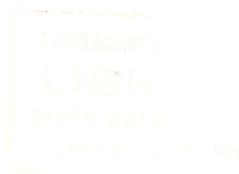


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WHITHER OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY?

R. E. CLEMENTS

This year has witnessed the publication of two substantial volumes on the subject of the history of the discipline of Old Testament theology. The first, by John H. Hayes and F. C. Prussner,¹ deals with an outline history of the subject's development since the early 17th century and the second, by Henning Graf Reventlow,² concerns itself with 20th century developments only, but deals with issues more thematically. Together the volumes provide ample material for reflection and, in their separate ways, serve to reflect much of the variety of viewpoint and uncertainty that pervades the subject at the present time. They also alert the serious student of the subject to many of the great disparities and disagreements that have hovered over the subject, particularly in the present century. In fact, although Graf Reventlow's title points to the problems inherent in the subject, it is not altogether out of court to suggest that the subject itself has become something of a problem in its own right. Clearly it does exist as a subject, since so many have written in pursuit of it, but it still needs to be asked by what kind of academic authority it exists and what kind of aims it may be thought to serve. By starting so far back Hayes and Prussner intrude into a period of Christian theology when it has to be asked whether there really was any Old Testament theology at all within the confines that the subject may be thought to demand for the modern day student. Christian Protestant theology was required to be biblical in a sense that stretched across both Testaments and much that was really quite essential to the use and treatment of the Old Testament was necessarily linked to the question of the relationship between the two Testaments. In fact, until the impetus grew for a more rigidly historically controlled approach to biblical theology towards the close of the 18th century, the idea of producing an entirely separate and distinct Old Testament theology did not properly arise.³ It is also noteworthy that, when it did arise, it very quickly lost ground and support again during the 19th century in favour of critical attempts to reconstruct historically a history of ancient Israel's religion. No doubt it is true that, in their several ways, these histories made all kinds of theological assumptions, but they did set very clear and desirable goals. Nor can one fail to note, in researching through the relatively few volumes that appeared with the title "Theology of the Old Testament", that they reflected a rather conservative, and in some degree almost pietistic, approach to the material. Much of their *raison d'être* was undoubtedly provided by a deeply felt concern to achieve some sort of rapprochement between the critical approach to the literature of the Old Testament, which was powerfully compelling re-assessments of its historical and literary origins, and the older and more traditional religious concerns with the Bible and the theological expectations which it has aroused. To this extent it cannot be dismissed as too arbitrary and cavalier a suggestion to regard almost all the Old Testament theologies that appeared in the 19th century as rather cautious, and in varying degrees, conservative, attempts to bridge the older knowledge about the Old Testament with the new critical insights that represented the vanguard of serious research. There is much to favour giving most attention therefore to the issues raised by the search for an Old Testament theology in the 20th century, which is what Graf Reventlow offers to the reader.

It is noteworthy that this latter volume takes a moderately firm and positive approach to its subject, pointing to problems that have been thrown up from within the various theologies that have appeared and noting only the broader context of the fundamental assumptions that are raised by it. There are however certain very basic features that come to the fore in reflecting back over four centuries of use of the Old Testament in Christian theology in the manner that Hayes and Prussner do. Perhaps we may note here a very obvious point, which may nevertheless be so obvious as to be overlooked. This is that the very title "Old Testament" theology raises the issue of why this first part of the biblical canon can be described as "Old" and what precisely is meant by this. Clearly it is on the one hand a term of relationship, contrasting the first with the second division of the biblical canon. It is also an allusion to the supersession of the old Mosaic covenant, or testament, made on Mount Sinai, with the new covenant made possible for the Christian Church through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. Lk.22:20). An emphasis upon the distinctness and separation of the theological content of the Old Testament from that of the New therefore contrasts very strongly with the earlier emphasis upon the unity of the Bible, which in many and varied ways formed so prominent a characteristic of both Catholic and Reformed assumptions in biblical interpretation. This is not merely being concerned with a verbal quibble, but does point to a number of in-built difficulties and tensions for the subject of an Old Testament theology right from the outset. How are the two Testaments related to each other and how are we to trace the ideational connections between them, as distinct from the purely historical conjunction? All along this has beset the would-be Old Testament theologian with a painful choice in the way in which he endeavours to fulfil his task.⁴ Either he, or she, can put the New Testament completely out of consideration and concentrate on the contents of the first part of the canon without reference to it, or, alternatively try to bring in some limited engagement with the themes and ideas of the New Testament without infringing a true awareness that these originated later, and in a new religious context. Either way the fact of the New Testament poses a dilemma for the Old Testament theologian because it is the existence of this later material which renders the Old Testament "Old" in the theological sense that categorises its contents. Nor can the fact of Judaism and the Jewish interest in this literature provide more than a limited assistance since here this literature does not form an Old Testament at all but rather remains the Hebrew Bible, the primary source documents of its faith which retains its authority and validity. In any case the particular form of an "Old Testament theology" has never approved itself to Jewish scholars and writers as a suitable way of interpreting the source documents of its faith.

