

The
HEARTBEAT
of Old Testament Theology

THREE CREEDAL EXPRESSIONS

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Preface

Reflection on the topics within this volume began many years ago as I was embarking on my doctoral studies at the University of Cambridge. I was told that British doctorates produced great researchers because of the singular focus on a dissertation on a limited topic or portion of text, while American doctorates were more conducive to teaching because of the demand of coursework, comprehensive exams, and dissertation. Knowing that I would most likely teach introductory courses in OT in North America, I carefully chose my dissertation topic: Neh. 9. It was a special passage, one that recited the entire history of Israel from creation to exile. And my method was primarily traditio-historical, that is, investigating the relationship of this prayerful recitation of the story of Israel to the rest of the OT. My hope was to gain comprehensive exposure to the content and critical study of the OT while remaining limited to a single passage. I was first exposed to Neh. 9 through Gerhard von Rad and his careful work on the short historical creeds. I was drawn to von Rad because he provided a critical approach to the redemptive-historical approach that I had learned from followers of the Old Princeton theologian Geerhardus Vos. Thus, as I began my journey into the academic study of the OT through Neh. 9, I was motivated by my interest in OT and Biblical Theology, and it is a relief to finally have an opportunity to express more fully my thoughts on the inner structure of OT theology. The influence of Neh. 9 and von Rad will be evident from the beginning,

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but it will soon become clear that I've discovered much, much more as I have explored the OT over the past twenty years.

My students were the first to hear lectures on the topics that I investigate in this book. I used early expressions of my thoughts found in this book as my lecture for students when I was candidating at Canadian Theological Seminary and McMaster Divinity College. I chose these lectures because they expressed my passion and identity as an OT scholar, that is, that I was interested in its theological message. But it was the Hayward Lectureship at Acadia Divinity College, Acadia University on October 21–23, 2013, that afforded me the opportunity to take my thoughts to a new level and expand them into the present book. I am grateful to Craig Evans for his kind invitation and to the warm hospitality that I enjoyed while in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, especially as I was hosted by Craig and Virginia Evans and Glen and Darlene Wooden. The opportunities to preach at the Manning Memorial Chapel and to spend focused time with students and faculty discussing the content of the lectures were stimulating, and I hope helpful for those who participated. Many thanks to President Harry Gardner for his warm welcome while on campus. Also I am thankful to Jim Kinney at Baker Academic for guiding the process of turning the lecture notes into the present book and patiently waiting for the arrival of the manuscript.

The research and writing of this book have taken place over many years within the academy, and my hope is that this book will be a helpful resource for those mentoring an emerging generation of students of the Bible. The book showcases an approach to the core theology of the OT that not only engages the OT text but also shows the connection between this core OT theology and the NT and the life of the community that embraces both Old and New Testaments. In a postscript, I present the sermon I preached at Acadia that served as an invitation to intimacy with the God who is revealed and confessed throughout the Scriptures. In an appendix, I provide a slightly revised edition of an earlier article that presents my theological hermeneutic for Biblical Theology and then what I hope is a basic procedure with an example to guide students of the Bible in reading the OT in a biblical theologically responsible way. I have included this long appendix to provide theological orientation and practical advice for others to

continue the tradition of biblical-theological reflection, whether for assignments in the academy, for sermons and Bible studies in the church, or for personal enrichment in the home.

I hope that this book will draw the uninitiated into the theological riches of the OT and motivate those who have already found these riches to explore new ways to communicate these riches to a church and world in need of the God to whom they witness. The ultimate goal, however, is that all that has been written will prompt greater glory to the God who is revealed and confessed throughout the Old and New Testaments.

I dedicate this book to my son Stephen, whose organ weekly sings praises to this God who is the focus of this book. My greatest hope as a father is that you will experience all the goodness of the God of the Scriptures in the abundant life available to you through Jesus Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Ego ex eorum numero me esse profiteor qui scribunt proficiendo, et scribendo proficient.

