

IS OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY AN ESSENTIALLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINE?

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Ever since its inception as a distinct theological discipline toward the end of the 18th century, Old Testament theology has been the virtually exclusive domain of Christian biblical scholars. This undeniable historical fact inevitably raises the question of whether Old Testament theology is essentially or exclusively a Christian theological enterprise. Most of its contemporary Christian practitioners would answer this question affirmatively. Representative of this position is Brevard S. Childs of Yale University. In his recent book on Old Testament theology, Childs makes the following observation:

It is my contention that the discipline of Old Testament theology is essentially a Christian discipline, not simply because of the Christian custom of referring to the Hebrew Scriptures as the Old Testament, but on a far deeper level.¹

Childs goes on to discuss some of the reasons for this position, which have to do with the differences in interpretation and in the appropriation of the Old Testament by Jews and Christians and the fact that Jews so far have shown little interest in writing biblical theologies. On the basis of these considerations, the author concludes that "the task of Old Testament theology is to reflect theologically on only the one portion of the Christian canon, but as Christian scripture."²

In this paper I shall take a divergent position from the majority of Christian biblical theologians represented by Childs. I shall argue that while, historically speaking, Old Testament theology arose as a Christian theological discipline, there is nothing in the essential nature and character of this discipline which would compel us to continue to define it as an exclusively Christian theological enterprise. It is my contention that Old Testament theology can and should be practiced by Jewish biblical scholars, a certain reluctance on their part notwithstanding, and that the inclusion of Jewish biblical scholarship would greatly enhance the discipline.³ In support of my basic thesis, I submit the

following considerations which are both historical and theological or philosophical in nature.

I. Retrospect on the History of the Discipline.

From the outset it must be admitted that, historically speaking, Old Testament theology has been in fact an overwhelmingly Christian theological enterprise. I would argue, however, that this situation is more the result of historical accident than logical or theological necessity. Old Testament theology as a distinct discipline arose toward the end of the 18th century. To my knowledge, the first book to be published under that title was G. L. Bauer's **Theologie des Alten Testaments**, published in 1796. Prior to that time, Old Testament theology was subsumed under biblical theology, which discipline had its root in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century and became an independent theological discipline during the course of the latter half of the 17th century.⁴ Biblical theology thus arose in a specifically Christian polemic context. This may in part account for the fact that few Jewish scholars were initially attracted to it. There were also other compelling historical circumstances which converged to keep Jews from entering the field at the time. These have been very ably elucidated by Moshe Goshen-Gottstein in an article published 13 years ago.⁵ Goshen-Gottstein has shown that just as the treasures of Jewish exegesis were made available to Christian Hebraists during the late 15th and early 16th centuries, Jewish biblical scholarship entered a period of protracted stagnation brought about by a combination of external circumstances and spiritual forces within Judaism. It was not until the 19th century that Jewish scholars re-entered the field of biblical studies, and then their interest tended to be more philological and atomistic, rather than theological and synthetic. Goshen-Gottstein goes on to argue, quite plausibly to my mind, that it is only the belated entry of Jews into 20th century biblical scholarship that has prevented until now the development of a Jewish biblical theology.

These historical considerations, I submit, support my contention that the relative absence of Jewish scholarship from the field of Old Testament theology is more the result of historical accident than logical or theological necessity. Now that the historical conditions are right, there

is no reason that Old Testament theology could not benefit greatly from a significant influx and contribution of Jewish biblical scholarship. Another brief look at the historical development of the discipline will support my contention. We will remember that biblical theology, and with it Old Testament theology, began in a polemic context: It was first directed against Roman Catholic dogma, and then subsequently against the dogmas of Protestant scholasticism. For nearly 400 years, biblical theology was the virtually exclusive domain of Protestant scholarship. Yet today both Protestant and Roman Catholic biblical scholars are engaged in fruitful theological dialogue and in the production of significant works in biblical theology. I see no compelling reason why a similar development should not take place between Jewish and Christian biblical scholars.

