

OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY SINCE WALTER C. KAISER, JR.

ELMER MARTENS*

Colleagues in OT studies have characterized Walter Kaiser's *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (1978) as "bold," even "pivotal," but also more negatively, as not going anywhere "owing to his one-sided, unhistoric method and framework."¹ Some thirty years later, comments like these can be re-assessed. This essay seeks not only to evaluate Kaiser's role in the development of this discipline, especially as it pertains to evangelicals, but also to analyze the current mosaic that characterizes the discipline, and further to signal some needed emphases for the future.

Walter Kaiser's "boldness" is evident in that his volume appeared amidst discussion in the 1970s of the crisis of biblical theology.² After the impetus given to OT theology in the first half of the twentieth century by the European giants Walther Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad, with subsequent contributions by American notables such as G. E. Wright,³ other scholars, Langdon Gilkey in particular, raised some cautionary flags, one of which was the place given to "history" within an OT theology.⁴ Kaiser acknowledged Gilkey's article as "deservedly famous,"⁵ but moved ahead by giving progressive revelation through history a prominent place in his outline. Said one reviewer: "He [Kaiser] boldly indicates that Hummel's verdict 'Biblical Theology is dead' is incorrect and that the opinion of Beker, Childs, Anderson, Krause, namely that we are faced with a crisis, should do no more than lead us to face the challenge of showing that there is really no crisis."⁶

* Elmer Martens is emeritus professor of Old Testament at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 4824 East Butler Avenue, Fresno, CA 93727.

¹ Magno Saebø, review of Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, *JBL* 99 (1980) 445. He adds, "His 'solutions,' I am afraid, will mean next to nothing for the future study of the OT." This essay is offered as a tribute to a friend and sometime sparring partner, Dr. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. on the occasion of his retirement. His contributions to scholarship and the church have earned him wide respect; it is fitting that he was honored in the book, *Preaching the Old Testament* (ed. Scott M. Gibson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). This essay's focus is on biblical theology.

² B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

³ W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, 1967); G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 1965); G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1952).

⁴ Langdon B. Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *JBR* 41 (1961) 194–205; repr. in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 33 (1962) 143–54.

⁵ Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 1.

⁶ Willem VanGemeren, review of Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, *WTJ* 42 (1980) 431–32. In a review of Kaiser's book, Mark Hillmer observes, "The author wades into the turbulent

There was boldness in yet another sense. Kaiser's was an evangelical contribution in a field of study largely dominated by critical scholarship. In a time when historical criticism and the fad of delineating sources were all the rage, Kaiser largely eschewed the battle and returned to the notion that the claims of Scripture had best be honored, and that speculations of all kinds should not encumber a forthright statement about what the OT was saying. Various reviewers, not only evangelicals, noted the entry of Kaiser's evangelical voice into the academic discussion of biblical theology.⁷

In the three parts of his book Kaiser staked out a methodology, presented the promise-blessing theme as the essential message of the OT, and in conclusion gave brief attention to the connectedness of the OT with the NT. A discussion of the current state of the discipline can conveniently employ those same rubrics.

I. ALTERNATE METHODS TOWARD AN OT THEOLOGY

Peer reviewers praised Kaiser for giving attention to methodology, a section that comprises one-fourth of his work.⁸ In this section Kaiser itemized four methods. These are: (1) structured type, as in Walther Eichrodt; (2) diachronic type, as in Gerhard von Rad; (3) lexicography type, as in P. F. Ellis;⁹ and (4) biblical themes, as in John Bright.¹⁰ Kaiser himself opted for a diachronic type, explaining, "In our proposed methodology, biblical theology draws its very structure of approach from the historic progression of the text and its theological selection and conclusions from those found in the canonical focus."¹¹ One reviewer commented, "There should be no quibbling with Kaiser on his definition of biblical theology and its corresponding methodology."¹²

waters of the debate on Old Testament theology with the boldness of a young Elihu chastising his elders for not having solved the Job problem" (*Int* 33 [1979] 418).

⁷ Saebø noted that Kaiser was president of the ETS in 1977, observing that in Kaiser's book "there is a detailed discussion from a definite evangelical standpoint" (review of Kaiser, 445). VanGemeren states, "Let us all be thankful that there are evangelical scholars who have not given up on the challenge which biblical theologians have placed before the church" (review of Kaiser, 431). *Christianity Today* enthused that Kaiser's work "constitutes the most thorough interaction of Bible believing scholarship with modern Old Testament theology that has yet been achieved" (J. Barton Payne, "Old Testament Theology" [review of Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*] *CT* 23 [May 4, 1979] 38). Eugene H. Merrill notes: "Until the publication of Walter Kaiser's work in 1978, the field of Old Testament theology had been dominated for the previous century largely by scholarship that held to either a totally dismissive view of Scripture as the inspired and authoritative Word of God or, at best, a position of moderate criticism that acknowledged the Bible's revelatory character in some respects while adhering to a historical-critical methodology that vitiated the Old Testament of any 'face-value,' genuine historicity or integrity of attributed authorship and unity" (*Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006] 19).

⁸ "Kaiser's main contribution to the study of Old Testament biblical theology is to be found in the first four chapters (pp. 1-69)" (VanGemeren, review of Kaiser, 433).

⁹ P. F. Ellis, *The Yahwist: The Bible's First Theologian* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1968).

¹⁰ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953).

¹¹ Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 12.

¹² VanGemeren, review of Kaiser, 433.

The fact is that there has been quibbling in the extreme, as evidenced in James Barr's substantial post-Kaiser volume.¹³ As things stand now, a more helpful revisionist way of describing methods would be: diachronic, synchronic (Kaiser's "structured type"), canonical, and "story."¹⁴ The diachronic, in Kaiser's definition, pays attention to the text which chronicles the stream of events in the OT. In adopting this method Kaiser followed G. von Rad and was followed by C. Westermann, E. A. Martens, and to an extent by P. D. Hanson.¹⁵ Clearly Kaiser, who is aligned with conservative scholarship, did not concur with the critical reconstruction of Israel's history. The larger issue, however, is how "history" as a category should function within an OT theology.

Heeding the historical dimension is important. Christianity as a religion is distinctive in being founded on historical events. While similar claims can be made by Judaism and to some extent by Islam, historical events are not constitutive for the oriental religions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism. In favor of highlighting history is the ease with which one can then organize material into eras (eleven in Kaiser; three in Martens).¹⁶ Moreover, the bridge from the OT to the NT is then easy to cross, for the NT not only begins with a genealogy (a form of history-writing) but throughout recalls events in Israel's history.

