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The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology edited by Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel

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BEN C. OLLENBURGER, ELMER A. MARTENS, and GERHARD F. HASEL, eds. *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology*. Sources for Biblical and Theological Study, vol. 1. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992. xii; 547 pp. Bibliography, indexes. \$29.50.

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The Flowering of Old Testament Theology is a reader designed to delineate “not only the issues but the progress and the achievements” of Old Testament theology during the twentieth century (ix). This purpose is accomplished by introducing readers to the major scholarly views on Old Testament theology and to the most influential scholars through excerpts from their writings. *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology* is the first volume in a series recently initiated by Eisenbrauns publishers.¹ The focus of this series is to provide general students of the Old Testament with the opportunity to “interact with foundational works firsthand” (vii).

The Old Testament is much more of a theological scrapbook than a textbook, containing no systematic discussion of doctrines and religious practices. Scholars have therefore attempted to delineate the major theological views of ancient Israelites, the development of those views, and the ways they were understood and applied by communities of believers from ancient times to the present. Not surprisingly, the variety of religious and academic orientations among modern scholars has produced an array of opinions not only about the major theological components in the Old Testament, but also about the definition of Old Testament theology.

As evidenced by the designation “Old Testament theology,” this field of study is mainly Christian in orientation. It took root and flourished primarily in the soil of European and American Protestantism and has historically excluded from serious consideration Jewish traditions and the views of Jewish scholars on the contents of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.²

The three editors of this reader share about sixty years of collective involvement in teaching and publishing in the area of Old Testament theology. As noted in the foreword, the editors of this

volume have made “an attempt to orient the student” to the major issues and “varieties of perspectives” found in the area of Old Testament theology (ix). They have admirably fulfilled the purpose they set for themselves in compiling this reader. The real virtue of this volume is that one is introduced to this area of study through samples of the work of the major scholars in the area.³ Each of the scholars whose work is sampled is the author of an introduction to Old Testament theology. While this compilation does not replace those extended, individual volumes, it allows a student to sample the work of these scholars and to compare them to each other and to additional approaches.

The Flowering of Old Testament Theology is divided into three parts. Part I, “Setting the Stage,” begins with a chapter by editor Ollenburger that reviews the historical development of Old Testament theology from the late 1700s to 1930. This chapter is followed by two programmatic statements on what Old Testament theology is and is not according to two German scholars who had a major impact on Old Testament studies during this century: Otto Eissfeldt, a historian of religion, and Walther Eichrodt, a theologian. These articles, originally published in German in 1926 and 1929, respectively, appear here in English for the first time. The different perspectives of these two scholars serve to highlight the variegated conceptions of the goals and substance of this area of study, and they provide a good foundation for the second part, which is the heart of the book.

Part II, “Sampling Old Testament Theology,” begins with an editorial essay by Martens that reviews the results of Old Testament theological study from 1930 to 1990. Fourteen chapters then survey the range of thought regarding Old Testament theology and sample the most representative work of those figures who have been particularly influential in the field. These chapters average 20–25 pages in length. A two-page introduction at the beginning of each of these chapters generally consists of three types of information: a “theological synopsis,” in which each scholar’s work and its impact is summarized by one of the editors, information on the career of the individual, and a list of major publications by (and occasionally about) each scholar. These introductions are very helpful, especially for those who have “heard his name” but are

not well acquainted with these men and their work (yes, they are all men). Following these introductions, each chapter contains two selections from the publications of these scholars: one conveys their general views on Old Testament theology, and the other represents the major emphasis of their work. For example, the chapter selections on Walther Eichrodt focus on covenant because he championed the idea that the concept of covenant, more than anything else, was the undergirding feature of Israelite religion. To him, covenant “enshrines Israel’s most fundamental conviction, namely its sense of a unique relationship with God” (58). These excerpts are designed not only to introduce, but to whet one’s interest in further study; none are intended to provide a comprehensive view.

The list of scholars represented reads like a “who’s who” in Old Testament theology. Among those whose writings are represented in part II are W. Eichrodt on “Covenant,” G. E. Wright on “God the Warrior,” G. von Rad on “Eighth-Century Prophecy,” C. Westermann on “God’s Judgment and God’s Mercy,” B. S. Childs on “Canon,” and P. D. Hanson on “The Community of Faith.” Admittedly, the choices represent the work of only western European and North American males. This situation is recognized by the editors (x), who rightly cite liberation- and feminist-oriented theologies as examples of less-than-mainline aspects of Old Testament theology that receive no attention in part II. Their choices do, however, represent the major work done in the area of Old Testament theology during the majority of the twentieth century. But times are changing, and so are people and the theological work they are doing. Thus the third part is directed toward reviewing the recent developments in, and the indicators of the future of, Old Testament theology.

