

W. H. BELLINGER JR.

"For a generation, Bill Bellinger has been at the forefront of our shared scholarship on the book of Psalms. Now, near the end of his teaching-scholarly career, he has moved out to a most ambitious undertaking in this book. The hard work of Old Testament theology is elementally to find a model or paradigm that can account for most of the textual material. Bellinger proposes a model that is not unlike a three-legged stool, offered in the parts of creation, covenant, and prophetic proclamation. It is of special interest that Bellinger finds his three accents in the book of Psalms, the text he knows best. In articulating this three-pronged model, Bellinger brings the wisdom of his many years of study. It is clear from this work that the enterprise of Old Testament theology is well, healthy, and demanding. Bellinger's discussion is sure to evoke new explorations and focus attention on canonical matters and the mystery of divine-human interaction that is definitional for the scriptural tradition."

—Walter Brueggemann, Columbia Theological Seminary (emeritus)

"Bellinger (who knows his way around the Bible) here presents a shape for Old Testament theology that is founded on, if not centered in, the book of Psalms. 'The key,' Bellinger suggests, 'is to stay as close as is humanly possible to the perspective the Hebrew text articulates about God and divine-human engagement.' He then proceeds to do exactly that by working through the main units and books of the Old Testament, assessing the parts in light of the whole and its larger structure. In the end, Bellinger identifies a kind of three-legged stool, with creation theology, covenant theology, and prophetic theology all supporting a seat that is nothing less than salvation itself. I am confident that this book will prove eminently useful in a wide range of courses on the Old Testament and its theology."

-Brent A. Strawn, Duke University

"Bellinger offers an innovative approach to an Old Testament theology. First, the three-legged stool analogy of creation, covenant theology, and prophetic tradition provides readers with tangible 'hooks' on which to hang the seemingly myriad theological ideas present in the Older Testament. And second, using the Psalter as a starting point for exploring this 'stool' provides a superb contextual focus for beginning the study. This volume will be a valuable resource for professors, students, and pastors."

—Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University

"Just as writing an Old Testament theology has been deemed a futile exercise, Bellinger offers an engaging and elegant introduction that deftly W. H. Bellinger Jr., Introducing Old Testament Theology Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022

Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2 Used by permission. navigates the 'Older' Testament's diversity and interconnections. Bellinger's judicious exegetical insights are matched by his keen conceptual thinking—a perfect combination for a theological introduction. Bellinger has turned a 'lost cause' into a just cause."

-William P. Brown, Columbia Theological Seminary

"Reading with the grain and using text-centered approaches, Bellinger invites readers to ponder select theological ideas that he draws out from his reading of 'Older Testament' texts. The volume reinforces the point that readers, grounded in their social locations, create meanings for biblical texts and that all theological content needs to be assessed critically and hermeneutically. The volume elicits questions: What constitutes Old Testament theology? Whose theology is being presented? How is such theology to be understood in the context of the twenty-first-century globalized world?"

-Carol J. Dempsey, University of Portland

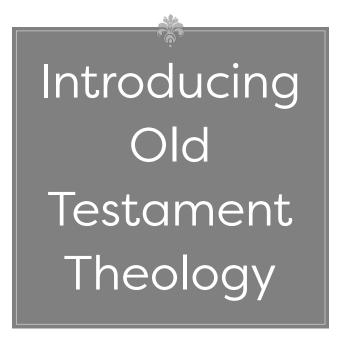
"Finding a shape for Old Testament theology without allowing that theology to shape the Old Testament is the present challenge of the discipline. We need ways of doing Old Testament theology that have a sense of their own shape and can enter a dialogue with other aspects of Old Testament study without trying to encompass all of them, and this is what Bellinger's work offers. His elegant presentation of creation, covenant, and prophecy keeps the movement of the Old Testament's narrative in view while attending to the complexity and diversity of its literary components. His definition of salvation as 'integrity of life' provides an expansive horizon for viewing the ways texts in the Old Testament engage contemporary questions."