The negative factors in giving history large prominence in a theology revolve around several questions. First, which history is one to follow? The OT paints a reasonably clear sequence of events. However, critical scholars, recent minimalists in particular, question the accuracy of this record, and speak easily about retrojection and fabrication (albeit disguised in more sophisticated language). Second, how does one derive theology from history? Third, in a postmodern age that is suspicious of meta-narrative, how compelling will a resultant theology be?

To exclude the historical dimension in presenting an OT theology, as Brueggemann does, is quite unsatisfactory.¹⁷ But to harness history as the exclusive work horse in an OT theology represents a commitment more to pre-suppositions dating from Gabler's eighteenth-century Europe than to the OT, which enlists categories other than history as the vehicle for its message

¹³ James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology. An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 345–61. For earlier discussions see G. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972; subsequent editions 1975, 1982, 1991).

¹⁴ An illustration of "canonical" would be Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998). For "story" see John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1: *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003).

¹⁵ E. A. Martens, *God's Design. A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (3d ed.; N. Richland Hills, TX: Bibal, 1998); C. Westerman, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982); and P. D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of the Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

¹⁶ Cf. John Sailhamer's extended discussion of the place of event in a theology. He proposes a text-oriented approach over against an event-oriented approach. *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 36–85.

¹⁷ W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

(e.g. wisdom literature). Conservatives have had a penchant for the category of history as a way of ordering the OT, at least from the time of J. C. K. von Hofmann (ca. 1840). Given the range of problems connected with a historicist approach,¹⁸ recent works have opted for the category of canon or “story.” In short, the linear approach is not the only possible approach to history.

Since Kaiser’s volume appeared, several authors, including evangelicals such as W. Dyrness, W. J. Dumbrell, and J. J. Niehaus have followed the second of Kaiser’s classifications: the synchronic.¹⁹ Working with a theme has the advantage of giving cohesion to the presentation. One can, even if somewhat arbitrarily, subsume related themes and thus encompass large blocks of the OT. Certain themes make for an easy bridge into the NT. The problematic side of the synchronic method is the means by which the coordinating theme is chosen. Does the choice come down to the author’s intuition? Moreover, the synchronic method carries the liability of theology understood as static. The dynamic dimension of development and change is difficult to encapsulate, even in works like those of Dyrness or Niehaus that feature multiple themes. More successful in this regard is the volume by B. W. Anderson, who works with the theme of covenant but who incorporates a more historical cast and so conveys a sense of movement and development. Yet for all the problems besetting the synchronic method, it still remains a fruitful method.

Two approaches—the canonical and the story—are not part of Kaiser’s typology; these approaches having become prominent since 1978. Brevard Childs is associated with the first.²⁰ The method that focuses on the final form of the text and often on the Hebrew canonical arrangement of books, has been followed by R. Rendtorff and by evangelicals, particularly Paul House,

¹⁸ L. G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). See E. A. Martens, “The Oscillating Fortunes of ‘History’ within Old Testament Theology,” in *Faith, Tradition and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (ed. A. R. Millard, J. K. Hoffmeier, and D. W. Baker; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994) 313–40, where the shortcomings of seizing too tightly on “history” are discussed at greater length, and where I plead for a tempered approach in which history is given an important but not an exclusive place (335–40). Cf. Barr: “And let us agree that the emphasis on history, as a pivotal centre for Old Testament theology, has been salutary and creative” (*The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 349).

¹⁹ W. A. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979); J. J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984). For other synchronic treatments, see S. L. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978); N. Lohfink, *Great Themes from the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, ET 1982); B. S. Childs, *Old Testament in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); H.-R. Weber, *Power: Focus for a Biblical Theology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1989); C. Barth, *God with Us: A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); H. D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); B. W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); and Otto Kaiser, *Der Gott des Alten Testaments* (3 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993, 1998, 2003).

²⁰ B. S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*; also *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament*.

William Dumbrell, Stephen Dempster, Bruce Waltke, and John Sailhamer.²¹ The values of the canonical approach consist in (1) providing a structural grid; (2) eschewing debates about the formation of biblical books and other complicated historical questions; (3) allowing, as in Dempster's book, and also in House's, a somewhat innovative configuration of expositions around a common theme; (4) enabling easier incorporation of wisdom material; and (5) facilitating an easy connect with the NT.

But this method is not wholly without problems. The dynamic nature of God's interaction with humans is at risk when historic progression is set aside and when the social matrices are less easily connected. Even though a single theme is pursued (as in House), attention to thirty-nine books in sequence is prone to some chopiness. House overcomes that danger in part with his interspersed sections on "canonical synthesis." Dempster gives priority to dynasty and dominion as organizing principles. The canonical approach serves him well, although placing Jeremiah first among the Major Prophets, according to one rabbinic ordering, raises the question: which canon?

Foremost in the category of "story" is John Goldingay's sizeable volume *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel*.²² A smaller volume that follows story but encompasses both testaments is *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology*.²³ One large advantage of "story" over the historicist approach is that the writer avoids entanglement with questions of historical reliability. A second advantage is that in a postmodern age that is skeptical of rationalist-only perspective, story is most appealing. Also, in the majority of the world, as in Africa, story is very much an essential in ethnic group identity.²⁴ Third, for a culture that is less and less biblically literate, story offers an easy entrée into the OT. A fourth and considerable advantage of the "story" approach is that the sense of dynamic movement is not lost; rather, it can be readily shown how the older traditions were adopted and adapted in new situations. Fifth, as some would argue, the narrative approach is a corrective to approaches that have majored on the didactic. Finally, the story within the OT is incomplete, and hence the bridge to the NT is easily made.

A major problem of the narrative approach to doing theology is how to derive a theology from story. As far as ethics is concerned, it is clear that

²¹ R. Rendtorff, *Theologie des Alten Testaments. Ein kanonischer Entwurf*, Vol. 1: *Kanonische Grundlegung*; Vol. 2: *Thematische Entfaltung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999, 2001); House, *Old Testament Theology*; W. J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament* (2d ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003); and Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *Old Testament Theology: A Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming). John Sailhamer's OT theology in manuscript form can be described as "canonical" modified by a compositional approach. See his *Introduction to Old Testament Theology*.

²² Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*.

²³ C. Marvin Pate, J. S. Duvall, J. D. Hays, E. R. Richards, W. D. Tucker, Jr., and P. Vang, *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

²⁴ "Majority world," especially as a descriptor of the changing church demographics, is a term popularized by John R. Stott to refer to Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

not every story is normative for Christian ethics.²⁵ Similarly, OT stories are not in themselves theologically normative. Moreover, resorting to story does not necessarily skirt issues of history.²⁶

Kaiser, were he to write in the twenty-first century, would have greater options as to method than he did three decades ago. At a minimum, his fourfold typology of approaches would necessarily be modified to include (5) the canonical approach; and (6) the narrative approach.²⁷ To summarize, evangelicals of Kaiser's era moved easily, perhaps too easily, with the diachronic approach, not as cognizant as they might have been to the problematic of hitching their theological wagon to the star of history. Subsequently, evangelicals such as Dumbrell and Dyrness chose the structural or thematic approach. Given the concern that evangelicals have to highlight the unity of the Bible, the canonical approach has seemed a propitious approach (e.g. House, Dempster, Sailhamer, and Waltke). In evangelical circles the story approach has recently attracted interest (cf. Goldingay, Dempster, and Pate et al.), perhaps because of its perceived affinity to "history" and also because the narrative approach sits comfortably with the concern for the Bible's unity.²⁸

II. REORDERING MATERIALS FOR AN OT THEOLOGY

Kaiser describes his approach as diachronic, by which he means that he will follow a chronological treatment of Israel's story as given in the biblical text. He traces a common thread throughout, that of the promise-blessing. In selecting the theme of promise he is in the company of scholars like Willis J. Beecher of an earlier generation and of contemporaries like R. E. Clements with his twin themes of "promise" and "law" and C. Westermann, who moves comfortably along the axis of "promise-blessing."²⁹

²⁵ See the provocative treatment by Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah. Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

²⁶ James Barr has noted that the narrative approach will not fully exempt writers from dealing with historical complexities (*The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 344–61). Barr, who sees himself as having championed the story approach early on, stresses other advantages of narrative (ibid., 350–52).

²⁷ Other approaches are emerging, e.g. "textual/scriptural reasoning." See *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century* (ed. Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Ben C. Ollenburger notes that this approach "may be a harbinger of biblical theology's future" (*Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future* [ed. B. C. Ollenburger; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004] 378). For information on methodology, see in the same volume Ollenburger's helpful introductions to the various collections of excerpts and especially the sections labeled "Approaches" (e.g. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* 41–47). Cf. also Leo Perdue's advocacy of metaphor in *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), and especially his updated chronicle of OT theology and emerging approaches in *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

²⁸ The agenda of the unity of the Bible is an important one, at least for evangelicals. Cf. Daniel Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

²⁹ Willis J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* (1905; repr. ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975). Kaiser's debt to Beecher and others is helpfully delineated by John H. Sailhamer, "Walter C.

1. *The ordering of materials: a center?* Reviewers both cheered and complained about Kaiser's choice of a center. One reviewer found the theme as developed in Isaiah 40–66 and Daniel especially helpful.³⁰ The criticism of promise-blessing as a center piece for an OT theology came from different quarters for different reasons. The very idea of singling out one topic under which to incorporate a vast array of genres and topics seemed misguided in that it ignored the complexity of the OT material.³¹ Some pointed out that there was no single Hebrew term for the concept of promise, as Kaiser acknowledged when he was questioned during a visit to the seminary where I teach. However, the lack of a Hebrew term need not be fatal to Kaiser's proposal. For example, one can discuss marriage without using the word "wedding." Similarly, Genesis 2–3, which describes what theologians label "sin," does not employ the standard root *ḥt'* (sin) or for that matter any of the some thirty Hebrew synonyms.

Kaiser's concept of promise is essentially the single promise to bless Abraham and through him all humankind.³² Such a theme is easily susceptible to a kind of prooftexting. There are other questions also. Is Kaiser's definition of promise too narrow? Should there not be a focus on a broader rubric such as "the kingdom of God?" With promise to Abraham/Israel as the center, how does one get "beyond Israel" other than that the nations will be blessed through Abraham? And how are curses and judgment speeches to be integrated? Is the choice of "promise" superior to other themes that might be chosen? Why start with Gen 12:1–3, rather than Genesis 1? A commonplace critique—as of almost any summary of the OT—is that Kaiser imposes an arbitrary grid on the texts, thereby somehow vitiating the enterprise.³³ It is hard, if not impossible, according to some, to incorporate the wisdom material in the promise scheme. Kaiser's answer to that issue was to highlight the term "fear of the Lord" as a bridge between covenant/law and wisdom.³⁴

Kaiser, Jr.," in *Bible Interpreters of the 20th Century* (ed. W. A. Elwell and J. D. Weaver; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 375–87. See R. E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978); C. Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers: Studies on the Patriarchal Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); and idem, "The Way of the Promise Through the Old Testament," in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (ed. B. W. Anderson; New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 200–224.

³⁰ D. R. Glenn, review of W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, *BSac* 137 (1980) 181–82.

³¹ Already G. Hasel, though he thought the quest for a center could be justified, asked, "Will not any center which is to serve as an organizing principle for the entire OT world of revelation and experience always turn out to be a *tour de force*?" (*Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* 137–38). Cf. W. Kaiser, "The Center of OT Theology: The Promise," *Them* 10 (1974) 1–10. Still a recent work by H. D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, represents another try at the single rubric, this time that of "election."

³² Kaiser, *Towards an Old Testament Theology* 13, 30–32.

³³ Referring to the grid Kaiser "imposed over the texts," Saebø comments: "The 'normativeness' of the Scripture cannot be secured in this way, because it is too arbitrary over against the true character of the texts—even though the intention of the author is the right one" (review of Kaiser, 446).

³⁴ Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* 165–75.

