The ABC’s of Old Testament Theology in the US

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The developments of the last fifty years have brought us to a quite new place in Old Testament theology. Here I will reflect on these developments in the United States. I believe at the same time, mutatis mutandis, however, that US developments are typical and representative. Reflection upon the development of the discipline is important for two reasons: a) We continue to carry around in the midst of us all of the older ways of formulating the questions and answers in the discipline even when they have become clearly passe. The past, in a reflective discipline, is never past, but continues to operate with some authority. b) Such a critical review helps us see that a certain way of putting questions and answers, any certain way, is highly contextual. A reflection on our past may help us to see how highly and peculiarly contextual is our own way of working in the discipline.

I.

It is a truism to say that by 1960, Old Testament theology had reached something of a settled state, variously dominated by Gerhard von Rad and Walther Eichrodt. Eichrodt, as is well known, had proposed that the «constancy» of Old Testament theology is to be found in «covenant», the single governing theme evident everywhere in the text.1 It is unfortunate for Eichrodt’s argument that the notion of covenant, in the 1950s through the work of Klaus Baltzer and George Mendenhall, was reduced to and came to be identified by a very specific notion of covenant linked to a particular form-critical pattern. Eichrodt’s vista on the time was much larger, being informed by a strong Calvinist understanding of the theme; but scholarship forgot that, and settled for a very thin critical notion of covenant. In retrospect it is easy to say that Eichrodt’s notion was too simplistic and reductionist; but it is important to recognize that Eichrodt in the 30s was responding to the dominant «history of religion» approach and was wanting to reaffirm the normative

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character of Old Testament faith. In any case, it is fair to say that Eichrodt has not exercised great influence in the US.

The case was much different with the work of Gerhard von Rad who wrote his theology in the 50s and whose work appeared in English in the 60s. Whereas Eichrodt’s approach was tilted in a *dogmatic* direction, von Rad, by contrast, was much more concerned with the *historical* dynamism of the text, an accent congruent with interest in the US. The core accent of von Rad was the notion of a credo recital that was very old in Israel and very stylized, and that could be traced through many adaptations until it arrived at the full, secularized articulation of the Hexateuch that provided a complete and normative assertion of YHWH’s mighty deeds. Retrospective assessments of von Rad include the recognition that he fully appreciated, much more than did Eichrodt, the rich pluralism of the text, so that he does not produce a single theology. Moreover, while von Rad’s several points are endlessly insightful and generative, it is easy to conclude that they do not readily cohere. Whether this lack of coherence is a result of von Rad’s failure to find an adequate unifying rubric, or whether the material itself is intractably pluralistic, is a subject for on-going wonderment and debate.

My own impression is that as Eichrodt is to be understood and appreciated contextually as a response against a »history of religions« approach, so von Rad is to be understood as a response to the German Church crisis of the 30s (in important ways those who subsequently appropriated von Rad’s categories failed to reckon sufficiently with this context and so absolutized von Rad’s categories in an unhelpful way). Specifically von Rad published two definitive articles in then 1930s that set much of the course of Old Testament theology in the 60s. Most important, his article in 1938 on the problem of the Hexateuch proposed the notion of a credo recital. It seems clear that von Rad, in the shadow of the Barmen Declaration, sought to provide »confessing« standing ground for the church against National Socialism. He did so by postulating that ancient Israel had to find confessional standing ground against the deep and pervasive threat of Canaanite »fertility religion«. Having established that »Canaanite religion« was a counterpart to National Socialism, already in 1936 von Rad concluded that »creation« was an extraneous theme in the Old Testament and not central to its re-

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3 The quest for a »center« (*Mitte*) has proved endlessly elusive to scholars who have tried to overcome the pluralism of which von Rad made so much.
tical of faith. He apparently made this judgment on the basis of and in response to the »Blood and Soil« claim of National Socialism that was in its own way a »fertility religion«, albeit Aryan. These two claims concerning *credo* in 1938 and *creation* in 1936 produced a theology of a radical »either/or« for ancient Israel, in the service of the radical »either/or« of the German church in crisis. Clearly the pattern that von Rad articulated was picked up and extended well beyond von Rad’s own German context. Specifically, the same radical »either/or« became intensely important in US biblical theology of the 60s, largely through the important work of G. Ernest Wright who worked in parallel categories.

It is to be observed that the work at mid-century dominated by Eichrodt and much more by von Rad was largely at the impetus of Karl Barth. As Barth’s Romans commentary in 1919 drew the line against cultural, accommodationist religion, so Eichrodt, sharing Barth’s Reformed rootage, sought to articulate normative faith claims that show the Old Testament as a coherent, more-or-less self-contained statement without reference to cultural ingredients. And no doubt Barth’s strictures against »religion« in the name of faith fed directly into von Rad’s polemics against »Canaanite religion« that became a critique of all »religion« in the name of faith. It is surely correct to say that the shadow of National Socialism and the bold challenge issued by Barth set the pattern for theological interpretation of the Old Testament for several generations.

II.

By the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, all of that defining work had begun to unravel. Broadsides were issued against the so-called »Biblical Theology Movement« by James Barr and Brevard Childs, Barr on the grounds of poor semantic method and Childs because »history« had become the controlling reference point of interpretation. It is not difficult to see, in retrospect, the limitations of the dominant patterns of interpretation that were propelled by Barth and offered by Eichrodt, von Rad, and Wright. But rather than focusing on those well rehearsed

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5 The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation, in: Problem (see n. 4), 131–143.
critiques, it may be more helpful to consider two other matters that contributed to the breakup of that dominant pattern.

