

## ACCESSING THEOLOGICAL READINGS OF A BIBLICAL BOOK

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I offer this essay with deep respect and a genuine affection for Professor Hasel. I am very grateful for his counsel and our joyous partnership in producing *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*.

The late Gerhard Hasel suggested a decade ago that one way of formulating a theology of the Old Testament would be to proceed inductively by identifying the theologies of individual books.<sup>1</sup> His suggestion is taken up here for further exploration. Specifically, I wish to propose a range of methodological options for discerning the theology of a biblical book.

### *Making Distinctions: Message and Theology*

An initial observation helpful to the process of determining the theology of a single biblical book is the distinction between message and theology. The message is captured by asking, What is the book about? The theology is found by asking, What drives the book? The message is a matter of information or persuasion about beliefs and behaviors. The theology is a matter of preunderstandings, givens, and fundamental assertions entailing a worldview. The message is more likely to be monocolored, as in the book of Judges, which laments the lack of a king. The theology, by contrast, is multicolored, because a constellation of conceptions informs the book. The message entails a focus on the text's audience; the theology, with the "why" and "wherefore" of that target. The message lies on the surface of the text as the sense of the text; the theology is beneath the text and "presumes there is a reference not fully held in the text."<sup>2</sup> The message is often situationally generated

<sup>1</sup>G. F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 177-179. Cf. his essay, "The Future of Old Testament Theology: Prospects and Trends" in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, ed. by B. C. Ollenbeyer, E. A. Martens, and G. F. Hasel (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), pp. 373-383, esp. pp. 382-383.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Brueggeman, *Old Testament Theology: Approaches to Structure, Theme, and*

(e.g., according to some scholars, the exile as the occasion for the Deuteronomistic history). The theology of the Deuteronomist, however, is determining not only for a single situation but nuanced for any situation. The two, message and theology, belong together; but in the words of Leo G. Perdue (though on a different subject), "analytical dichotomies are necessary for critical inquiry."<sup>3</sup> The question to be kept to the forefront in this essay is, What drives the book?

Discerning the theology of a book is not a matter of following defined recipe-like procedures. Rather, a theology emerges from attention to certain factors pertaining, first, to the text, and second, to the researching theologian. The emphasis in this essay is on factors pertaining to the text.

### *Factors Pertaining to the Text*

Repeated readings of the biblical book, preferably at a single sitting, are a prerequisite. Through multiple readings one becomes attuned to the tone of the book and is drawn into its subject matter. Ideally the theological synthesis of a book follows after a detailed exegesis of every pericope. With or without such detail, substantive investigation can begin with a form-critical structure.

### *Form-critical Structure*

A form-critical structure is concerned, not first with topics or content, but with form and genre. Formal considerations rather than content considerations dominate in the preparation of a structural analysis. Here the signals from the Hebrew text in moving from genre to genre (signals often glossed or even ignored in translation) deserve notice. If one follows the guidelines given in the *Forms of the Old Testament Literature* (FOTL) series, one has available a method as well as a vocabulary: lament, *riib*, judgment speech, historical review.<sup>4</sup> The labeling of the parts is not content-oriented, though as memory joggers and for later reference it is helpful to insert in brackets the subject matter treated (e.g., sanctuary, war). Use of the form-critical method means that certain relatively objective standards are in place. The method theoretically affords control of the material in ways which can be rechecked by another. In practice, however, the outcome is not that

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*Text.*, ed. P. D. Miller, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 113.

<sup>3</sup>L. G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 154.

<sup>4</sup>See Ronald Hals, *Ezekiel, Forms of OT Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

discrete, nor do persons using the same method necessarily come to the same conclusions about a book.

