

**Old Testament Theology –**  
**Survey and Elements**

1. Introduction
2. Survey of Old Testament Theology
  - a. Liberal-Critical Approaches
  - b. Conservative Approaches
3. Elements of Old Testament Theology
  - a. Historical Evidence
  - b. Personal Application
4. Conclusion

## 1. Introduction

“Diversity and disagreement about Old Testament and biblical theology did not simply emerge over time; they were present at the beginning.”<sup>1</sup> Already around 1828, when Baumgarten-Crusius published his relevant work, “the number of meanings assigned to the term biblical theology roughly equalled the number of published works on the subject.”<sup>2</sup> Thus a study of Old Testament theology inevitably has to deal with the many viewpoints introduced by the many scholars involved.

The book *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future* contains many crucial essays on the subject. Most of them were written by mainstream scholars in the spirit of liberal criticism. Such ‘liberal’ approaches are treated in chapter 2.a. Those essays that we classify as ‘conservative’ we will discuss in comparison in the next chapter 2.b. Decisive point for classification is the question of authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures, including historical reliability. As Baumgarten-Crusius put it, “The idea and the execution of biblical theology are joined essentially with historical interpretation.”<sup>3</sup> Naturally, those who regard the Bible as historically reliable come to different conclusions than those who deny its historicity.

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<sup>1</sup> Ben C. Ollenburger, “Old Testament before 1933,” in *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004) (hereafter cited as *Old Testament Theology*), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig F.O. Baumgarten-Crusius, *Grundzüge der biblischen Theologie* (Jena: Frommann, 1828), 4; quoted in Ben C. Ollenburger, “Old Testament before 1933,” 4.

Prof. Dalman's book *Yahweh's Song* is written from the conservative viewpoint that the Bible is (historically) inerrant and authoritative. We will refer to his approach in chapter 2.b. and discuss his points in chapter 3 in more detail. The Professor lays emphasis on historical evidence and leads to the application of the Old Testament. The student agrees that these are the two main issues that must be addressed in an Old Testament theology and thus they are given the separate chapter 3.

## **2. Survey of Old Testament Theology**

### **a. Liberal-Critical Approaches**

"The first Old Testament theologies of the nineteenth centuries ... adopted a *philosophical* [not *historical*; note from the author] framework"<sup>4</sup> (emphasis mine). Prominent scholar of this movement was Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette who wrote from the anthropological starting point that any "religion is a part of human spiritual life."<sup>5</sup> In simple words, his basis of theology was not God (*theos*) but man. Julius Wellhausen and Hermann Gunkel developed his ideas and established the "history-of-religion-school."<sup>6</sup> For the critics, the Old Testament books were not divine revelation but merely the outcome of a historical development.

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<sup>4</sup> Ben C. Ollenburger, "Old Testament before 1933," 5; emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Otto Eissfeld continued with the literary-critical and historical tradition of his mentors Wellhausen and Gunkel. Yet for the scholars of his time, the task of Old Testament theology was more than to grasp the essence of Israel's religion, and so Eissfeld investigated the relation between biblical history and revelation. For him, it is "dangerous to combine the two approaches"<sup>7</sup> since he regards historical knowledge and personal faith as independent entities. His understanding of faith was close to 'blind faith' not rooted in evidence. Reversely, his study of the Old Testament as a historical source was more than ever detached from the doctrine of inerrancy.

In response to Eissfeld, Walther Eichrodt argued that within the historical considerations the search for meaning and interpretation actually is the scholar's 'noblest task', while leaving the question of 'truth and validity' to the dogmatics.<sup>8</sup> The theological center Eichrodt found in the covenant principle that comprises the relationship between God and the People, God and the World and God and Man.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he advocated that only the New Testament revelation is the right viewpoint for a theological treatment of Old Testament history.<sup>10</sup> For Eichrodt, such a

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<sup>7</sup> Otto Eissfeldt, "The History of Israelite-Jewish Religion and Old Testament Theology," in *Old Testament Theology*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Walther Eichrodt, "Does Old Testament Theology Still Have Independent Significance?" in *Old Testament Theology*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Id., "Covenant," in *Old Testament Theology*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Id., "Does Old Testament Theology Still Have Independent Significance?", 26f.; id., "Covenant," 41f.

systematic approach complements the historical. His teachings opposed the claims of historical criticism but, despite his emphasis on divine revelation, were nonetheless saturated with critical presuppositions such as the Documentary Hypothesis.<sup>11</sup>