First, it may be said that unintentionally, the dominant pattern had become deeply repressive of a great deal that was now found in the text that insisted upon articulation but that could not be admitted into the dominant formulations. There was in the 1970s a moment of bursting of fresh energy that pushed in new directions. Rather than speaking of the loss through unravelling, I prefer to consider the gains. I shall mention six new facets in the field that contributed to a sense of disorder and confusion that was to last for two decades:

1. In a not very precise way, we may speak of the emergence of post-modern pressures in the field, by which I mean the growing awareness that the dominant patterns of interpretation were seen to be an interpretive monopoly that served and maintained a certain kind of hegemony. To be sure, neither Childs nor Barr had (or has) any sympathy for the general politicizing of interpretation; it cannot be doubted, however, that long before people in the field had heard of Derrida or Foucault there came to be a sense that interpretive discourse is indeed a mode of power. And therefore the older consensus, sustained by a relatively homogenous community of interpreters, came to be deeply under assault.

2. As Brevard Childs and Langdon Gilkey came to see that «history» as an interpretive category is deeply problematic, we may notice the rapid disintegration of the consensus claims of «history». From a theological side this critique came from Brevard Childs, but differently from the work of Thomas Thompson and John van Seters. Since that time, the problematizing of «history» has gone on apace among the minimalists – otherwise termed the nihilists – who include, along with Thompson and van Seters, Keith Whitelam, Nils Lemche, and Philip Davies. The tendency of this critique has been to deny any historicity

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to the early purported events in the Old Testament, and so to date everything later, or in the case of Whitelam in particular, to argue that what is represented as history is deeply ideological in a way that served ancient and now serves contemporary ideological agenda.

The assault on «history» meant particularly the demise of the Albrightian synthesis in the US popularized in John Bright’s *History.* Specifically I refer to Burke Long, *Reaping and Sowing,* in which Long forcefully argues that the Albrightian reconstruction of the history of Israel was, from the outset, a quite tendentious enterprise that was remote from its own claims of «historical objectivity».

Whether Long’s critique is fully sustainable or not, clearly «history» was on the way out as the defining category for interpretation. In 1979, Childs published his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture.* The phrase «as scripture» means, for Childs, a departure from historical questions toward the ecclesial and, for Childs, toward the canonical.

3. In the same year that Childs published his introduction, 1979, Norman Gottwald published his massive *Tribes of Yahweh.* It is difficult to overstate the importance or influence of this book, even though it is poorly edited and has been much criticized. The «historical» intention of Gottwald’s book was the reconstruction of early Israel as a revolutionary movement in a peasant revolt. The Moses-Joshua texts, moreover, are seen to be «functions» of the social revolution of the peasants against an entrenched economic monopoly. Informed by a Marxian interpretive grid, Gottwald kept his materialism dialectical, insisting that YHWH was a function of the revolution, even as the revolution is a function of YHWH. The major importance of this declaration, for which Gottwald makes no apology, is the first of these, that YHWH is a function of the revolution.

While Gottwald’s historical reconstruction has been critiqued and while his Marxian categories of interpretation have been difficult for old-line historical interpreters, the decisive and surely irreversible gain of Gottwald is methodological. He has made a way whereby sociology, and derivatively the social sciences more generally, can be useful for interpretation. That is, texts are not simply reportage, but they are engines of social force that are embedded in and reflective of social transactions. This insight, carefully worked out by Gottwald, represents a huge move

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16 Ibid., 603–621.
in the discipline, for it means that the texts are not safely “back there”, but have immense and contemporary ideological force. To be sure, much of the social scientific study since Gottwald has wanted to stay clear of his radical Marxian focus and have appealed afresh to Weber and Durkheim. But even so, the move from “history” to texts as *vehicles for social acts* has opened up a great deal of fresh interpretation and made the older “innocence” of interpretation no longer possible.

4. In 1978, one year before Gottwald and Childs, Phyllis Trible published her book, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*.17 This book was the first sustained entry of feminist interpretation into the discipline, and continues to be one of the finest and most careful exhibits of exegetical sensitivity toward feminist issues. As Gottwald served two purposes in his book – a reconstruction of early revolutionary Israel and a methodological move – so Trible’s book has served a dual function in the field. Most clearly, her book is reckoned as a bench mark for rigorously text-based feminist interpretation that since her work has exploded in many directions, some much more radical than is Trible. It is important to recognize that Trible’s feminist sensitivity in this book is not as a shrill manifesto but as the slow, delicate notice that the texts are immensely subtle and that close reading requires that one pays attention to hints and silences that older historical criticism usually did not notice. Her work has been a harbinger of a great deal of feminist work that deprivileges older historical “summaries” and pays attention to conflicts and tensions in the text. Among those who have followed her lead are Cheryl Exum, Angela Bauer, Kathleen O’Connor, Alice Bach, David Gunn, and Dana Fewell.18

Most to be noticed, however, is the fact that Trible’s second important contribution is her rhetorical criticism that she learned from James Muienhub and has since treated more programmatically in her book, *Rhetorical Criticism*.19 Trible has proposed the bracketing out or disre-
garden of the usual historical critical questions, with the insistence that
what counts is the inner working of the text, so that the important refer-
ce points are those offered in the text itself, without appeal to exter-
nal historical or theological reference points. So far as I know, we
have as yet no close discussion of the interrelatedness of feminist her-
me-neutics and rhetorical methods, but it is to be noticed that historical
criticism was the work of a largely male scholarly enterprise and even
now functions especially among those who fence out all kinds of inter-
pretive questions such as those raised by feminism. I do not suggest that
the two – feminism and rhetorical criticism – are intrinsically connected,
but the question warrants further study.

