

On Finding the Theological Message of Old Testament Books: A Plea for Paying Attention to the Redemptive-Historical Context

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Abstract

What is the theological message of an Old Testament book? How should one proceed in attempts to trace and formulate it? The answer to these questions is vital for the study biblical theology. These are likewise relevant for students working on the exegesis of a pericope or ministers preparing a sermon series on a specific book. In this study, I will argue that it is not only helpful but also necessary to pay more attention to the position of the books in the broad context of the history of Israel and the history of redemption. As this context is particularly relevant for the interpretation of the historical books and the prophets, I will focus on examples taken from these books.

I. The Normal Practice in Dictionaries of Biblical Theology

A few years ago, I was working on a new course on the Prophets. I took the opportunity to read the entries on these books in the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* and the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*.¹ When reading the various contributions, I noted that the authors often formulated the theological message of a book in terms of themes such as the sovereignty of God, sin and judgment, retribution, and covenant. Later, I found a similar approach in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* and the *Introduction to the Old Testament* by Tremper Longman and Raymond Dillard.² The information was beneficial but also raised questions regarding the relevance of the historical context of each book and its position in the history of redemption.

Amos may serve as an example. In the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Robert Chisholm opens with an overview of the contents of the three sections of the book (chs. 1–3, 4–6, and 7–9). Next, he reviews three topics. The first relates to the prophet’s portrayal of the LORD as the sovereign ruler of the world, a warrior-king, and creator. The second is about the LORD and the nations. Chisholm observes that Amos also holds the nations responsible for keeping the LORD’s demands and suggests that it relates to the divine mandate to Noah in Genesis 9:7. The third is the LORD’s relationship with Israel. Although Chisholm says that this is the focus of Amos’s prophecy, he treats it more briefly. Amos refers to Israel’s election as God’s covenant people, the deliverance from Egypt, and the conquest of Canaan. Israel broke the covenant through injustice, greed, pride, and hollow, ritualistic religion. The LORD had already implemented several covenant curses, but Israel refused to repent. Now the LORD’s patience has run out, and he will punish his people with destruction and exile. However, “as always,” divine judgment will be “discriminating and purifying”: a faithful remnant will be brought back to the land, and the Davidic dynasty restored.³

¹ T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000); hereafter *NDBT*. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig C. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright, eds., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); hereafter *DTIB*.

² Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996); hereafter *EDBT*; Tremper Longman III and Raymond Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nottingham: Apollos; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007); hereafter *IOT*.

³ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “Amos,” in *NDBT*, 242a–45a (quotations on 244b). Cf. also *IOT*, 431–32.

In the *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Robert Hiebert proceeds somewhat differently by starting with a description of the historical context of Amos's message, the northern kingdom of Israel in approximately 760 BC. In those days, the nation prospered but was also "in an advanced state of social, moral, and spiritual decay." Otherwise, his treatment largely corresponds to Chisholm's, except for his comments on Amos 9:11–15, for which see below.⁴

Both authors are aware of the historical context, as they mention the fact that Amos's prophecies are addressed to the people of the northern kingdom and point to the advanced state of decay prevailing among the audience. Moreover, unlike Chisholm, Hiebert explicitly relates the sins denounced by the prophet to the historical situation during the reign of Jeroboam II around 760 BC.⁵ However, neither of them specifies the function of Amos's intervention in terms of the overarching story of redemption, which moves from creation and the fall of Adam to the birth of Jesus Christ. In other words, I wonder how the theological message would have been different if Amos had interacted, for example, with the repeated apostasy in the period of the judges.