Theodorus C. Vriezen agrees that the New Testament is the starting point for Old Testament theology. He, too, dissented from the “history-of-religion-school” and pinpointed: “Old Testament theology is concerned with the Old Testament”<sup>12</sup> and not with the religion of Israel in its historical growth and origin. He sided with Eichrodt that the historical approach to the Old Testament has to complement its message, largely undermined by liberal criticism. Unlike Eichrodt, his theological center was God’s communion with man, not the covenant.<sup>13</sup>

Gerhard von Rad’s teaching that Old Testament theology should consist in retelling God’s acts in history resembles George Ernest Wright’s suggestion of ‘recital’<sup>14</sup> but differs insofar as, in the spirit of liberal criticism, von Rad did not regard Israel’s confessional traditions as historically true.<sup>15</sup> His studies are based on the Documentary Hypothesis which leads him to a separate treatment of the prophets.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 50-56; Eichrodt regards Moses as the founder of the Israelite religion but not as the author of the Pentateuch.

<sup>12</sup> Theodorus C. Vriezen, “The Nature of the Knowledge of God,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 59.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-74.

<sup>14</sup> See below, chapter 2.b.

<sup>15</sup> Gerhard von Rad, “Eighth-Century Prophecy,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 95.

He divides the Old Testament into fractions and so discovers 'new theological paths' instead of one consistent salvation history.<sup>16</sup>

On similar grounds, Walther Zimmerli states: "Religious traditions in new situations find new interpretations."<sup>17</sup> He finds the inner continuity of Old Testament theology in the sameness of Yahweh himself, the God of Israel since Egypt. Also John L. McKenzie<sup>18</sup> and Ronald E. Clements saw God as the center and unifying principle of the Old Testament. Yet it appears that all such unification approaches and their variations eventually fall short of the rich message of God's word. It may be that the search for a unifying theological center was in fact a desperate reaction against the liberal criticism that tore the Old Testament into loose pieces before. Clements is at pains to gather the fractions back into one 'canon of sacred scripture'.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Samuel L. Terrien laid special emphasis on the canon and the presence of God motif.<sup>20</sup> Claus Westermann's approach, in comparison, resembles more the observations of his colleague von Rad. He studies along the Old Testament books and focuses on its historical character. For him, God's deliverance of his people

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 104-114.

<sup>17</sup> Walther Zimmerli, "Life before God," in *Old Testament Theology*, 122.

<sup>18</sup> John L. McKenzie, "Cult," in *Old Testament Theology*, 141ff.

<sup>19</sup> Ronald E. Clements, "Law and Promise," in *Old Testament Theology*, 157ff.; he also studies from both the Jewish and the Christian perspective.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel L. Terrien, "Presence in Absence," in *Old Testament Theology*, 192, 197ff..

determined Israel's faith in him, even in light of the entire Bible comprising the New Testament message of salvation in Christ. On the negative side, he assumes that Israel's faith developed along the presuppositions of form criticism.<sup>21</sup>

The tension between such presuppositions and the canonical approach to the Old Testament in its final form appears again in the studies of Brevard S. Childs. He engaged with historical criticism but tried to uphold the divine message apart from it. For him, the importance of the final canon outweighs the aspects of source criticism:

Regardless of the age and circumstances lying behind the Deuteronomic covenant formulation, its theology became the normative expression of God's relation to Israel and served as a major theological category for unifying the entire collection comprising the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>22</sup>

The statement is difficult to maintain in the face of the liberal presupposition that the Deuteronomic writings were compiled many centuries after Moses' ministry. If the law was not given to Moses, how could it later comprise his theology?

Contrary to the scholars above who "attempted to overcome the Old Testament's theological diversity by focusing on its unifying aspects, on the unity in diversity,"<sup>23</sup> Rolf Knierim proposes to interpret the relationship of the various theologies instead. He also separates the Old Testament theology from the New.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Claus Westermann, "God's Judgment and God's Mercy," in *Old Testament Theology*, 216ff.

<sup>22</sup> Brevard S. Childs, "Canon," in *Old Testament Theology*, 262.

<sup>23</sup> Rolf Knierim, "Cosmos and History," in *Old Testament Theology*, 273.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

The question remains to what extent the assumed different theologies really exist. Conservatives usually disagree with liberals at this point.