(Augustine, *Epistle* 143.2, via John Calvin)

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Taking the Pulse of Old Testament Theology

Past and Present

I am a person who likes to track progress, and in no place is that more important to me than at my local gym, where two or three times a week I mount an elliptical trainer for a thirty-minute workout. This machine is a high-tech wonder, tracking my steps, distance, and most important of all, my heartbeat. By my grasping two handles this elliptical trainer reads the speed of my heartbeat. At the end of my workout a summary report shows how long I trained within the optimum pulse rate for my size and age. In the normal pace of life I don't even notice my heartbeat, but through the miracle of technology I am able to take my pulse. My elliptical trainer identifies my heartbeat as a single rhythm, but more sophisticated instruments, such as a stethoscope or an EKG monitor, reveal that multiple rhythms compose my heartbeat.

I invite you to don your theological stethoscope and listen for the heartbeat that represents the very core of the theology of the

OT. We are not the first to practice biblical cardiology. The OT and NT themselves provide evidence that the writers of the Scriptures were interested in taking the heartbeat of the biblical witness, whether that was Zechariah identifying the heartbeat of the prophets (Zech. 1:3–4) or Jesus the heartbeat of the law and the prophets (Matt. 7:12). Even the history of scholarship in the twentieth century provides a helpful case study as we begin to take the pulse of OT theology.

The past century of biblical scholarship bears witness to the rising and falling, revising and fracturing of the discipline of OT theology, sometimes foreshadowing, oftentimes paralleling, the dominant hermeneutical agenda of the times. With the supremacy of diachronic presuppositions and methodologies at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that OT theology had in large part been silenced across the OT guild in favor of the study of the history of religion. Taking their lead from Wellhausen’s work in the late nineteenth century, OT scholars used the biblical text mainly as a source for accessing the religious ideology of the ancient Hebrew people as it evolved from nature religion to its heights in prophetic monotheism before its demise in priestly legalism.¹

A loosening of the diachronic stranglehold on the study of the OT in the period between the World Wars prompted the revival of OT theology. Although the historical study of the Hebrew people, religion, and literature had laid bare the historical context of the OT, it was time to allow the ancient texts once again to speak theologically. In a way, this shift from the history of religion to OT theology foreshadowed the mid-twentieth-century shift from diachronic to synchronic hermeneutical paradigms, represented in New Criticism and Structuralism.²

There are examples in the second half of the twentieth century of an approach to OT theology more akin to classic Christian systematic theology, focusing on categories such as theology (God), anthropology (humanity), soteriology (salvation), and eschatology

1. See Spieckermann, “God’s Steadfast Love,” for superb examples of the differences between the disciplines of OT theology and history of religion.

2. For the categories (which I have revised and updated) employed below, see Hasel, *Basic Issues*.

(future state).³ At the same time there are others who continued to approach OT theology through the lens of history of religions.⁴ However, these approaches have been overshadowed by four key figures who dominated the discipline in the second half of the twentieth century: Walther Eichrodt, Gerhard von Rad, Brevard Childs, and Phyllis Trible.⁵ Eichrodt focused on covenant as the central theme of OT theology. Von Rad leveraged the development of traditions in the OT to trace key streams in OT theology. Childs attended to the canon of the OT to identify the shape of OT theology. Trible sought to shift focus from text to reader and the hermeneutical framework for reflection on OT theology.

Eichrodt is representative of a series of thematic approaches that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. His approach is best described as a cross-section thematic approach, one that structures OT theology around a theme or topic that lays bare “the inner structure of religion.”⁶ This entails selectivity, as the OT theologian is searching for (a) prominent idea(s). Others have adopted a thematic approach without limiting themselves to a single theme. Terrien’s presence versus absence, Hanson’s teleological versus cosmic, and Westermann’s deliverance versus blessing are representative of many who have used two contrastive themes to structure OT theology.⁷ At the core of Brueggemann’s courtroom approach to OT theology lies the dialectic of core testimony versus countertestimony, which produces a “tension” that “belongs to the very character and substance of OT faith” and that “precludes and resists resolution.”⁸ Many, however, have adopted a multiplex thematic approach along

3. Baab, *Theology of the Old Testament*; Köhler, *Old Testament Theology*.

4. Schmidt, *Faith of the Old Testament*; Gunneweg, *Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments*; Gerstenberger, *Theologies in the Old Testament*; cf. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology*, 25–75.

5. Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*; von Rad, *Theologie*; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*; Childs, *Introduction*; Childs, *Old Testament Theology*; Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*; Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*; Trible, “Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology.”