Of course, if Amos had lived in the premonarchical era, he could not have spoken to the northern kingdom, but what is the theological relevance of the fact that he did? This question is of particular relevance to the last words of the book (Amos 9:11–15), which announce the future restoration of Israel and the royal house of David. According to Hiebert, the perspective of this passage "seems to be that of an exile from Judah"; it portrays the bright side of the eschatological day of the LORD, "the light of which will never dawn on the intransigent Israelites to whom Amos ministers."⁶ These comments show that he is aware of the problem. Yet one is left with the question as to what the conclusion of the book implies for the role of the northern kingdom and its downfall in God's plans, as well as for those northerners who were not "intransigent," but did not live long enough to witness Judah's exile, let alone the future restoration.⁷

All this does not mean that the contributors to these dictionaries of biblical theology reject the idea that biblical books should be read in connection with the overall history of redemption. For example, Brian Rosner,

⁴ Robert J. V. Hiebert, "Amos, Theology of," in *EDBT*, 17a–21a (quotation on 17a).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17a, 18b.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷ In *DTIB*, Karl Möller somehow circumvents the problem, as he posits that the book is addressed to Judeans who read the book after the fulfillment of Amos's prophecies in the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 BC; see Karl Möller, "Amos, Book of," in *DTIB*, 37.

one of the editors of the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, argues that biblical theology should pay close attention to the Bible's overarching story. In his view, the analysis of the theology of a biblical book includes considering "its unique part in the progressive unfolding of God's plan of salvation for humanity."⁸ In line with this principle, several entries briefly describe the "plot" of the Bible's story or part of it, thus offering a framework in which to interpret the individual books.⁹ However, things are a bit different when it comes to the entries on the various books.

Everybody will agree that the link to the overall story is particularly relevant for the historical books, such as Genesis to Kings. A few examples may illustrate how much attention this element receives in the entries on these books.

In Duane Garrett's overview of the theology of Genesis, he observes that the book "tells of the fall into sin but also immediately begins the story of redemption through the promised son."¹⁰ Kenneth Mathews mentions Genesis's report of the partial fulfillment of God's promises to the patriarchs and how the book prepares for the following phases of the story: God's election of Israel, the monarch, and the coming of Jesus Christ.¹¹ Gordon Wenham points out that the author of Genesis presents the call of Abraham as God's answer to the problems of humankind described in Genesis 3–11, that is, "the effects of sin on the human race."¹²

Whereas the authors just mentioned refer to the connection with the beginning of the story in Genesis only in passing, it has a prominent role in Peter Enns's discussion of the theological themes of Exodus. He not only relates the story told in the book to God's promises to the patriarchs, but in particular makes efforts to show that Israel's departure from Egypt, the giving of the law, and the building of the tabernacle are acts of re-creation.¹³

The sketches of the theology of subsequent historical books tend to pay less attention to the question of how the history told in the book contributes to the unfolding of the initial promise of Genesis 3:15. Instead, the description

⁸ Brian S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 4, 6a; cf. also his definition of biblical theology, which includes the phrase "maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus" (10b).

⁹ See Philip E. Satterthwaite, "Biblical History," in *NDBT*, 43–51; Craig L. Blomberg, "The Unity and Diversity of Scripture," in *NDBT*, 67a–69b; T. Desmond Alexander, "Genesis to Kings," in *NDBT*, 115a–20a; cf. also Richard S. Hess, "History of Israel," in *DTIB*, 299b–302b.

¹⁰ Duane A. Garrett, "Genesis, Theology of," in *EDBT*, 285b.

¹¹ Kenneth A. Mathews, "Genesis," in *NDBT*, 140b–46a, esp. 141a and 146a.

¹² Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis, Book of," in *DTIB*, 249b.

¹³ Peter E. Enns, "Exodus (Book)," in *NDBT*, 146a–49b. On the law and the tabernacle, see also *IOT*, 75–80.

of its role in the history of redemption is often restricted to its relation with more recent phases of the story, with what will follow soon, and with the fulfillment in the New Testament. The entries on Samuel and Kings illustrate this tendency.

As for Samuel, the broadest scope is found in Robert Vannoy's treatment, wherein he affirms that God's promise of an enduring Davidic dynasty in 2 Samuel 7 carries forward both the promises to the patriarchs and that of Genesis 3:15. He further points out that the Davidic covenant "provides the framework for the flow of redemptive history from the old covenant (the Sinai covenant) to the new covenant." Like the Sinai covenant, the Davidic covenant includes obligations for individual covenant members, but failure to live up to the obligations "would not jeopardize the ultimate fulfillment of the promise through the line of Abraham and David."¹⁴ Philip Satterthwaite presents a more limited view and restricts himself to stating that the reign of David brought a partial fulfillment of the promises to the patriarchs and was a turning point in the outworking of God's purposes of salvation. From that time on, the question will be whether the monarchy is indeed a blessing for Israel.¹⁵ The last element is also mentioned by Longman and Dillard, who further observe that from Samuel onward God's choice of Jerusalem as the place for his house is inseparably tied with his choice of David.¹⁶