Horst Dietrich Preuss sided with those who searched for a theological center in a more systematic way in order to see the ‘total picture’ of Old Testament theology and its relationship to the New. Similar to Eichrodt and others, he defined the center to be “*YHWH’s historical activity of electing Israel for communion with his world.*”<sup>25</sup> Though, his total picture is again challenged when he reminds the reader that, according to liberal criticism, different theologies are set forth by various corpora of texts like Deuteronomy, Deutero-Isaiah and the Priestly document.<sup>26</sup>

Walter Brueggemann tries to solve problems like these by focusing on the Old Testament’s *speech* about God, while excluding the question of *historicity*. For him, the character of the Old Testament texts is testimony, not history. He says there are other ancient Near Eastern documents that are more historically reliable than the Old Testament writings.<sup>27</sup> Even more explicitly than others, Brueggemann pulls out the historical basis of biblical theology and then constructs his own theories.

Bernhard W. Anderson harks back to the idea that “the Old Testament contains a diversity of materials that resists being pressed into a coherent, structural unity.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Horst D. Preuss, “Exodus and Election,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 293.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Israel’s Testimony,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 312.

<sup>28</sup> Bernhard W. Anderson, “Royal Covenant,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 342.

He thus studies the covenants (with Abraham, Moses and David) in their scriptural context with special regard to each distinctive symbolism. Erhard S. Gerstenberger resembles the philosophical beginnings of de Wette when he writes that we study the Old Testament in order to understand *ourselves* (not *God*).<sup>29</sup> He further presupposes that “there is no uniform coherent canon” and that “it is impossible for a canon of writings which has grown up in history over generations to represent a coherent theological doctrinal structure.”<sup>30</sup> With Gerstenberger the pluralistic theology of the liberal critics has reached maturity. For him, the concept of one unified and consistent Old Testament theology was out of question.

The diversity and complexity of Old Testament liberal critical scholarship increased even more with additional proposals like those of Hartmut Gese, Phyllis Tribble, Jon D. Levenson, R.W.L. Moberly and Mark G. Brett. Gese sustains the assumption of a theological plurality based on form criticism and so advocates his ‘traditio-historical approach’.<sup>31</sup> Tribble contributes with a feminist hermeneutics that introduces female depictions of deity.<sup>32</sup> Levenson suggests a historical development

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<sup>29</sup> Erhard S. Gerstenberger, “One God, Changing Theologies,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 359.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

<sup>31</sup> Hartmut Gese, “Tradition History,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 384-388.

<sup>32</sup> Phyllis Tribble, “Overture for a Feminist Biblical Theology,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 403.

in Israel from polytheism to monotheism.<sup>33</sup> In the philosophical spirit of de Wette, again, Moberly supposes that the 'true meaning' of biblical texts can only be found by interrelation between the question of God and the question about humanity which, for example, leads him to the discussion about texts as potential propaganda material.<sup>34</sup> Brett, at last, tries to connect Old Testament theology to the realm of social sciences.<sup>35</sup> The value of all these proposals for biblical scholarship is rather low.

The distinguished James Barr rounds up the discussion by debating the validity of Old Testament theology as a discipline on its own. He writes that "the detailed work of biblical theology is closer to the normal activity of exegesis than is commonly realized."<sup>36</sup> For him, biblical theology constitutes a bridge between exegesis (including the 'historical perspective') and doctrinal theology. Insofar there is no 'right' methodology for 'one' certain Old Testament theology. Thus Barr tends to disagree with the above proposed unifying principles and theological pluralities. The bulk of his neo-orthodox teachings notwithstanding, many of the conservative scholars would probably agree with Barr at this point, as we will now see.

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<sup>33</sup> Jon D. Levenson, "Creation and Covenant," in *Old Testament Theology*, 411f.

<sup>34</sup> R.W.L. Moberly, "The Bible, Theology, and Faith," in *Old Testament Theology*, 469-474.

<sup>35</sup> Mark G. Brett, "The Future of Old Testament Theology," in *Old Testament Theology*, 491.

<sup>36</sup> James Barr, "'Real' Theology and Biblical Theology," in *Old Testament Theology*, 451.

## **b. Conservative Approaches**

From the beginnings of Old Testament theology at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, scholars like Johann Philipp Gabler and his colleague Gerhard Lorenz Bauer taught that biblical interpretation has to be grounded in historical investigation. Outside the historical framework of the biblical text, its meaning may be distorted.<sup>37</sup> Based on this conviction, the conservative scholars, unlike the liberals, then linked their historical studies with the field of dogmatics and developed the rather unified idea of “salvation history” in contrast to the liberal “history-of-religion-school”.