Let Deuteronomy be an example of the identical method yielding disparate results. The approaches of three scholars can be noted: Peter Craigie, Rolf Knierim, and Dennis Olson. Peter Craigie structures Deuteronomy on the format of international treaties (cf. Mendenhall's research): preamble (1:1-5), historical prologue (1:6-4:49), general stipulations (chaps. 5-11), specific stipulations (chaps. 12-26), blessings/curses (chaps. 27-28), and witnesses (30:19; 31:19; 32:1-43). Craigie's mini-essay on the theology of the book deals with covenantal understandings, such as the decrees of Yahweh, the suzerain, and the call for the vassal to comply. Craigie writes: "The basic principle for interpreting the theology of Deuteronomy rests upon its character as a covenant document."<sup>5</sup>

Rolf Knierim offers a formal outline that differs markedly from the treaty form. Attention is given to the speeches of Moses, as well as to the narrative about his death. Knierim has a two-part structure for the book: Report of Events before Moses' Death (1:1-34:4), and Report of Moses' Death (34:5-12). In these two quite unequal parts, the first is dominated by Moses' farewell speech (1:1-30:20), and to a lesser degree by a report of Moses' last actions (31:1-34:4). The outer frame of the book, along with the several speeches, leads Knierim to conclude that the book is in the genre of last will and testament by a great leader. The message still calls for obedience to Yahweh, but the theological underpinning is now understood differently. The motivation for obedience lies in the authoritative directives of a notable leader. In this schematic of the book, the role of covenant is muted.<sup>6</sup>

Dennis Olson arrives at the structure of the book via six superscriptions which define the literary blocks as follows: "These are the Words" (Deut 1-4); "This is the Torah" (Deut 5); "This is the Commandment" (Deut 6-11); "These are the Statutes and the Ordinances" (Deut 12-28); "These are the Words of the Covenant" (Deut 29-32); and "This is the Blessing" (Deut 33-34). In his judgment, Deut 5 is a compressed form of the book's content. The chapter and hence the book are identified as "Torah." The form, he claims, is that of a catechesis. With such a structure the legally-oriented materials (chaps. 5-28) hold center stage. For Olson, much of the book is an

<sup>5</sup>P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 36.

<sup>6</sup>Class notes from a graduate seminar on Deuteronomy, Claremont Graduate School, 1968. Knierim's argument that the Pentateuch as such is in the genre of a biography of Moses is formulated in "The Composition of the Pentateuch," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* No. 24, 1985, 393-415.

exposition of the Ten Commandments as given in chap. 5. Deut 6-11 is a commentary specifically on the first commandment, and Deut 12-28 is an explication of the full Ten Commandments. The message remains one of obedience to the Torah, but the governing theology for this message is the importance of transmitting the teaching as a replacement for the presence of its founding leader.<sup>7</sup>

Since the objective is to provide a common, agreed-upon platform from which a theology may be extrapolated, what is to be said about the fact that the platform for a theology for Deuteronomy is variously built? There is, after all, a considerable difference between the scaffolding of an ancient Near East political treaty, of a last will and testament, and of a structure built around superscriptions. Do these various structures invalidate the form-critical approach as serviceable in discerning "theology"? Not necessarily. Indeed, the examples only sharpen the importance of this stage of the process, for the theological outcome is clearly determined by the proposal of the book's structure.

The differences in proposed structures may mean that the form-critical guidelines need to be more properly followed or that they need honing. Competing structures need to be compared for adequacy. Thus the ANE treaty overlay on the text of Deuteronomy is helpful for Deut. 1-28, but since that format leaves Deut. 29-34 dangling, it must be judged not fully adequate. Both Knierim's and Olson's outlines single out the importance of Moses' death. Knierim's outline assumes a strongly narrative base, but narrative is more a recessive than dominant feature. Olson's use of the book's own transition signals certainly gives his outline a competitive edge.

It is of some comfort that the structural scaffolding, while a critical piece in the construction of a theology, is but one of several methodological components in discerning a theology.

### *Sitz im Leben*

One of the objectives of form criticism is the establishment of a *Sitz im Leben* of the written text. Were one able to pinpoint the agenda or purpose for which a biblical text was written, the theology of the book would more readily become apparent.

