

METHOD AND OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

BARR, BRUEGGEMANN AND GOLDINGAY CONSIDERED

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Summary

In the past several years two of the English speaking world's most influential Old Testament scholars, Walter Brueggemann and John Goldingay, have produced lengthy volumes of Old Testament theology. In the same period James Barr has produced a comprehensive methodological reflection on Old Testament theology. Barr raises a number of key issues which continue to inform the discipline. The theologies of Brueggemann and Goldingay each in different ways illustrate these methodological issues, and may be critiqued in their light. What emerges when this is done is an appreciation of two Old Testament theologians whose rigorous readings of the final form of the text produce significant insights for both the church and the academy. In the opinion of this reviewer the particular methodological strengths of Goldingay are those that are most likely to prove helpful both for the ongoing development of Old Testament theology and for the church's reading of the Old Testament.

1. Introduction

In the past several years two of the English speaking world's most influential Old Testament scholars have produced lengthy volumes of Old Testament theology. Walter Brueggemann's 700 page *Theology of the Old Testament, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* appeared in 1997 and John Goldingay's *Old Testament Theology, Israel's Gospel* came out in 2003.¹ In the case of Goldingay, his 900 pages are merely the

¹ W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), and J. E. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Volume One, Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003).

first instalment in a three-part project. Each man's long career has been marked by an acute methodological reflection on the task of the interpreter, a creative and respectful reading of the text itself, and a commitment from within the academy to the contemporary church as hearer of both the text and its interpretation. These volumes each integrate those characteristics as they bring a lifetime's reflection on the God revealed in the pages of the Old Testament.² In the same period James Barr has produced his comprehensive reflection entitled *The Concept of Biblical Theology, An Old Testament Perspective*.³ His 600 page volume is not an Old Testament theology *per se*, but is an important methodological overview of that enterprise.

These are simply three of a number of voluminous works added to the English corpus of Old Testament theologies over the past fifteen years or so, but taken together they offer a useful picture of the current state of, and emphases in, Old Testament theology. My purpose in this article is not to attempt a comprehensive review of the subject area, but rather to traverse the landscape in this particular snapshot of writers as a methodological exploration of the contemporary nature and state of Old Testament theology.⁴ I will do so first by noting Barr's work and critiquing the methodological issues raised by him, and then by reading the theologies of Brueggemann and Goldingay in order of their appearance with an eye on the issues raised by Barr.

² Notwithstanding the title of his book, Goldingay prefers the descriptor 'First Testament' for the body of material in question, but for simplicity I will retain the 'Old Testament' nomenclature throughout the article, including when I am discussing Goldingay's work, except when quoting directly from him.

³ J. Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology, An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

⁴ For a comprehensive overview of other practitioners in the field, including in the world of German-speaking scholarship, Barr should be consulted. Examples of additional theologies in English that can be noted are: R. Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology: Overtures to Biblical Theology* (trans. M. Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993); J.H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); P. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998). Barr also rightly reminds us that the practice of Old Testament theology is not confined to those who produce large volumes of that title; there are many thematic studies that effectively are working in the field of Old Testament theology. One in particular, to which we return below and to which all three of the authors under review owe a debt, is L. G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

2. Background

These volumes do not appear in a vacuum, for they represent a moment in the historical development of a particular discipline in the modern era. Each of our three authors provides an overview of the historical development of Old Testament theology, albeit each in quite different ways. They remind the reader of the various forces at work in biblical studies since the enlightenment that came together in the so-called ‘Wellhausian synthesis’ (Brueggemann, 12)⁵ with its focus on biblical criticism and the history of religion as an approach to Old Testament studies. They remind us of the subsequent rebellion against the evolutionary assumptions of Wellhausen early in the twentieth century and an accompanying desire to recover a theological interpretation of the Old Testament. They also point us to the two epoch-making works of Old Testament theology that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century, namely the two-volume theologies by Walter Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad, both German scholars and both enormously influential through translation on the English-speaking world of Old Testament interpretation.⁶ Eichrodt and von Rad each brought to his work both a respect for the gains of biblical criticism and a desire to reawaken the theological voice of scripture for the church. Although it is something of a caricature of the nature of their work to say so, each one also sought a central organizing principle around which to gather his theological understanding. For Eichrodt this was the idea of covenant, and for von Rad it was the history of God’s salvific work with his people. It would be fair to say that Eichrodt and von Rad dominated the next generation of biblical scholarship, whether their successors were building on them or reacting against them.

During the generation or so after their work appeared, with occasional exceptions, there was a lull in the practice of Old Testament theology in the sense of an attempt at a comprehensive statement.⁷ The theologies of both Eichrodt and von Rad left a lingering sense that,

⁵ For simplicity my references to the three volumes that are the subject of this article will be indicated by page numbers in brackets in the text, along with the author’s name if the context requires it.

⁶ W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; London: SCM, 1961 and 1967); G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper and Row, 1962 and 1965).

⁷ One such exception is C. Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

notwithstanding the excellence of their interpretive powers, their central ideas still left things unsaid, but nobody was quite sure how to address the lacuna.⁸ There were those, not least among them Barr himself, who claimed a ‘crisis’ in Old Testament theology.⁹ The way through this impasse seemed unclear.