Reflections on the redemptive-historical role of the monarchical period described in Kings concentrate on its end: the fall of the kingdom of Judah and the Davidic dynasty, as well as the glimmer of hope provided by the release of Jehoiachin in 2 Kings 25:27–30. According to Iain Provan, the ending of the story suggests that the fulfillment of the promise to the patriarchs still lies in the future and looks forward to the coming of the ideal Davidic king.¹⁷ In Mark Chavalas's view, Kings shows that because of Israel's sins, the immediate future of the nation will be "without monarchy, government, or structured religious center"; instead, the nation will be identified by "fidelity to the Mosaic religion and the demands of the covenant."¹⁸

These are all useful observations, but they do not provide a satisfactory answer to the question as to the historical role of the Davidic monarchy in the realization of God's purposes of salvation. Its emergence gave rise to the royal family in which the Messiah, Jesus Christ, would be born, and its

¹⁴ J. Robert Vannoy, "Samuel, First and Second, Theology of," in *EDBT*, 708a.

¹⁵ Philip E. Satterthwaite, "Samuel," in *NDBT*, 178b, 182a.

¹⁶ *IOT*, 163–64.

¹⁷ Iain W. Provan, "Kings," in *NDBT*, 185a, 187a.

¹⁸ Mark W. Chavalas, "Kings, First and Second, Theology of," in *EDBT*, 456b.

failure contributed to the longing for a better David.¹⁹ But is that everything that can be said? These authors mentioned do not explain the role of the temple of Solomon, the construction and demolition of which are an essential element of the storyline of Kings. Why did God have this sanctuary built if he knew beforehand that it risked ending its existence in ruin (cf. 1 Kgs 9:6–9)?

II. A Learning Process

In summary, the link to the overall history of redemption receives at least some attention in a number of entries of the dictionaries of biblical theology. However, several authors restrict themselves to retelling the contents of the book, or outlining its theological message on a thematic basis without much consideration for the historical context or any comment whatsoever on its role as part of the large story.²⁰ Besides, when they do consider the relationship with the large story, one misses a discussion of vital historical elements, such as the role of the northern kingdom or the function of the temple.

Things are remarkably different in Stephen Dempster's 2003 book *Dominion and Dynasty*. In his sketch of the theology of the Old Testament, he relates the substance of every book to the two themes that dominate biblical history from the beginning. The first is dominion or geography: When God created humans in his image, his purpose was that they would be in relationship with him and represent his rule over the world. The promise of the holy land and its fulfillment as well as the construction of the tabernacle and the temple bear relationship to this theme. The second theme is dynasty or genealogy: After the fall, God promised the coming of the seed of the woman, by whom he would restore the lost glory.²¹ By continually referring to these themes, Dempster succeeds in showing not only the unity of the Old Testament but also how each book contributes to the development of its plot.

Tracing the influence of Dempster's study on subsequent discussions of the theological message of Old Testament books is beyond the scope of this

¹⁹ Cf. also *IOT*, 165; Vannoy, "Samuel," 708; Brian E. Kelly, "Samuel, Books of," in *DTIB*, 720a.

²⁰ See, e.g., G. Michael Hagan, "Exodus, Theology of," in *EDBT*, 226b–29b; Nobuyoshi I. Kiuchi, "Leviticus," in *NDBT*, 152a–56a; Kelly, "Samuel," 718b–19b; Richard S. Hess, "Kings, Books of," in *DTIB*, 422b–25b; Joel R. Soza, "Jeremiah," in *NDBT*, 223b–27b; Thomas Renz, "Ezekiel, Book of," in *DTIB*, 218b–23a; Robert D. Spender, "Hosea, Theology of," in *EDBT*, 357b–59b; Paul Ferguson, "Jonah, Theology of," in *EDBT*, 427a–28b. Cf. also *IOT*, 84–91 (Lev), 181–89 (Kgs), 367–70 (Ezek), 405–8 (Hos).