3. Not only did the so-called Biblical Theology Movement focus
on »history«, but it did so to the deliberate neglect of »creation«. Dur-
ing the German struggle in 1936, von Rad had linked creation to »fer-
tility religion«, and thereby to the »Blood and Soil« slogans of National
Socialism; as a consequence, »Mighty Deeds in History« became an al-
ternative to »creation theology« that was too easily linked to racial
politics. Because of the influence of that article and that interpretive
linkage, Old Testament theological interpretation has largely stayed
clear of creation themes, judging that they were not central to Old Tes-
tament faith. But of course such a position is unsustainable and can be
accepted only while staying closely within the early context of von Rad.
In the 1970s that contextual claim was broken, and immense energy has
since been expended on the exploration and reassertion of creation
themes (alongside, perhaps as a by-product, has been the recovery of
wisdom as a crucial datum for Old Testament faith). This work has in-
cluded publications by Claus Westermann, Frank Cross, Samuel Ter-
rrien, James Barr, Jon Levenson, Hans Heinrich Schmid, Terence Fre-
theim, and Rolf Knierim, and even von Rad’s final book in 1970 on
wisdom. Large vistas of interpretation were opened with the sugges-
tion of Patrick Miller that it is the covenant with Noah and YHWH’s
promise to humankind (of which Israel is a subset) that is the primary
horizon of Old Testament faith. Insofar as scholars could speak of
»God’s Mighty Deeds in History«, the reclamation project of YHWH
concerns the redemption and restoration of the whole of creation.

20 An important exception is the work of B. W. Anderson, From Creation to New Cre-
at-ion: Old Testament Perspectives, 1995; Creation Versus Chaos: The Reinterpretation
21 I have cited and summarized this material in The Loss and Recovery of »Creation« in
22 P. D. Miller, Creation and Covenant, in: Biblical Theology: Problems and Perspectives,
ed. by S. J. Kraftschick e.a., 1995, 155–168.
6. Finally it is fair to say that in these decades there was a great tendency to retreat from the theological impetus of Barth that had been exploited by Eichrodt, von Rad, and Wright, and to return to a *history of religion* approach that echoed much of Wellhausen. That is, the dominant theological categories no longer convinced, and scholars relapsed into earlier critical approaches. The most important study in this regard is that of Rainer Albertz, published in the 1990s, but already inchoate in his book of 1978.\(^{23}\) Albertz, however, is not a return to the unilateral evolution of Wellhausen, for the subtitle of his book concerns pluralism. It is the variegated quality of Israelite religion that concerns Albertz, as it does Erhard Gerstenberger, a clear rejection of the hegemonic force of the Biblical Theology Movement.

Now these six factors can all be documented in the literature and I have cited some of the most important works. It is important to recognize, however, that scholarship never happens in a cultural vacuum – thus the issue of history – and so the abrupt turn of the 1970s also needs to be understood contextually. The 70s in the US and in Western Europe generally witnessed a huge turn of affairs, all amounting to a deep distrust of established hegemonic authority. In the US, these are the days of the Civil Rights movement, resistance to the Viet Nam War, and the Watergate affair. And in Europe the most obvious point of reference is perhaps the student revolt in Paris in 1968, of course the same year as the Democratic Convention in Chicago that featured police brutality and the breakdown of civic order.\(^{24}\) All of this contributed to an atmosphere for rejection of authority, a reaction to repression, and consequent withdrawal of allegiance to established authority. I do not suggest a direct or one-to-one linkage with developments in Old Testament study, for the matter is clearly more complex than that; but I do suggest that the context powerfully contributed to pluralism that refused to submit to consensus opinion and invited thoughtful people to engage in methodological experimentation. The critique of ideology is implicit in the work of Gottwald and Trible, the pluralism of Albertz, and the rejection of *history* by Childs; all of this ferment converged to create a disorder and reconstitution of the field. It is no wonder that by the end of the 80s, many in the field had drawn the conclusion that the shattering of the field and its methodological splintering had made any larger work in Old Testament theology an impossibility. From the perspective of the old synthesis of von Rad, the 70s and 80s are powerfully critical and deconstructive.


Given such a recent past, no one could have foreseen that the 1990s would feature such focus in Old Testament theology with enormous energy that created clear alternatives, but all of which were convinced that the doing of Old Testament theology is both possible and worth doing. For purposes of convenience, I will reflect on three theologies from the 90s, all by senior and now retired US Scholars, leaving out some other important efforts, notable that of Rolf Knierim and John Goldingay. The way in which I will proceed lets me nicely dub it as the »ABCs of Old Testament theology«.

First, A is for Anderson. Bernhard Anderson was a distinguished teacher at Princeton Seminary before his retirement, and continues his research and publication in retirement. He was a student of James Mui- lenburg and is much informed by the great generation of post-war German scholarship. During the course of his long career, US scholarship was largely dominated by the historical-archaeological concerns and judgments of the Albrightians, but Anderson kept at his distinct embrace of the theological task, most notably in his studies of creation, *Creation versus Chaos* and *From Creation to New Creation*. Anderson’s recent theology, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* is characteristic of his special gifts as a teacher; it is clear, accessible, balanced, and ienic. It probably is fair to say that his book does not break new ground. He is not engaged in any of the interpretive conflicts that now seem important to the field, but instead offers an exposition that is rooted in the categories of the older Biblical Theology Movement, though with a fresh eye on how these categories are to be understood at the end of the century. The first two parts of the book provide a masterful synthesis on major themes. Part I (37–78) provides what I think is the best statement we have in English on the God of Israel as »the Holy One«. Anderson takes up the required issues of the names of God, YHWH and the other gods, and insists with finesse on the God who is »Wholly Other«, who is disclosed in the lived reality of the world.