Eichrodt’s covenant concept or Vriezen’s principle of God’s communion with mankind might have been other well-meant attempts to find rather ‘conservative’ unifying principles in order to defend the message of the Old Testament. However, as long as their basis was more or less liberal, scholars still needed to refute the criticism of the historians to head for scriptural inerrancy and historical reliability of the Bible. George Ernest Wright, fellow student of the well-known W. F. Albright and founder of the periodical *The Biblical Archaeologist*, stepped into discussion and challenged the assumptions of the liberal critics. His approach to Old Testament theology including history thus took place on more solid ground.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Ben C. Ollenburger, “Old Testament before 1933,” 5.

<sup>38</sup> Though he, too, was not free from the shackles of source criticism; cf.

For Wright, the substance of biblical theology is the interpretation of history, similar to Gabler above. The three core elements of Israelite faith – revelation, election and covenant – are all based on real historical events. History is the revelation of God that reached its climax in the advent of Christ.<sup>39</sup> Taken the biblical accounts serious, biblical theology should be conceived as confessional recital.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, Wright did not deal with the application of God’s Word.

In opposition to the many liberals of his time, Walter C. Kaiser Jr. provides refreshing insight into conservative Old Testament theology. In his view, “biblical theology draws its very structure of approach from the historic progression of the text and its theological selection and conclusions from those found in the canonical focus.”<sup>41</sup> For Kaiser, the Old Testament writers received divine revelation, both in regard to selection and evaluation of the records. Thus his starting point is the Bible itself and no ‘assured results’ of Old Testament (liberal) studies. And his focus of the biblical message is the theme of God’s promise, the divine plan which started with the blessing of Abraham and reached out to all nations as written in Gen 12:3.

Similar to Kaiser, Elmer A. Martens begins his approach to Old Testament theology with an exegesis of a chosen biblical text. In Exodus 5:22-6:8, God lays

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George Ernest Wright, “God the Warrior,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 84.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 78f.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>41</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Promise,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 176.

before Moses his four-part design: Israel's deliverance from Egypt, the formation of God's covenant community, the relationship between God and his people and a good life in the promised land.<sup>42</sup> These are "the controlling purposes of God within the Old Testament."<sup>43</sup> Unlike Kaiser, his outlook does not cover the promise to all nations. The New Testament viewpoint he excludes from the subject.

Paul R. House agrees with the conservatives that Old Testament theology must have a historical base and, secondly, "must explain what the Old Testament itself claims, not what preconceived historical or theological systems impose upon the biblical material."<sup>44</sup> His radical statements set free from all philosophical bias and serve those who defend the supreme value of the Holy Bible: "The goal is to avoid forcing the text into a mold before the text is studied."<sup>45</sup> And, "one of the drawbacks of a noncanonical, or non-book-by-book, approach is that many current students do not have extensive biblical knowledge."<sup>46</sup> Therefore House studies the Old Testament in the canonical order and attempts to show each book's own theological contribution. For him, a focal point (but not 'the central theme') that connects the Old Testament books is their common emphasis on the existence and worship of one God.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Elmer A. Martens, "Land and Lifestyle," in *Old Testament Theology*, 229ff.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>44</sup> Paul R. House, "Ruth in the Canon," in *Old Testament Theology*, 324.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

In order to deal with the many critical approaches outlined in the above chapter and especially to challenge those who focus on the final canon without acknowledging its authority, John H. Sailhamer bases his theology on a model of form criticism that is „consistent with an evangelical view of Scripture.”<sup>48</sup> He goes along the components composition, canonization and consolidation of the texts and shows that the conservative view does not need to overlook biblical criticism. Instead, his positive text model of the Old Testament reinforces the weight of the final canon, a necessary task that is widely neglected among conservative scholars.

Gunther Hermann Wittenberg emphasizes another crucial aspect so widely ignored among scholars of all camps: the *application* of God’s Word. Theology should not be divorced from action, and the knowledge of God is no analytical exercise but demands commitment – a decision for God and against the idols.<sup>49</sup>

At some points this aspect is one distinctive element that characterizes the theological standpoint of Rodger W. Dalman. But even more, his teachings are largely substantiated by historical evidence. His detailed work provides deep insight into the debate, encourages the reader to form his own opinion and leads him to an attitude towards Old Testament theology that is marked by personal active commitment.

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<sup>48</sup> John H. Sailhamer, “Canon and Composition,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 426.

<sup>49</sup> Gunther Hermann Wittenberg, “Contextual Theology and Resistance,” in *Old Testament Theology*, 438-441.