-Mark McEntire, Belmont University

"This offering on Old Testament theology is a gift of tradition, of scholarly history, and of current creativity. Bellinger mines the historic conversation on what the words 'Old Testament' and 'theology' mean when they are connected by reminding us of the field of study and the way Scripture leads us into a view of God that illuminates faith. His definitions and examples make the book worth the read, even if one believes they already 'know' Old Testament theology. Let this book, then, be a reintroduction from different vantage points. I hope professors will take it up, offer it to their students, and lean into his creative thinking and expansive grace as he leads us through the text with a paradigm for how to engage the First Testament's words about its God. The book is a gift worth exploring."

-Valerie Bridgeman, Methodist Theological School in Ohio

Introducing Old Testament Theology



Creation, Covenant, and Prophecy in the Divine-Human Relationship

W. H. BELLINGER JR.



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I dedicate this volume, with gratitude, to my colleagues in the Department of Religion at Baylor University and to Dr. Stephen Breck Reid, professor of Christian Scriptures at George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University, for his friendship and ongoing dialogue with my scholarly work.

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Preface

eaders of this volume are likely those with an interest in the Bible and in particular what the Bible says about God and about faith. The volume will likely find a place in college and seminary classrooms and so as part of the academic study of the Bible. Biblical studies include a variety of perspectives on the Bible, such as historical background or connections and literary questions about the text and how it came to be. Readers may have some background in such academic endeavors with the Bible and now be prepared to take on another area of inquiry—Old Testament theology. The term "theology" literally means a word about God. This area of study typically embraces that in a broad way to talk about faith and the divine-human relationship and implications thereof. In traditional biblical study, attention to the theological dimensions of biblical texts has often been seen as the crowning task of the discipline. This volume will summon the readers' experience with the Old Testament and with theology to explore their relationships. The emphasis will be on the Protestant canon.

Some scholars have abandoned the use of the term "Old Testament" because the adjective is seen to suggest outdated ancient texts with no connections to the twenty-first century. Some fear that the term communicates a supersessionism in which the New Testament completely replaces the Old. The terminological issue has brought several responses.

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Some scholars use the term Hebrew Bible or Hebrew Scriptures (though there are some parts in Aramaic) to clarify that these texts originated in Hebrew communities. For those interested in theological concerns in the text, it is problematic that those terms are academic inventions and not tied to any community of faith. The Jewish Bible today is mostly referred to as the Tanak, indicating the three parts of Jewish Scripture: Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim (Law, Prophets, and Writings). Some have sought to reinvigorate the term "old" in terms of wisdom and respect. Others have changed the term to "First Testament." The concern that raises for theologians of the church is that the New Testament could then be taken as the "Second Testament" and thus secondary. Another possibility is "Elder Testament." I prefer the term "Older Testament" as an indication of an awareness of the terminological difficulties and an awareness that this section of the biblical canon is older and wiser and more formative than are we as interpreters. I do not believe there is a simple solution to the terminological difficulty. The phrase Old Testament theology is still the standard one in the discipline, and so I will continue to use it. I will use Old Testament and Hebrew Bible or Hebrew Scriptures interchangeably while being aware of the differences the two phrases suggest. As I have indicated, my preference is Older Testament.3

Another issue of terminology has to do with the parts of the Older Testament. The Hebrew canon has three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Prophets include two sections: the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve). These two sections have a variety of connections. This book uses some terms of the Protestant organization of the canon. Chapter 4 uses the term "Historical Books" as a way to discuss the Former Prophets plus some

^{1.} Goldingay, Old Testament Theology; McLaughlin, Introduction to Israel's Wisdom Traditions.

^{2.} Seitz, Elder Testament.

^{3.} The use of "Older Testament" makes clear that I interpret the text as a Christian. I am indeed a lifelong Baptist. I understand the interpretive task to be a conversation between texts and readers, guided by the shape of the text. Certainly, the context of the interpreter makes a difference, but I hope to begin with the shape of the text itself.

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additional books related to the history of ancient Israel. Chapter 7 uses the heading "The Prophets" to discuss the theological perspective of the Latter Prophets. Readers will find it helpful to be aware of both sets of terminology.

This volume will focus on the theological or faith dimension of the Older Testament. That dimension relates to the sociohistorical or cultural context of these texts and to the shape and history of this literature. The hope is that readers will have prior knowledge of these areas in biblical studies. This volume will build on those areas and explore them when they relate to theological dimensions of the text. The focus here is the testimony Old Testament texts present to the divine-human engagement.