There are, however, some other obstacles or issues which stand in the way of this happening, and it is to some of these that we now must turn.

II. The Problem of the Name.

Another obstacle to greater Jewish participation in the production of Old Testament theologies has been the very name, "Old Testament." It originated as a Christian designation for the books of the Hebrew canon of scripture and was based on the Septuagint rendering of Hebrew **b^erit** by Greek **diathéké** and the Christian claim that the "new" covenant promised in Jer 31:31-34 had been fulfilled with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. It has been suggested that the very name "Old Testament" implies the existence of a "New Testament" and that consequently Old Testament theology is a Christian theological discipline in which the question of the relationship between the Testaments must be construed as part of its essential task and purpose. To my mind, however, such an argument is not irresistibly persuasive. To be sure, the question of the relationship between the Testaments, or of the relationship between the faith of the early Christian community and the Jewish milieu out of which it arose, is a legitimate historical and theological issue. And this not only for Christians, but probably also for at least some Jews. But it is not essential to Old Testament theology as such! This issue belongs more appropriately to a Christian biblical theology, or to the arena of interfaith dialogue

between Jews and Christians. While a New Testament theology cannot be written without reference to the Old Testament and the Jewish milieu of the intertestamental period, the reverse is not equally true. Old Testament theology can be done without reference to the New Testament or early Christian theology.⁶ Moreover, the term "Old Testament" is not necessarily pejorative or indicative of theological value judgments. Today it is frequently used in a neutral or purely literary sense of designating the books of the Hebrew canon of scripture.⁷

But if the name still represents a problem, perhaps other more felicitous designations could be found in its stead. Recently, M. Goshen-Gottstein has introduced the designation Tanakh theology for doing Old Testament theology from a Jewish perspective.⁸ Others may prefer to speak of a theology of the Hebrew scriptures. But whether we call it Old Testament theology, or Tanakh theology or Hebrew Scriptures theology, we are essentially talking about the same entity. A rose by any other name is still a rose! The fact that the documents of the Jewish canon also happen to be part of the Christian canon of scripture does in no way necessitate the assumption by Christians that their theological witness cannot be ascertained in its own right, but must only be heard in the context of the theological witness of the New Testament. The history of the discipline of biblical theology has amply demonstrated that when New Testament or specifically Christian perspectives are emphasized, the unique theological witness of the Old Testament becomes muted and obscured. And this leads me to another obstacle which has stood in the way of a more extensive Jewish presence in the discipline of Old Testament theology.

III. Anti - Jewish Bias in Christian Theology.

A more significant obstacle than the name "Old Testament" has been the traditional anti-Jewish bias of much of Christian theology, including biblical theology. It is an undeniable, sad, and regrettable fact of history that Christian theology throughout its long history has been infected by a persistent strain of anti-Judaism. Whereas Jesus and most of his early followers were observant Jews who continued to value the Old Testament as scripture, already in the 2nd century C. E. there

arose a strong movement which sought to devalue the Old Testament in favor of more recent Christian writings. Marcion sought to get rid of the Old Testament altogether, viewing it as the document of an inferior religion and of an alien God. While the Church officially declared Marcionism a heresy, Marcion's ghost continued to haunt the Church throughout its history and right on into the present. Christian orthodoxy insisted on keeping the Old Testament as sacred scripture, but in actual practice the theological witness of the Old Testament was distorted and muted through various exegetical techniques and Christian theological assumptions. And it did not much matter whether these were primitive and crude, like the allegorical and typological methods of the early church fathers, or theologically a little more sophisticated, like the promise/fulfillment and law/gospel dialectics of the Reformers, or more modern, like the philosophical rationalism of a G. L. Bauer or the historicism of a Julius Wellhausen.⁹ Even the best of recent Old Testament theologies are to some extent still tainted by a subtle but pervasive anti-Jewish bias and by an unhistorical caricature of early Judaism.¹⁰

This distortion of the theology of the Old Testament through Christian and other extraneous philosophical biases is an undeniable fact of the history of the discipline which has been amply demonstrated. But is it essential to the discipline? Must it continue to define it in perpetuity? I think not! There is some evidence in the recent history of the discipline to suggest that we are learning to read the Old Testament more accurately and objectively and that we are learning to differentiate more carefully the theological perspectives of our own religious traditions from those of the Old Testament.