Two considerations make Kaiser especially vulnerable in his choice of the “blessing-promise” theme. If the promise is reduced largely to the promise to Abraham understood in terms of the Messiah, and if this promise is fulfilled in the NT, then what force or weight has the OT now that the Messiah has come? Is OT theology primarily in the service of apologetics? The question is that of the goal of biblical theology. A second issue turns around the theoretical (as opposed to the practical) nature of the promise-blessing theme. In Kaiser’s work only minimum ethical direction is given to the faith community. The questions the church faces in the West have to do with religious pluralism, faith and morality, the role of the church in society and especially in politics, the church’s responsibility to the marginalized in society, and environmental issues. One could insist that it is not the business of a biblical theology to address these questions; they belong to systematic theology.³⁵ Leo Perdue holds with others, however, that “questions of modern culture must be addressed,” and in keeping with that conviction is launching a new series of sixteen volumes, “The Library of Biblical Theology,” of which he is the general editor.³⁶ The issue cannot be evaded: for what purpose does one produce a biblical theology?

2. *Ordering the materials: which goal?* A short answer about “goal” can be formulated as follows: It is the purpose of biblical theology in summarizing the biblical message (OT with NT, or each separately) (1) to clarify both the dominant and recessive elements of the message for the benefit of committed believers as well as for the curious; (2) to set forth the salient features of the message, thereby facilitating dialogue and confrontation with other religions; (3) to enable Christians to process their beliefs and practices relative to their scriptural canon; and especially (4) to facilitate and connect readers with the transcendent God.³⁷ The fourth objective of truly knowing God and his ways is a Christian goal also of exegesis, systematic theology, and other types of biblical study. In the words of Francis Martin, “All theological reflection must ultimately bring the believer and the community into transforming union with the word of God.”³⁸

³⁵ The debate as to the relation of biblical theology to systematic theology is a long standing one. See chapter 5, “Difference from Doctrinal Theology,” in James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology* 62–76. Cf. Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

³⁶ Noted in L. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* 11–12, 351.

³⁷ I have elsewhere given a definition of biblical theology as an expansion of the first goal. Biblical theology is “that approach to Scripture which attempts to see Biblical material holistically and to describe this wholeness or synthesis in Biblical categories. Biblical theology attempts to embrace the message of the Bible and to arrive at an intelligible coherence of the whole despite the great diversity of the parts. Or, put another way: Biblical theology investigates the themes presented in Scripture and defines their interrelationships. Biblical theology is an attempt to get to the theological heart of the Bible” (“Tackling Old Testament Theology,” *JETS* 20 [1977] 123).

³⁸ Francis Martin, “Some Directions in Catholic Biblical Theology,” in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. C. Bartholomew, M. Healy, K. Moeller, and R. Parry; Scripture and Hermeneutics Series; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 84.

Of these goals, with the last being a constant, the third—that of instructing the Christian community—has particular urgency in our time. As proposed here, the faith community is the *raison d'être* for the work of biblical theologians. Granted, not all see the enterprise in this way.³⁹ Kaiser, in a comment on the OT-NT relationship, says, “The objective of the discipline of biblical theology is to discern what flow of continuity, if any, the writers betrayed in their works.”⁴⁰ However, Kaiser would no doubt agree that biblical theology is in the service of the church, and that such service can take many forms.

Biblical theology is to the health of the church what the Center for Disease Control in the USA is to a nation's health. Just as the Center for Disease Control monitors trends and offers directives to the public, so biblical theology serves as a resource whereby the church can do a reality check to ensure that the faith community is not aberrant or one-sided in its beliefs. Norms for belief and behavior are important for the church in whose service the discipline of biblical theology is placed.⁴¹ Balance here is critical. As an example one may cite the evangelical church currently being so emphatic about God's love and goodness that it downplays or ignores the biblical portrait of a God who, out of necessity rather than his nature, is wrathful against evil. Attention to an adequate summary of the OT will help keep the faith community healthy in its world view.

Apart from setting out the belief parameters, a biblical theology should deal with the praxis of the church, including matters of life-style.⁴² That Kaiser is sensitive to this dimension of praxis is evident by the separate book on OT ethics which he has released.⁴³ But his book on OT theology, despite a few pages on the subject and a chapter on “Promise: Sapiential Era” (sparse on details), is inadequate in the area of praxis and ethics. That inadequacy comes about because the centerpiece of promise-blessing allows only somewhat awkwardly for the incorporation of praxis. On this score, C. H. H. Scobie's work is more on target. Like Kaiser, Scobie insists on God's work and speech; unlike Kaiser, he expands on praxis and ethics at some length. In Scobie's two major divisions, “God's People” and “God's Way,” may be found discussions of worship, ministry, and God's commandments.⁴⁴

³⁹ R. P. Knierim sees OT theology as discerning the criteria for the adjudication of the plurality of theologies (“The Task of Old Testament Theology,” in *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Substance, Method and Cases* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 1–20).

⁴⁰ Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* 267; cf. his attempt at a theology “consciously joined from era to era” (ibid. 9). Cf. John Sailhamer's comment, “Thus the task of [biblical] theology is the restatement of God's self-revelation” (*Introduction to Old Testament Theology* 107).

⁴¹ C. H. H. Scobie offer similar sentiments, “The biblical material synthesized by BT constitutes the norm that has to be correlated with the situation faced by the church today” (*The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003] 48).

⁴² For a sampling in the OT, see Deuteronomy; Proverbs; Amos 3–6; Isaiah 58; Jeremiah 5, 7; Ezekiel 24.

⁴³ W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

⁴⁴ Scobie, *The Ways of Our God* 567–651, 741–879.

Other theological syntheses, especially recent works, give attention—some less, some more—to the praxis dimension of the faith community's life. The advantage of Paul House's concentration on the "theo" of theology is that the transcendental aspect of theology is given large (and proper) weight. His book is somewhat like Kaiser's in that he does theology from above, that is, with an emphasis on God. True, attention to theology from below, which treats the human response, is not entirely absent. Where the ethical dimension occurs, as in the discussion of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), House summarizes the canonical material, but more theoretically. The canonical approach is distinctly of value here, for in moving through Leviticus and Deuteronomy, discussion of ethics, worship, or leadership cannot be avoided, nor does House avoid them.⁴⁵ Still, the Book of Proverbs, which might be expected to focus on ethics, carries the chapter title "The God who Reveals Wisdom." His "canonical syntheses" gravitate to subjects such as "The Relationship between Righteousness and Blessing" rather than to larger-scale characterizations of the righteous. House's treatment, theological to the core, similarly touches on Psalms with topics such as "Word," history, or covenant, but with scant attention to the praxis of worship.