### **3. Elements of Old Testament Theology**

#### **a. Historical Evidence**

In comparison to the New Testament, the scope of the Old Testament is vast. The books cover a period of thousands of years, not to mention the subject of creation. Now for studies of the Bible, as emphasized, we need to consider historical evidence. Every part of the Old Testament in its huge variety needs to be understood in its own historical setting. Relevant information can be found in various neighbouring disciplines, e.g. archaeology. With this complexity in mind, we understand that the search for one 'center' of Old Testament theology and its one 'right' methodology is a rather hopeless task. At the same time, only detailed study of the Bible (close to biblical exegesis as taught by Barr, Kaiser, Martens and House) shows that the inspired writings do not confront us with different or even contradicting theologies.

For the sake of practicability we follow Dalman in dividing the subject of Old Testament theology into certain textual areas or periods.<sup>50</sup> The method is close to House's proposal above. Dalman suggests five distinctive areas of Old Testament theology: (1) The Great Genesis Debates, (2) Prehistory and the Patriarchal Age, (3) Israel's Formation, (4) The United Monarchy and (5) The Divided Monarchy. General

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<sup>50</sup> Roger Dalman, *Yahweh's Song: A Handbook for Understanding Old Testament Historical Theology* (Trinity Online Learning Center, 2006).

subjects like Kaiser's chosen message of 'promise' notwithstanding, each of the five parts brings about its own issues that should be addressed in an Old Testament theology. Detailed study of the individual texts alone can lead to insight about the Old Testament as a whole, to follow House's argument.

The Genesis debate, for example, cannot ignore evidence gained from fields like geology, biology, paleontology and archaeology, though the task of biblical interpretation must always be granted dominance. Since the overall picture is not conclusive at this point, the debate is fierce and scholars differ in their opinions. Though, two questions that are largely overlooked may help: What was *God's purpose* in providing the biblical (Genesis) text? How did the *original audience* understand the (Genesis) text? As Dalman describes it, "Genesis was written under the influence of the history, needs, and theological problems of the wilderness community."<sup>51</sup> The people came from Egypt, thus it is significant to recognize that much of the Genesis account also appeared in ancient Egyptian texts.<sup>52</sup>

The patriarchal age of Abraham and his descendants must likewise be seen in its proper historical context. Knowledge about the political, economical and cultural situation is essential for biblical interpretation about this time – e.g. the weak position of Egypt, the preceding drought in Palestine, Abraham's semi-nomadic lifestyle as a

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<sup>51</sup> Roger Dalman, *Yahweh's Song*, 50.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 51ff.

caravan trader and his family matters (marriage, heritage).<sup>53</sup> Besides, comparison to other ancient texts even shows that the Old Testament account is not invented fiction but historically accurate, which carries tremendous implications for our approach to Old Testament theology.<sup>54</sup> Indeed the issue divides into the two camps of chapter 2.

Another critical question to consider is the relation between Israel and Egypt. The Old Testament gives rather few hints about the Egyptian position of those times. Archaeologists are divided about the chronological link between Israel and Egypt:<sup>55</sup>

<b>Biblical Event</b>	<b>Suggested Years</b>	<b>Egyptian Dynasty</b>
Birth of Abraham	~2100, 2000 BC or later	~10 <sup>th</sup> – 11 <sup>th</sup>
Birth of Joseph	~1900 BC or ~1700 BC	12 <sup>th</sup>
Slavery in Egypt	430 or ~200 years	...
Exodus from Egypt	1447 BC or ~1290 BC	19 <sup>th</sup> , 18 <sup>th</sup> or 13 <sup>th</sup>

In dependency of the dating scholars come to different conclusions about the life of the patriarchs and the political power of Egypt, especially during the ministry of Joseph, the time of Israel’s slavery and the time just before and after the exodus.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 89ff.

<sup>54</sup> Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Documents from Old Testament Times: A Survey of Recent Discoveries,” *Westminster Theological Journal* (Fall 1978): 1-32; Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>55</sup> Id., *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966), 57-69; Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 178ff.; Roger Dalman, *Yahweh’s Song*, 233ff.; David Rohl, *A Test of Time. Volume I: The Bible – From Myth to History* (London: Arrow Books, 1995).

Dalman's assumption that Israel's exodus took place during the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty implies that Egypt was rather strong during the time of the judges.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, the 13<sup>th</sup> dynasty exodus model says that Egypt was rather weak for some time after the exodus. The historical question affects the nature and message of Israel's deliverance. Next, the archaeological results confirm the Bible's credibility or not, in dependency of the dating. Since Yahweh himself often recalls that he brought Israel out of Egypt (e.g. Ex 20:2), the chronological debate is important, not *despite* but *because* of its complexity and the strong implications for the nature of Israel's formation.