Several issues surface from time to time in this volume that merit comment. One is the connection between Old Testament theology and various critical issues tied to texts. Examples include the shape of the composition of the Pentateuch as well as the Former Prophets. Issues of composition also arise for various texts in the Latter Prophets as well. Form-critical questions are central in the study of the Psalms and Wisdom literature. Readers will bring some knowledge of these issues. Those of us reading the Older Testament theologically must interact with such historical- and literary-critical matters. I hope I have done that when needed and done it with care. It is important to address critical issues with humility, and it is important not to be controlled by them. Where these issues are clear and helpful, I have used them in the service of theological purposes. However, one must remember that the primary issue for Old Testament theologians is what the text says about God—the simple definition of "theology"—and how the text contributes to reflection on the divine-human relationship. That is the focus. Perhaps one might say that my approach is postcritical.

A second issue is the relationship of theology of the Hebrew Scriptures as treated in this volume to theological studies as pursued in contemporary theological education. The image of a two-way conversation is significant here. Theologians working today may bring theological issues, traditional theological categories, and philosophical

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questions into conversation with Old Testament theology as treated in this volume. Those who study the theology of the Hebrew Bible may also raise issues and categories for conversation with contemporary theologians. Such conversations can be beneficial for readers and interpreters of the Hebrew Bible and for communities of faith. At times such conversations may be difficult to follow, or to find ways forward in, but they provide possibilities for the engagement of the Hebrew canon with contemporary life and faith.

Third, what is the relationship of the theology of the Hebrew Scriptures and communities of faith, particularly with Judaism and Christianity or the church? Both Judaism and Christianity understand their faiths to fulfill the promise of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. Rabbinic Judaism continues to live faith as a covenant community in relationship with the creator. The proclamation of the Hebrew Scriptures nurtures that community as the community either looks forward to the fulfillment of their faith or lives currently in that fulfillment. The church is nurtured and guided by the proclamation of the Older Testament in conversation with the New Testament and the Christ event. The New Testament does not replace the Old Testament. Jesus Christ incarnates the Old Testament and, in that sense, deepens and broadens it. The New Testament understands itself to be in continuity with the Old. In some Christian communities, supersessionism, in which the New Testament takes the place of the Old, prevails in reading the Old Testament. That is unfortunate and misguided, and I seek to avoid it. I suggest rather that the Older Testament first be interpreted on its own terms as far as possible. Indeed, a full understanding of the New Testament depends on an understanding of the Old Testament, the necessary beginning for the New Testament. Christians often use the phrase "New Testament church" to refer to the church of New Testament times, but if understanding the New Testament depends on understanding the Old, then a better phrase would be "biblical church." The Old Testament proclamation speaks to the church; the Old Testament emphasizes the import of salvation by way of creator, deliverer, and prophetic word. The Hebrew Scriptures speak to both Preface

synagogue and church and are interpreted and embodied by those communities.

Fourth, what is the social location of the writer of this volume? This question is important in contemporary scholarship. I am a white male seventy-one years of age. I am a Protestant Christian and specifically a Baptist minister. I am also an academic, and part of the academic establishment, who has spent most of his life in the southern United States. I think it is inevitable that these realities have an impact on my scholarship and on my interpretation of both Scripture and Old Testament theology. At the same time, I hope I have given an honest account of the text of the Hebrew Bible and interpreted it with humility and with robust reading of its details. I seek to be aware of my assumptions. I am an ecumenical Christian and so seek to attend to various interpretations, including Jewish ones. I hope my readings of the text are candid and helpful. Interpretive communities are important. Mine include Lake Shore Baptist Church, the broader church, the guild of biblical studies, the broader academic community, and anyone who nurtures an interest in the Hebrew Bible. I understand any interpretation of the Scriptures to be incomplete. I hope this volume is a wellfounded and honest effort at that task.

Many people contribute to the publication of a book. I am grateful to my graduate student colleagues, staff colleagues, faculty colleagues, and administrative colleagues at Baylor. Doctoral student Cara Forney has made a significant contribution to this volume. I heartily thank Baker Academic, especially Jim Kinney, Brandy Scritchfield, and James Korsmo.