All of this changed with the work of Brevard Childs, whose development of canonical approaches has dominated recent developments in the field both negatively and positively, at least in the English-speaking world.¹⁰ Much of what he has done has been subject to criticism, in some cases severe, but his critique of the historical critical domination of biblical studies and his respect for the final form of the Old Testament text has played an important role in opening a way through the impasse for other scholars. As is often the case with pioneers, his single-minded pursuit of his canonical critical goal has not always taken enough into account and he has not always anticipated or appreciated the uses to which other Old Testament interpreters have put his work.¹¹ Nevertheless, over the past fifteen or so years there has been a recovery of confidence in the possibilities of Old Testament theology, partly as a result of his influence and partly because his work has coincided with the emergence of postmodern contextualised epistemologies. It is no accident that the recent re-flowering of Old Testament theology has worked extensively with the category so central to Childs’ own thought, the canon. As we will see below, Goldingay and Brueggemann have each benefited from Childs’ renewal of respect for the received text and from the possibilities of contextualised interpretation opened up by postmodern epistemologies. Indeed, Brueggemann himself speaks of a ‘break in the long-standing stalemate in Old Testament theology’ (p. 95).

⁸ Instance the need for von Rad himself to produce a subsequent volume on *The Wisdom of Israel* (London: SCM, 1972).

⁹ The word used by Brevard Childs in the title of his *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970). For a critique of Childs’ own response to this ‘crisis’, see M. G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For Barr’s varying responses see the bibliography of his *Concepts* (pp. 611-15).

¹⁰ See in particular B. S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM, 1985) and *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London: SCM, 1992).

¹¹ Instance the link drawn by Brett between Childs’ canonical criticism and the ‘New Criticism’ movement (Barr, 392). See Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis?:* 38-57.

3. James Barr

Before turning to the particularities of their approaches, it will be helpful to treat the methodological reflections of Barr in his *Concepts* volume. For many years Barr has been an exacting critic both of the task of Old Testament theology and of most of its practitioners, and he continues to be so in this volume. In that respect his survey is a mixed achievement. There are aspects of his work that are constantly irritating; history will eventually reveal whether the irritation is producing a pearl or not. He writes with a slightly overdeveloped sense of his own significance, which means that he is often unduly harsh on those who he feels have not taken his own work seriously enough.¹² Despite his description of Childs as ‘my friend Professor Brevard Childs’ (p. 378), his adversarial relationship with both Childs himself and his work dominates the book. He has a tendency to caricature the positions of those who have disagreed with him in scholarly fora.¹³ As he has done for many years, he continues to use the term ‘fundamentalist’ as a loose catch-all category and in so doing falls occasionally into the same trap of relying on ‘ism-accusation’ (my phrase) in argumentation that he cautions others against. From an evangelical perspective, for instance, it is astounding to find Clark Pinnock described by implication as a ‘primeval American fundamentalist’ (p. 686). He also allows his interest in natural theology to intrude in a way that is not always apposite to his purposes.

My central complaint about this book, however, is that after an entire career thinking about, worrying at and critiquing biblical theology, including affirming its importance, Barr has not managed, nor even seriously attempted, to come up with an Old Testament theology that satisfies his own criteria. The closest he comes is a short chapter tentatively exploring an analogy with historical theology as a way forward (pp. 209-21) and a concluding proposal that the Durham-based theologian David Brown has provided some useful categories for the pursuit of biblical theology in his monograph *Tradition and*

¹² His complaint (p. 398) that the indices in Childs’ *Biblical Theology* have too many errors, including the omission of a number of entries about himself, is typical of the tone of some of his work. Ironically Barr’s own indexed references to Childs and to others contain a number of errors.

¹³ Barr’s treatment of Francis Watson, for instance, is marked by the very ‘contemptuous superiority’ of which he accuses Watson (p. 202).

Imagination (pp. 586-604).¹⁴ A classic trap for book reviewers is to lapse into unfair complaint that the author under review has not written the book the reviewer wants written and I am in danger of falling into that trap with these comments. Nevertheless, I think it not an unreasonable expectation on the part of the guild that Barr, after his hundreds of thousands of words of critique over the years, might have shown us how Old Testament theology should be done, especially given his professed commitment to the enterprise.

Notwithstanding any of that, however, much of Barr's critique has been incisive and influential and continues to be so in this volume.¹⁵ Whether one agrees with him or not, it is worth looking past the irritations and appreciating the achievements of *Concepts*. There are two in particular that I wish to highlight. The first arises from the observation that there are too few scholars who can work with ease in both English and German, as a result of which there is not enough cross-fertilization between the traditions of academic theology characterized by those two languages. Barr is one who has a thorough grasp of both English-speaking and continental European scholarship, and for that alone monolingual English speakers are greatly in his debt.

Secondly, Barr has done a fine job of elucidating the key methodological issues surrounding Old Testament theology. He begins by distinguishing biblical theology from other approaches to study of the Bible. Particularly useful in this regard are his comments about the distinctiveness of biblical theology as against non-theological study of the Bible, and as against dogmatic or systematic theology. This latter distinction in particular is woven through the book, and is of crucial importance to the practice of both biblical theology and systematic theology. He explores in considerable detail the category of canon with respect to Old Testament theology. In that respect he has an understandable preoccupation with Childs, but also highlights a number of other biblical theologians whose work can be described as in some sense canonical. He wrestles with the tension between theological and religious historical approaches to scripture, and here his attention

¹⁴ D. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination, Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Few works have been as influential on the practice of a sub-discipline within biblical studies as Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

to continental scholarship is particularly useful.¹⁶ He also pays attention to the category of narrative, which includes a clearly drawn distinction between story and history. We are in Barr's methodological debt for highlighting issues that continue to demand attention in the pursuit of a biblical theology and, in particular, an Old Testament theology.