Since Christians have been guilty of some of the crassest distortions of the Old Testament and hence have much to be penitent about, I as a Christian scholar may be permitted to concentrate for a moment on what I believe Christians must do in order to contribute to a more viable Old Testament theology. Christians must first of all learn to accept the Old Testament as an indispensable and independent theological norm for Christian faith. With respect to the question of the relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament, or between Judaism and Christianity, all notions which are of a unilaterally evolutionary or supersessionist nature must be resolutely rejected.

Marcion and his latter-day disciples notwithstanding, the God of Jesus is the same as the God of Moses, Abraham, Miriam and Deborah. The Old Testament continues to function for Christians as a source of revelation and a valid apprehension of God's essential character and relationship to humanity and the world; and this quite independently of the theological witness of the New Testament. The theological meaning of the Old Testament must be ascertained through objective and critical, historical and theological scholarship, in which both Christian and Jewish scholars can and should participate.

Please note that I am not saying that the theological perspective of the subsequent faith communities for whom the Old Testament is scripture plays no role in the theological interpretation of the Old Testament. It clearly does and often yields valuable insights into the different theological perspectives of the Old Testament. The different faith perspectives which Christian and Jewish interpreters bring to the Old Testament may even serve to mutually correct one another. What I am saying, however, is that the subsequent faith perspectives of these respective communities must not be granted normative theological value in the sense of dictating in advance how the theological message of the Old Testament is to be heard. Allowance must also be made for both continuity and discontinuity in the theology of the Old Testament and the two faith communities to which it gave rise. Neither the New Testament nor the Talmud should be allowed to define Old Testament theology in any normative sense.¹²

Christian faith assumptions and anti-Jewish bias, however, have not been the only obstacles to greater participation by Jewish scholars in the doing of Old Testament theology. There are some obstacles within Judaism itself which have prevented this from happening until now, and we need to address these briefly as well.

IV. Jewish Lack of Interest in Theology.

One reason why Jewish biblical scholarship has been slow in producing Old Testament theologies is because of Judaism's alleged lack of interest in systematic theology. In a recent essay, Jacob J. Petuchowski has called attention to some fundamental contrasts between rabbinic and systematic theology. Whereas systematic theology is generally

characterized by a rigorous adherence to logical thought and contemporary prevailing philosophy, rabbinic thought is more organic, associative, and concrete. It participates more in the nature of religious discourse, rather than philosophical-theological discourse. In spite of occasional exceptions, rabbinic thought for the most part got along without systematic theology or the formation of dogma.¹³

Jon Levinson, in the article cited in note 3 above, likewise argues that the impulse toward systematic theology is stronger among Christians than among Jews. Moreover, whereas the impulse to systematize among Christians finds its outlet in theology, among Jews the impulse to systematize finds its outlet in law.¹⁴ It can thus be said with some degree of justification that to a religious Jew orthopraxy is more important than orthodoxy. It is this lack of interest in systematic or dogmatic theology which at least in part accounts for a corresponding lack of interest in Old Testament theology among Jewish scholars.

While there is undoubtedly some truth in this explanation, it does not constitute a compelling argument against the production of Old Testament theologies by Jewish scholars. And this for at least a couple of reasons. First of all, while biblical theology originated as a servant of dogmatic theology, the history of the discipline shows that it has become increasingly emancipated from dogmatic theology. Today biblical theology is neither rigidly logical nor primarily philosophical, to use Petuchowski's terms. Biblical theology itself has become much more organic and concrete, phenomenologically descriptive, and objective.

