); volume II was subtitled 'The theology of Israel's prophetic traditions' (English translation 1965). In von Rad's view, Israel's traditions derive from cultic schemes and not from historical records. They are a *confessio*, shot through with Israel's response, her faith, to God's revelation. And this faith is basically from a theology tied to history, with its fundamental tenets from her past history now expressed according to her growing self-awareness.

We may look a little closer at this new approach of von Rad, particularly at his second volume on the prophetic traditions which exemplify much of his general principles. The general contents of this volume fall into three main parts: (i) preclassical prophecy (e.g. with Elijah and Elisha), the calling, style and freedom of the prophet; certain main features of prophecy (the word of God, history, eschatology, the Day of Yahweh); (ii) An examination of the individual prophets from Amos to Daniel. (iii) The relationship between the Old and New Testaments expressed in terms of continuity and fulfilment. The author suggests that it is outdated as well as mistaken to use the previous descriptions of the prophets as 'ethical monotheists' or 'spiritual personalities'. We are dealing rather with more down-to-earth characters: they must be given back to salvation history—they speak out at critical times for their people, reminding them of their sacred past and of their promised future. We may no longer set up an opposition between 'prophetic' and 'cultic' (or priestly) religion, nor treat the prophet as apart from the Torah. The principal tradition to which prophetism is most tributary is salvation-history and the most novel and startling aspect of this tradition in the prophets is their employment of it as a basis of condemnation. Other cultic traditions found in the prophets are the saving aspects of creation, the vocation of the prophets, the exodus, the Sinai covenant, priestly laws, northern levitical traditions, 'David', 'Zion', the 'Temple', the 'Servant'. The traditions on these themes are then discussed in the various

prophets. Von Rad makes the interesting observation that since apocalyptic is not rooted in salvation-history, and thus cannot perceive the prophetic dimension of history as a *confessio*, it cannot be said to derive from prophecy (many will disagree here). He derives it more from the wisdom movement. If eschatology appears in the prophetic writings it is because the prophets placed God's action in present or future history on the same basis of intervention as in the past—a past which points to a future pattern of intervention (a new exodus, a new covenant, etc), rather than to a definite historical period of time.

Finally, von Rad sees the New Testament prepared for by the traditions in the Old in this sense that the repeated interpretations of past generations were thrusting forward towards the definitive fulfilment with Christ. The New Testament use of the Old—often so casual and arbitrary—rested upon the basic Christian conviction that now the mounting structures of Old Testament cultic tradition had achieved final construction.

All these schools of thought, I have said, have been proved inadequate or have come under heavy criticism. The obvious danger of those who would systematize is that the Old Testament's living and concrete experience of the world of God is hardly amenable to a system with its bloodless abstractions. The Old Testament, witnessing to such a diverse encounter of God and man over so long a period, resists such a systematization since ideas are present in it only in historical events and institutions. The static unity of a systematization cannot define the dynamic unity of that growth and outgrowing of Old Testament faith and worship. The Christological approach can (and has) too easily lent itself to seeing Christ envisaged in every text and to raising every Old Testament assertion to a Christian level—even if the Old looks forward to the New as to something beyond itself, and the New backwards to its preparation and explanation. The difficulty of the salvation-history approach is one that must be inherent in the presentation of such a vast corpus of belief according as there is a constant weaving and interweaving of themes and history. As to von Rad's method (over which I have lingered somewhat because of its impact), it is too early yet to see how effective this may become. But one must surely wonder whether too great a concentration on Israel's traditions as cultic confession has monopolized an attention which should have been shared with other factors at work behind their transmission. Was that transmission maintained principally because it was a 'credal formula?' Were there not—as in any continuing tradition—brute historical factors to be found in any people's handing on of their history, even if—in Israel's case—her traditions were derived from revelation?

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Nevertheless, if universal agreement has been lacking on the way to approach a theology of the Old Testament and consequently on the various 'Theologies' we have been looking at, still the efforts of these schools have taught us much about the faith and life of Israel, and that alone has justified the immense labours of dedicated scholars.

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