The goal of raising these points is simply to try to highlight the fact that both from a religious and historical point of view it was the intense interest in the historical antiquity of the ideas and themes presented to us in the Old Testament which generated a new concern in a distinctive subject of an Old Testament theology. This awareness certainly retains its validity, but it needs now to be asked concerning the extent to which this sense of historical antiquity attaches to the Old Testament in a way, and to a degree, which cannot be said to be true of the New Testament. In a strictly historical sense this latter also belongs to a past era of human civilisation which was markedly different from our modern day world. Nor has this fact escaped the attention and concern of scholars to a

quite significant extent in current research. The view that gained much currency and popularity among theologians in the latter half of the 19th century – that the historical-critical approach to the Bible has weakened and undermined the sense of a divine revelation in the Old Testament, but has not affected the New Testament in the same way – must be regarded as a very doubtful assumption. In all essentials the historical-critical approach to the biblical sources affects both Testaments more or less equally. Even more emphatically we must insist that it is fundamental to the New Testament in all its writings to claim that the revelation of God which it presents is wholly continuous with, and foretold by, the revelation which God has given in the Old Testament.

This brings us back to certain convictions that I endeavoured to adumbrate earlier in my book *Old Testament Theology. A Fresh Approach*.⁵ These are that the various aspects of the question concerning the relationship of the New Testament to the Old belong very firmly within the subject of an Old Testament theology. Furthermore the awareness that Judaism as we know it historically, and Christianity as it emerged during the early centuries of our era, represent two different ways of responding to the ideas and expectations engendered by the Old Testament literature also deserves consideration in an Old Testament theology. We can proceed to note a further feature which also needs not to be overlooked if we are concerned about a future for the subject of Old Testament theology. This is that, just as there has emerged a kind of pause in the rush to produce further volumes of Old Testament theology, there has arisen a strengthened and intensified interest in the question of hermeneutics and the assumptions and principles by which the biblical material is to be interpreted for the modern reader.⁶ Part of this has been stimulated from circles of literary concern with the Bible, but part also has found support from the knowledge that, since the Bible continues to be read, it is important to show such readers how it can and should be interpreted.⁷ This too raises theological issues, and in practice it must be insisted that it is not truly practicable to divorce hermeneutical from theological questions. Although therefore there is a strong, and often thoroughly justifiable, contention on the part of overtly literary approaches to the Bible that these offer a “neutral” position so far as theological questions are concerned and that theological exegesis has frequently been guilty of lamentable failure to grasp the true nature of biblical texts, these points can only carry a modicum of weight. It can no more serve the needs of those who read the Bible to adopt an exclusively secular “literary” approach than for those whose interests are theological to ignore the literary nature of the texts in which they are looking for theology. The fact that in the past some false assumptions and crude misinterpretations have appeared does not invalidate the fact that both ways of approaching the material can usefully contribute to each other. The questions of hermeneutics and the questions of theology overlap with each other. Here too then is a further area of importance for the Old Testament theologian of the future to consider. The literary character of the Old Testament necessarily determines much of what it conveys by way of ideas about God, man, the world and the nature and possibilities of human destiny.

If we look back over approximately two centuries of attempts to produce a clear and consistent Old Testament theology therefore, since the time when J. S. Semler and J. P. Gabler pressed the claims for a sharper line of division

between the contents of the Bible and the use that is made of this in Christian theology, then certain prominent features can be discerned. The first of these is that there has been a sharp tendency to over-dramatise and over-value the purely historical dimension of research. This is wholly understandable when we look at the way in which the European Enlightenment initiated a whole new dimension of historical study. Good as this has been, one can clearly have too much of a good thing even in biblical studies. Other aspects of the biblical material deserve more consideration than they have, at times, been given. The second prominent feature is that, once historical research began to make a deep impression into a number of traditional assumptions about the Bible, Old Testament theology seemed to be one way of softening the impact of this. In consequence a strongly defensive and conservative trend has therefore consistently re-appeared in efforts to sustain interest in the Old Testament by presenting its contents as a theology. Whether this has been a good idea is questionable, and it is far from clear that Old Testament theologies have really represented the vanguard of Old Testament research. The third point has been that, since the Old Testament exists as a literature which retains, even in the present, a primary attraction for people on account of its religious interest and associations, we cannot properly ignore this religious commitment. How to read the Old Testament, when suggested as a guide for the well intentioned reader, requires something of a religious sensitivity and outlook since the documents that are to be found in it emanate from a culture which was through and through religious in its assumptions. If on the one hand we have been able to claim that Old Testament theologies have seldom represented the most significant and popularly engaging literature about the Old Testament, it is also true in the other direction that rather self-consciously secular and non-theological approaches to it have failed to grasp and convey its true meaning.