If the acuity of Barr's work demands our attention, it does not require our agreement in every instance. I find his concluding introduction to the work of David Brown to be problematic. It is partly problematic because Brown himself does not claim to be a biblical scholar and does not appear to address the problem of Old Testament theology. More significantly, however, it is problematic because of the nature of the relationship between scripture and tradition proposed by Brown and endorsed by Barr. Brown suggests that within scripture a process of subsequent critiquing and being critiqued by tradition has begun. This process continues beyond the time of the development of the Christian canon, as a result of which the church is called to critique scripture in the light of tradition as well as to be critiqued by it.¹⁷ Accordingly, Barr also insists on a distinction between what the text of scripture meant and what it means (p. 197), although it is not clear from Barr what controls may be in place to prevent him critiquing the parts of scripture with which he disagrees and accepting uncritically what he does agree with.¹⁸ He is not able to or chooses not to indicate what prevents us from allowing the text to mean anything we, or the spirit of our own particular age, want it to mean, other than the controls introduced by the historical critical method, a method whose subjective nature is becoming increasingly apparent. Indeed, Barr by and large deals harshly with those who challenge the hegemony of that approach to scripture, who see problems with an enlightenment epistemology and who are looking for a more postmodern understanding of the relation of subject and object to each other in interpretation. Correspondingly, he is patient of the fact that most people and strands

¹⁶ Especially that of R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (2 vols; London: SCM, 1994).

¹⁷ Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*: 106-35. Barr (p. 603) rightly discerns that some 'will find [Brown's] emphasis on tradition too great to be acceptable.'

¹⁸ Notwithstanding my hesitations about Barr's deployment of Brown, the latter's critique in *Tradition and Imagination*: 123-27, of performance analogies for understanding 'the role of Scripture in the contemporary Church' is provocative in the best sense.

of tradition effectively function with a canon within a canon (pp. 380-87). Because he preserves the prerogative of the interpreter to critique scripture, he sees the formation of a canon within a canon as simply part of that process.

On this last point Barr deserves a hearing, for in his comments on canon he is doing one of the things he does best, namely placing the rhetorical claims of a particular point of view against the actual practices of the claimants. He is right to challenge those who believe that all scripture is equally revelatory by pointing out ways in which that belief is routinely denied in practice.¹⁹ This is a regular feature of his argumentation on other topics also. To give him some credit for his lengthy disagreements with Childs, Barr's challenges to those who espouse canonical or final form approaches sometimes hit their mark (pp. 382-87 for example).

4. Walter Brueggemann

While he does not make much explicit use of canonical critical terms and approaches, Brueggemann is one who advocates a theological reading of the final form of the Old Testament. Like most who attempt such an exercise, he is seeking a coherence across the many voices of the Old Testament witness. As we have noted above, the attempts of earlier practitioners to do so have, by and large, focused on key themes or narrative strands. Brueggemann attempts the same thing by an epistemological route, by a consideration of ways of knowing in a postmodern context. In so doing he alights on the category of 'rhetoric'. The Old Testament scriptures constitute speech about God, and according to Brueggemann, 'Speech constitutes reality, and who God turns out to be in Israel depends on the utterance of the Israelites or, derivatively, the utterance of the text' (p. 65). As a result, 'The cruciality of speech in the faith of Israel ... suggests that imagination is a crucial ingredient in Israel's rendering of reality' (p. 67). Having decided that the rhetoric of the Old Testament is the key to understanding its theology, Brueggemann then suggests that the different voices of the Old Testament may be read as different manners

¹⁹ In that respect Barr is in tune with the point made by Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*: 122, that 'what appears on the page is seldom what directly enters hearts and minds.'

of speech about and by God. He bundles all of these types of speech into the central metaphor of the courtroom, which is reflected in the sub-title to his work, 'testimony, dispute, advocacy'. The different voices of the Old Testament are then read as different voices in the courtroom drama. The gradual disclosure of God through the rhetoric of scripture occurs partly by means of what Brueggemann calls 'countertestimony' and 'unsolicited testimony', his denotation of those parts of scripture that seem at odds with Israel's 'core testimony'.

There is a certain genius in this approach. It does induce a careful listening to all the voices of scripture rather than foreclosing on which voices should be privileged and which silenced in interpretation. It takes account of the final form of the text of the Bible and, in so doing, counters the inability of the historical critical method finally to uncover theological truth within the text. It provides a way into the subject for those who bring a postmodern suspicion of metanarrative to their reading, as Brueggemann neither presents the Old Testament as a metanarrative nor asks the reader to accept a thematic metanarrative imposed by the biblical critic. He comments that 'the Old Testament is not a metanarrative but offers the materials out of which a metanarrative may be construed' (p. 559). He is correspondingly determined to hear the text as much as possible in its own terms, including what seem to be the discordant voices within it. Postmodern rebellion against an emphasis on propositional expressions of truth has alerted us to the importance of the particular in the discernment of truth and Brueggemann has been able to exploit this in a helpful way for a new generation of readers of the Old Testament. All of this is supplemented by Brueggemann's own genius for imaginative and contemporary application of the text. His work is imbued with a respect for what he calls the 'remarkable, intentional artistic elusiveness' (p. 3) of the text and the concomitant role of imagination in interpretation.

