



**The Role of  
Old Testament Theology  
in Old Testament Interpretation**

*And Other Essays*

**Walter Brueggemann**

*Edited by K.C. Hanson*



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*Chapter 9*: “Theology of the Old Testament: A Prompt Retrospect” first appeared in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, edited by Todd Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, 307–20. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998. Used by permission.

# Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
BHT	Beiträge zur historischen Theologie
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ET	English translation
<i>EvTh</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
FCBS	Fortress Classics in Biblical Studies
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
IRT	Issues in Religion and Theology
ISBL	Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>

<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LAI	Library of Ancient Israel
LXX	Septuagint
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
ThBü	Theologische Bücherei
<i>ThTo</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>TLZ</i>	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
<i>USQR</i>	<i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZTK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

# Foreword

THE ESSAYS IN THIS VOLUME comprise the first of three volumes of Walter Brueggemann's contributions to *Festschriften*. These hidden gems are an important component to his oeuvre because they allow the reader to see him take on very brief passages (chapters 7 and 8), longer passages (chapters 3 and 5), biblical themes (chapters 2, 4, 6), as well as methodological issues (see chapters 1 and 9)—all at the highest level.

What continually intrigues me in reading Brueggemann's books, articles, and essays are not only his detailed analyses and clarity of writing, but also his broad interests and his ability to cut through all the distractions to the meat of the matter. My experience of reading Brueggemann is that I am always getting a fresh take—an angle of vision that challenges, broadens, and provokes me. One will find an excellent entry-point into his approach to exegesis in his *A Pathway of Interpretation*.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, I recommend Davis Hankins's essay that provides a provocative analysis of Brueggemann's work in relation to contemporary philosophers and theorists.<sup>2</sup>

As one reads these essays one is acutely aware that all of these essays are interconnected with Brueggemann's Old Testament theology both leading up to it and flowing out of it.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps my biggest professional disappointment is that I began as biblical studies editor at Fortress Press a few months too late to edit that volume.

1. Brueggemann, *A Pathway of Interpretation: The Old Testament for Pastors and Students* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008).

2. Hankins, "Introduction," in Brueggemann, *Ice Axes for Frozen Seas: A Biblical Theology of Provocation*, edited by Davis Hankins (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 1–18.

3. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minnesota: Fortress, 1997).

## Preface

THERE ARE AS MANY ways of doing theological interpretation of the Old Testament as there are people who take up the task. Only a few years ago one could not have anticipated the present ferment and energy in Old Testament theological interpretation, because we had arrived at something of a stalemate between the major German models of the twentieth century that dominated the field. In the wake of that stalemate, however, came a variety of fresh initiatives that have evoked new interpretive possibilities. Among the new initiatives have been the fresh importance of social-scientific methods, the emergence of new voices from beyond the old guild of white males, a turn from the critical to the canonical, and a new engagement between Jewish and Gentile readers.

These essays reflect over time my effort to make a contribution to the ongoing conversation. Because these articles have been generated ad hoc over time, it will not surprise that there is some repetition of the accents of my work. Each of these essays was a contribution to a *Festschrift* volume. For readers who may not know the term *Festschrift*, it is a combination of two German words, *Fest* meaning “festive celebration” and *Schrift*, “writing.” Thus such a volume is a celebrative writing, characteristically offered as a tribute to a senior scholar on his/her sixtieth, sixty-fifth, or seventieth birthday as a salute from other colleagues in the field. One does not initiate a contribution to such a volume, but is on occasion invited to participate. I have been fortunate to be invited to make such contributions, the substance of which is evident here. I have been glad to have been invited to join in honoring such senior, major scholars, each of whom has made a formative contribution to our common work and has been a generative influence on my own work. The warrant for reprinting

such articles is that a volume that is a *Festschrift* is usually quite expensive and so has only limited circulation. Consequently such articles are often unnoticed or “buried” in such a volume. In each case I have tried to offer a contribution that is congruent with the major interests of the honoree of the volume. It is a distinct honor to travel in the train of such distinguished scholars who have shaped our discipline and my own work in the discipline. Such an assignment provides occasion to make a programmatic statement; or more often it is an opportunity to focus on a more narrow subject and to give it more leisurely attention. It is also an opportunity to reflect on one’s academic rootage and the great debts owed to predecessors.