6. Hasel, *Basic Issues*, 49.

7. Terrien, *Elusive Presence*; Hanson, *Dynamic Transcendence*; Westermann, *Elements*.

8. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 400.

the lines advocated by Gerhard Hasel.⁹ This approach eschews any limitations on themes traced through the OT, encouraging reflection on any and all themes that arise from OT exegesis.¹⁰

Von Rad's approach is representative of a series of approaches that have been called diachronic. Von Rad focused on the development of the historical traditions (including the premonarchial traditions of Genesis–Joshua and the monarchial traditions that follow) and the prophetic traditions of Israel.¹¹ In tracing the historical traditions, von Rad showcases not only his diachronic approach to interpreting the text (sensitive to the development of the text over time) but also the diachronic dimension of the content of the text (sensitive to the presentation of a salvation history).¹² This attention to diachronic development for writing OT theology can also be discerned in the work of Christoph Barth, although he focuses on the presentation of a salvation history with little interest in the development of the text over time.¹³ Geerhardus Vos also fits within this approach even though he focuses more on the presentation of revelatory history, which he identifies as inseparable from redemptive history.¹⁴ His revelatory history is twofold: the Mosaic epoch and the prophetic epoch, with the first focused on revelation and events associated with the era of Moses and the second on events associated with the era of the prophets, understood particularly as guardians of the theocratic kingdom ruled by the monarch.

Brevard Childs structures his OT theology according to the canonical identity of the text.¹⁵ Those who have followed Childs's lead have

9. Hasel, *Basic Issues*, 111–14; cf. Youngblood, *Heart of the Old Testament*; Dyrness, *Themes*; Alexander and Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.

10. One might place within this stream Gerstenberger, *Theologies in the Old Testament*, who does not adopt the typical canonical sensibility of Hasel, for instance, but seeks sensitivity to the complexity of religious voices within the OT text.

11. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, whose first volume is subtitled: “The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions,” and second volume: “The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions.”

12. On this approach, see chap. 2 below.

13. Barth, *God with Us*. John Kessler’s work takes seriously the diverse perspectives based on key theological tradition streams in the OT in a way that is akin to von Rad’s approach; cf. Kessler, *Old Testament Theology*.

14. Vos, *Biblical Theology*.

15. Childs, *Introduction*; Childs, *Old Testament Theology*; Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*.

adopted one of the thematic approaches articulated above, usually a multiplex approach. Childs focused on the final form of the text with attention to the unique witness of the OT before bringing it into conversation with NT theology to produce a Biblical Theology. Elmer Martens has suggested an intertextual approach that focuses on the many intertextual links (allusions to characters, episodes, vocabulary) between canonical texts in the OT.¹⁶ Paul House and Waltke and Yu also focus on the final form of the text, but they focus attention particularly on the theological witness of the individual books within the OT.¹⁷ Others have given attention to the theological witness within specific sections of the OT canon and/or according to the overall shape of the OT canon.¹⁸

In recent years, however, one can discern a significant shift toward ideological approaches to OT theology. Phyllis Trible signaled this shift long ago when she called biblical theologians to take biblical hermeneutics more seriously.¹⁹ Ideological approaches abandon the façade of objective description of OT theology and embrace contemporary identities that provide a lens through which to view the text. The scholarship traced by Leo Perdue in his helpful volume highlights the diversity of approaches that have emerged from this hermeneutical shift, including liberation, ethnic, feminist, mujerista, womanist, Jewish, postmodern, and postcolonial biblical interpretation and theology.²⁰

Whereas the diachronic focus of biblical studies at the beginning of the century, with its emphasis on the evolution of religion in Israel, left little room for expressing a unified theology in the OT, the synchronic methods of the middle part of the century that began with great intentions of a synthetic unity increasingly contributed to the disunity of the OT as a corpus, first through tracing multiple tradition streams, later through investigating multiple themes, and

16. Martens, "Reaching."

17. House, *Old Testament Theology*; Waltke and Yu, *Old Testament Theology*.

18. Morgan, *Between Text and Community*; Zuck et al., *Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*; Hubbard et al., *Studies in Old Testament Theology*; Chapman, *Law and the Prophets*; Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*; Boda, *Severe Mercy*.