The second, quite extensive section of the book (79–236) concerns the covenants of YHWH with Abraham, Moses, and David. The scope of the Abrahamic covenant in his discussion is noteworthy, for it includes creation and the Noah covenant, plus an extended consideration

26 See n. 20.
of the theology of Presence in the Priestly material. This is to stretch the
rubric of covenant considerably, but the discussion itself is illuminating.

The third part of the book is more defuse and is, I believe, haunted
by the issue of theodicy. The first topic is wisdom that culminates in Job
(251–274). The second topic is the linkage of prophecy to apocalyptic
with attention to the »Dominion of Evil« and the claim of resurrection
(275–285). And the third theme is apocalyptic that leads to the New
Testament, so that Anderson without apology understands his enter-
prise to be Christian, requiring the affirmation of Jesus as the resolution
of the issues of the Old Testament (287–324). None of this is stunningly
new and certainly none of it is objectionable, but its fresh articulation is
itself important.

I believe it correct to say that the sub-text of Anderson’s book that
keeps recurring is the problematic of history. Anderson is committed to
»God Acts in History«, and yet he knows at the same time that history
has become immensely problematic since the formulations of the 50s, so
that he permits himself none of the innocence of the earlier formul-
ations.28 Thus he is alert to the fact that »history« is close to »story«,
and he must attend to the matters of drama, imagination, and metaphor,
ways of speaking about history that are recent in the field. The book is
an important one because it is marked by a) a deeply thought wisdom
about the faith of the text that is not twisted by fad, b) a pastoral sen-
sitivity that recognizes the complexity and ambiguity of lived faith, and
c) a contemporaneity that is located at the front edge of the difficult in-
terpretive, theological issues we face.

IV.

B is for Barr. James Barr taught in Edinburgh, Manchester, and Ox-
ford, and has recently retired from Vanderbilt. He first attracted notice
and contributed powerfully to the demise of the mid-century theological
consensus by his The Semantics of Biblical Language in 1961. Since that
time his research and publication have been preoccupied with two
major concerns, a) a methodological interest in proper semantic method
whereby he has been vigilant about theological claims made for the text
on the basis of what he regards as poor method, and b) a running
critique of fundamentalism that he has repeatedly shown to be objec-
tionable and irresponsible. At first it may seem that these two agenda
are very different, until one recognizes that much of his energy on
proper method has been to expose illegitimate theological claims, the

28 The context and the intention of Anderson's study is illuminated by the fact that the
book is dedicated to the memory of G. Ernest Wright, his long-time friend and col-
league.
most extreme form of which is fundamentalism. Thus both concerns for Barr have made him primarily a critic of other scholars, vigorously deconstructing arguments of which he disapproves.

Barr’s most recent contribution to the discussion of theology is his book in 1999, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*.29 It is in many ways a curious book, because it is not and does not purport to be an offer of theological interpretation, nor is there any positive proposal for what Barr’s own offer of theology might look like. Rather the book is a survey of the field in its recent history and a critical assessment of current work from Barr’s quite modernist perspective. The book is not well ordered and it is not easy to identify a *Gestalt* to the whole. Nonetheless several elements of the book are of great importance. I will mention four aspects of the book.

1. Barr proposes a typology of five of the most influential Old Testament theologies of the century, Koehler, Eichrodt, Vriezen, von Rad, and Childs (27–51). While he alludes to a variety of issues, the point to which Barr repeatedly returns is the extent to which the faith of Israel is presented in a *descriptive* way or, alternatively, the way in which the text is read from a *confessional* Christian perspective. Barr believes that only descriptive work is legitimate and any confessional impetus is a discrediting mark. Not surprisingly, he is able to show that characteristically these five scholars are Christian, as indeed has been the entire enterprise of Old Testament theology, and so there is regularly a direct linkage made to the New Testament, and an imposition of the categories of Christian dogmatics. There can be little doubt that this is the case, a point already made by Jon Levenson.

2. The most important part of the book, in my judgment, is an extended discussion of the ways in which Old Testament theology is related to and different from other disciplinary approaches, namely doctrinal theology (62–76), non-theological study (77–84), history of religion (100–139), philosophy and natural theology (146–171), and the New Testament (172–188). Of these, perhaps the most important and the one where there is most at stake concerns the history of religion. Barr particularly notes the strong Swedish tradition in this matter with special reference to Professor Ringgren.30 Positively Barr insists on an historical analysis that is more or less objective and descriptive, with attention to «similarities with other peoples». Negatively, he proposes that the history of Israelite religion has been skewed by the way it has been related to the New Testament, and particularly by the imposition of «dialectical theology», with reference to Karl Barth and Brevard

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30 Ibid., 113.
Childs. In passing, Barr notes that Calvin’s work is *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and makes the point, surely counting too much on the word (poor semantic method!), that Calvin understood about »religion« that it could not be »abolished« as Barth sought to do.\(^{31}\)