In these respects Brueggemann is a beneficiary of Childs' trail-blazing emphasis on canonical form. He also displays some deep points of difference from Childs, although he argues them more irenically than does Barr. Two in particular may be seen as outcomes of his desire to let the text both reflect and construct an understanding of God. First, he takes issue with Childs' concern for a 'reality' beyond the text and to which the text points (p. 65). Secondly, he eschews Childs' explicitly christological approach to the Old Testament (p. 93).

Both of these are issues that Barr has alerted us to in his critique of Old Testament theology. In Barr's view, Brueggemann's emphasis takes him a little too close to a position where the rhetoric no longer requires an 'essential reality' behind the speech (Barr, 547). In contrast to Barr, Brueggemann is much less concerned with history, either of the text itself or of the world outside the text. He is content to meet the God who is contained within the text and our appreciation of the rhetoric of the text. He goes so far as to say that 'the God of Old Testament theology as such lives in, with, and under the rhetorical enterprise of this text, and nowhere else and in no other way' (p. 66). This statement is probably intended as a corrective against those who bring pre-determined readings to the text and as a particular proposition concerning the relation of Old Testament theology to other thinking about God, but Brueggemann has surely said more than he means here. The practice of exposition and application in his own corpus of work suggests that he would not want to be painted into the corner of asserting a God who is *merely* a rhetorical construct, but it is nevertheless an accusation to which his form of words has made him vulnerable. Yet Brueggemann displays little sense of feeling so. Later he comments with respect to his central organizing metaphor that 'The matrix of trial-witness-testimony is one of the few social contexts in which it is clear that reality is dependent on speech' (p. 134). It is true that the outcomes of some trials may help to construct reality: the 1992 Marbo decision of the Australian high court, for example, constructs (or more properly reconstructs) the reality of native land title for the Aboriginal peoples. But it is also true that the process of trial-witness-testimony is usually vitally concerned to get as near as possible to what actually happened. A trial can hardly take place without a precedent event or series of events.

It is intriguing to find Brueggemann and Barr, who together contend against Childs as being too 'realistic' in his approach, now on different sides of the fence from each other on the matter of rhetoric versus history. The reason for this is that they have different complaints about realistic approaches. For Barr, the problem lies in Childs' insistence on reading the final form of the text, which is what Brueggemann is doing; while for Brueggemann the problem lies in Childs' imposition of pre-determined theological categories on the text, which is something that Barr does in his critique of scripture itself and which Brueggemann is seeking to avoid by means of his trial metaphor.

Barr and Brueggemann do, however, agree against Childs that ‘the Old Testament is not a witness to Jesus Christ’ (Brueggemann, 107). Brueggemann qualifies this by saying that the witness is not ‘in any primary or direct sense’. Barr is concerned more pragmatically with his observation that it is almost impossible to make valid connections between the Old and New Testaments without resorting either to history of religion description or to the imposition of a pre-determined dogmatic scheme on the Old Testament (Barr, 179). From either perspective, this is a problematic position for a Christian to countenance. It is particularly so in the case of Brueggemann who so determinedly reads the rhetoric of the final form of the text yet is not able to admit into his reading the church’s decision to set the Old Testament in a shared canonical context with the New. One is left either wondering why a Christian would want to read the Old Testament at all, or asking what the nature of the secondary and indirect witness of the Old Testament to Jesus may in fact be. It is difficult to imagine that it would not be some kind of imposition on the text of the sort which Brueggemann seeks to avoid. He softens this stance in his methodological postscript when he admits of the possibility that Christ is a fulfilment of the Old Testament, but also places a bet the other way by insisting that may only be so from this side of the New Testament (p. 732). Accordingly, ‘the church has no interpretive monopoly on the Old Testament’ (p. 733). We will note Goldingay’s response to this issue below, but suffice to say for now that this continues to be a fraught area in the Christian practice of Old Testament theology.

Brueggemann is a creative and highly competent student of the Old Testament and, notwithstanding the methodological problems in his approach, the achievements of his *Theology* are many. I can highlight just a few here. Perhaps none speaks more clearly into our own age than his insistence on understanding God from the standpoint of God’s relationality rather than his attributes (pp. 201-28). While such an approach arises evidently from the nature of the Old Testament corpus itself, which is overwhelmingly relational in emphasis, it is a difficult approach to take. It leads us to a God who is ‘self-giving, harshly demanding, and endlessly restless’ (p. 228) and who is ‘at the same time sovereign and faithful, severely preoccupied with self-regard and passionately committed to life with the partner’ (p. 283). Inexorably Brueggemann leads us to a God whose ‘holiness, glory, and jealousy

will not be captured anywhere in creation' (p. 372). The temptation to filter out aspects of this relationality is ever present and we are reminded of the rule of thumb for interpreting communities to 'attend always to the tradition that is more problematic and demanding' (p. 429).