John Goldingay is on the "more" side of praxis. Like House and Kaiser, he begins with the word "God." His chapter headings each begin with God as subject and are followed by a predicate (e.g. "God Started Over," "God Wrestled"). Goldingay follows the story of Israel and so differs from House, who follows the canon, but both emphasize the divine actor in human history. Given the commitment to a transcendental perspective, Goldingay could be expected, like House, to be minimalist in highlighting the praxis ideals for the faith community. However, he is not. In following Israel's stories, Goldingay recognizes such ethical claims as dealing with the care of the earth (pp. 109–19), abuse and strife (pp. 183–92), "being a blessing" (pp. 213–24), marriage and parenthood (pp. 268–76), family life (pp. 276–87), and also Yahweh's expectations (pp. 378–85), the crusade for holiness (pp. 495–504), a worshipping community (pp. 725–31), and a distinct community (pp. 740–50).

But this is not to say that Goldingay trades in moralisms. Hardly, if at all, does Goldingay draw applications for the current community's faith life. More typical is an observation such as the following: "The theological perspective Genesis offers readers is not a lesson in resolving conflict within families, but a promise that conflict is not the end of the world." Again, "the First Testament is not as interested in passing moral judgments on its characters as it is in seeing how God works out a purpose through them in their moral ambiguity." Goldingay, it seems, would concur with P. Ricoeur's notion that stories are not to be read as prescribing ethics or mandating behavior, but as opening up a range of ethical possibilities and hence debate about them.⁴⁶ Goldingay echoes Ricoeur when he says, "The absence of moral judg-

⁴⁵ House, *Old Testament Theology* 135–37, 176–80, 182–86.

⁴⁶ Ricoeur says that "telling a story . . . is deploying an imaginary space for thought experiments in which moral judgment operates in a hypothetical mode" (*Oneself as Another* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992] 170). I owe this reference to Professor Athena E. Gorospe of

ment from the stories draws readers into them to make their own judgments as they set these stories alongside the stories of their own lives."⁴⁷

Since Kaiser's time when "center" and choices of center were large in the discussion, the agenda has moved to "goal," which, as here proposed, is not only an academic exercise of ordering OT materials, but a synthesis that enables the church to check its faithfulness to its God in both belief and behavior.

III. A WHOLE-BIBLE THEOLOGY

Kaiser's 1978 volume treats only briefly the connection of the OT with the NT. Though only seven pages, Kaiser designates this connection as Part 3 of his book (the other two parts being "Definition and Method" and "Materials for an Old Testament Theology").⁴⁸ In connecting the two testaments he is in the company of von Rad, whose work ended in Part III with a discussion of "The Old Testament in the New."⁴⁹ J. Barton Payne made clear from his title, *Theology of the Older Testament* (1962), that he intended his discussion on the covenant to take note of the NT message.⁵⁰ J. L. McKenzie had emphasized that an OT theology should stay strictly within the canonical books of the OT and be written "as if the New Testament did not exist."⁵¹ Post-Kaiser volumes depart from McKenzie's notion to offer an overture to the NT as part of the OT theology include Goldsworthy, Martens, Childs, Smith, Niehaus, and Anderson. Several of these have a concluding chapter devoted to the NT follow-through.⁵² Goldingay, in relating Israel's gospel, concludes with

Asian Theological Seminary, Manila, who, in her dissertation notes that Ricoeur stresses emplotment in narrative as critical for ethics in contrast to S. Hauerwas whose stress is on character. Summarizing Ricoeur, Gorospe notes, "Thus, the ethical function of narratives is not to inculcate in us a certain virtue, but to involve us in exploring ethical possibilities that would lead to greater self-understanding." Evangelicals would do well to grapple more with ethics and narrative.

⁴⁷ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* 280, 285, 287.

⁴⁸ Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* 263–69. D. R. Glenn comments that Part III was "so brief that it raises more questions than it answers" (review of Kaiser, 181).

⁴⁹ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* 2:319–409. Cf. Manfred Oeming's critique of von Rad's moves toward the NT in *Gesamtbiblische Theologien der Gegenwart: Das Verhältnis von AT und NT in der hermeneutischen Diskussion seit Gerhard von Rad* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1985; 2d ed. 1987) summarized in Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology* 497–503. G. E. Wright, who stressed biblical theology as recital, and also worked the field of both Testaments, says, "The simplest summary of the central Biblical events as the New Testament saw them is contained in the address attributed to the Apostle Paul at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:16ff)" (*God Who Acts* 70).

⁵⁰ Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament*. S. Terrien took a whole-Bible approach in *The Elusive Presence*.

⁵¹ J. L. McKenzie *A Theology of the Old Testament* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974) 319. Of like mind were R. P. Knierim, "The Task of Old Testament Theology," *HBT* 6 (1984) 52, and R. Rendtorff, "Must 'Biblical Theology' be Christian Theology?" *BRev* 4 (1988) 42, as noted in Scobie, *The Ways of Our God* 60.

⁵² G. Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1981); E. A. Martens, *God's Design*; B. S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*; R. L. Smith, *Old Testament Theology: Its History, Method, and Message* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993); J. J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai*; and B. W. Anderson, *Contours of an Old Testament Theology*.

a lengthy chapter, "God Sent: The Coming of Jesus."⁵³ Walter Bruggemann, on the other hand, would be representative of theologians whose work does not bridge into the NT.⁵⁴ But the combination of OT and NT in one Scripture for the church already virtually begs for at least some attention to the Second Testament by Christians working in OT theology.⁵⁵

Overtures are something of a half-measure. Although attempts at a full-blown theology of both testaments were relatively infrequent during most of the twentieth century, towards the end of the century stirrings in that direction were clearly noticeable. Willem VanGemeren, though not touting his work as a full-scale biblical theology, nevertheless cited his indebtedness to Geerhardus Vos's "epochal work," which was a whole-Bible theology.⁵⁶ Note should also be taken of G. Goldsworthy, a comparable work.⁵⁷ Of especial interest in this connection are some fresh serials launched toward the end of the century. The series "Studies in OT Biblical Theology" was launched by Zondervan in 1994 with Willem VanGemeren and Tremper Longman as editors.⁵⁸ D. A. Carson is the editor of the series "New Studies in Biblical Theology," which numbers about 20 monographs and has been published since 1996 by InterVarsity.⁵⁹ Early volumes in the series were published by Eerdmans.⁶⁰

1. *Developments in the twenty-first century.* Acceleration in the direction of a whole-Bible theology in the 21st century was no doubt spurred by Child's seminal works on canon.⁶¹ A cadre of scholars, most of them at the Pruet

⁵³ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* 789–858.

