

# OT 501--Old Testament Introduction

## Lecture Notes—Theology and the New Testament

This section of notes is based upon John Rogerson, John, *Beginning Old Testament Study*. Second Edition (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998). (*BOTS*)

### OT Theology

--In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars produced many works of “biblical theology,” and especially “OT theology.” As Barton<sup>1</sup> pointed out, this quest left most people disappointed, or even confused. The OT does not present a “theology” in any systematic way, rather presenting God’s actions as interpreted by the biblical writers, who clearly represented only a small portion of ancient Israel’s population.

--Christians often speak of a “progressive revelation,” or “winding quest” (as delineated by Barton), leading from the polytheistic world of Mesopotamia, through the brutal and violent world of the judges into the monotheistic words of the prophets, and finally culminating in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ in the NT. While certain truth may exist in this understanding, problems still abound (such as the violent revolutionary attitudes still existent in NT period Judaism).

--W. Eichrodt

--Eichrodt<sup>2</sup> argued that the theology of the OT could be presented in an understanding of Israel as God’s covenant people. Therefore, he centered his theological presentation of the OT on the theme of covenant. Because of the covenant, God expected complete allegiance from His people.

--Gerhard von Rad

--Von Rad<sup>3</sup> centered his presentation on *heilsgeschichte*, or “salvation-history.” He based his presentation on confessional statements, such as Deut. 26:5-9, where the basic tenets of God’s activities with Israel were remembered and celebrated.

--“Biblical Theology Movement”

--This movement<sup>4</sup>, primarily in the 1960s and 1970s<sup>5</sup>, sought to understand the OT presentation of God and His actions in relation to His people. All of the presentations, which were numerous, suffered from a variety of shortcomings.

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<sup>1</sup> *BOTS*, chapter 6.

<sup>2</sup> W. Eichrodt, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., Translated by J. A. Baker, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., Translated by J. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1962, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> See Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*. Fourth edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), for an outline of the development of the “biblical theology movement.”

<sup>5</sup> Examples include G. E. Wright, *The God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (Chicago: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1952); W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978); Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978); Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). One may note the recent

--First, they were selective. Von Rad and Eichrodt had this same problem. Not all of the OT texts lend themselves to any system. In fact, the wisdom literature of the OT is completely set apart from the historical traditions. Von Rad attempted to resolve this problem by presenting the wisdom literature (and the psalms) as responses to God.

--Second, as Barton pointed out, they assume that the presentation of God in the OT was an accurate one. While readers may debate the veracity of these presentations in the OT, the varieties of depictions of the nature of God does cause one to question a systematic approach to "OT Theology."

## The OT and the NT

--The relationship of the OT and NT has been a matter of debate for all of Christian history. As Joyce<sup>6</sup> pointed out, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Marcion argued that the God of the OT was incompatible with the God of the NT, and thus attempted to excise all Jewish influence from the Bible, including removing portions of the NT.

--A variety of issues arise when relating the OT and the NT. One very clearly is the appearance of inconsistencies between the two, such as the violence of the final verse of Ps 137. How can this be harmonized with the teachings of Jesus, such as "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemies"? Honestly, one cannot harmonize the two attitudes. However, the Christian reader trying to make sense of the OT and NT, as well as to apply the teachings of the entire canon to life on the street, must make the attempt.

--One may reject the OT as incompatible with the NT, as Marcion did.

--In the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the OT is often rejected by neglect.

--The OT, or certain portions of it are often allegorized. Song of Songs has been allegorized by both Jewish and Christian teachers. Violent texts like Ps 137 are often allegorized to refer to sin, temptation, or even spiritual warfare.

--What Joyce called the "fundamentalist approach to the Bible"<sup>7</sup> usually seeks to ignore, harmonize, or downplay the inconsistencies in order to maintain the infallibility of the biblical text.

--Dispensational theology often applies difficult texts to other groups of people, like apostates, Jews, or unbelievers.<sup>8</sup>

--"Intellectually Honest" Approaches (?)

--Scholars have recognized literary strands in the OT text. This might explain the discrepancies between parallel texts, such as David's introduction to Saul. Furthermore, recognizing strands of tradition allows for development over time, thus explaining the different expressions of history in Kings and Chronicles.