The united monarchy period concentrates on the life of David and Solomon. Again, historical (archaeological) evidence that confirms their lives must be noted. Dalman mentions stela that probably refer to King David and so prove his existence.<sup>57</sup> He further studies about Solomon's building projects. Since Solomon's time of abundance as recorded in the Bible is commonly denied among scholars, the apologetic element of Dalman's theology carries some weight. The same can be said for the divided monarchy period that he links with numerous archaeological results. Dalman's approach addresses the practical problem: "The greatest reason that the church is losing its youth may be a broad lack of intellectual credibility."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Roger Dalman, *Yahweh's Song*, 242ff.; 250ff.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

The presented list of theological issues in regard to historical evidence in the Old Testament is only a rough outline but not exhaustive. Dalman's book *Yahweh's Song* contains countless additional aspects that are worthy of discussion. Moreover, usually neglected is the whole Old Testament corpus of wisdom literature in distinction from the other texts. It also seems that together with the wisdom texts the important task of *application* is widely excluded. The next chapter intends to recall that God gave us his Word with a purpose in mind – our response and commitment.

#### **b. Personal Application**

Personally, one of the best books that taught me about the Old Testament is a German bible that contains thousands of questions referring to the biblical text itself.<sup>59</sup> The reader is encouraged to think about the text in order to learn and apply the insight gained for his own personal life. Beyond the academic level the studies touch the heart for personal response and commitment. The student thinks that such a reading is necessary and vital for the believer's life. God is personal, not academic. And though some academics "claimed to be wise, they became fools." (Rom 1:22; cf. 1 Cor 2)

On the other hand, the discussion may eventually lead us to the right method of application. The Genesis question, for example, is still not settled and the debate

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<sup>59</sup> *Die Hauskreisbibel – Altes Testament* (Holzgerlingen: Hänssler, [2001]).

rather unfruitful. However, so we are led to the question of purpose. Why does God tell us *that* he created the world without telling us exactly *how* he created? What is the relation between the *Who* and the *How*? What was more important for Moses and the wilderness community? What is more important for us (and the academics) today?

Then, the bridge between the original setting and our own life is important. What does the record about Abraham's life teach us today, especially since the New Testament refers back to him? (Rom 4:1ff.; Hebr 11:8ff.) We are called for obedience in the account about Joseph and his resistance of temptation.<sup>60</sup> We read that Joseph obeyed and resisted even though the law was given to Moses later. What does it teach us today about the relation between grace and the law? Dalman often implies but not explicitly exhorts application. For example, he rightly points out that the preceding chapter 38 about Judah and Tamar serves as an intentional contrast to Joseph's righteousness.<sup>61</sup> The reader is confronted here with the doctrine of the two ways similar to the wisdom texts. (e.g. Prov 9) Not only the historical but also the textual setting is important for interpretation of the Old Testament message.

Linking Israel's Old Testament history with archaeological evidence leads us to the question of reliability and authority. If archaeology *disproves* the Bible (as some scholars claim), how can we believe and preach the Word? Kaiser asked, "If Jericho

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<sup>60</sup> Roger Dalman, *Yahweh's Song*, 124ff.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

be not razed, is our faith in vain?”<sup>62</sup> The academic discussion has practical relevance for our own personal faith! If the Pentateuch teaches us that God delivered Israel, and if Samuel, Kings and Chronicles tell us that God acts with his people in this way or the other according to his character and the faith of his people, and if all those stories are actually not really true, what are we supposed to learn, believe and apply?

Thus the acceptance of Old Testament theology as a discipline hangs on the question of truth but not methodology. Scholars must decide whether to uphold the Bible as a relevant message that calls for action or as a collection of fables that are merely interesting to read and talk about. The student believes that the Christian faith is anchored in the – factual – Old Testament history that demands our response today.

#### **4. Conclusion**

God’s thoughts are too vast and too rich to summarize them into one Old Testament theological theme or center. At the same time, the omniscient God cannot contradict himself. There are no contrasting theologies but only one consistent whole. The Word of God is perfect, in contrast to men’s studies. What we need today is humility and awe before God, the right attitude to study the inspired Bible and the willingness to *learn* from God before we *teach*.

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<sup>62</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1987), 61.

“Is not my word like fire,  
declares the LORD,  
‘and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?’”  
(Jer 23:29)

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