19. Trible, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," 448–66.

20. See the superb review of various approaches in Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology*, 76–339.

ultimately through consideration of the unique perspectives of the various books. The geometric expansion of themes and claims resulted in the hermeneutical fatigue of postfoundational OT theology and the conclusion that OT theology was merely a perspectival exercise. The constant in each era is the claim of diversity, whether that diversity is located within the evolving community that lay behind the text, in the varied canon that lay within the text, or in the fractured communities that interpreted the text.²¹

Is there any way ahead? Can we speak any longer of a theology that lies at the core of the OT? Are our claims of theology merely perspectival projections, or can we identify something in these ancient texts that witnesses to some form of unity in the biblical corpus?

The present book focuses on what I think lies at the core of OT theology. Of course, my own perspective (“I think”) is key to this statement. I am fully aware that I am limited by my own hermeneutical journey, one that has involved reflection on the OT from my childhood within the Christian tradition until the present day. My journey has involved, however, consistent and deep engagement with the OT itself as I have read and taught these texts over the past four decades, nearly three of which have been spent in graduate education. I have also had the privilege of dialoguing with the best in scholarship on the OT, both confessional and secular, and from this have drawn insights that have endured for generations. I have honestly articulated my own hermeneutic and my approach to OT theology in the appendix below: “Biblical Theology and the Old Testament.”²² But let me begin with a short definition of my purpose in this book, a short articulation of my methodology, and then the dominant image I have adopted for the presentation of my topic.

The core purpose of the study of theology is, of course, reflection on God, and for the study of OT theology and Biblical Theology, reflection on the presentation of God in the OT and the NT. The enterprise of theology entails also reflection on the meaning of creation both human and nonhuman in relation to God, which explains why topics such as anthropology, soteriology, eschatology, and ecclesiology

21. On the future of OT theology, see the reflective comments of Brueggemann, “Futures in Old Testament Theology.”

22. See also the introduction to Boda, “*Return to Me*,” 19–34.

are also included in studies of “theology.” But it is important to remember that the main purpose of theology is deep and disciplined reflection on God. This present project seeks to describe what is foundational to the revelation and confession of God within the OT with sensitivity to how this revelation and confession is reflected as well in the NT. While the focus is on God, we will soon see that one can never abstract God from creation, especially humanity, among whom the canon was formed.

The methodology I have adopted is a selective intertextual-canonical approach that identifies core expressions of God that appear throughout the OT canon. It is “selective” in the sense that Eichrodt noted long ago: certain topics in the biblical witness seem to constitute its “inner structure,” and it is important to highlight these topics that provide cohesion to the OT and the NT. It is “canonical” in that its focus is on the texts that are found within the canon in a form that has been accepted within a particular community of faith. As a Protestant I am part of a community that has adopted a certain set of texts as canonical. While I am aware that there are other communities of faith, both Christian and Jewish, that have adopted a different set of texts, it is also evident to me that the theological elements I have selected in this present study of OT theology are not exclusive to the Protestant canon (whether the particular books or the manuscript traditions employed) but can be discerned in all the major canonical traditions in Christian and Jewish faith. I have focused on the OT because it is my area of expertise and I do think it is important to give the OT a voice within biblical-theological reflection, even though I do show how the emphases of the OT find echoes in the NT. Finally, my method is “intertextual” in that it focuses on repeated use of particular phrases, expressions, and structures throughout the breadth of the OT and the NT. These topics are identified by close attention to what is ubiquitous throughout the biblical texts.

With this I have identified my particular approach to biblical cardiology. My selective intertextual-canonical method is the medical tool I have honed to discern the heartbeat and the patterns that are evidence of the core life principle that animates the biblical witness. I am going to argue for three basic rhythms that compose the heartbeat of the OT, identified with three basic creeds that can be discerned

throughout the OT: the narrative, character, and relational creeds. In OT theology we will see that the three basic creedal rhythms reflect, on the one side, God's plan to form a redemptive community (Israel) and, on the other side, God's plan to transform all creation.

So join me as we take our theological stethoscopes and place them on the Scriptures to listen carefully for the heartbeat that shows that the Scriptures are indeed "living and active" (Heb. 4:12; cf. John 6:63, 68; Acts 7:38) and words by which we may truly live (Lev. 18:5; cf. Deut. 32:47; Ezek. 20:11, 13; Neh. 9:29).²³

23. Throughout the book, I will generally draw citations of Scripture from the NASB translation, modified at times to reflect my own translation choices.