

**OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY IN OUTLINE** by Walther Zimmerli, trans. by David E. Green. T. & T. Clark, 1978 £5.80

It would not occur to one to write a *Theology of the Old Testament*, as distinct from a history of Old Testament religion, unless one had first discovered in the Old Testament a certain overall coherence. Most of those who have set up as Old Testament theologians have sought to demonstrate this coherence through the identification of a theological 'centre' to the Old Testament in a motif such as Covenant, Revelation, Salvation-history, Promise/fulfilment or Law/gospel. Alas, the Old Testament material is so diverse that all attempts to organise it in relation to one or other of these motifs have proved to be more or less artificial; even such remarkable Theologies as those of Eichrodt and Von Rad, full as they are of valuable insights, are widely agreed in the final analysis to be Procrustean tours de force. Yet Old Testament Theologies continue to appear. Why? Do Old Testament scholars, in order to prove themselves, perhaps *need* at some stage in their careers to try their hand at reducing the multiplicity of Old Testament theologoumena to a unified theology? Professor Zimmerli (whose book here appears in an admirably clear English translation; the volume is, however, sadly marred by numerous misprints in the Hebrew letterpress) is well aware of the difficulties and tries to avoid some of the pitfalls by only attempting to provide an 'outline' of Old Testament theology, a loose framework within which to organise a selection of material. He also offers fewer hostages to fortune than most of his predecessors by choosing as his centre the doctrine of Yahweh. His book is to that extent open to less radical criticism than most Old Testament Theologies. God, it may safely be said, is not far from the centre of most Old Testament concerns. Of course he has to *interpret* what the various texts say about Yahweh, but his interpretations are never eccentric.

Zimmerli sees the Old Testament as a whole to testify to a faith in the sameness of the God it knows as Yahweh, a God who liberated his people from slavery in the days of Moses, a God who is also the Creator of the world, a God who is himself

free and whose purpose is always to give his people freedom and hope. Having begun his Outline with a statement of these 'fundamentals' of Israel's convictions about Yahweh, Zimmerli organises the remainder of his selected Old Testament theologoumena under four broad headings, 'The Gifts Bestowed by Yahweh' (which include the Land, the Temple, Kingship and Prophecy); 'Yahweh's Commandment' (the Torah); 'Life before God' (this comprises an examination of the human response required by Yahweh, and of Israelite prayer, together with a discussion of the Wisdom tradition); and 'Crisis and Hope' (here we find Gen. 1-11; Gen. 12-50; Prophecy; and Apocalyptic rubbing shoulders with each other). This framework is sufficiently flexible to accommodate without distortion the theologoumena selected.

The proffered reading of the Old Testament in terms of the doctrine of Yahweh, or more specifically a doctrine of Yahweh's self-revelation as a God who reserves to himself his freedom (Ex. 3:14 is plausibly taken not as an ontological proposition but as an assertion that Yahweh cannot be defined but will be revealed in whatever he chooses hereafter to do) is both interesting and tenable—perhaps the full-length Old Testament Theology that Professor Zimmerli is working on (p. 10) will persuade us that it is something more than tenable—but I find it hard to square with the preference for the Hebrew-Aramaic Canon expressed on p. 12. The Septuagint arranges the Old Testament books that it treats as authoritative in an order that points forward, namely History, Wisdom, Prophecy, representing respectively Past, Present and Future. The Hebrew-Aramaic Canon, on the other hand, sees the heart of the Old Testament to be the Torah, the heritage passed down from the Mosaic age, and the other books it treats as essentially commentary on the Torah. If one rejects the principle on which the Palestinian synagogue arranged the books, is there any good reason for retaining its shorter Canon rather than the longer one used by the Diaspora Jews? If

we are right (and like Zimmerli I think we are) to see in P, in the Deuteronomistic history, in Chronicles, and in other books composed after the catastrophe of 586 an openness to the future, a conviction that Yahweh, being the same God as had done so much on Israel's behalf in the past, but would exert himself again for them should we not find that we have more in common with those who drew up the Greek Canon than with the reactionaries who formulated its alternative?

Since Zimmerli expresses the conviction that it is in prophecy that 'the confrontation between Yahweh and his people Israel achieves its radical depth' (p. 10), it is not unfair perhaps to gauge the success or otherwise of the book by its treatment of the prophetic corpus. The section on the prophets is in fact rather short (50 pages out of 258) and I found it frankly disappointing since we get little more than a statement of how Zimmerli sees each of the prophets without discovering his reasons. Who is likely to benefit from this? The reader who knows little about the

problems of interpreting, say, First Isaiah will be led to underestimate the complexities of Is. 1-39, while anyone who has made forays into the jungle of Isaiah-scholarship will be surprised that little cognisance is taken of such major problems as the authenticity of many of the Isaiah-oracles, the attitude of Isaiah to Jerusalem-theology (and therefore to the likely outcome of the crisis of 701) and the relationship of the theology to politics in Isaiah (was he, as Brunet supposes, a practical statesman whose theology of faith in Yahweh sprang from a hard-headed practical judgment that neutralism was in the circumstances of his day the best policy, or was he rather, as Heaton and others believe, a theologian whose conviction of the sovereignty of Yahweh made him see all political involvement as an infidelity to God?). Perhaps the 'more exhaustive presentation of Old Testament theology as a whole' that Professor Zimmerli promises us will give him the scope, *inter alia*, to do justice to the prophets.

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