⁵⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*. Similarly H. D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*. About Brueggemann it should be said that he discusses the issue (pp. 729–33) but feels that the polyphonic voices of the OT do not require, from the OT side, a foray into the NT.

⁵⁵ Jewish scholars have traditionally not been interested in an OT theology; for them the bridging to the NT is not an agenda. However, to the extent to which a theology of the Tanakh is a separate undertaking, Jewish interest in something akin to an OT theology, is rising. For a full updating on the Jewish stance toward theology of the Hebrew Bible, see Leo G. Perdue's chapter, "From Jewish Tradition to Biblical Theology: The Tanakh as a Source for Jewish Theology and Practice," in L. G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* 183–238.

⁵⁶ W. A. VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

⁵⁷ G. Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1991). Other titles in this genre are: H. Seebass, *Der Gott der Ganzen Bibel* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982); and Hans-Reudi Weber, *Power: Focus for a Biblical Theology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1989).

⁵⁸ A representative volume is T. Longman III and D. G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

⁵⁹ E.g. G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (NSBT; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

⁶⁰ E.g. R. Ortlund, *Whoredom: God's Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology* (NSBT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). The German publication *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* was founded in 1986, and in 1977 the influential series "Overtures to Biblical Theology" was begun, edited initially by W. Brueggemann and J. R. Donahue.

⁶¹ Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (1986), and especially his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament* (1992). For a more detailed discussion of trends that have led to a new openness to biblical theology, see Scobie, *The Ways of Our God* 29–45. He makes an interesting correlation between the study of literary criticism (moving successively from attention to author, text, and reader) and biblical theology.

School of Christian Studies, produced *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology* (2004), which stresses the paradigm sin, exile, and restoration.⁶² Noteworthy is the volume *Out of Egypt*, an impressive set of essays devoted to problems and possibilities of a pan-biblical or whole-Bible theology.⁶³ There J. D. G. Dunn warns that one should not be too facile in speaking of “Biblical theology” as though the meaning of this phrase is obvious. “The Bible,” he argued, is not understood identically by Jewish and Christian communities. “The beginning of biblical theology is the recognition that the texts in focus are the Bible of two world religions.”⁶⁴ So, to the extent that Dunn is compelling, it would be better to describe the whole-Bible theology as a Christian biblical theology.⁶⁵

C. H. H. Scobie’s work, which appeared early in the twenty-century and carries the subtitle “An Approach to Biblical Theology,” is an arresting demonstration of how a whole-Bible theology might look. Under the four topics (1) God’s Order; (2) God’s Servant; (3) God’s People; and (4) God’s Way, Scobie succeeds remarkably in moving in each topic through both testaments. It is not as though he takes a flat-Bible approach and “systematizes” topics documenting randomly from both testaments. Rather, Scobie proceeds with sub-topics to treat first the OT and then the NT on the subject, concluding frequently with a several-page section on theological reflections. So, for example, when discussing “God’s Commandment” under the major topic “God’s Way,” Scobie lays out the theological basis for ethics, norms as given in the Torah, the Prophets and throughout the created order, including wisdom, before reaching for the NT material. There he treats the theological foundation which is followed by Jesus and epistolary writings. The total schema is helpfully summarized.⁶⁶

However, a serious question for Scobie is how well his treatment, though sensitive to canon, can capture the dynamic of anticipation toward the future which is characteristic of the two testaments. In other words, can Scobie avoid being victimized by the tyranny of the static? He explains that the OT is largely about two things: proclamation and promise. The NT is largely about two things as well: fulfillment and consummation. Rather neatly the two testaments complement each other around the themes indicated above. Scobie’s model, which recognizes the promise aspect and hence the forward movement in each testament anticipating the ultimate consummation, does preserve the sense of overall movement. Still, whether the dynamic of the reappropriation of texts in various social contexts is sufficiently adumbrated remains a point of discussion.

2. *Critique of the whole-Bible theology project.* One probing analysis of the very enterprise of a biblical theology has been offered by Karl Moeller.

⁶² Pate, *The Story of Israel*. See the extended discussion of this paradigm by Roy Ciampa, “The History of Redemption,” in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (ed. Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007) 254–308.

⁶³ Bartholomew, *Out of Egypt*. A recent example is Hafemann and House, *Central Themes in Biblical Theology*.

⁶⁴ Bartholomew, *Out of Egypt* 183.

⁶⁵ So also Rendtorff, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* 2:310–12.

⁶⁶ Scobie, *The Ways of Our God* 99.

In his article he is basically sympathetic to Scobie's work; even so, he questions whether Scobie really escapes the problem of packaging biblical theology in an "alien idiom of didactic exposition."⁶⁷ As he explains, the Bible is a "first-level discourse" that puts readers in touch with a "world." Any "theology" is a "second-level discourse" about the first level, namely the Bible, and so it is removed from the "world," a consequence of which is to level out some of the configurations offered in first-level discourse.

Moeller then identifies three limitations or constraints that affect the doing of biblical theology. One is the limitation of categorization. In classifying materials under one theme or even multiple themes, a certain arbitrariness is unavoidable. Subjectivism makes any result suspect. Returning to Scobie, it should be said that Scobie recognizes the problem of schematization and the dangers of an imposed grid such as the standard categories for systematic theology (God, Man, Salvation, etc.). Scobie approvingly cites Eichrodt, "We must avoid all schemes which derive from Christian dogmatics."⁶⁸

A second limitation under which the discipline of biblical theology labors is the urge for coherence. Theologians feel that biblical materials need to be ordered. To take a specific example: How is the narrative material of Scripture to be ordered in a coherent manner? Despite a theologian's best intentions, some biblical material will almost certainly be squeezed into the "ordering," or misrepresented in the zeal for order. A third limitation is summed up in the word "reductionism." If, as Scobie states, the objective of biblical theology is to give an ordered account "of what the Bible has to say about God and his relation to the world and to humankind,"⁶⁹ then the multifaceted nature of the biblical material is reduced to the didactic intent. It is as though, for example, the rich metaphorical and poetical expression in the book of the Psalms were reduced to a list of propositions. The aesthetic and the emotional, even the mystery, would be largely drained away. Moeller comments: "[T]here is a danger that, in comparison with the biblical material itself, descriptive biblical theologies may seem somewhat impoverished, timid, arid, bloodless and lacking in life, to use adjectives employed by the Italian poet, scholar and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837)."⁷⁰