As we would expect from his previous work, Brueggemann maintains a strong focus on what he calls the 'social practice that ... mediates Yahweh in the midst of life' (p. 574). Consequently he emphasises both the private and the public responsibility inherent in such a social practice. He comments, appropriately for our times, on the link between obedience and the care of creation (p. 201) and, from within his own perspective, worries about the conduct of the United States in the context of a reflection on the nations as YHWH's partner (p. 527). Not surprisingly, given this regular focus on the public and applied aspects of theology, Brueggemann's Old Testament theology succeeds in achieving coherence at one point where many fail to do so, in its incorporation of the wisdom strand into his theology. The category of 'mediation' is a key to this achievement.

Any reflection on the divine is a work in progress and, methodological issues apart, there are some aspects that need more work. His theodicy seems to me not consistent with the tone of the rest of the book. When it comes to the matter of YHWH's creation of evil and woe (his textual exemplars are Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6-7; Isa. 45:7), Brueggemann seems to depart from his usually unrelieved attention to the contradictions of YHWH and resorts to a more traditional theology of excuse for YHWH (pp. 352-55). Correspondingly on the question of whether YHWH is on occasion abusive as, for example in Hosea 2:24 (where the verb 'allure' may carry a coercive sense) or in Jeremiah's complaint about YHWH's deception (Jer. 20:7), Brueggemann suggests that 'Jeremiah, in his imbalance and extremity, exposes a sense of Yahweh that is less than honorable' (p. 362). At this point Brueggemann dances a little uncertainly between ontology and witness and hence denies his own insistence on the constructed reality of the text. This illustrates how difficult it is finally to do Old Testament theology without some partnership with a moral or dogmatic theology.

Strangely, Brueggemann consigns apocalyptic to 'the edge of the Old Testament' (p. 694), thus demonstrating in another way that some selectivity of interpretation amongst the diversity of Old Testament

voices is almost unavoidable. In the process he unwittingly confirms Barr's point that, in practice, even those who insist on the entirety of the biblical witness seldom escape some kind of canon within a canon.

5. John Goldingay

When it comes to Goldingay's recent *Old Testament Theology, Volume One, Israel's Gospel*, definitive comments really should wait until the second and third of his volumes appear. The first volume presents itself as the narrative expression of Israel's story, or a tracing of what happened. The second volume will look more at the discursive thinking that expresses Israel's faith and hope, while the third promises to draw the link between Israel's belief and story and her lifestyle, worship and ethics (Goldingay, p. 28). The plan is that the first volume begins with the historical material, the second with the writing prophets and the third with the Writings, that is, the Psalms and wisdom material. The division of Goldingay's three volumes therefore roughly coincides with the traditional threefold division of the Hebrew Bible into Torah, Prophets and Writings. Goldingay points out that the three volumes are 'not simply three separate theologies' (p. 28), as a result of which each volume will not/does not confine itself to its core section of the Tanak; all (will) feed off each other. Indeed, in this respect Goldingay claims to be 'writing a theological midrash, and midrash does bring together texts that have a relationship of substance if not a historical relationship' (p. 28). By the author's own description the second of the three volumes promises to be 'the nearest to traditional theology in this work as a whole' (p. 28), so it will be interesting to see if it represents an advance in the awkward relationship between biblical and dogmatic or systematic theology explicated by Barr.

Despite the anticipation of two further volumes, there are some authorial clues at the beginning of the first volume that invite a response to this first volume. At the most basic level the author's prefaced comment that 'This is one of three volumes that I *hope* to write' (p. 13, emphasis mine) invites a response to the first volume just in case his hope is not realised. He follows that immediately with a description of this first volume as 'a theological commentary on the Old Testament story'. That, coupled to the book's title, sounds to me close enough to a claim to an Old Testament theology *per se*.

To some extent Goldingay walks in the footsteps of Brueggemann.²⁰ He footnotes Brueggemann more than any other author, sometimes to disagree but usually to find an apposite expression of his own thoughts. He makes considerable use of Brueggemann's *Theology* but just as much use of various of Brueggemann's exegetical works. Explicitly, he follows Brueggemann in his desire to 'subject [his] framework of thinking to the Old Testament's' (Goldingay, p. 19). This heralds two characteristics that do in, fact, emerge in Goldingay's theology. First, it anticipates a critical respect for the final form of the text. Secondly, it foreshadows a willingness to engage with the text in its nature as a many-voiced narrative with all of the awkwardness and ambiguity that that implies. In this respect, Goldingay and Brueggemann are both inheritors of the legacy of Child's affirmation of the final form of the text and both have proved to be sensitive to the exegetical possibilities of the contextual epistemologies of postmodernity.