²¹ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT 15 (Leicester: Apollos; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003); see, e.g., 49, 68–70.

article. In this connection, only two observations can be made. First, Gregory Beale can be mentioned as an author who has learned from Dempster's approach. In his 2011 study on the unfolding of the Old Testament in the New, he presents an overview of the storyline of the Old Testament in which he very briefly comments on each book's relation to the fulfillment of God's commission to Adam to reign over the earth.²² Second, the same is not true, however, for Bruce Waltke's textbook on Old Testament theology published in 2007.²³ In this massive volume, Waltke still follows the familiar pattern of retelling the contents of the books—including numerous interpretative comments—and describes their theological message from a thematic perspective.²⁴ Not much attention is paid to the question of how the story starts at the beginning of Genesis and moves on in a particular book.

Despite Dempster's and Beale's innovative contributions, it seems worth further evaluating the usual thematic approach. In accepting this challenge, it is not my aim just to criticize this approach, let alone reject its results. I must even admit that I followed the same line when I wrote a chapter on Hosea as part of a book on theological themes in the Latter Prophets published in 2012. In that contribution, I structured my review of the theology of Hosea thematically, under headings like "Exclusive Love," "Israel's Adultery," and "God's People Reunited." I tried to do justice to the historical context of Hosea's prophecies and their being addressed to the northern kingdom, but hardly reflect upon their relationship with the overall story of the Bible.²⁵ In other words, if I am advocating a different approach now, this is part of a personal learning process that will hopefully continue in the coming years.

III. *Understandable and Problematic Aspects of the Thematic Approach*

What are we looking for in a quest for the theological message of a biblical book? How does one define the term "theological" in this connection? These

²² Gregory K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 29–87.

²³ Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

²⁴ Waltke's discussion of the theology of the "Deuteronomist" (Deut–Judg and 1 Sam–2 Kings) is a fine example of a purely thematic approach; see Waltke and Yu, *Old Testament Theology*, 738–52.

²⁵ Gert Kwakkel, "Hosea, Prophet of God's Love," in *The Lion Has Roared: Theological Themes in the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament*, ed. H. G. L. Peels and S. D. Snyman (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 27–39.

questions are of major importance for all reflections on the proper way of doing biblical theology. One could, for example, use a strict definition, limiting the theological message to what a book says about God himself, and more particularly about his eternal virtues. In that case, it can be expected that the historical element will be filtered out in favor of eternal truths. Those taking this lead will certainly find many helpful insights in the books of the Old Testament, for these writings say a lot not only about God's historical acts, but also about his unchanging nature.

An alternative option would be to take theology in the sense of the message of a particular book for the church of today. Just as with the first option, one can easily understand that following this line, historical elements that no longer seem relevant are left out of consideration.

Another argument in support of playing down the relevance of historical aspects could be that some Old Testament books lack a clear relationship with a specific point in time. This is true for Job and Proverbs, but also for a prophetic book such as Joel, which does not provide any information as to the era in which the prophet lived and has resisted all efforts to present a definite view on its historical context.

It seems, then, an obvious step not to attach considerable importance to the historical details when one assumes the task of describing the theological message of an Old Testament book. However, this evidently does not hold for the relationship between the contents of a book and the overall history of redemption. According to the firm conviction of Reformed theologians, Scripture gives evidence of a long storyline that moves on from the beginning at creation to the fulfillment of God's purposes in the new creation described in Revelation, with Jesus Christ as its center. Admittedly, the link with this storyline may be stronger in the historical books than in others, such as the wisdom literature or a few prophetic books. In some cases, it can be hard to tell how a particular book—let alone a single event or passage—contributes to the development of the overall plot. If one continually tries to present a clear answer to this question, one easily runs the risk of schematism and speculation.²⁶ Nevertheless, if it is true that a long storyline links the beginning of Scripture with its end, it is necessary at least to ponder whether something can be said about the relationship between a particular book and the main storyline of Scripture. If one fails to do so, one risks

²⁶ Cf. Cornelis Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis en prediking: Hervatting van een onvoltooid gesprek* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1986), 101–3; English translation: *Preaching and the History of Salvation: Continuing an Unfinished Discussion*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Scarsdale, NY: Westminster Discount Book Service, 1996), 127–30; Piet Houtman, “*This Is Your God*”: *Preaching Biblical History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), 127–28.

isolating the book from its canonical framework. This can only be detrimental to a proper assessment of its theological message.