Barr pays particular attention to the recent two volumes of Rainer Albertz (118–129). He appreciates Albertz’ willingness to be »historical« and yet observes a) that while the texts are very late Albertz regards them as reliable for the early period and b) that there is no real religious development in Albertz’ perspective. Barr’s acute analysis of Albertz indicates how exceedingly problematic the distinctions among disciplines are because, says Barr, at points Albertz »comes closer to Biblical theology«.\(^{32}\) While Barr sets out to make clear distinctions between theology and history of religion, his own discussion may suggest that the distinctions cannot be kept as neat and clean as he proposes, for eventually the material pushes beyond objective historicism. In the end, Barr suggests that the defining difference of approaches is that history of religion must attend to all of the text, whereas theology is related »to certain texts and to the theology implied by them.«\(^{33}\) If Barr is correct, then he seems to think that theology operates by censoring texts that it cannot bear. If that is true (and I would not dispute it), it may suggest fresh work whereby theological interpretation must take into account all of the texts and not engage in denial by censorship.

3. Barr’s study permits him to consider special topics that have long concerned him. I suggest three of these are of special interest. First, he offers a chapter on »evolution and anti-evolution« (85–99). There are, as nearly as I can see, three aspects to this theme that interest Barr. a) He wants to insist, with Wellhausen and against Barthian theology, that Israelite religion does have a developmental process in the Old Testament, and to pretend otherwise is to miss the data. Moreover Barr insists that Albright fully conceded the point about development, even though he has been understood otherwise. Thus Barr’s initial word on evolution concerns an affirmation of nineteenth century hypotheses on developmentalism. b) Barr comments briefly on »evolution and creation«, as taken up by Claus Westermann. c) But clearly what Barr finally is interested in is the notion of »development of doctrine« that precludes any final, absolutist statement. My impression is that Barr’s attention to the history of religion is instrumental to his resistance to finding in any mode of Israel’s religion anything that might have normative status.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 109.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 121.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 133.
Second, Barr reiterates the argument of his Gifford Lectures on natural theology (468–496). He offers natural theology as a way of fending off any narrow «theology of the word» and sees the positive implications of natural theology for morality and particularly for ecology.

Third, Barr offers a long discussion concerning how Old Testament theology is to be related to Jewish theology (286–311). He considers in general the on-going vitality of Judaism and takes up in particular the work of a number of contemporary Jewish scholars. Barr judges that the alienation between Christian and Jewish interpreters has been a tragic loss for what might have been an important and mutually productive exchange. One of the incidental gains of this discussion is his fine summary of contemporary work. There are a number of Jewish scholars at work on interpretive questions who can no longer be ignored. Like Barr, I judge that the most important of those is Jon Levenson, though Barr’s critique of Levenson is more than I would consider warranted.

4. It is evident that Barr proposes that Old Testament theology should be a historical discipline that stays completely away from the tasks of ecclesial interpretation. My impression is that he has a quite rigid and classical notion of dogmatic theology, so that it becomes important to him to maintain space for biblical study not threatened by such an imposed agenda. In fact Barr is most comfortable with the historical categories of nineteenth century historical criticism and so in fact continues the program of Philip Gabler who proposed Old Testament interpretation to be a historical project.

In light of this passion on his part, then, I mention finally the polemic note of the book. The polemic runs throughout the book against «dialectical theology», by which Barr means the work of Barth, but his particular strictures are against the work of Childs (401–438), and belatedly, against my work (541–562). Indeed, the accent on historical developmentalism is precisely resistance against any claim that the Bible offers normative or authoritative teaching, for to make such a claim is to cease to be an historian and so to become a dogmatic theologian. This aspect of Barr’s work is, in my judgment, more than a little embarrassing, for it is a polemic offered in a seemingly out-of-control, emotional form.

Nonetheless, his presentation that is so troubling in tone is an important one, because it joins issue on perhaps the most urgent question in the discipline, namely, whether interpretation is finally an historical enterprise done in an objective academy, or if it is finally an ecclesial matter designed for the instruction of the church. The latter obviously assumes a normative quality for the text and its claims, and it is this normative quality that evoked Philip Gabler and that clearly propels Barr. What is odd is that for the most part, specific interpretive disputes are not joined at all; what is offered is simply a loud generic protest against
authoritative claims that clearly are felt by Barr as an unbearable authoritarianism. The book leaves me with a sense of disappointment, because what purports to be a judicious assessment of the field ends in a shrill emotism. My own sympathies are of course elsewhere than with Barr, and so I suggest that in the end, he imports into this conversation about Old Testament theology an authoritarianism that is clearly and sharply felt by him but, I have no doubt, is based in and felt from elsewhere and transferred here. It is clear to me that authoritative teaching that tends to be authoritarianism inevitably produces scholars committed to «objectivity» in a defense against a personally felt threat. Indeed I only add that in the end, Barr becomes as authoritarian toward those who are «wrong» as anyone in the ecclesial tradition could possibly be.

V.

This brings us directly to C, Brevard Childs. Through the confusing decades of the 70s and 80s when the task of Old Testament theology seemed impossible, it was Childs more than anyone else who kept determinedly at the task of Old Testament theology. His particular enterprise has focused on his sense of «canon» that he understands not to be a late ecclesial imposition on the text, but a theological decision made by the tradition that governs the church in its reading of scripture. His major publications on this project, supported by a series of journal articles, include:

_Biblical Theology in Crisis,_
_Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture_, and
_Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Perspective_.