But this does not mean they are doing the same things in their theologies. There are some sharp and important points of methodological divergence. The most explicit is Goldingay's complaint that Brueggemann's work 'argues relentlessly' for 'his liberal Protestant metanarrative' (Goldingay, p. 22). It is a little hard to discern whether Goldingay is complaining about Brueggemann's use of a metanarrative *per se* or complaining about the particular metanarrative in use. If the latter, then it is equally unclear what Goldingay means by 'liberal Protestant' as this is a label the content of which is only ever implied by him. However in the context of those remarks he goes on to discuss the gap that exists between 'the church's metanarrative and that of the Old Testament' (Goldingay, p. 22). This suggests two important things about his methodology. First, unlike Brueggemann, Goldingay is relaxed about metanarratives as an epistemological category. Secondly, he is as resistant as Brueggemann to the superimposition of an alien metanarrative on a reading of the story itself, but he gives this resistance a more accessible content with his challenge to the limits of interpretation that the church has attempted to place around the reading

²⁰ When I speak of Goldingay as 'walking in the footsteps of Brueggemann' I mean by accident of chronology that one man's major Old Testament theology appeared before the other. The appreciation goes the other way also. Long before Brueggemann's *Theology*, Goldingay produced his *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

of scripture.²¹ In that respect he sees it as a ‘pressing imperative’ (p. 23) for the church to read the New Testament in the light of the Old rather than vice versa, as its failure to do so has been one of the chief causes of the gap between the metanarratives of scripture and of the church.

This suggests two further important differences between Goldingay and Brueggemann. First, Goldingay treats the Old Testament in the Christian canonical context and so admits the New Testament into his reading, in contrast to Brueggemann’s comments that the New Testament is not the only trajectory that could be initiated by the Old. He is therefore not so concerned to avoid metanarratives as to ensure that the right ones are used. There is no such reading as one that occurs on a *tabula rasa*. Secondly, while his reading challenges the received interpretive wisdom of the church at a number of points, Goldingay does his work more explicitly in the service of the church than is the case with Brueggemann.²² Goldingay is drawn by his own approach inexorably towards some reflection on the story of Jesus and the church in the light of his reading of the Old Testament. A final chapter, integrated into the narrative structure of the theology, tells that ‘God Sent’ and recounts the story of Jesus as the culmination of the preceding chapters. In contrast, Brueggemann’s Christian reader is left wondering what to do with the Old Testament theology that emerges if a Christian reading is not a necessary trajectory. Why then should such a trajectory be taken at all, except as an acceptable historical accident? And is such a basis for doing so adequate?

A further important methodological difference between the two writers emerges in Goldingay’s extensive postscript.²³ We have seen that Brueggemann so privileges the category of rhetoric in his Old Testament theology that he comes close to denying any ontological or historical substance behind the text. Perhaps this freedom of rhetoric is

²¹ Specifically Goldingay (p. 22) takes issue with F. Watson, *Text, Church and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994): 6, who considers that the church sets limits ‘within which it must work and beyond which it must not stray.’

²² This is not a comment on the motivation of Brueggemann, whose extensive body of work is demonstrably placed at the service of the church, but on the implications, intended or otherwise, of his approach to Old Testament theology in his *Theology* volume.

²³ One difference between the two authors is that Goldingay keeps his explicit epistemological reflection to the end whereas Brueggemann begins with it. Each has advantages, but I suspect that some of Goldingay’s reader would benefit from reading his final chapter first.

part of what we have seen Goldingay call Brueggemann's 'liberal Protestant' metanarrative. In contrast, Goldingay offers a highly nuanced discussion of the nature of history under the categories narrative and history (pp. 859-65), history and criticism (pp. 865-76), and creation and history (pp. 876-83). He begins with reference to Leo Perdue's notion of the 'collapse of history', a concept that Brueggemann also works with (Brueggemann, pp. 35, 46), as one way of expressing the fact that there has never been a satisfactory connection between theological study of the Old Testament and the dominant nineteenth century phenomenological conception of history that has functioned as the chief guide in the study of the Old Testament.²⁴ Brueggemann works with this problem by proposing a shift from 'history' to 'story' as a guiding approach to the Old Testament. But he then goes a step further with the comment that 'this seemingly innocent word change from 'history' to 'story' is in fact a major decision to forgo the 'happenedness' of biblical recital and to allow for a dimension of fictive imagination in the account in the text' (p. 46). To the extent that this move implies a shift of focus onto the narrative of the Old Testament, his comments are unexceptional; to the extent that they permit an abandonment of any sense of the Old Testament as a historical document as so far understood, his is a problematic position. And so it proves, as we have indicated, as he proceeds to privilege the category of rhetoric over against history.

Goldingay does something quite different. He shares the discomfort of Brueggemann with the hegemony of a modernist notion of history in Old Testament interpretation, but he then goes on to ask a different consequential question. Where Brueggemann is in danger of parking history in a methodological cul-de-sac in his rhetorical theology of the Old Testament, Goldingay asks whether the problem is not so much history *per se* as our modernist understanding of history.²⁵ His nuancing of the historical question moves from there in several

²⁴ Perdue, *Collapse of History*.

²⁵ Brueggemann's work in his Old Testament theology has the effect of treating the phrase 'collapse of history' as a complete expression while Goldingay works more within Perdue's own agenda, which is to address not 'the collapse of history' *per se* but rather 'the collapse of the historical paradigm as the singular approach for doing Old Testament theology.' See Perdue, *Collapse of History*: 11. As Barr (p. 545) points out, in this respect Brueggemann has failed to provide Perdue's anticipated 'theology of imagination', a hope expressed by Perdue of Brueggemann some three years before the publication of Brueggemann's theology.