We may also, in looking back over approximately two centuries of attempts to write an Old Testament theology, feel that many of the most interesting insights into it have arisen from what theologians and philosophers who have not been specifically trying to write an Old Testament theology have had to say about it. In the 19th century, for example, the impact of F. D. E. Schleiermacher upon the understanding of this literature has been significant, even if largely negative. So also, in the 20th century, has been the influence of R. Bultmann.⁸ Nor does the catalogue of those who have aroused a considerable level of re-awakened concern with the Old Testament end at the frontiers of theology in the narrower sense. Here we should certainly draw attention to a feature that has all too frequently been overlooked in surveys of the changing fortunes of biblical theology during the present century. This rests on the awareness that theology, as an intellectual discipline, has necessarily changed very considerably in its underlying aims and assumptions from what it regarded as proper to its task a century ago. This rests in part on the relinquishing of certain of its claims, and on its much deeper involvement in its social and human awareness of the role of religion in human conditions. It is no longer strange to find such themes as “theology and culture”, “the significance of the history of religion for theology”, and the whole question of the role of religion throughout the entire history of human civilisation as primary subjects demanding theological explanation and attention.

It is in this area that the intending Old Testament

theologian can draw greatest confidence and stimulus for continuing at his task. The insights and disciplines of Social Anthropology, the study of the History of Religion in an all-encompassing range, and the role that may be assigned to each individual religious tradition in searching for an answer to the question "What is Man?" point us back more firmly than ever towards grappling with the way in which these issues are raised in the Old Testament. Is it really too venturesome to claim therefore that a surprising reversal of roles has taken place between what pertained in the 19th century and what is true today, so far as the study of the Old Testament is concerned. A century ago the Old Testament appeared to the more venturesome and *avant garde* theology to be an encumbrance, and even a liability, to the inheritance of the Christian Church. With little real interest in any meaningful dialogue between Christians and Jews, a sense that the discovery of the complex, and in many ways self-evidently human, origins of the biblical literature prejudiced popular commitment to its authority, it is not surprising that some theologians argued openly that the Old Testament could be left aside. It was never really important to the Christian faith, and it had, at best, provided a useful support for earlier generations. Very many others simply came to a point of paying less and less attention to the Old Testament, and were careful to avoid making more than a very occasional explicit appeal to its writings. Now a great change has taken place in which the more searching and profound questions of theology which face the Christian faith are demanding more and more attention to the Old Testament inheritance of the Christian church. Where did the Christian idea of God derive from? Where did the Christian understanding of Church and community take shape? How should Christians relate their understanding of God to that of other faiths? All of these issues point more and more firmly to a serious Christian re-engagement with features that emerge from the Old Testament. When we ask questions about how the earliest Christians thought of themselves, how they framed their position towards political society, how they brought together a distinctive range of ethical ideas and social values and how they framed images of the origin and destiny of the universe, we are forced inevitably back to look at what the Old Testament has to bring to our attention on these questions.

It may appear immediately that the need to formulate theological ideas and propositions in relation to a broad set of social, anthropological and cultural concerns could be regarded as representing only one particular segment of the theological spectrum. It is in many respects a segment which has appeared to be removed by some distance from those areas which have more traditionally belonged to biblical theology. Yet it must be argued that this is yet another indication of the extent to which theology has changed during the past two centuries and which make the older demarcations between a biblical and a dogmatic theology almost stultifying and moribund. Clearly the Bible, and with this the whole historical Christian revelation, originated in an intellectual and social context which was very different from our own. Ideas of the supernatural, of the power and efficacy of religious rites, of the pervasive impact of holiness, of contrasts between the spirit and the flesh, and of the psycho-physical nature of humankind make the assumptions present in the biblical world-view appear very different from our own. To what extent they really are different, and to what extent they represent more superficial distinctions which are not so deep-seated once the surface level of words and images has been penetrated, is

a matter for further discussion. No doubt much will continue to be written in relation to such themes. The point that needs to be made here is that, once biblical theology reached the stage where it became clear that simply collecting together the various words and ideas to be found in the Bible and fitting them into a scheme failed to penetrate to the heart of the content of this literature, the need for the Old Testament becomes all the stronger.