Part III, “The Way Forward: Old Testament Theology in the Twenty-first Century,” begins with an essay by editor Hasel that surveys current trends and future prospects in this area of study. Six chapters then introduce and excerpt the theological writings, for example, of W. Brueggemann on “A Shape for Old Testament Theology,” J. D. Levenson on “Creation and Covenant,” and Phyllis Trible on an “Overture for a Feminist Biblical Theology.”

One of the enjoyable aspects of this compilation is the opportunity to learn of the variety of backgrounds represented by these twenty-plus scholars. For example, J. L. McKenzie was a U.S. citizen associated with the Roman Catholic (Jesuit) tradition (169–70); R. E. Clements is English with a Baptist orientation, including ministerial service (211–12); C. Westermann is a German Lutheran with pastoral experience (276–77); and E. A. Martens is a Canadian with an evangelical orientation and a long association with the Mennonites (298–99). Also of interest is the correlation, or lack thereof, between the background of these scholars and their scholarly views. For example, J. L. McKenzie held that “the study of the theology of the Old Testament has never been advanced by the Christianization of the Old Testament” (169), while T. C. Vriezen (83–84) and others proceeded from a diametrically opposite position (i.e., that much of the Old Testament not only can, but must be viewed as culminating in the saving ministry and sacrifice of Jesus).

Although none of these scholars is a Latter-day Saint and while there are views expressed in this compilation that do not accord with Latter-day Saint doctrine,⁴ there is much of value here for Latter-day Saints. Experiencing the ways in which those who do not enjoy the advantage of latter-day revelation have wrestled with the central themes of the Old Testament and their value in our time is worthwhile in and of itself. Also, Latter-day Saints should remember they are not alone in seeking to better understand the scriptures and their role in developing a relationship with the Lord. Many people from various backgrounds, including an academic one, have exercised sincere efforts to this end. In addition, many statements contained in this compilation will extend the thinking of Latter-day Saint readers. Consider these observations of G. E. Wright regarding God as a warrior:

A most pervasive Biblical motif is the interpretation of conflict in history as owing to the sin of man, against which the cosmic government and its Suzerain [= God] take vigorous action. Since so much of history is concerned with warfare, it therefore must be expected that one major activity of the Suzerain will be the direction of war for both redemptive and judgmental ends. That is, a major function of the Suzerain will be understood to be his work as Warrior.

Yet in our time no attribute of the Biblical God is more consciously and almost universally rejected than this one. The reason is that theologically we are unable to keep up with our emotional attitudes towards war. The latter are so shocked by the savage horror of war that it is most difficult to see any positive good in this type of conflict. (110)

[However,] God the Warrior is the theme that furnishes hope in time. . . . Wars and rumors of wars are a Biblical reality, a present reality, and we see no immediate surcease of them in the future. Yet the strong, active power given language in the Warrior-Lord means that there is a force in the universe set against the forces of evil and perversity. Life, then, is a battleground, but the Divine Warrior will not be defeated.

Now if one thinks this type of language is too strong, let him only remember that God the Warrior is simply the reverse side of God the Lover or God the Redeemer. The seeking love of God is only one side of the Suzerain's activity, because, to change the figure, divine love is a two-edged sword. (115)

Consider also Vriezen's observations:

There are many voices to be heard in the various writings [of the Old Testament], but the speakers and singers all want to proclaim one and the same God. He is the one focal point of all the Old Testament writings, whatever their literary character, whatever their period of origin. (85)

All this means complete absorption in the voices which bear witness in the Old Testament to the work of God and so to Him in the course of history, and this is not merely a philological and historical exercise but also a personal exercise in listening and spiritual understanding. (84)

Any student of the Old Testament who is interested in increasing his or her exposure to an understanding of the major, often competing, twentieth-century scholarly ideas on the dominant theological themes of the Old Testament will find time spent with this compilation both interesting and rewarding. Given the intended audience, the editors could have included a glossary with terms such as "salvation history," "dogmatics," and "systematic theology" for the convenience of those who have not yet mastered the jargon of this area of study. This, however, is a minor complaint. *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology* is an enjoyably different introduction to Old Testament theology. I recommend it.

NOTES

¹All the volumes in this series are hard bound with a plasticized cover.

²This situation has been addressed recently by Jon Levenson, for example, whose comments on this problem are summarized on page 427 of *Flowering*.

³All of the material quoted in these excerpts has been retypeset, not merely photocopied from the original sources. This gives the book a unified, well-produced look. Conveniently, the editors have included in brackets in the text the page numbers from the original publications. Previously published English translations of material originally in non-English form are the sources for the excerpts of the work of several European scholars.

⁴For example, without the revealed knowledge that the gospel of Jesus Christ was known on the earth as early as the time of Adam and Eve, many people view the law of Moses as a step upward in the relationship between God and his people (as is apparent in Eichrodt's comments on Moses [73-74]). In contrast, Latter-day Saints view the law of Moses as a lesser law, not as the full order previously known to the patriarchs nor as the full embodiment of the possibilities available at Sinai (Joseph Smith Translation, Ex. 34:1-2; D&C 84:23-27).