What about other historical aspects? Can they be stripped off without drawbacks? As observed, this may lead authors to neglect important elements (e.g., the role of the temple of Solomon in Kings). Besides, this procedure may generate problems, particularly when affirmations about a specific theme in one book or passage seem to contradict what is found in others. The following examples illustrate this point: two from 1 and 2 Samuel and the others from the Prophets.

First, as is commonly agreed, kingship is a major theme in Samuel.²⁷ The establishment of the Davidic monarchy was a vital step towards the coming of Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes. Thus a favorable look on Israel's being ruled by a king is already found in passages such as Deuteronomy 17:14–15 and Judges 17:6; 21:25. However, this positive stance contrasts with the apparent negative evaluation in 1 Samuel 8:6–18; 10:19; 12:12, 17–20, where both Samuel and God himself severely disapprove the people's request for a king and take it as a rejection of God's kingship. As may be expected, the theological dictionaries consulted in the course of this study address the problem and suggest solutions.²⁸ On closer inspection, I wondered whether it would be possible to improve their solutions by considering even more the historical context of Samuel's view on kingship. Is it a good idea to study the texts by asking the thematic question whether the monarchy was a good thing for Israel or other peoples?²⁹ Could such an approach also distort the theological message of the book?

Second, in 2 Samuel 7:14–16, God promises David and his family an everlasting kingdom. He will keep this promise, even if he must discipline David's offspring for committing iniquity. Psalm 89:29–38 expresses the promise in similar unconditional terms. Other texts apparently deviate from this pattern when they affirm that there will always be a descendant of David on the throne *if* his descendants respect God's covenant and commandments, which implies that they may lose the throne if they refuse to do so (see 1 Kgs 2:4; 9:4–9; Ps 132:11–12). What does this imply for God's covenant with David? Is it conditional or unconditional? The issue is of great importance for biblical and systematic theology, as God's covenants are a central theme for both. Is the conventional distinction between conditional and unconditional covenants valid?

²⁷ Cf., e.g., Vannoy, "Samuel," 705a; Kelly, "Samuel," 718b.

²⁸ See Vannoy, "Samuel," 705; Satterthwaite, "Samuel," 179b–80a, 182a; Kelly, "Samuel," 718b.

²⁹ Cf. the brief overview of the use of Samuel in political theology in Kelly, "Samuel," 720.

Third, Amos proclaims more than once that God's judgment on Israel is irrevocable and that he will no longer spare his people (Amos 2:6; 7:8; 8:2; cf. also 8:11–12). He also gives voice to the hope that the Israelites may live and receive God's grace if they really seek him, love what is good, and maintain justice (Amos 5:4–6, 14–15). Does this suggest that notwithstanding his strong affirmations about the inevitability of judgment, it is always possible to escape through repentance? In support of this idea, one could point to Jeremiah 18:7–8, which says that if a nation turns from evil, God will indeed relent of the disaster with which he has threatened it. Conversely, 2 Kings 23:25–27 says that even the unrivaled faithfulness of King Josiah did not drive God to turn from his burning anger provoked by the sins of Josiah's grandfather Manasseh. What, then, does the Old Testament teach about the theme of repentance and judgment: can one always count on God's compassion if one breaks with evil?

Fourth, the last example builds on the previous one, by narrowing down the issue to the apparent discrepancy between the prophetic messages of Jonah and Nahum regarding the fate of Nineveh. According to Jonah 3:10, when God saw how the Ninevites turned from their evil way, he relented from the disaster announced by his prophet. He always reserves the right to have mercy upon such a great city, with so many ordinary people and so much cattle (Jonah 4:10). By contrast, Nahum's message does not refer to this possibility. Instead, it proclaims God's resolute intention to take vengeance on and destroy the proud capital of the enemies of his people. How can one reconcile these two perspectives on God's attitude towards Nineveh? Is Jonah written in response to Nahum, to temper its message of doom?³⁰ If so, how does one account for the fact that Nahum comes after Jonah in the canon, which rather suggests the opposite?