As with form criticism, where consensus on structure does not always prevail, so also with the *Sitz im Leben* research. Deuteronomy is a classic instance of lack of unanimity regarding *Sitz im Leben*. If its speeches are indeed by Moses, as purported, and the geographical location is the plain of Moab, then the agenda is to instruct a generation

<sup>7</sup>D. T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

now on the threshold of occupying the land about Yahweh's expectations. Crucial for theology, given this setting in life, is the legal material.

There is a second proposal. If, as generally argued, Deuteronomy was composed in the seventh century, then the preaching of the eighth-century prophets is presupposed; the audience is Judah. In one version of this reconstruction, the desire is to reform the Jerusalem cult tradition and to ensure the survival of Israel as a people, a survival threatened, as the writers saw it, by the apostasy of Manasseh. The intent of the book, then, is to stress the unity of God, his acts in Israel's history, especially the loving action of Yahweh in calling to himself a holy people for the purpose of giving them abundant life. Theologically, the *good* which Yahweh has extended to Israel is prime motivation toward obedience.<sup>8</sup>

There is still a third proposal about the *Sitz im Leben* and hence the agenda for Deuteronomy. The scholarly claim is that a redactor, perhaps not long after the destruction of the southern kingdom, fused a series of works into what is now known as the Deuteronomic history, a lead-off book for which is Deuteronomy. The redacted work is intended to show the inevitability of divine punishment upon sin and so offers a religious/moral explanation (perhaps in contrast to a popular military/political one) for the collapse of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar's attacks. The Book of Deuteronomy, as seminal, has for its theological locus the act-consequence nexus.

E. Achtemeier has followed up the preaching possibilities for Deuteronomy, depending on which *Sitz im Leben* is posited. For a thirteenth-century setting, the theological point is of a people under way on a journey. "Israel's journey is ours, and all along the way there are texts from Deuteronomy that tell what God is doing on the journey and how we are to respond to him."<sup>9</sup> The seventh-century setting, with its call to loyalty to God, functions as a stimulus for the churches' introspection. A sixth-century redaction had the purpose of showing that because of sin Israel and Judah were sent into exile. Warning and judgment are also appropriate words for the church which deviates from God's ways.

<sup>8</sup>For a convenient summary of impulses to the study of issues and approaches to Deuteronomy, see Duane L. Christensen, ed., *A Song of Power and the Power of Song* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 3-17.

<sup>9</sup>Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Plumbing the Riches: Deuteronomy for the Preacher," *Int* 41 (1987): 269-281.

The proposed settings for Deuteronomy have a tentativeness about them. They should not be ignored, even though currently literary and canonical considerations are fashionable. Where proposals about the *Sitz im Leben* differ, theologians had best use their keenest judgment and settle on the one which, given the evidence, appears the most likely.

The structuring of a book offers a framework on which the theology of a book is built. The agenda, if it can be determined from the *Sitz im Leben* research, narrows the field of theological options opened by the overall framework. A look at the traditions utilized in the biblical book will still further delimit the options and will move one closer to the nerve center of the book.

### *Traditions/Redaction*

Traditions are part of the "stuff" of the Bible. While the theology of a book is more than identifying its traditions, the isolation of the traditions and the use which an author/editor makes of them become part of the checks and balances in a theological appraisal.

Attention to traditions takes place in three steps. The first step is to identify the major traditions incorporated in the book. In Deuteronomy that would include the exodus tradition, the wilderness tradition, the Sinai tradition, especially the Decalogue, and the golden calf story. The second step is to investigate the specific "spin" a tradition has within the text. For example, the motivational clauses frequently appended to the Torah statements recall the exodus. The rehearsal by Moses of the story of the golden calf introduces the new element (as compared with Exodus) of Moses falling prostrate before the Lord and fasting from bread and water for a second round of forty days (9:18). For Olson, that additional notation, especially the description of causing to fall prostrate, fits with other occurrences of self-denial and hence with the theme of Moses' death, a theme that he feels pervades the book.