directions. First, he addresses the question of genre and the importance of discerning the points at which the narrative intends to be historical in the modern sense of the term (and Goldingay does not deny that this is sometimes the case) and points at which it does not. This is familiar ground after a generation or so of scholarly attention to the text as narrative. More innovatively, Goldingay also affirms the validity of introducing belief into our doing of history. ‘A civilization has the right to decide how to give itself an account of its past, and specifically whether to include God in its account,’ he writes (p. 861), and accordingly ‘The fact that these [Old Testament] narratives give prominence to *God’s* involvement in events does not imperil their right to be designated history’ (p. 861).²⁶ Once this move has been made then the distinctions between what is factual and non-factual and between history and story are much less *angst*-ridden for the contemporary Western interpreter. That is the sense in which Goldingay understands the so-called ‘collapse of history’, as the coming apart of the categories of history and story. Both are important; the text holds both together and, in so doing, calls the reader to do the same; in the process we are called to an appreciation of both. Goldingay applies assured historical critical results in his writing and he does not eschew historical critical appreciation, but he resists the imposition of modernist historical enquiry as a metanarrative consisting of categories that the text simply does not understand. Specifically, he writes, ‘Instead of interpreting the First Testament on the basis of one hypothesis or another about its background, I have sought to understand it as its own textual world and in the context of our own world, in the conviction that it truly reflects God’s world’ (p. 874). This does not deny that ‘the events that happened matter’ (p. 868), but it does require what Goldingay calls a ‘leap of faith’ although not one ‘without a basis’ (p. 870).

As a result of this approach Goldingay is able to do three things particularly well in his theology of the Old Testament. First, but not

²⁶ Unlike Brueggemann in his two chapters of methodological prolegomena, Goldingay does not spend time examining this question in terms of the wider hermeneutical conversation of the day, nor does he use this particular language, but it seems to me that his epistemological companions at this point are those who seek to remove the wedge between (a) subject and object and (b) knowledge and belief in their understanding of the nature of knowing. One such approach is that of M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge, Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

necessarily most importantly, his approach helps him to make sense of some of the less palatable aspects, at least to the postmodern mind, of the Old Testament story, such as the death of Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6 and the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10. He helps his reader to see that a premodern conception of history was able to hold both that these events happened and that they did not correspond to the community's own experience of God at the time they were written down. This gap did not compel them to say these things did not happen, but rather to say that they do not happen like this now. There was a time when 'People were often larger than life, and the significance of their acts was often larger than life' (p. 875).

More importantly than any of that, though, Goldingay's understanding of history *vis à vis* Old Testament interpretation is crucially determinative of his organizing approach to the task of Old Testament theology. As we have seen, it is impossible to do Old Testament theology without some central thematic guidance, and it has so far been equally impossible to find a guide that sufficiently comprehends the task. Like all interpreters and their critics, Goldingay sees God and his scriptures yet through a glass darkly, but it seems to me that he has succeeded in developing a theology the shape and approach of which reflects that the Old Testament is supremely the story of God. Central to Goldingay's work is that story and that character. A glance at the contents indicates both the category of story and the central character. Each major chapter has 'God' as the subject followed by an active verb – began, started over, promised, delivered, sealed, gave, accommodated, wrestled, preserved, sent – and each verb is in the simple past tense, the tense of narrative and of history. If Goldingay is able to sustain this approach through his second and third volumes, he will have made considerable progress towards a healthy relationship between biblical and dogmatic theology.²⁷

This focus on the perspective of God may be illustrated by two concrete examples. In treating the story of the flood and the subsequent covenant with Noah, Goldingay is not delayed by concern over the destructive seeds that we find throughout creation and which sometimes cause the promise of the rainbow to ring somewhat hollow. Rather, he finds that 'God's covenant [with Noah] does not guarantee

²⁷ Incidentally, if God's story is both the story of God and the story by God, Goldingay has so far told us much about the story of God; the next stage may well be for him to look more closely at the story by God.

that humanity cannot destroy the earth, but it promises that God will not, and it invites humanity to associate itself with God's commitment.' (p. 183). Similarly, he treats the human sinfulness that pervades the Old Testament text and at times seems to dominate it with another turn to God as the chief character in the constituent stories: 'Their hope and their gospel lie not in the moments when the human beings get things right, as they occasionally do, but in the fact that God is making promises come true through the whole story and not only through its acceptable features.' (p. 287).

Such a focus also requires the reader, and by extension the church, to feel the force of Goldingay's determination to confront the difficult aspects of YHWH's character. The reader is brought up short by the writer's comment, for example, that particular courses of action 'are good because Yahweh commands them rather than being commanded because they are good' (p. 366). We are led by this approach to confront both the inscrutability of God and our own deepest motives as readers in the way we respond to scripture and to the God we encounter there. In a similar vein, in the context of his excellent exposition of Genesis 1–2 (pp. 42-130), Goldingay's exegesis of Genesis 1:27 compels him to declare, in a direct challenge to the spirit of the age, that that verse really is about the woman's role in childbearing (p. 105). That is not the only voice that he finds on this matter, and there is more that he says on this particular voice, but it is one voice that must be confronted.

To my mind a more problematic example arises in his treatment of the presence and absence of God. So unrelieved is Goldingay's reading that he comments, 'If we overemphasize the significance of God's permanent presence, we lose the ability to own God's real absence and to think of and plead for an occasional more real experience of God appearing and acting.' (p. 307). I struggle with the notion of 'God's real absence', and wonder if it takes sufficient account of a pervasive sense of God's sovereignty in the Old Testament, but it is an appropriately provocative statement of the sort that Goldingay does well.