Old Testament theology is a particularly complicated area of Old Testament studies. I hope this volume will make a meaningful contribution to the area, especially for students.

Introduction

he goal of this volume is to help students and other readers explore the faith dimension of the Older Testament in our current context by presenting a shape for Old Testament theology. How to begin and how to organize an Old Testament theology are open questions. Some contemporary scholars and readers seek a new shape for this area of study in the face of theological diversity and a current era characterized by pluralism. Several Old Testament scholars, however, suggest that in such a reality, the search for a shape for the theology of the Hebrew Scriptures is a lost cause. They argue that the search is unwise, asserting that any attempts to organize Old Testament faith in a coherent way fail in the face of the text's wide-ranging theological diversity. Such scholars often see a coherent organization as unnecessary and believe the central task at hand is to continue to interpret particular texts. Let me respond to that perspective.

I agree that we need to continue to study the theological dimensions of individual texts in the Older Testament, but I also think that contemporary readers of these texts need frameworks for such interpretive efforts. Interpretations are more fully informed when they are aware of contexts and attend to reading strategies that fit those contexts. Such careful interpretive work also helps readers to see their assumptions and to consider them critically. As I have said previously, "If we can craft a satisfying shape for Old Testament theology, it will give readers frameworks and contexts in which to read these ancient texts in

beneficial ways." Reading the part in light of the whole is a basic task of interpretation. This volume is my attempt to craft a satisfying shape and thus aid readers in the interpretive task.

I argue for a shape of Old Testament theology in terms of divine revelation and human response. That revelation and response has three perspectives: creation theology in which God is present to bless and offers wisdom as an avenue of response, covenant theology in which God hears and comes to deliver and shape a community in which covenant instruction provides a path for response, and prophetic theology in which YHWH speaks and calls for fidelity to the creator and liberator in response. The analogy I call on is that of three legs of a stool, a tripos. History suggests that in the old days of the University of Cambridge, students sat on a three-legged stool to be quizzed about the subjects of their undergraduate studies. I use this analogy to point to three theological perspectives at the core of the shape of revelation and response in the Older Testament. I view these three perspectives as the three legs of that stool. The question here is what constitutes the seat of the stool supported by the three legs.

My proposal for the seat of the stool is "salvation." In some faith communities, that term is located in covenant theology and tied to deliverance, and it can be defined in a variety of ways dependent on the theologies of the communities. The English word "salvation," however, derives from the Latin *salvare*, which carries a broader sense of wholeness or fullness or completeness or health. The goal of blessing, liberation, and proclamation is wholeness of life for the faith community and all in it, for creation and all in it. The Hebrew for "integrity" (*tom*, from *tmm*, as "integrity" or "wholeness"; the understanding is akin to shalom as wholeness) correlates to "salvation" in which life fits together in a holistic way in a community characterized by just and generous relationships nurtured by the creator, liberator, and guide. The diverse perspectives of the Hebrew canon support that goal. That goal reflects a loose umbrella of unity for the Hebrew canon, but any

^{1.} Bellinger, "Shape for Old Testament Theology," 292.

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step into the Hebrew text brings readers very quickly to a diversity of perspectives. Enormous diversity characterizes the Old Testament in a considerable variety of ways. In the face of that reality, I boldly propose a shape for an Old Testament Theology.

Please note that it is *a* shape and not *the* shape. At the same time, I pursue this shape in robust ways. It does not resolve the diversity of the Old Testament into a tripolar center but rather provides a heuristic avenue for organizing the theological perspectives of the Older Testament as an aid in interpretation. It presents a path that is based in the Psalms, and so begins with a textual base. It also accounts for what the text says about God and God's engagement with the world and the human community and its life. It provides a path for interested readers to pursue reading the Hebrew canon in meaningful ways. There are, no doubt, other helpful paths. My hope is that this one provides ways forward for students and other interested readers.