Finally, in 1993, he published _Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments._ Childs is of course thoroughly trained at Basel in historical critical methods; it is equally clear, however, that at Basel he was powerfully impacted by Barth, as has been the central work of Old Testament theology through this century. Over a long teaching career at Yale that ended with his retirement in 1999, Childs has been slowly and thoughtfully developing his notion of canonical reading. His presenting problem has been preoccupation with history and awareness that historical critical methods subject the text to references outside the text that are essentially misleading and distracting for the claim of the text itself.

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His counter to such a historical practice has been an insistence that in ecclesial reading (which is his singular interest), the reference point is not external history but the internal claims of the canon, taken as a whole as normative text. Thus his introduction, entitled *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* meant an important departure from classic introductions, for »as scripture« means as the church’s canon. It is clear at the outset how deeply Childs stands apart from Barr a) in accepting the *church as matrix* for interpretation and b) in taking the text as *normative* for the doing of theology.

His large book of 1993 represents something of a culmination of his continuing rumination on canon. It has as its thesis:

> A major task of Biblical Theology is to reflect on the whole Christian Bible with its two very different voices, both of which the church confesses bear witness to Jesus Christ.36

This bold central claim defines a task that in crucial ways sets Childs apart from his antecedents in the discipline and that clearly reflects the decisive influence of Barth upon him. Childs proposes nothing less than a massive redefinition and repositioning of the discipline. It is evident that Childs has set himself completely against the conventional perspectives of Old Testament theology and certainly against the »objective«, historicist categories championed by Barr. Concerning his »canonical« project I will mention five aspects:

1. Childs quickly reviews contemporary ways of doing biblical theology, none of which interests him much (11–29). His more important antecedents and reference points concern the master teachers of the church before the modern period. In this inventory he takes up Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, Thomas, Luther, and Calvin, and at the present time, he is more intensely at work on Patristic exegesis (30–51). It is clear that Childs intends to nullify the entire modern period of interpretation and the historical critical project as a failed attempt, insisting rather that one should read as the church read before the Cartesian program of autonomy. It appears to me that Childs opts for a »Scripture and Tradition« approach not unlike Trent, a maneuver perhaps of special interest, given the recent rapprochement of Rome and the Lutherans. It is difficult to overstate the radicality of this proposal to scuttle the critical project of modernity, even while it is clear that to some extent Childs must inevitably appeal to its critical gains. Indeed, Childs’ own education in the modern critical tradition suggests that even as he protests, he inevitably appeals to that modern critical tradition.

2. As Childs has clarified and refined his sense of canon, he has begun to appeal much more to the »Rule of Faith« as the matrix of exe-

36 Ibid., 78.
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gesis. Thus he references Irenaeus who uses the phrase to locate the
»order and connection« of scripture that are essential to its truth. It is
important to recognize that Childs’ appeal to the »Rule of Faith« is not
the same as any church confession, though Childs himself is a Calvinist.
The Rule of Faith is broader and deeper than any of the church’s con-
fessions, but it is for Childs the normative limit of what texts can legit-
imately mean for the church. My own sense is that the notion of the
»Rule of Faith« is enormously elusive and not clearly defined, so that it
can be used more or less by such a learned scholar as Childs to sanction
what he takes it to mean. That is, it permits high ground for quite sub-
jective judgments, as Irenaeus understood in its use, for the rule of faith
is a »living voice« that cannot be regarded as a »static deposit«. At
points, nonetheless, Childs’ strictures seem to treat it as a settled deposit
to which he appeals.

3. Childs’ book proceeds in three extended discussions that consti-
tute the argument and the problem of the book. The first of these is
»The Discrete Witness of the Old Testament« in which Childs takes up,
in something of an »historical sequence« conventional themes of Old
Testament study, moving from Creation through Patriarchs, Moses,
Judges, Kings, Exile, and on to Apocalyptic, Wisdom, and the Psalms
(95–207). Childs is of course a first rate reader and one can learn much;
his presentation contains few surprises, however, except the surprise of
how much he follows the »historical« account. It strikes me that he
treats texts very much »in sum«, without any consideration of the inter-
nal dynamic of any text, as though one only reads for conclusions. That
is, Childs is not inclined to any of the newer »narrative« methods that
go »inside« texts, but reads for theological outcomes.

4. The second substantive section is »The Discrete Witness of the
New Testament« in which he treats in turn the early kerygma, Paul, the
Gospels, Acts, and the »Post Pauline Age« (209–322). This discussion
is, mutatis mutandis, parallel to that of the Old Testament. It is to be no-
toniced that both discussions are »discrete« witnesses.

5. The final section, constituting half the book, is »Theological Re-
fections on the Christian Bible«, in which he takes up conventional
themes such as creation, covenant, reconciliation, law and gospel, and
finally ethics (349–716). Each of these headings is developed somewhat
differently, but there is a pattern for each of them; the Old Testament

37 Ibid., 31–32.
38 Ibid., 32. For a discussion of »Rule of Faith« with which Professor Childs would likely
agree, see P. Stuhlmacher, The Christian Canon, Its Center, and Its Interpretation, in:
How to Do Biblical Theology, 1995. T. H. Polk, The Biblical Kierkegaard Reading by
the Rule of Faith, 1997, however, leaves things much more open and undetermined. See
especially p. 8f. on Augustine and chapter 2.
material and the New Testament material are discussed and then come general comments that move things fairly far in a dogmatic direction toward the fullness of Church teaching.