The third step is to situate the tradition within the book. There are several possibilities. The particular tradition may embrace several minor traditions, or itself be subsumed within a more dominant tradition. It may, as having equal status with other notable traditions, weave a strand. In Deuteronomy, the Sinai complex of material is given a particular cast. In the Exodus version the legislation includes both cultic and ethical material with a preponderance of material relating to the tabernacle. In Deuteronomy *some* attention is given to cult, as in the centralization of worship and instructions about festivals, but the preponderant emphasis from the Sinai tradition is on a people's loyalty. Olson proposes that the first commandment is elaborated in

chaps. 6-11. The emphasis within these chapters is not in the context of cult but in the context of fleshing out the first commandment through love and obedience. Essentially, then, Deuteronomy has lifted up for marked emphasis a particular aspect of the Sinai tradition (*viz.*, the internal) within which the tradition of the golden-calf incident is included as a negative commentary on what it means to have no other gods before Yahweh. Overall, the Sinai tradition, together with explanations and elaborations of the stipulations there, must be factored into a theology of the book.

Beyond such avenues of access to a theology as the shape of the book, its *Sitz im Leben*, and its traditions, there remains at least one other avenue of access: the literary.

### *Literary Analysis*

Another direction from which help can come for the biblical theologian is literary analysis of the book, a method which in recent years has gained numerous adherents. Here, even more than in the earlier approaches mentioned, the activity changes from excavative scholarship for what is behind the text, to a stress on the biblical text itself. In contrast to form criticism, accused of too much focus on the smaller literary units, the newer approach keeps the literary whole in focus and asks about characterization, plot, and stylistic devices such as repetition, symbolism, and metaphor.<sup>10</sup> Especially because literary analysis keeps the literary whole in focus, it is highly valuable as an aid in the discernment of theology which also asks for the larger picture.

Attention to literary coherence starts the research for the theological warp and woof. Coherence within a literary work is exemplified by a variety of features: staging of material around plot, around cause and effect, around geography, or around a central character. The coherence of a work may consist, as Cuffey notes, in various internal linkages, including verbal forms and transitions.<sup>11</sup> Other options for cementing a text into a coherent whole involve repetition, patterning, and metaphor. The last three will be used to illustrate the possibilities of the literary approach for theologizing in Deuteronomy.

**Repetition.** Stylistic devices such as repetition can become handholds assisting the theologian to climb to fresh vantage points. The message of a book will almost always congeal into key terms which, in

<sup>10</sup>R. Alter and F. Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Collins, 1987); Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman, eds. *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

<sup>11</sup>Kenneth Cuffey, "The Coherence of Micah: A Review of Proposals and a New Interpretation," Ph.D. Dissertation, Drew University, 1987.

good rhetorical fashion, will be repeated. Identification of these repetitive words helps determine and document the theology. H. W. Wolff, for example, discerned that the kerygma of biblical material was through formulaic speech patterns or even single words (e.g., "fear God" for the Elohist strand; *shub* (turn, repent) for the Deuteronomistic history.<sup>12</sup> F. H. Breukelman leads off a theology of Gen 1-25 around the key term *toledot* (generations).<sup>13</sup>

Deuteronomy, as Patrick Miller has shown, contains an oft-repeated term, *natan* (give). It occurs 167 times; in 131 occurrences God is the subject.<sup>14</sup> Often the term appears in association with land. Gift terminology in the Pentateuchal context recalls the earlier promise to the patriarchs, and so emphasizes that God is a promise-keeper. Within the Deuteronomy text itself, the theological significance is that, however much Torah that book may contain, Deuteronomy must be viewed from a particular angle of vision, i.e., God's earlier gifting activity which precedes Torah. A grace dimension must, therefore, be part of the theology of Deuteronomy. Exclusive attention to a single term may easily blind the theologian to other theological components operating in the text, but by attending to repetition the scholar may feel confident that some objective controls guide the enterprise.