It is a good sign that evangelicals such as Moeller are increasingly reflective and self-critical. Moeller is not adverse to the enterprise but wants practitioners to be realistic about claims they entertain. In defense of the

⁶⁷ Karl Moeller, "The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H. H. Scobie's 'Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,'" in Bartholomew, *Out of Egypt* 57–58. The phrase "alien idiom of didactic exposition" is from S. Terrien, who says, "It is now recognized that such attempts [viz. dogmatic structures], inherited in part from Platonic conceptual thinking and Aristotelian logic, were bound to translate the *sui generis* thrust of biblical faith into the alien idiom of didactic exposition" (*Elusive Presence* 34).

⁶⁸ Scobie, *The Ways of Our God* 83.

⁶⁹ Moeller, "The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology" 56, quoting Scobie, *The Ways of Our God* 5.

⁷⁰ Moeller, "The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology" 59.

enterprise and as something of a rebuttal to Moeller, several observations are pertinent. First, one might enlist the insight of anthropologists who remark about the “human cognitive necessity to categorize.” Second, as to the problem of categorization being too much of a subjective enterprise, the truth is that any work of a synthetic nature, such as biblical theology, will of necessity carry the imprint of its writer, who will introduce categories. Nor is this to be deplored. As David Kelsey says, decisions in doing theology are shaped by the interpreter’s “imaginative construal,”⁷¹ by which he means the configurations of material (viz. categorization and such) within the writer’s mind, are subject to *discrimen*, which makes for creative presentations. Part of the excitement and genius of processing a document is the “aha” experience, in which a configuration of the material is discerned. Since the subjective element in this process is inevitable, the question is whether the author represents the material one-sidedly or misleadingly. That is, has the bias of the subjective been reined in with self-awareness and self-discipline? Is the author open for correction by peers? In the end, the adequacy of the (re-)presentation is what needs to be adjudicated.

Third, with regard to coherence, Moeller properly warns against a “one size fits all” approach, for this would mean either ignoring those items that do not fit, or incorporating odd items somewhat forcibly for the sake of coherence. The danger is to be noted, and so is the admonition to be aware of diverse theologies, or should one say, emphases. But not infrequently theologies are called “contradictory” because they seem to be so on the surface.⁷² To what extent are these contradictory? For example, if, as has been maintained, the Yahweh of war in one part of Scripture is at odds with the ideology elsewhere of peace, must one conclude that the two positions are contradictory? The difference may be accounted for, in part, by changes of circumstance. If a mother in the morning tells a daughter not to cut the flowers in the front yard but by evening she asks the daughter to cut flowers for the dinner table because guests are coming, are these contradictory instructions? Other factors such as divine accommodation account for differences that humans might see as contradictory. In synthesizing biblical materials the challenge is to understand the priorities by which one can account for at least some of the “discrepancies.” Still, the challenge frequently heard about the diversity of theologies cannot be easily dismissed. In their insistence on the unity of the Bible, evangelicals need to proceed with scholarly integrity.⁷³

⁷¹ David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 166, 168; the term is freely used by Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* 731–32.

⁷² Too great eagerness in setting out diversities is evident in E. S. Gerstenberger, *Theologies of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

⁷³ Bruce Waltke, in defining the task of a biblical theology, is attentive both to distinctive theologies and thematic unity. “The task . . . is to articulate the distinctive theologies of individual blocks of writings in the Old Testament and to trace the trajectory of their major themes and concepts to the fulfillment in Jesus Christ and his church” (*Old Testament Theology: A Canonical and Thematic Approach* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007; draft mss., p. 20]).

Fourth, and not unrelated to the problem of coherence is the problem of reductionism. An example is taking “messiah” passages and speaking of them as “the Messiah.” Complexities must be acknowledged. The rich texture of biblical material must come to expression, possibly by means of intertextuality.⁷⁴ In part, the problem of reductionism might be overcome by having teams work together. In general, greater attention might also be given to peer review. Testing is part of a “scientific” approach.

3. *Advocacy of a whole-Bible theology.* So, granted that the problems of doing a whole-Bible theology are substantial, nonetheless the case for attempting the enterprise is strong. A pan-biblical theology is necessary in the face of the plurality of world religions. A synthesis of the biblical material that delineates the larger priorities is important, lest analysts seize on minor points and the Christian faith be thereby misrepresented. The biblical theologian can hardly work in cocoon-like isolation on only a part of the total canon. The church, in whose service the biblical theologian works, must address the challenges of non-Christian faiths. The full canon of Scripture must be mobilized, and hence an orderly whole-Bible theology is necessary. Especially in a postmodern world where there is greater openness to examine various religious claims, the trumpet sound of a biblical theology should be clear rather than fuzzy, or worse, even absent. In this regard systematic theology is somewhat hampered, being caught up, at least in the West, in a philosophical matrix.⁷⁵ The task therefore falls to biblical theology.

Christians generally, and evangelicals in particular, are active in missionary-type outreach. Clearly the message that is proclaimed, even initially, needs monitoring, lest it deviate from Scripture and be off target. It is not only necessary to know the redemption story and selected biblical texts. It is the synthesis of the biblical material that is critical to the proclamation of the gospel. While it is helpful to have processed a theology of either testament, the ideal surely is for God’s kingdom agents to have a solid grasp of the full biblical revelation.

Not only the initial presentation of the gospel message, but the ongoing nurture of believers, whether in a newer setting as in parts of Africa or in a longer-standing European/Western ambience, stands to benefit greatly by a whole-Bible theology. A major goal of biblical theology is the shaping of a community, such that it will be clearly aligned with the biblical teachings. One aspect of biblical theology, to be sure, is of an academic nature in which

⁷⁴ One example where intertextuality is used to good effect is Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*. For an article advocating intertextuality in doing a whole-Bible theology see E. A. Martens, “Reaching for a Biblical Theology of the Whole Bible,” in *Reclaiming the Old Testament: Essays in Honour of Waldemar Janzen* (ed. Gordon Zerbe; Winnipeg: CBMC Publications, 2001) 83–101.