Secondly, in spite of traditional Jewish reticence to enter the field, it is an undeniable fact that Jews as well as Christians study the Bible and reflect on its theological content. This is evidenced by a good deal of recent Jewish biblical scholarship, even when it does not overtly label what it produces as Old Testament theology. Yehezkel Kaufmann's well-known **Religion of Israel**, while following an essentially historical and descriptive methodology, also has recourse to more conceptual presentations of the phenomena of biblical religion and is at points very constructive and normative in its theological reflections. It does not require much imagination to see that Kaufmann, were he alive today, might easily have produced an Old Testament theology worthy of the name. Much of the work of the late Abraham Joshua

Heschel clearly falls within the understanding of Old Testament theology advanced in this paper. His treatment of the prophetic literature of the Old Testament is one of the theologically most perceptive and finely nuanced known to this author. Heschel's biblical scholarship is theologically highly reflective and constructive. By any definition of that term, Heschel was clearly an Old Testament theologian of the first rank. The fact that his work is highly respected and accepted by both Christian and Jewish scholars shows how far we have moved toward a non-partisan understanding of the discipline of biblical theology. More recently yet, Jon Levinson has laid before us significant treatments of major theological themes of the Old Testament, his avowed disinterest in biblical theology notwithstanding.¹⁵ His volumes clearly fall within the understanding of the discipline advanced in this paper. Surely these are signs that contemporary Jewish biblical scholarship is beginning to address theological issues and themes in biblical studies and that it is losing some of its traditional suspicion of and aversion to doing biblical theology.

V. Scripture and Tradition.

There is however yet another alleged obstacle to greater Jewish participation in doing Old Testament theology. And this is the different understanding of the relationship between scripture and tradition in Judaism and Christianity. Whereas Christianity took over the Hebrew Bible as a closed entity and added to it the writings of the New Testament to form its sacred scripture, Judaism produced the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrashim, but did not canonize them as scripture in quite the same fashion. Rabbinic Judaism viewed these writings as authoritative oral tradition which took its place alongside of scripture.¹⁶ Whereas Christian theology has tended to view the New Testament as standing in some kind of dialectical relationship to the Old Testament, Jewish theology has felt no corresponding urge to bring Talmud and Midrash into some kind of theological dialectic with the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷ As a matter of fact some scholars maintain that this would be quite impossible. Thus Goshen-Gottstein observes: "The system of halakhic observance and the structure of Tanakh meaning have hardly anything in common."¹⁸ And Childs makes the observation that

“for the Jew the heart of the Bible is Torah, which also establishes a different relationship to the present community of faith from that of Christianity whose relation to the Bible remains christologically conceived.”¹⁹

These differences in attitude toward the Hebrew canon of scripture between traditional Judaism and Christianity are real and significant, and I would not wish to minimize them in any way. However, I fail to see how they present insurmountable obstacles which would compel us to continue to define Old Testament theology as an exclusively Christian theological discipline. It would appear to me that the question of what constitutes a proper theology of the Old Testament and the question of how the same is to be appropriated by the respective faith communities who share the Old Testament as sacred scripture are two distinct issues. Both of them must be dealt with at some point, but they should not be prematurely confused. I submit that they belong to different realms of theological discourse. Old Testament theology belongs to the realm of descriptive and historically objective biblical theology. The question of the appropriation of the theology of the Old Testament by the respective religious communities who view the Old Testament as sacred scripture belongs to the realm of Jewish or Christian theology and praxis.

VI. Conclusions.

In concluding, I now wish to return to the question which I posed in the title of my paper: Is Old Testament theology an essentially Christian theological discipline? An informed answer to this question requires, among other things, that we have a clear understanding of what we mean by Old Testament theology. So let us begin to answer our question by providing a concise definition of Old Testament theology. Old Testament theology is an exegetical and theological discipline which seeks to describe in a coherent and comprehensive manner the Old Testament understanding of God in relationship to humanity and the world. I will elucidate very briefly a few key terms in this definition.