**Patterning.** Another literary stylistic by means of which a book's theology can be discerned is patterning. Where parallels exist, as in prose and in poetry, or where chiasmic structure is uncovered, one has not only a pleasing literary phenomenon, but may well find a door into theology. Patterns of symmetry other than parallelism also invite investigation. For example, the historical review in Deut 1:6-3:29 is staged according to events occurring successively at Horeb (1:6-18), Kadesh Barnea (1:19-45), en route to Zered (2:1-15), and in Moab (2:16-3:29). Each incident is launched with a directive (1:6; 1:19; 2:2-3; 2:8) and is followed by some complication. For example, Israel is to leave Horeb, but an overburdened Moses signals the lack of judicial organization (1:9-12). At Kadesh the problem is the unknown character of the land they are to enter (1:22).<sup>15</sup> There follows in each instance an

<sup>12</sup>Walter Brueggeman and H. W. Wolff, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 29-39, esp. 35-36.

<sup>13</sup>F. H. Breukelman, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis. Israel's First Born Status Gen. 1-25* (Kampen: Kok, 1992).

<sup>14</sup>P. D. Miller, Jr., "The Gift of God: A Deuteronomistic Theology of the Land," *Int* 23 (1969): 451-465; J. G. McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy*, JSOT SS 33 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984).

<sup>15</sup>Other examples: As Israel leaves Mt. Seir, they are faced with the negotiation of

account of how Israel coped with the obstacle. These sets of incidents throw into relief the characters: God, people, Moses. From here the theological undertow becomes clear: God is initiator, chastiser, boundary keeper, and deliverer; the people vary in their responses, sometimes compliant, and sometimes not; Moses is fulfilling the role of a much-needed mediator.

When this pattern is juxtaposed with the setting in which the book is cast, the theological impact is compounded. Taken together, the opening scenarios with the sequence of (1) order, (2) obstacle, and (3) resolution become a powerful prelude, a foreshadowing of what is to come. On the plain of Moab at the threshold of the land, the command to enter the land is imminent. Obstacles in that venture are certain to be present. How the conquest will be navigated can be informed by the past. The easily-understood *message* is to proceed. The *theology* about a God who overcomes obstacles informs that *message*.

Dennis Olson finds a symmetry in the closing chapters of the book, chaps. 29-32.<sup>16</sup> These chapters deal in turn with liturgy (chaps. 29-30), word (chap. 31), and song (chap. 32). These three blocks in parallel motion elucidate the Moabite covenant. The three blocks share a threefold movement. Each contains a reference to the past, noting especially God's faithfulness (29:2-8; 31:1-6; 32:3-14). Each block also mentions the present situation with a focus on human limitations (e.g., knowledge, 29:4,29; life, with the impending death of Moses, 31:14-15; or bondage resulting from rebellion (31:15-34)). Each block ends with a reference to the future. The first block envisions restoration (30:3, 4; cf. God's breaking the barriers of space and time, 29:7; 30:11-14; 29:4,10,12, 13, 14, 15; 30:11, 15, 16, 18, 19). The future in the second block is signaled with the transfer of leadership to Joshua (31:7-8; 14-15, 23), and the third with Yahweh's victory (32:36-43). The movement in each block is thus a movement through time: from past to present to future.

**Metaphor.** Devices such as patterning and repetition are more on the order of the cosmetic and so only tenuously become pointers to a theological reading. Metaphor, by contrast, captures something of a worldview and is potentially more fundamental in generating or explicating a message. David Tracy maintains that "all major religions are grounded in certain root metaphors."<sup>17</sup> Here metaphor is understood

passage through alien territories (2:4-7). After crossing the brook Zered, Israel meets active military opposition by the forces of King Sihon of the Amorites and King Og of Bashan (2:30-3:5).

<sup>16</sup>Olson, 130-131.