Although I have been majoring on methodological issues in my comments to this point, an important feature of this volume is Goldingay's ability to work with the text in new and fresh ways. Notwithstanding his methodological differences with Brueggemann, it is in their imaginative exposition of the text that the two have the most

in common and most often draw on each other's insights. Goldingay's exploration of the paradox that 'the glorious colours of autumn are the colours of death' (p. 95) typifies his ability to arrest the reader with his insight. Another example is his unusual treatment of laughter, delight and playfulness in creation (p. 123). He is also not afraid to bring that exposition to bear on the problems of our own day. There is an excellent reflection on the problems of leadership (p. 431) and an innovative discussion of war as a contemporary problem in the light of the Old Testament (pp. 474-95). In this context Goldingay treats the tricky question of *herem*, of devoting something to destruction, and has something to say about the vexed issue of Palestine today. He is not afraid to think about YHWH's actions with respect to human action at the level of nations (pp. 608-12) and supplements this with an explicit reflection on the spiritual condition of contemporary Europe and the United States (p. 695).

No writer can satisfy everyone, but this last example highlights the fact that Goldingay's use of examples throughout betrays a markedly North Americo-centric tone, surprising in one whose origins lie on the other side of the Atlantic. Occasionally, those unhappy souls like me condemned not to live in either Europe or the United States might be inclined to ask, 'What about us?' But perhaps that is a question for us to answer, and I cannot have it both ways. If I am pleased to see contemporaneity in an Old Testament theology, I must accept that it will be the contemporaneity of the author.

6. Conclusion

The theologies of Goldingay and Brueggemann illustrate well some of the key methodological points made by Barr in his survey. Both of them build on the canonical approaches of the last generation of Old Testament scholarship, and both are determined to hear the varied voices of the text as much as possible in their own terms and with respect for the narrative nature of the text. This means that they have at times to confront traditional church-based readings that have sidelined what sound like the more discordant voices of the Old Testament. It also means that they take issue with the history of religion approach at points where it does not sufficiently seek a coherence amongst the voices for the church. Both also are the beneficiaries of postmodern

epistemologies in that they are able to work with the fundamentally relational nature of the text and its corresponding particularity. Consequently they both seek to bring the voices of the text to bear on the contemporary situation, albeit from within the limits of their own particularity. In those respects they both serve and challenge the church – and both do so with the faithful and arresting creativity that we have come to expect in their work.

At certain points in their commonality they illustrate Barr's own views while at others they stand apart, especially in their openness to the place of the particular in Old Testament interpretation. Their commitment to hearing the several voices of the text in their own terms, for instance, introduces a tension between that approach and Barr's espousal of Brown's proposed critique of scripture in the light of tradition. Accordingly, they do not look for a canon within a canon in the way that Barr would permit. However, Brueggemann in particular is occasionally vulnerable to Barr's critique on this point.

There are also some key methodological differences between Goldingay and Brueggemann. Two in particular have emerged in our review of the authors and both are foreshadowed by Barr's critique of the task of Old Testament theology. While Barr himself would take issue with both authors at various points in each of these methodological issues, the quests for an Old Testament theology by Goldingay and Brueggemann have confirmed the importance of the types of issues that Barr has raised. The first issue relates to the extent to which an Old Testament theology may be Christian or christological. As we have seen, Brueggemann with Barr does not see this as a necessary trajectory; in contrast Goldingay's approach is explicitly christological while at the same time careful to avoid using the New Testament as a predetermined template for reading the Old. As a result, in the mind of this reviewer anyway, from the vantage point of the church Goldingay's voice emerges as the more compelling both as the church's servant and as her challenger.²⁸

A second key difference in their respective approaches concerns the role and understanding of history with respect to Old Testament theology. As we have seen, Brueggemann's insistence on rhetoric over against history is problematic, and is seen to be so by Barr. Goldingay,

²⁸ I emphasise again that this is not to deny Brueggemann's own commitment to, and engagement with, the church in his own corpus, as a result of which there is some irony about the methodologies adopted in his Old Testament theology.

in contrast, is more in line with the approach taken by Barr in his insistence that rhetoric depends on some level of ‘happenedness’ for the events that are described, and that correspondingly there must continue to be a place for history in the doing of theology. His is a carefully nuanced understanding of history that seeks to avoid the wedges between history and faith and history and theology driven by modernist historiographies. In that respect, also, Goldingay’s approach promises more to the church than does that of Brueggemann.

Another key methodological issue raised by Barr, the relationship between Old Testament theology and systematic or dogmatic theology, is not yet resolved in the work of either Brueggemann or Goldingay. In the case of Brueggemann, a weakness is that his commitment to testimony and rhetoric as his organizing metaphor means that he simply does not engage with this relationship. With Goldingay, we must wait for his second and third volumes, which promise to engage with systematic categories.

Both Goldingay and Brueggemann have produced helpful and challenging accounts of the story of God. They have set a standard for others. As for a methodological assessment of the two, the categories developed and the cautions and challenges issued by Barr have proved to be useful in reading and assessing their theologies. It is here that Goldingay’s emerges as the theology that is more methodologically coherent and hence the more likely to provide a platform on which others within the discipline may continue to build. But history has a habit of making fools of reviewers!