It is impossible for me to overstate the heavy lifting that K. C. Hanson at Cascade Books has done on this collection of essays (as with other of my publications) to make it useful and coherent. I am grateful to him and his colleagues at Wipf and Stock for their continuing attentiveness to my work.

Walter Brueggemann  
Columbia Theological Seminary  
November 17, 2014

# 1

## The Role of Old Testament Theology in Old Testament Interpretation

### Four Interpretive Phases

IN A SUMMARY WAY, it is possible to distinguish in scholarship four rather distinctive phases of critical study, each of which hosted theological interpretation in a way peculiar to its horizon.

#### The Reformation Period

IT WAS IN THE Reformation that “biblical theology” became a distinct enterprise, as theological interpretation was undertaken apart from the sacramental system of the church, and to some extent outside the conventional categories of the dogmatic tradition.<sup>1</sup> In that context, “biblical theology” had as its role the attempt to voice the fresh, free, live word of gospel, completely uncontained and unfettered by any hegemonic categories of established church tradition. Different traditions in the Reformation, of course, gave different accents to this newly “evangelical”

1. It was Luther’s intention to interpret the Bible and its Gospel apart from the interpretive controls of the church. Thus “biblical theology” became an enterprise distinct from church theology. It is instructive that Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments*, 6–24, begins his study of biblical criticism with the rubric *sola scriptura*.

interpretation, best known in Lutheran *grace* and Calvinistic *sovereignty*. In all these cases, however, the effort was made to deal directly with “the things of God” in the text, without mediating forms and structures that worked toward domestication and containment. Thus “biblical theology” had a distinctly “evangelical” impetus.

### Enlightenment Historicism

WHILE THE FORMS AND cadences of Reformation “biblical theology” persisted into the seventeenth century, the notion of unfettered witness to the things of God was exceedingly difficult to maintain. In both Lutheran and Calvinist circles (not to speak at all of Trent), the great claims of unfettered gospel were eventually reduced to new scholastic formulation, surely as domesticated as the scholastic formulations against which the primal Reformers had worked.<sup>2</sup>

In that context, the move from *dogmatic* to *historical* questions was an attempt to emancipate biblical interpretation from the deep domestication of Scripture. It is exceedingly important to recall that the emergence and appropriation of “the historical” was an effort to maintain the free availability of scriptural claims against the new theological scholasticism. It is common to cite the lecture of Johann Philip Gabler in 1787 as the decisive articulation of this new approach, whereby Gabler insisted that Old Testament study was primarily an historical and not dogmatic enterprise.<sup>3</sup> As Ben Ollenburger has shown, however, Gabler’s intention is more subtle than the simple categories of dogmatic–historical may indicate.<sup>4</sup>

Focus upon “the historical” brought with it the subsequently developed notion of “God acts in history.” But the primary energy released by this new category was devoted to historical criticism and the effort to situate every text according to its date and recoverable context. This movement culminated in Wellhausen’s great synthesis that is aptly titled *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*.<sup>5</sup> That is, the documentary hypothesis,

2. See Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*.

3. Gabler’s decisive lecture is available in its pertinent parts in English by Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, “J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology.”

4. Ollenburger, “Biblical Theology.” See also Knierim, “On Gabler.”

5. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*.

for which Wellhausen is widely credited and blamed, is a preparation for doing *history*.