<sup>17</sup>Tracy is quoted by Perdue, *Collapse of History*, 201, fn. 10.

as more than poetic enhancement but, leaning heavily on Paul Ricoeur, as being as ultimate as language itself. Proceeding analytically, one may distinguish between tenor and vehicle. Tenor is descriptive of the essence of what one wishes to communicate. It is the principal subject (e.g., God). Vehicle is the mythic (or perhaps existential) carrier by which the essence of the message is forwarded. Vehicle is the secondary subject (e.g., Divine Warrior). Metaphors are the interface of the two, tenor and vehicle.

Dennis Olson's recent work singles out the death of Moses as both the recurring theme and an important metaphor in Deuteronomy. In an overview of Deuteronomy, Olson delineates the way in which the subject of Moses' death is expressed in the six divisions of the book. He writes, "Moses' demise is a metaphor for the necessary and inevitable losses and limits of human life and power before God."<sup>18</sup> The death of Moses is not the ultimate word. God's compassion and blessing continue and so provide a basis for hope.

Other metaphors in Deuteronomy, however, vie for attention. There is the metaphor of covenant. God is the suzerain who elects a people and invites them into a relationship of intimacy and holiness (7:6-11; 26:16-19; 29:12-13). That God is the Lord of the covenant is abundantly clear from the section on blessings and curses (chaps. 27, 28). He is also the divine parent, and Israel are sons and daughters, an image which extends the notion of both authority and protection (32:6, 19). God is the Master, and Israel is cast in the posture of a servant (32:36, 43).

If the centerpiece in Deuteronomy revolves around Torah, which, as Olson observes, functions as a kind of community catechesis, then these images of covenant Lord, divine Parent, and Master reinforce the importance of the teaching. The metaphors about God lend large weight to that catechesis. So also, but in a lesser way, do the references to Moses' death. The topic of Moses' death, rather than pointing to life's limitation (as Olson sees it), functions to give authority to the Torah teaching.

How germane is metaphor in accessing a book's theology? Leo Perdue holds to a priority of metaphor. "Old Testament theology must begin with the metaphors which are present in narrative and poetic texts. The theologian should not be content to describe elements of faith, but must explain how narrative and poetry actualize faith and understanding for the implied audience. The task is not simply

<sup>18</sup>Olson, 17.

confessional recital but rather explanation of process.”<sup>19</sup> Perdue has demonstrated his claim in the analysis of the theology of the book of Job, and more recently has shored up his case in a sustained discussion about methodology in doing biblical theology. He has critiqued the dominance of the history paradigm as constitutive of Old Testament theology and advocated that metaphor be primary in doing biblical theology, illustrating his claim from Jeremiah.<sup>20</sup> Perdue challenges the Enlightenment’s linear thinking, and champions metaphor along with other literary methods as ways of focusing on the text rather than on the events and traditions behind the text. Perdue’s emphasis on metaphor and rhetorical criticism is provocative. That metaphor has a solid place in the set of tools for getting at a theology is not to be disputed; but that its role should be as dominant as Perdue advocates needs further to be assessed.

On the basis of the procedure outlined here, we may sketch the lines of a preliminary theological statement of Deuteronomy as follows: Obedience to the expressed will of God is urged upon the people of God in view of God’s good intentions, the operating dynamic of love, his various grace-gifts (including Torah, land, and victory), the specificity of his expectations, and the warnings that emerge from the act-consequence nexus as illustrated in Israel’s checkered history. Further supporting theological nuances entail the authority (and also finitude) associated with the final words of a long-term, God-commissioned leader.

My proposal in accessing theological readings is to regard the structure of the book as offering the framework for a theological reading, to pay attention to the content of the book via traditions and patterning, and to allow metaphor to fine-tune the theology. All these avenues—structure, *Sitz im Leben*, traditions, patterning, and metaphor—are text-oriented. Another set of decisive factors pertains to the theologian.

#### *Factors Residing in the Theologian*

So far the emphasis has been on external data. The theologian, by giving attention to the theological tilt indicated by the form-critical structure, the *Sitz-im-Leben*, the traditions within the book, and the literary analysis, is poised to set out the theology of a book. But factors internal to the theologian also impinge on the delineation of a theology.