In passing, I mention three critiques that are not terribly important for Childs. First, the product of this analysis is an outline of propositional conclusions that are given with almost no attention to the actual working of texts. Now it may be that Childs had neither space nor time for such attentiveness, but it is clear that Childs is focused on conclusions. I suggest that it is the process of the text itself that is more important for the theological enterprise and the dynamics that are revelatory. The point is an arguable one but an alternative to Childs is at least thinkable. Second, I think it is fair to say that in the last section, the Old Testament is so submerged as to disappear, being overwhelmed by the claims of the New Testament. Third, for all of Childs’ careful articulation of discrete witnesses, his presentation has not at all solved the problem of how discrete witnesses relate to the final, coherent witness, for he has simply placed them side by side. I do not think he has at all solved the problem of continuity and discontinuity which is his major agenda, and so his work in that regard does not seem to me to be an advance.

I would, however, not labor these points. What is finally to be said of Childs is that he has boldly and with sustained power articulated a fresh approach that is avowedly ecclesial in a deliberate break with the more academic pattern championed by Barr. It should be clear, if one can get past the polemics, that Barr and Childs have offered models of work that set out the choices to be made by subsequent scholars.

VI.

Before finishing, I want to situate my own work in my book of 1997 by acknowledging the critique made of may work by Anderson, Barr, and Childs. My own work is a proposal that Old Testament theology is essentially a rhetorical analysis of the actual, concrete utterance of the text to see what Israel says about YHWH and how it is said, that is, it is a study of Israel’s testimony to the reality and character of God. It is clear that a singular focus on testimony (utterance) requires me, as a strategy I sustained as best I could, to forego questions of historicity and to bracket out dogmatic claims. This is a strategic and provisional decision on my part (as is clear in the book), because I did not want historical or dogmatic claims to have the kind of priority that would curb

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40 Ibid., 118.
the richness, boldness, and complexity of Israel’s testimony. As one might imagine, such an attempt at anti-foundationalism has evoked critical response:

1. Anderson has judged that my attempt to bracket out historical questions is unworkable, because the claims made for YHWH are claims in history.41 The point is a sensitive one, but at least it needs to be recognized that the nature of «history» is highly problematic and one does not overcome the problem simply by insisting on an undifferentiated notion of «history», as though the term has agreed upon signification and is not a mere mantra. Anderson is of course aware of its problematic, for he can speak of «the symbolic world of the Mosaic covenant» and refer to the preaching of Deuteronomy as «imaginative construal».42 Moreover he can allow divine judgment from Mt. Zion to be distanced from history:

From the very first the language about the Divine Warrior tends to move away from actual history into a world of imagination ... it is clear that the present form of the story invites the reader into a symbolic world, where the Divine Warrior calls for radical faith.43

In speaking of this imagery he concedes that it must be understood «with a poet’s appreciation of the metaphorical language».44 In using language of «imagination, symbolic, metaphorical», Anderson is quite close to my own intention. Anderson knows well that the notion of history is problematic, both because of the nature of the rhetoric of Old Testament claims and because of the probes of the historical «minimals» in the field. But he is nervous that if we go «too far» we will lose the connection to lived reality.

That risk does not seem to me an issue, precisely because, as Paul Hanson says in his critique of my work, «history counted in Israel’s account of God».45 Precisely! But what we have is the recount («account») in utterance, and what counts as history is given us only in the recounting. It is the recounting that lets history count, and my attempt is to pay attention to the recounting (testimony) which is what we have in hand. In any case, on the pivotal theological claims of faith in the Old Testament (as distinct from other aspects of Old Testament study), I believe that «history» is not a very substantive aid to us, except as given us in Israel’s textual utterance. I may not have given quite the correct nuance, but I do believe that finally our interpretation must attend to the what

42 Ibid., 138.
43 Ibid., 178.
44 Ibid., 179.
45 P. D. Hanson, A New Challenge to Biblical Theology, JAAR 67 (1999), 450.
and the *how* of utterance. While Anderson has paid careful attention to the nuance of my work, Hanson has not. He has brusquely dismissed my work in a way that justifies a certain notion of »history« without taking into account the inescapable slippage between »testimony« and »happening«.

2. Barr has issued a much more wholesale attack on my work (541–562). I suspect that the real impetus for Barr’s assault on my book is that in a rejection of Enlightenment reason as final arbiter, I have taken an anti-foundational posture. Barr is unembarrassedly a foundationalist, and such anti-foundationalism as mine strikes him as flimsy on the one hand and as absolutist and authoritarian on the other, because it attempts to make authoritative claims outside the domain of consensus reason. We shall simply differ on this crucial matter. His shrill dismissal of such an anti-foundationalism, however, does not so easily dismiss that epistemological option nor does his abrasiveness cover over the glaring problems of the rationalism he advocates.

My concern, a concern that has no legitimacy for Barr, is with the undeniable generative power of the texts for the community of faith, texts that attest to a God who inscrutably and inexplicably makes all things new. Now it is clear that an Enlightenment foundationalism must from the outset resist such an evangelical claim so that »the news« of the text necessarily evaporates into »explanation«. I do not know how the generative power of the text for the church, generative power for missional energy, is possible if the text must be trimmed to fit modern reasonableness. Nor do I know how such manifest generative power is to be understood if the text can only legitimately be understood in flat and descriptive ways. I suggest that even if Barr’s stricture against my work is valid, there remains this question of the generative power of the text that is an historical datum that is both important and unanswered.