Historical criticism, perhaps inevitably, focused upon the history of Israelite religion, thus situating each religious practice and implied theological claim in a specific context, understanding each practice and claim as context specific. The outcome was to relativize every practice and claim, to permit a developmental scheme by which every practice and claim was eventually displaced (superseded!) by another. As a consequence, every practice and claim is pertinent only to its immediate historical context. In that enterprise that stretches, as we conveniently put it, from Gabler to Wellhausen, the study of the history of Israelite religion almost completely displaced Old Testament theology, and the latter continued only in a subdued way as a rearguard action to maintain the “constancies” of “orthodoxy.” It is of particular interest that whereas “biblical theology” in the Reformation period was emancipatory, in the period of high Enlightenment it was, where it was undertaken at all, not so much emancipatory as conserving and consolidating, an attempt to resist the vigorous enterprise of relativizing historicism. Such an approach to the text was distinctly against “the spirit of the times.”

### The Barthian Alternative

The dominance of a history-of-religion approach, with its relativizing consequences, inevitably evoked a response. But no one could have imagined that the response would be as forceful, bold, and demanding as that offered by Karl Barth in his *Römerbrief* in 1919.<sup>6</sup> Barth's effort was to interpret the text in a boldly and unembarrassedly theological, normative way, without yielding anything to historical relativism and without reducing faithful practice and theological claim to contextual explanation.

It is difficult to overstate the decisive contribution of Barth in turning the interpretive enterprise and in freshly legitimating theological interpretation that dared to treat theological claim in the text as constant and normative. Barth enlivened and legitimated nearly a century of theological interpretation, including the most important work in Old Testament theology; but of course from the perspective of scholars who, for personal or intellectual reasons, fear and resist such claims of the “normative,” Barth is to be regarded as an unfortunate digression in the discipline.

6. It was presented in English translation as *The Epistle to the Romans* (1933).

While Barth's theological eruption already in 1919 is taken as a decisive break in Enlightenment historicism, it is not possible to appreciate the impact of Barth apart from the later context of his work, with particular reference to the challenge of National Socialism in Germany and the articulation of the Barmen Declaration in 1934. The mood and tenor of the work is profoundly *confessional*, an assertion of *normative* truth that had practical consequences and that implied personal and concrete risk. That mood and tenor of confession did not bother to make itself persuasive to "cultural despisers," who, by historical criticism, managed to tone down "evangelical claims" for God, to make matters compatible with Enlightenment reason. The daring claims made in a Barthian posture stand in deep contrast with the consolidating, even reactionary function of biblical theology in the earlier period of historicism. Barth's dominance is a primal example of the ways in which context presents questions and challenges that push biblical theology in one direction rather than another. It is unmistakable that the crisis of the twentieth century both required and permitted biblical theology in ways neither permitted nor required in the earlier period of high historicism.

The legacy of Barth may be said to have dominated the field of biblical theology until about 1970. In the center of that period is the magisterial work of Walther Eichrodt who took *covenant* as his mode of normativeness, and the even more influential work of Gerhard von Rad, whose definitive essay of 1938 surely echoes the credo-orientation of Barmen.<sup>7</sup> While the normativeness and constancy of Barth's perspective can take different forms, both Eichrodt and von Rad sought to provide a place of normativeness in which to stand in the face of the huge barbarisms of the twentieth century, for it was clear that the domestications of historical criticism provided no standing ground at all. More than Eichrodt, von Rad continued to attend to and be puzzled by the unmistakable dynamic of historical change reflected in the faith of Israel, but he finally does not yield to it. In the United States, moreover, the odd juxtaposition of normative theological claim and historical vagary was handled

7. The pivotal essay for von Rad, surely reflecting the confessional crisis of Barmen, is "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch." The belated English translations of the more comprehensive works are Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.); von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.). See Brueggemann, "Introduction," as an overview and critique of von Rad's contribution.

with remarkable finesse and, for the moment, in a compelling way by G. Ernest Wright in his influential *God Who Acts*.<sup>8</sup>

It is to be noticed that while this essentially Barthian enterprise of “the Short Century” might provide credible ground for faith midst the brutalities of history, it is also the case that the interpretive movement out of Barth was vigorously hegemonic, providing in various ways a summary account of the faith of ancient Israel that was exclusionary in its claims and allowing little room for alternative reading.<sup>9</sup> While such an assertiveness can well be understood in the context of brutality whereby interpretation was an emergency activity, it is also important to recognize that such a hegemonic posture evokes an inescapable response at the end of its domination, a response of considerable force and authority.