<sup>19</sup>L. G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1991), 28.

<sup>20</sup>Perdue, *Collapse of History*.

These include the theologian's creativity, theological prehension, and social location.

### *Imagination/Creativity*

Even if from the examination of the text one has several theological strands in hand, one still needs to sort them out and, so to speak, "get a line" on the book theologically. To set forth a theology of a biblical book is not a mechanical task which gathers up the input and rearranges it as output for consumption. Rather, a measure of creativity is involved. As with all creativity, it is important to assemble the research data, but then to allow for reflection and rumination. Even as one bends one's efforts to the task, one needs at some point to step away from close reading in order to let the details fall into place and allow the "big picture" to emerge with clarity.

The process is not unlike walking about town on foot making copious notes about streets, structures, even railways and rivers, in an attempt to describe the dynamics at work in the town. But then, airborne, the surveyor sees the same town from a different perspective. The surveyor/observer can now more easily give an account of the overall configuration. More is involved than rehearsing the data. From a new vantage position the connectedness of all the data should be plain. The rationale for the direction of the railways, the locations of industrial complexes, perhaps in terms of both railways and river, can be discerned and explained. But the explanation calls for identifying, almost intuitively and imaginatively, a certain Gestalt.

Multiple emphases which seem to the researcher to point in multiple directions can become through a flash of insight a series of carefully aligned emphases arranged as though around a magnet. Admittedly, how that comes together in the observer's mind is idiosyncratic. It is an "aha" experience. That which David Kelsey describes as a step in the process of exegeting a text is applicable also to the more macrocosmic task of theologically representing an entire biblical book: a process entailing "imaginative construal."<sup>21</sup> Imaginative construals are not dictated by the texts themselves (despite a theologian's close attention to them), but are in some ways the creative constructive work of the interpreter. Walker-Jones, using D. Kelsey's questions, tries to show how the theologies of Gabler, Eichrodt, and von Rad were influenced by how they saw the Bible functioning in the church and by what aspect(s) of the Bible they found interesting.<sup>22</sup> Each

<sup>21</sup>David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 159, 163, 215.

<sup>22</sup>A. W. Walker-Jones, "The Role of Theological Imagination in Biblical Theology,"

was informed by exegesis, but each chose different points of departure (e.g., Gabler, ideas; Eichrodt, covenant; von Rad, confessions). Walker-Jones' thesis is "that there is no one method nor object of biblical theology; instead, biblical theologians make an imaginative, synoptic judgment about what is theologically meaningful and this judgment then influences the patterns in Scriptures they consider significant."<sup>23</sup>

The process of congealing the heterogeneous into something of a unity is aided by asking of a book: What is the fundamental problem to which the book speaks, and what materials are brought to bear by the writer/editor on that problem?

Imagination has been highlighted for its importance to Old Testament theology by Walter Brueggemann.<sup>24</sup> The prophets, Brueggemann observes, are characterized by their imaginings of an alternative way of being in the world. One may think of them as pinpointing a problem, as for example Jeremiah, who identifies (1) the problematic ideology of security based on a Deity present at the temple (Jer 7), and (2) the sins of royalty (Jer 22-23). Upon these Jeremiah brings to bear Israel's traditions, such as the exodus and the Sinai/wilderness complex; but he does more: He paints a picture of what could be (Jer 30-31). The theologian in processing Jeremiah's materials is also creatively imaginative, not only in ordering materials theologically, but in describing the wellspring from whence they are derived. Leo Perdue, who offers extended treatment on the subject, notes, "The promise of imagination for theology is significant, for it offers a way not only of accessing the linguistic and historical realities of the past but also of engaging these narrative and poetic worlds in the present."<sup>25</sup>

Imagination, the subconscious, but also spiritual resources (e.g., prayer), make possible a constellation, a theological Gestalt, an imaginative construal of the data. The necessary creative touch can be fostered by a clear grasp of the data, experimentation with certain options of synthesis, and a willingness to set these options aside to allow time and space for other possibilities to emerge.