First of all, by defining it as an “exegetical and theological discipline,” I wish to underscore that Old Testament theology must be rooted in

the careful and detailed exegesis of the specific texts and documents of the Hebrew Bible, but that this must be done in such a manner that the theological dimensions of the text are not ignored or obscured, but are given due prominence.

Secondly, the phrase "to describe in a coherent and comprehensive manner the Old Testament understanding . . ." seeks to emphasize the descriptive aspects of our task, so that we may hear what the Old Testament itself has to say, rather than superimposing upon it extraneous theological or philosophical perspectives. To be sure, any theology worthy of the name also has some constructive or normative dimensions which cannot and should not be ignored. But such constructive dimensions must always be closely related to or rooted in the descriptive dimensions of our discipline. Old Testament theologians must be able to operate in both modes, but should not confuse these, but be clear about when they are operating in one or the other mode. Furthermore, the adjectives "coherent" and "comprehensive" suggest that Old Testament theology is concerned with the essential faith structure of the Old Testament. It is not concerned with every phenomenological or historical detail of Israelite religion, though it must be sufficiently comprehensive so that no important theological element in the Old Testament is slighted or ignored.

Finally, our phrase "God in relationship to humanity and the world" points to the proper object and parameters of our theological inquiry. It is not the God of philosophical abstraction or theological speculation that is the object of inquiry, but Yahweh God who is revealed not only in creation, but in the concrete historical experience of a particular people called Israel.

By now it should have become clear that my answer to the question posed in the title of my paper is a resounding negative. Old Testament theology, as it has been defined by me and as it has in fact been practiced by many biblical scholars, is **not** an essentially or exclusively Christian theological discipline! While it arose in a specifically Christian polemic context, and while the vast majority of its practitioners have been Christian scholars, and while Jewish scholars by and large have been reluctant to embark upon it, I see no compelling reason, from either a Jewish or Christian perspective, why this should continue to characterize the discipline in the present or future. On the

contrary, it is my conviction that the discipline would be greatly enhanced and would reach new heights of productivity and excellence by a significant influx of Jewish biblical and theological scholarship.

Who knows, maybe such a collaboration between Jewish and Christian Old Testament theologians might even yield significant changes in the self-understanding and identity of their respective religious communities, so that ancient animosities and traditional misunderstandings between them might at last yield to a clearer and more harmonious vision of their oneness as God's people, engaged in common mission to be a light and a blessing to all the nations of the world. But now I am speaking not so much as a biblical scholar, but as a man of biblical faith who occasionally is also given to see visions and dream dreams.

NOTES

¹Brevard S. Childs, **Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context** Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986, 7.

²Ibid., 9. A similar point is made by Joseph Blenkinsopp in his article, "Old Testament theology and the Jewish-Christian Connection," **JSOT** 28 (1984) 3-15, when he says: "In other words, the elucidation of the Jewish-Christian connection seems to be logically implicit in the very ideas of an Old Testament theology" (p. 11).

³Jewish reluctance to become involved in biblical theology has been the subject of a recent article by Jon Levinson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in **Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel**, ed. by Jacob Neusner et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, 281-307.

⁴When we posit the origins of biblical theology in the Protestant Reformation, we do not wish to suggest that the theological use of scripture was unknown prior to that period. In a paper read before the Society of Biblical Literature four years ago, Matitiahu Tsevat argued with some degree of plausibility that the apostle Paul was one of the first Old Testament theologians. See his "Theology of the Old Testament - A Jewish View," **Horizons in Biblical Theology** 8/2 (Dec. 1986) 33-50. Obviously, both Jews and Christians have used the Bible theologically ever since the formation of a canon of scripture. What we are saying, rather, is that biblical theology came into being as a dis-

tinct theological discipline as a result of the Reformation's **sola scriptura** principle. Prior to that period, biblical theology was subsumed under dogmatics or systematic theology. Its full emancipation from dogmatics did not come about until toward the end of the 17th century, under the impact of German pietism and the Enlightenment.