⁷⁵ Admittedly, a biblical theology is hardly assumption-free, nor are philosophical influences absent, but they are in general less determining of the outcome than is true for systematic theology. Even so, biblical theologians have reason to be more self-aware of the philosophies within which they operate.

scholars set forth proposals and engage in critique. But another function, and the more important, I would propose, is targeted to the faith community.⁷⁶

Walter Kaiser's word about the use of biblical theology in interpretation is to be heeded. As he correctly notes, teachers of the Scripture exegete individual passages; and preachers for the most part limit themselves to small slices of Scripture. Scholars, also focused on smaller texts, build toward an overarching umbrella-like theology. But the process is also the reverse. It is a grasp of the larger framework of theology that not infrequently gives clues to interpretation of smaller units, especially the difficult passages.⁷⁷ The more encompassing the theology, the larger and better the framework, the better it can serve interpretation. C. J. H. Wright has said it well: "Like a map, a hermeneutical framework can provide a way of 'seeing' the whole terrain, a way of navigating one's way through it, a way of observing what is most significant, a way of approaching the task of actually encountering the reality itself (just as a map tells you what to expect when you are actually 'in' the terrain it portrays)."⁷⁸

Moreover, in the West, though not only there, biblical illiteracy is widespread. Christians individually and collectively as a church are in need of a biblical world view, one which biblical theology helps provide. Neither the OT alone nor the NT singly can fully provide such a view. What is needed is a full-blown biblical theology. If one of the goals of biblical theology generally is to shape a community of faith, and if the shapers of that community are largely pastors and preachers, then it is incumbent on these leaders to be resourced, not with a partial biblical theology, whether of OT or NT, but rather with a comprehensive biblical theology. Basic to the above considerations is the reality that despite the designation of OT and NT, the two together supply the full story of redemption. The argument for a whole-Bible theology outweighs the objections that can be brought against it.

A final reason for urging continual experiment with and production of biblical theologies is that in this way serious attention to Scriptures will continue. Just as the Thessalonians gave themselves to search the Scriptures (Acts 17:11), and as rabbis before them combed the Tanakh for new insights, so scholars have reason to work diligently with the message of the Bible through surveys, or commentaries, but especially through biblical theology. To resort to colloquial language, it is well that the pot be continually stirred.

⁷⁶ Sophisticated academic works are needed, but also semi-popular books geared for pastors and informed laity, more and more of whom, not only in the West but also in the majority world, are university-trained. See G. Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, though what I have in mind is not quite that elementary. Similarly, Brueggemann thinks that there should be an acknowledgement of a "division of labor between the academic and ecclesial interpreting communities (*Old Testament Theology* 743 [italics his]).

⁷⁷ Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* 17–19. Cf. his *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).

⁷⁸ C. J. H. Wright, "Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," in Bartholomew, *Out of Egypt* 139. A stimulating volume on the order of a whole-Bible theology is his *The Mission of God. Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006).

The current ferment in the discipline is considerable and is to be welcomed. New approaches and directions are sure to emerge, especially as theologizing is responsibly undertaken by scholars in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.⁷⁹ Evangelicals in the North have reason to listen and learn from colleagues in the South. In the meanwhile, an agenda toward which evangelicals in the North could contribute is a whole-Bible theology—steps toward which are underway.⁸⁰

Some parameters for such an endeavor of producing whole-Bible theologies might be the following.

- (1) Deference to “history” should be maintained, but not as tenaciously embraced as formerly.
- (2) The canonical approach, which represented an infusion of energy into doing theology, may yet yield additional fruit, though configurations beyond those already made are not obvious. A qualified thematic approach remains viable.
- (3) A narrative approach has large possibilities. I write this in Africa, where I once more come face to face with the appeal of story, not totally in contrast to the more European method of working with conceptual abstractions but certainly a more palatable way of communicating the heart of the Bible’s message.
- (4) Whatever the approach, one should not lose sight of the dynamic movement in the biblical message, nor of its sociological matrices, and certainly not of Jesus Christ, God’s consummate revelation.
- (5) While the importance of belief and worldview should not be minimized, a biblical theology should not overlook praxis but give attention to worship, ministry, ethics, and so on. In this way the Bible and the synthetic summary represented in biblical theology can help in forming a community. It should be clear that God’s intent was not to provide a textbook to be merely studied. God’s intent was to form a community of whom God could say, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

IV. CONCLUSION

For evangelicals especially, Walter Kaiser’s foray into biblical theology at a time when evangelicals were second-class citizens in the scholarly household represented a new lease on serious academic work. The fact that his book was given a hearing signaled in some ways that evangelicals had come of age. To be sure, the evangelical commitment to the Scriptures as God’s in-

⁷⁹ Through case studies written by nationals Leo Perdue chronicles what is emerging in Senegal and in India by way of theological reflection (*Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* 319–36).

⁸⁰ For a strong champion of what he calls a “unitary canonical biblical theology,” see Paul R. House, “Biblical Theology and the Wholeness of Scripture. Steps toward a Program for the Future,” in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect & Prospect* (ed. S. J. Hafemann; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) 267–79. See Hafemann and House, *Central Themes in Biblical Theology*.

fallible revelation seemed to some to bias straightforward scholarship. But Kaiser blazed a trail, like J. C. K. von Hofmann, who more than a century earlier offered a scholarly conservative alternative to the regnant views of the day. Since Kaiser's work appeared, the contribution to OT theology—not to mention NT theology—by evangelicals alone has been wonderfully remarkable.⁸¹

⁸¹ Apart from full scale theologies mentioned in the essay and those forthcoming, and the several new series of monographs, evangelicals in the last decade have produced two dictionaries of biblical theology: *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. Walter Elwell, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), and *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) and several stock-taking articles, even books: E. A. Martens, "The Flowering and Floundering of Old Testament Theology" in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. W. A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 1: 172–84; R. W. L. Moberly, "Theology of the Old Testament" in *The Face of Old Testament Studies. A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (ed. D. W. Baker and B. T. Arnold, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 452–78; and S. Hafemann, *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*. I gratefully acknowledge help from the following: John Sailhamer, Paul House, Ben Ollenburger, Chester Wood, Eugene Merrill, and my immediate colleagues, John E. Toews and Lynn Jost.