A Suggested Path for Shaping Old Testament Theology

As stated previously, this volume will focus on the theological or faith dimension of the Older Testament, on the testimony these texts articulate in the divine-human engagement. The faith dimension relates to the sociohistorical or cultural context of these texts and to the shape and history of this literature but emphasizes the witness to faith. Since this academic area of inquiry has a long and distinguished history in biblical studies, it stands to reason that we begin with a basic review of that history of scholarship to gather lessons from it. The discipline of Old Testament theology seeks to retain the gains of modern study of the Hebrew Scriptures while not being held captive to the extremes of modernism. For this reason, chapter 1 provides an overview of this history already hinted at in the opening discussion. As readers will no doubt notice, the current state of the discipline and its lack of direction could be paralyzing. What is central is the task of asking what God is doing in texts in the Older Testament. What does the text say about the divine-human engagement and the implications of it? How might

one then begin to organize the variety of answers to such questions? In chapter 2, I suggest a textual place to begin: the book of Psalms.

The place in the Old Testament where the faith community of ancient Israel sings and confesses its faith is the central book of Psalms, ancient Israel's prayer book and hymnbook. This textual starting point both articulates the major themes of Old Testament faith and reflects the problems inherent in doing so. The book of Psalms reveals the divine side of God's engagement with all of creation and calls for human response. When we consider how God is involved with the human community, one of the two dominant psalm genres suggests that God is present to bless, to make it possible for the faithful to grow and thrive in the world. The descriptive psalms of praise illustrate that perspective well. Psalms of the other dominant genre, lament, portray YHWH as the one who hears and comes to deliver. When we consider the wider Old Testament, these two perspectives of the blessing God and the delivering God suggest the perspectives of creation theology and covenant theology. In Old Testament creation theology, God is the one who is present to bless, and the means of human response is wisdom in how to live in the creation. In Old Testament covenant theology, God is the one who hears a lament and comes to deliver, bringing about a covenant relationship, including covenant instruction or torah. A third perspective also surfaces in several of the psalms of praise where God is characterized as the one who speaks and calls for fidelity to the divine-human relationship. This perspective is reflected in the Latter Prophets and their calls for repentance from injustice and idolatry or from lack of faith in the divine fidelity in Israel's experience of trouble and woe. The Latter Prophets combine in complicated ways creation and covenant theological perspectives in a genre focused on divine revelation by way of prophetic voices.

At the risk of repeating, I articulate again the path we will follow. Starting with ancient Israel's liturgical confessions of faith instigates a three-part structure for articulating Old Testament faith: creation theology, in which God is present to bless, with wisdom as an avenue of response; covenant theology, in which God hears and comes to deliver,

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with *torah* as an avenue of response; and prophetic theology, in which God speaks and calls for fidelity from the faith community. This structuring proposal is more heuristic than determinative, and so in chapters 3–7, I will not take the three parts of the confession as a structuring device but will rather work through the parts of the canon with these three perspectives in mind to see how they are present and how they interact in shaping the Hebrew canon and a memorable portrait of salvation.

Chapter 3 attends to the formative first part of the Hebrew canon, the Torah. Appropriately, the opening book of Genesis puts creation theology on display with creation accounts and narratives of the beginnings of human experience. God here creates and blesses with the power to live and grow, and the texts teach wisdom for living in this world. The ancestral stories continue with the emphasis on the divine blessing for Abram and Sarai and their descendants as they find wisdom for living with this blessing. The language of covenant appears at times in Genesis, but the primary theological perspective is that of creation theology. In the first half of Exodus, covenant takes center stage with the faith community's cry for help in Egyptian bondage, the divine hearing of the cry, and God's coming to liberate the community. The exodus from Egypt leads to the creation of the covenant community and instruction (torah) in how to live in that relationship. Following the agreement of the covenant relationship, Exodus moves to instruction in worship for the faith community. The context is still covenant instruction, but the text most often functions from the perspective of creation theology in Genesis, and this emphasis continues through Leviticus and parts of Numbers. Deuteronomy concludes the Torah with powerful articulation of the covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel. The creator also provides blessing in Deuteronomy, but the focus is the gift of covenant and the call for a human response of fidelity in that relationship.

Chapter 4 begins with the Former Prophets as they continue to narrate, on the basis of Deuteronomy's covenant theology, the life of ancient Israel as the community emerges in the land of Palestine and lives