It could always be claimed that, from a strictly historical point of view, the religion and literature of the New Testament alone represents a strikingly narrow base from which to understand the Christian religion. Not only is this true in the narrow historical sense of a chain of events, but it is also true in the deeper cultural and anthropological sense that, without the Old Testament, it is next to impossible to uncover where the ideas, values and fundamental assumptions of the New Testament about the world and the place of humanity upon it derive from. The Old Testament provides the New Testament with a dimension of depth, and it can no longer be calmly assumed that students of the New Testament can take this element of depth for granted. Increasingly we find that the questions put to theology about what it is and what it aims to achieve are questions which probe into this dimension of depth. The existence of a supernatural dimension to life, the superiority of monotheism to polytheism, the ethical nature of religion are merely some of the areas where traditional Christian answers can no longer be taken as self-evidently right, but stand in need of rethinking and fresh definition. Without the basis of the Old Testament from which the Christian tradition drew these convictions and beliefs the biblical scholar would find his resources severely curtailed.

We may single out some of the features which suggest that the future lines of interest and research in Old Testament theology may show some significant departures from what has hitherto been the case. Very prominently here we may draw attention to a point already made. Theology and hermeneutics belong together since there are so many areas in which the assumptions and aims of the one overlap with those of the other. It has been objected at times that the kinds of Old Testament theologies to which we have become accustomed are themselves based upon very particular and distinctive hermeneutical aims. Nor are these objections altogether wide of the mark, since much of the debate, for instance, about where the "centre" of the Old Testament faith is to be located can be regarded as itself belonging within the area of hermeneutics. If the Old Testament faith does not display a formal and explicit centre of its own, then it must lie to some extent in the aim of the interpreter to formulate what such a centre should be. Nor can the would-be Old Testament theologian be as complacent as some of this recent predecessors have been in dismissing as of no great account the history of the way in which the Old Testament has been understood until the rise of the historical-critical movement. Vague and eccentric as much of this has been, many of the basic assumptions that have shaped it have not been hard to find. Furthermore it should be re-asserted with as much vigour as possible that the goal of handling the Old Testament from a theological point of view is that of enabling all men and women, whether they profess a religious faith or not, to understand and appreciate what is to be found in the Old Testament.

It may be appropriate at this point to question whether what we should call "Old Testament Theology" in the sense that has come to be attached to such a discipline is

really the right and best way of fulfilling such a task. The very element of isolation and self-containedness which is implicit in such a title poses restraints and problems of its own. As we have already pointed out, such a title is not without its ambiguities since it draws attention to the fact that this Testament is construed as "Old" in a theological sense which can only be resolved by reference to the second part of the biblical canon. Where the theological insights and resources of the Old Testament come most clearly to the fore is in relation to many of the most central ideas and themes of the New Testament, of the Christian faith more widely, and of Judaism which appears as a sister religion to Christianity based on its Old Testament inheritance. There are many ways therefore in which the Old Testament can be used and developed theologically besides that of presenting it within a separate subject discipline peculiar to itself. We have sought to claim that, even though it was devised as a bridge discipline between the modern critical view of the biblical literature and its earlier use in the formulation of Christian doctrine, Old Testament theology has tended not to do this. It has, instead, become isolated and separated from both, so that it has appeared as one of the most esoteric of Christian pursuits.

One title has emerged with great frequency and popularity among a large number of biblical interpreters in recent years which also needs to be noted. This is that of "narrative theology", which recognizes that a story, or even an extended epic narrative, has been constructed or adapted to illustrate a religious point. This fact draws attention to the considerable amount of narrative story-telling material in the Bible. Although this is not the only class of literature to be found in it, it is undoubtedly the most prominent and most important. The absence of what we should recognize in the modern world as formal theologizing, or the presentation of theological propositions, in the Bible highlights the significance of this narrative story-telling form. Those who read the Bible and acquire from it a set of religious ideas and attitudes do so in an oblique fashion from what they discern in individual stories and then from the larger way in which these stories are brought together into a whole. This is yet a further reason why any worthwhile "Theology of the Old Testament" ought not to depart too far from the form in which the literature now actually appears. Hermeneutics and theologising belong in close relationship to each other and this aspect of the need to learn how to read a story so as to discern the point that it is actually trying to make is of great importance. Failure to do this must certainly be regarded as the worst consequence of the over-emphasis upon history and the reality of historical events in modern critical research so far as the pursuit of an Old Testament theology is concerned. I am not here wanting to advocate a kind of radical "mythologising" or abandonment of belief in the historicity of much that is contained in the Old Testament. Far from it. The point is rather that, in learning to read a biblical narrative with a critical eye, the concern with its historical factuality may represent only a small part of the meaning that it is endeavouring to convey. This is clearly so in regard to the story of the exodus from Egypt where, in the 15 biblical chapters which deal with the event, most of the interest focuses upon the nature and sovereignty of the Lord, the God of Israel. What this means in regard to oppressive tyranny, rival religious claims and the place of freedom in human society are spelt out very clearly in such a way as to push the concern with providentially ordained events to the very edges of narrative significance. An effective Old Testament theology must surely be fully aware of the need