3. In his review of my book, Childs takes particular exception to my distinction between »core testimony« which includes Israel’s account of YHWH’s sovereign fidelity and »counter testimony« that refers to the hiddenness and negativity of this God, a testimony that tells against the normative account of YHWH’s fidelity. On this dual focus, I wrote:

Lived faith in this tradition consists in the capacity to move back and forth between these two postures of faith, one concerned to submit to Yahweh, culminating in self-abandoning praise, the other concerned to assert self in the face of God, culminating in self-regarding complaint that takes a position of anatomy.

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47 SJTh 53/2 (2000).
48 Brueggemann, Theology of the Old Testament 40f.
Childs’ judgment is that such a distinction bifurcates the unity of the character of God in a way that is »gnostic«. Hanson takes refuge in a usual theological ploy of »Mysterious Otherness« as a category that holds everything together in the testimony.\textsuperscript{49} That of course is a convenient statement, but I do not see how that, \textit{per se}, helps at all with the disjunction that is so evident in the text. My point is exactly that our conventional solutions to the problematic of the text do not adequately take into account of the testimony itself. Simply an impervious statement to the contrary does not solve the problem that is so intractable and I believe defining for the text.

The problem with overriding the distinctions so evident in the text, so it seems to me, is that in asserting coherent unity, the homogeneity tends to be all on the side of sovereign fidelity with the near evaporation of what I have pointed to in »counter testimony«.\textsuperscript{50} It seems to me that in the Old Testament, precisely in the parts not congenial to Christian convention (and likely Childs would say in the Rule of Faith), Israel candidly testifies negatively about YHWH, negatively without resolution. And of course Israel speaks so about YHWH precisely because in its lived history YHWH is »revealed« in this way as sometimes absent, silent, passive, or hostile.

Of course it is a matter of concern to settled theology whether the character of God can be seen to be available to Israel in more than one mode, in ways that contradict. I have no doubt that the text presents YHWH in such a manner, precisely because YHWH in the text is a full personal character with all the freedom that belongs to uncurbed personhood. Israel, moreover, cannot say everything about YHWH at once, and so makes its various utterances that tell the truth about YHWH. I understand that in »canonical« approach one holds this more easily together than I have done. I resist any canonical approach that has the effect of censuring what is uncongenial or letting the positive win easily. Such a reductionism not only violates the text but diminishes textual resources for living freely and honestly as the people of God in a world deeply conflicted and short on resolution.

\textsuperscript{49} Hanson, A New Challenge to Biblical Theology, 459. If Hanson had read more carefully and not been so eager to caricature my work as »modern psychological«, he would have noticed that my argument refers always to the matter dialectically, even as he himself insists.

\textsuperscript{50} Hanson, ibid., 459, appeals for »integrative moral and religious beliefs«. But every such »integrative« belief is an act of imaginative construal that surely stands under the criticism of the text itself, especially the text in its abrasive counter voices.
VII.

I take the trouble to review my own work with reference to A, B, and C, not because I need here to make a defense of what I have done, but because I believe the exchanges attest to the vitality of the discipline and to some of its unfinished work. While Anderson tends to be quite irenic, Barr and Childs more readily are dismissive of those who depart from their norm, respectively modernist or canonical. My own judgment is that the emotional force of such dismissiveness is not simply about the study as such, but it is about felt needs and felt threats that propel our work, even if kept hidden. It is clear that the felt threat of Barr (authoritarianism) is very different from the felt threat of Childs (fragmentation). Fair enough. But surely not all work in the discipline needs to be propelled by the same agenda or responsive to the same felt threat. I believe that the discipline now has energy for important work. But I also have no doubt that the field must be open enough to permit different agenda. There is no doubt that Childs’ canon strikes Barr as authoritarian, and that Barr’s foundationalism strikes Childs as avoidance of the truth of the matter. It is possible, however, instead of dismissing all those who »err« and depart from critical or canonical orthodoxy, to learn from each other. The text is complex, hidden, and irascible enough that it will finally elude all our categories, historical, foundational, and canonical.

With the formulation of Old Testament theology at mid-twentieth century by Gerhard von Rad and Walther Eichrodt, the discipline seemed to have reached something of a point of settlement. The methodological disruptions of the 1970s and 1980s challenged the consensus of mid-century and splintered the field methodologically, so that subsequent work in Old Testament theology seemed nearly impossible. This article attends to the surprising vitality in the discipline that has emerged in the last decade, with particular reference to new contributions in the United States. The »ABC« of the title refers to recent contributions by Bernhard Anderson, James Barr, and Brevard Childs. A delineation of the several strategies of these scholars exhibits the great ferment in the field, the key issues to be faced, and the immense potential for further work. The author pauses over the work of Anderson, Barr, and Childs long enough to situate his own work alongside and in tension with their proposals.

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Walter Eichrodt was a Swiss Old Testament scholar and theologian of the 20th century. He was part of the biblical theology movement, which ran aground because its concern for the theology of the Old Testament was not matched by a concern for the reality of the events as scripture declares them to have actually happened. But this does not mean that their theology was bad! Eichrodt in particular seemed to have a real knack for theological writing. Just as the God of the Old Testament is no Being reposing in his own beatitude, but reveals himself in the controlling will of the eternal King, so the pious Israelite is no intoxicated, world-denying mystic revelling in the Beyond, but a warrior, who wrestles even in prayer, and looks for the life of power in communion with his divine Lord. Old Testament Theology is the branch of Biblical theology that seeks theological insight within the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. It explores past and present theological concepts as they pertain to God and God's relationship with creation. While the field started out as a Christian endeavor written mostly by men and aimed to provide an objective knowledge of early revelation, in the twentieth century it became informed by other voices and views, including those of feminist and Jewish scholars, which