⁵See his article, "Christianity, Judaism, and Modern Bible Study," **VT Supplement** 28 (1975) 69-88.

⁶John L. McKenzie, for instance, claims that he wrote his Old Testament theology "as if the New Testament did not exist." **A Theology of the Old Testament**, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1974, 319. Whether he has actually succeeded in doing so is open to debate.

⁷It is a term which today is used even by Jewish scholars. See, for instance, the article by M. Tsevat mentioned above. I am also aware of the fact that there is a difference among Christians as to which books are to be included in the Old Testament. However, for the purpose of defining Old Testament theology, I propose that we confine ourselves to the books of the Hebrew canon which all Jews and all Christians recognize as scripture. But even if one were to include the books of the Old Testament apocrypha in the writing of an Old Testament theology, the resultant theology would not differ significantly from one based on the shorter canon.

⁸See his article, "Tanakh Theology: The Religion of the Old Testament and the Place of Jewish Biblical Theology," in **Ancient Israelite Religion**, ed. by P.D. Miller, P.D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, 617-644. While Goshen-Gottstein argues for the desirability of developing the academic discipline of Tanakh theology as a Jewish alternative to Christian Old Testament theology, I personally am more impressed by their commonality. My understanding of Old Testament theology is very much alike to what Goshen-Gottstein describes as Tanakh theology. There is no need to separate these disciplines along confessional lines.

⁹It can be argued that at least one of the factors leading to the appearance of Old Testament theology as a distinct discipline late in the 18th century was the then fashionable rationalistic devaluation of the Old Testament in favor of the New Testament.

¹⁰This point has been made eloquently and repeatedly by Jon Levinson in several of his recent writings. See especially his article cited in note 3 above. The low esteem in which post-exilic and early Judaism has been held by biblical theologians has also been documented extensively by John H. Hayes

and Frederick Prussner in their book, **Old Testament Theology. Its History and Development**, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985, especially pp. 276-279.

¹¹Judaism, for instance, by and large has done a better job of dealing with the theological significance of the Pentateuchal traditions, especially as regards their legal and cultic dimensions. On the other hand, Christianity, especially in its Protestant manifestation, has theologically been more at home in the prophetic and historical traditions of the Old Testament.

¹²A similar point is made from the Jewish side by Matitahu Tsevat in his article quoted in note 4 above. Tsevat argues for a definition of Old Testament theology which is concerned with the religious and especially the God-related ideas of the Old Testament. It is to be an objective discipline, which is to be neither specifically Jewish nor Christian.

¹³See his essay, " 'Rabbinische' und 'dogmatische' Struktur theologischer Aussage," in **Jüdische Existenz und die Erneuerung des christlichen Theologie**, ed. by Martin Stöhr, München: Chr. Kaiser, 1981, 154-162.

¹⁴Jon D. Levinson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," 296.

¹⁵See his two recent volumes, **Sinai and Zion. An Entry Into the Jewish Bible**, Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985, and **Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence**, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.

¹⁶Traditional Roman Catholicism, in this respect, stands much closer to Judaism than traditional Protestantism with its *sola scriptura* principle.

¹⁷See Levinson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," 286. From the Christian side a similar observation is made by Childs, **Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context**, 8.

¹⁸See his "Tanakh Theology . . .," 627.

¹⁹Brevard S. Childs, **Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context**, 8. While there is a lot of truth to Childs' observation, I question whether these differences are as immutable as Childs seems to imply. It seems to me that the Christian relationship to the Bible is not inevitably christological, but can also be conceived theologically or theocentrically. And whether Judaism does not also admit of greater flexibility and variety in its relationship to the Bible than traditionally and halakhically conceived is at least open to debate since the enlightenment and the re-establishment of Israel as a nation in its own land.



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