to focus attention upon the theological implications of the Old Testament as a book of stories in the popular sense. In fact it may be suggested that the extraordinary extent to which a number of Old Testament theologies in the past have ignored the actual literary form of the material they are concerned to interpret has reflected a measure of self-defeating over-confidence on their part. If we are in the present being compelled to rethink why we need to use and interpret the Old Testament theologically, then it is as well that we should avoid making too many assumptions about the place that others accord to the subject.

In another field also we may expect to find some very different assessments and alignments of material in future work from those that have prevailed in the past. Especially here it is to be hoped that the trend towards establishing a sharp line of division between creation and history and between historical order and natural order, which appeared at one time to be so assured, will be reversed. No overall portrayal of the relationship between the human and the divine worlds, between God and humanity, and of a divine providence controlling the origin and destiny of all things, can really tolerate a sharp distinction between history and the natural order. So too it is clear that in what it has to say about the creation of the world the Bible is as much telling us about the way things are as it is concerned to explain the way things were. In this respect it is striking that the justifiable scientific interest in the origin of the universe, which began to emerge with the new physics in the 17th century and reached a kind of high-point with the debates about evolution in the mid-19th century, imposed a level of false expectation upon the biblical material dealing with the relationship between God and the natural world. Happily, with the need for strongly defensive positions past, biblical interpretation has moved forward to open up some of the most interesting, discerning and original areas of research in its studies of what the Bible has to say about creation and a divinely ordained world order. Here too then is a further reason for expecting the directions of future work in Old Testament theology to be different from those that have prevailed hitherto.

Finally it may be urged that the growing interest in Religious Studies as a subject with a range of disciplines extending far beyond those traditionally associated with the pursuit of Christian theology draws all the greater attention to the significance of the Old Testament. For most modern readers, whether academically inclined or not, the encounter with the Old Testament is the most direct and immediate, if not the only, encounter with the world of ancient religion. The intricacies of polytheism, the complex rules of holiness, the interaction of health, prosperity, fertility and the mysterious force of life itself are to be found here in a very clear and striking fashion. Contrastingly the fear of death, demonic powers, and disease all show how vital and all-pervasive was the need to discern the good and bad features which confronted every human being. From this perspective too therefore, it may be argued that the Old Testament has an irreplaceable role to fulfil in answering the question of "Why theology?" and why the pursuit of theology remains a vitally interesting and constructive part of the humane disciplines of the modern world.

NOTES

1. J. H. Hayes & F. C. Prussner, *Old Testament Theology. Its History and Development*, London, 1985.

2. H. Graf Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century*, Eng. Tr. J. Bowden, London, 1985.
3. Cf. R. Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 25), London, 1973; O. Merk, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments in ihrer Anfangszeit* (Marburger theologische Studien 9), Marburg, 1972. G. Hornig, *Die Anfänge der historisch-kritischen Theologie* (Forschungen zur systematischen Theologie und Religionsphilosophie 8), Lund - Göttingen, 1961.
4. This point is made by D. L. Baker, *Two Testaments. One Bible*, Leicester, 1976.
5. R. E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology. A Fresh Approach*, London, 1978.
6. The importance for theology of hermeneutical issues is well demonstrated by A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*, Eng. Tr. J. Bowden, London, 1978; J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament. Method in Biblical Study*, London, 1984.
7. The wide interest in the volume by R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York, 1981, should be noted. This has significant theological implications, even though it sets out to hold clear of dealing with specific theological questions.
8. In this regard note must be taken of the very stimulating collection of essays *The Old Testament and Christian Faith. A Theological Discussion*, ed. B. W. Anderson, New York, 1969, which focussed upon an essay by R. Bultmann.

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