### The Coming of Post-Modernity

It is now common to cite 1970 as the break point of what came to be called (pejoratively) “the Biblical Theology Movement,” that interpretive enterprise propelled by Barth and especially voiced by von Rad and Wright. The “ending” of that monopolistic interpretive effort was occasioned by many factors. It is conventional to cite the work of Brevard Childs and James Barr as the decisive voices of the ending, even though it is clear that Barr and Childs come from very different directions and agree on almost nothing except their critique.<sup>10</sup> Also to be fully appreciated, from inside the movement itself, are the insistence of Frank Moore Cross (a colleague of Wright) that Israel is enmeshed in ancient Near Eastern culture and is not as distinctive as had been urged, and Claus Westermann’s (a colleague

8. Wright, *God Who Acts*. See also Wright, *The Old Testament against Its Environment*.

9. On “the short century” see Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*. The “short century” refers to the time from the outbreak of World War I to the fall of the Soviet Union. The nomenclature is pertinent for our topic that was dominated by a certain set of assumptions growing from Barth. The exclusion practiced by what became “the Biblical Theology Movement” is easy to spot in retrospect. On the positivism related to the enterprise, see now Long, *Planting and Reaping Albright*.

10. See especially Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*; and Barr, “Revelation through History in the Old Testament and Modern Theology”; Barr, “The Old Testament and the New Crisis of Biblical Authority”; Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*; and Barr, *Holy Scripture*. In addition, it is important to mention Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language.”

of von Rad) urging that the horizon of creation was as important as the “historical recital” for the faith of Israel.<sup>11</sup>

More broadly the rise of feminist and liberation hermeneutics and the failure of mono-interpretation have produced, since 1970, an interpretive context that is by many styled “postmodern,” that is, after the hegemony that had dominated the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Coming to the more important features of this development of scholarship that has put the work of Old Testament theology in some disarray, we may notice three.

*Pluralism.* Von Rad has already taken seriously the pluralism of the theological claims of the Old Testament text. But now the awareness of pluralism is much deeper and more seriously noticed, so that the text seems to admit of no single, grand formulation. Indeed the text not only offers a plurality of God-claims, but when read closely, the several texts themselves are plurivocal, open to a variety of readings. The quality and character of the text, moreover, is matched increasingly by a plurality of readers, reflecting a diverse community of interests, so that no single synthetic reading is any longer possible.<sup>13</sup>

*Ideology.* It follows from a full-faced acknowledgment of pluralism, that one can readily see that every offer of normativeness is in some sense ideology. Most benignly this means it is an advocacy for a certain perspective and not a given. Thus, even the hegemonic approach held in common by Barth, Eichrodt, von Rad, and Wright is seen to be not a stable foundation, but rather an advocacy on offer to the larger interpretive community that must be received and adjudicated by interpreters who occupy other ideological perspectives.<sup>14</sup> Behind this collage of interpretive adjudications among advocacies, we are able to see more clearly that the pluralism in the text itself concerns the things of God, a collage of competing advocacies

11. See Brueggemann, “The Loss and Recovery of Creation in Old Testament Theology,” and the references there to Cross, Westermann, and Schmid.

12. I have no special concern for the label “postmodern,” except that it is a convenient way to reference the quite new interpretive context in which we are now placed. See Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*. For a vigorous and important resistance to postmodernity, see Watson, *Text and Truth*.

13. For an insistence upon a unified reading that resists pluralism in faithful reading, see Watson, *Text and Truth*, and his earlier *Text, Church and World*.

14. It seems evident that long-standing theological hegemony turns out to be ideological advocacy, as does skepticism that assumes the ideological claims of Enlightenment rationality. None is immune from an ideological insistence, so that we must work midst our competing advocacies.