HBT 11 (1989): 73-97.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>24</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987); *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); *Interpretation and Obedience* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); *Living Toward a Vision* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); *Power, Providence and Personality: Biblical Insight into Life and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster-John Knox, 1990).

<sup>25</sup>Perdue, *Collapse of History*, 285-286.

### *Biblical Theological Prehension*

The formulation of a theology of a book is influenced by the theological configuration the theologian already entertains about the OT as a whole. This configuration may be the result of studied reflection, perhaps distilled in a book or at least in copious teaching notes. Such a theologian will find the task of stating the theology of a single book easier because certain rubrics around which the individual themes of a book can be grouped are already in place. At the same time, this theologian may come to a single book somewhat fixated by the larger scheme and so have difficulty disentangling the threads, some of which may not fall into his or her larger theology.

Leo Perdue outlines the shift in Biblical theology from a focus on history (as event and tradition) to greater centrality given to creation.<sup>26</sup> For a theologian functioning with a creation model more than with a history model, motifs such as wisdom and land in Deuteronomy might well be singled out for attention. Eugene H. Merrill draws on the history model. He posits a schema for the Pentateuch, the coordinates of which include the mandate for humankind to rule over creation and God's intent to undo the damage of humanity's misrule. That this schema colors his approach to the theology of Numbers is made explicit. Merrill introduces Numbers with a link to the creation account; Numbers is a way station in the journey for Israel to occupy Canaan, a paradigm, moreover, of the way humankind generally will take possession of the earth in a God-designed way.<sup>27</sup>

But that which makes the task easier also complicates attempts at objectivity. Too easily one reads a book searching for what one wishes to find. To find supporting evidence for an earlier-conceived framework is reassuring. The Chinese proverb applies: Ninety percent of what one sees is behind one's eyes. One's own religious orientation—whether Catholic, neo-orthodox, evangelical, dispensationalist, or reformed—will almost inevitably function in the critical stage of imaginative construal. For example: G.E. Wright's reformed tradition, as expressed in Barthian terms, shaped the way he structured an OT theology. There is no way to prevent impulses from one's tradition or from one's personal makeup from entering into the shaping of a final statement. Scholars have long since abandoned hope of total objectivity.

Still, if properly wary of subjectivity, one can minimize the subjective element. An obvious step in forestalling extraneous

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 17-68; 111-150.

<sup>27</sup>Eugene Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 7-87.

theological import is to be aware of one's orientation. Perhaps one should examine with additional scrutiny those theological aspects that seem to reinforce one's biases. A dose of suspicion is wholesome. While one cannot put one's convictions aside, one can come to the text with an openness that wishes genuinely to be informed by the text. Continuous self-critical dialogue between interpreter and text should be cultivated. The subjective is mitigated also by a willingness to entertain critiques from the faith community.

### *Social Location*

Not only one's religious convictions, but also one's social location, have a bearing on how one extrapolates a theology of a given book. A white, middle-class male may well attach importance to questions of leadership and status. Scholars trained in the enlightenment tradition, with an emphasis on the rational and methodical, may have a fascination with attributes and characteristics. Oriental scholars are more in tune with the mystical dimensions represented in biblical material. Feminist scholars and those from racial minorities will resonate with themes of discrimination, oppression, and social stratification. They may single out for emphasis the laws about slavery or the exclusion of Ammonites and Moabites from the congregation (23:1-6; cf. 24:17-19). One cannot deny one's social location. The skewing effects, however, can be minimized through self-awareness, willingness to dialogue honestly and self-critically with the text, and a readiness to entertain critique from the Christian community.

To summarize: Biblical theologians can better discern the theology of a biblical book by paying attention to factors that pertain both to the text and to factors inherent in the person of the theologian. To the first belong considerations of the book's formal structure, its traditions, the agenda it addresses, and its literary features. To the second belong considerations about the theologian—his or her creativity, theological prehension, and social location.<sup>28</sup>

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