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development and discussion in the field by perusing the following works: Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Louisville: Fortress, 1997); John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology. Volume One. Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003); H. D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*. 2 vols. OT Library. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1995-6).

<sup>6</sup> *BOTS*, 133ff.

<sup>7</sup> *BOTS*, 135-136.

<sup>8</sup> These last two approaches both require some mental gymnastics. One must sacrifice intellectual honesty at times to maintain the harmony of some OT and NT texts.

--The OT is not as different from the NT as often believed. The dichotomy between the law of the OT and the grace of the NT is a caricature at best. The OT contains an abundance of grace, while the NT includes a great deal of law, judgment, and violence. In fact, as Joyce pointed out, "the tension between demand and grace is vital to both Testaments."<sup>9</sup> Thus, preachers and scholars debate the supposed contradictions between Paul's grace salvation and James' works salvation, when in fact the distinction is a tension, not a contradiction.

--Joyce wrote that students of scripture "should not imagine that the only way of viewing the authority of the Bible is one that assumes that texts must be either absolutely authoritative, in the sense of being timelessly infallible, or else completely without authority."<sup>10</sup> The belief that a text is historical conditioned and not applicable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not a lack of belief in the authority, or even infallibility, of scripture. Nor, he argued, should all portions of the Bible be viewed as "uniformly authoritative, with every part as important or permanently valid as the next."<sup>11</sup> The OT did not develop in a historical or cultural vacuum, and the reader must remember this fact. Some texts that were applicable to members of the rural ancient society of Israel are not as valid to the 21<sup>st</sup> century urbanite.

#### --The Use of the OT in the NT

--The OT is quoted or alluded to in the NT often, sometimes as a prophecy to be fulfilled, and sometimes as an example of God's continued work in the life of His people. The attitude that should be avoided is that the OT is simply "preparation for the gospel,"<sup>12</sup> or the NT. The OT has a theology of its own, and modern readers (even Christian readers) should remember this when reading and studying the OT.

--As Joyce concluded, a great continuity exists between the OT and the NT. The NT could not have been written without the themes, history, theology, and terminology of the OT. The theological vocabulary of the NT is found in the OT. The NT writers used the phrases and terminology of the OT to express the development of faith in God through Jesus Christ in the NT. The "best hopes and aspirations" of the OT are realized in the NT, but both are necessary for a complete in faith in God.<sup>13</sup>

### Using the OT in the Church

--In the epilogue of *Beginning Old Testament Study*, Rogerson asked how the church should apply the OT. He offers both positive and negative answers.

--First, the diversity found in the OT directly corresponds to human life today. People experience times of faith and times of doubt, times of obedience and times of rebellion, times of love and times of hate. The OT speaks to these varieties of experience in a way that the NT does not.

--The fragile tension between grace and judgment, also evident in the NT, is ubiquitous in the OT. In the wilderness, Yahweh's people experienced devastating judgment and

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<sup>9</sup> *BOTS*, 139.

<sup>10</sup> *BOTS*, 140.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *BOTS*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> *BOTS*, 145-146.

amazing mercy. The tension between individual and corporate responsibility is also echoed in the NT and modern believers must struggle with that tension. Followers of Christ must not ignore the importance of community and one's responsibility for another, but neither must they allow themselves to apply national laws and expectations to the church. The words of 2 Chr 7:14 may be the quintessential example of this tendency to equate Israel with the church. The theological tension between the two entities exists, however, even in the NT.

--The OT and Moral Issues

--Christians have used the OT to support variety of moral and ethical matters, including capital punishment, slavery, polygamy, and domestic abuse. Interestingly enough, most followers of God pick and choose from these based on other matters, seldom recognizing that culture and history are the primary motivations for their choices.

--Today, homosexuality is a hotly debated issue. Does the OT forbid homosexuality, or especially a homosexual lifestyle? Rogerson concluded that the OT does not forbid homosexual behavior, unless it also allows for capital punishment for adulterers and rebellious sons.<sup>14</sup> While the reader may disagree with Rogerson, the intellectually honest reader should at least hear his suggestions. Of course, these discussions are made with no connections to the NT, where Rom 1 is usually brought into the discussion.

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<sup>14</sup> *BOTS*, 155-156. Rogerson uses language ("pure fantasy") that betrays his strong feelings on the matter, and probably is too strong. Furthermore, he, too, is selective when discussing grace in the OT on p. 156.