IV. Exploring a More Redemptive-Historical Approach

Could paying closer attention to the redemptive-historical context help in finding solid solutions to these biblical-theological issues? I now review them again in order to show to what extent a close consideration of the historical context can contribute to a better understanding of the theological messages of Old Testament books.

³⁰ Thus Stephen G. Dempster, "Prophetic Books," in *NDBT*, 125a; cf. also Thomas Renz, "Nahum, Book of," in *DTIB*, 527b.

1. *The Apparent Rejection of Kingship in 1 Samuel*

In Deuteronomy 17:14–20, Moses says that when the people of Israel have taken possession of the promised land and settled in it, they may have a king if they desire so. The king, however, had to be totally different from what was usual in the ancient Near East. He would neither be allowed to set up a strong army—at the price of bringing the people back to Egypt, the house of slavery—nor to acquire a vast harem. Instead, he would have to study the *Torah* of Moses throughout his life, in order to keep the commandments of the LORD. In other words, a king who could help the people was a person with special knowledge of God’s will, not a commander-in-chief always out on enlarging his power.

According to Joshua 21:43, the ideal situation anticipated in Deuteronomy 17:14a had materialized: the Israelites had taken possession of the land and settled in it. However, history developed in a way opposed to what Moses had wished. Time and again, the people forsook the LORD and served other gods. The religious and moral chaos of those days made it clear that they needed a king *like the one described by Moses* (cf. Judg 17:6; 21:25). Their apostasy resulted in oppression by hostile nations living around them, but when they cried out to the LORD for help, he delivered them by raising judges. After Gideon had saved them, they expressed for the first time their desire for a king. However, when they asked Gideon to become their king, they did not do so because they wanted him to lead them according to the *Torah*, but because he had delivered them from the Midianites (Judg 8:22). Gideon refused, but after his death, his son Abimelech became king at Shechem, which was a terrible experience (Judg 9).

Samuel would be the last judge. In his days, it became clear once again that the Israelites did not need a king to be saved from their enemies. For that purpose, it sufficed that they put away the idols, confessed their sins, performed rituals including making a sacrifice, and had Samuel pray on their behalf. When they did these things, God promptly responded by destroying the Philistines (1 Sam 7). Nevertheless, when Samuel had become old, they asked him to appoint a king for them. The king they had in mind would be such that they could become a nation like the others. He would be their commander-in-chief and fight their battles (1 Sam 8:20). They were even willing to pay the highest price: the king could take everything he wanted from them and make them his slaves (1 Sam 8:11–19). The king they desired was different from the one that Moses had in mind and had allowed to the people. They had not taken to heart the lessons of the period recorded in Judges, nor those of the recent events related in 1 Samuel 7. They did not see that their real problem was not defense but disobedience and apostasy.

Instead of asking for a leader who would teach and guide them the ways of God, they desired a king because that was the best way to be free from their enemies and live safely. They refused to trust in the LORD, who was willing to give them freedom and safety and was strong enough to do this by his power. Thus, he rightly affirmed that by asking a king, they had rejected him as their king over them (1 Sam 8:7; cf. also 1 Sam 10:18–19).

It follows that the question at the heart of this part of 1 Samuel is not whether the monarchy would be a good political system for Israel. As is apparent from 1 Samuel 12:14–15, the central question was: does Israel want to listen to the LORD and obey his will? They needed a king, first of all, to help them to remain faithful and obedient to God. As the period of the judges had amply demonstrated, there was a real risk that the promises of the covenant made at Sinai and renewed in the land of Moab would not materialize (cf. Deut 29:1 [28:69]). The safe and prosperous life of Israel in Canaan, which was meant as an important step towards the restoration of God's living with people as in the garden of Eden, was really in danger. God's project was threatened. Therefore, they needed a king, and God accepted their request despite all its flaws, by first giving Saul as a king according to their own desires, and next David, who really was a good shepherd for the people (cf. Ps 78:70–72).

Accordingly, as regards the theological message for today's church, this element from Samuel reminds us of the God's marvelous wisdom and providence. His project did not fail because of the repetitive apostasy of his people, far from that. He could even make use of a request implying his own rejection, to provide for what they needed and to continue his work towards the fulfillment of his promises (including the coming of kings from Abraham and Jacob; cf. Gen. 17:6; 35:11). Furthermore, the leaders that the people of God need are not those who excel in power or anything that commonly makes them attractive for our contemporaries. Their first duty is to keep the church on the track towards salvation by humbly studying the Word of God and teaching it to the people.

2. Davidic Kingship and Covenant

After David had become king over all Israel, he decided to transport the ark—the symbol of the royal presence of the LORD among his people (cf. Jer 3:16–17)—to his new capital, Jerusalem. During the festivities celebrating the arrival of the ark, David showed his willingness not to exalt himself above his fellow Israelites, in line with Deuteronomy 17:20 and in contrast with Saul (2 Sam 6:20–22). Next, he wanted to honor the ark by building a house for it. God replied that he would first build a house for David. This

meant that David's own son would succeed him. God would firmly establish his kingship, and he would build a house for the name of the LORD. David's son and successor would be as a son to God, whom God would discipline if he committed iniquity. Even then, God would not withdraw his steadfast love from him, as he had done with Saul but would establish David's royal house and kingship forever (2 Sam 7:11b–16).

When David was about to die, he reminded his successor, Solomon, of this promise. In words that recall Deuteronomy, he said to Solomon that his kingship would prosper if he kept the commandments of the LORD. Then God would fulfill his promise that David would never lack a son on the throne of Israel (1 Kgs 2:1–4) if his sons walked faithfully before him with all their heart and soul. David emphasizes the conditions attached to God's promise more than God himself had done in 2 Samuel 7. However, his interpretation is confirmed in 1 Kings 9:4–5, where God expresses himself in similar terms. How can one account for the difference?

The books of Samuel and Kings do not offer an explicit explanation but only a clue in 1 Samuel 2:30. There a prophet says to Eli the priest that God would certainly not fulfill the promise he made to his family that they would always serve him as priests. From this point onward, readers of Samuel know that God reserves the right to annul an everlasting promise if the recipients fail to meet his expectations. If David was familiar with this event, he was aware of the consequences for the fulfillment of God's promise, which might follow grave sins. Therefore, one can imagine that after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and killed Uriah, he may have found it necessary to emphasize more what God expected from him and his offspring.³¹

David's fear came true. Since Solomon became unfaithful at the end of his life, his son Rehoboam lost the throne of all Israel. He and his successors only reigned over Judah and Jerusalem. During several centuries, God kept his promise only by not taking this "lamp" from David's royal dynasty (1 Kgs 11:36; 2 Kgs 8:19). However, this part also seemed to have come to an end when the Babylonians deprived David's descendants of their kingship and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. In the end, however, God fulfilled the promise by sending his own Son as the ultimate and faithful Davidic king.

It follows that the unconditional aspect of God's promise to David related to God's decision never to replace his dynasty by another one, as he had

³¹ For more details on the relation between 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Kings 2, see Gert Kwakkel, "The Conditional Dynastic Promise in 1 Kings 2:4," in *Reading and Listening: Meeting One God in Many Texts; Festschrift for Eric Peels on the Occasion of His 25th Jubilee as Professor of Old Testament Studies*, ed. Jaap Dekker and Gert Kwakkel, ACE BTSup 16 (Bergambacht: 2VM, 2018), 79–87.

done with Saul and later with Jeroboam, Baasha, and Jehu. For the rest, the promise was conditional: David's descendants would only prosper and reign over all Israel or Judah themselves if they respected God's commandments.³²

Coming to the theological message, the first aspect is the strong link between the two houses: the royal dynasty and the temple. This is an essential part of 2 Samuel 7, as well as Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8 (cf. Ps 132). Israel needed kings like David and Solomon to protect the sanctuary against the decline described at the beginning of 1 Samuel, which had led to the loss of the ark. Once again, a king appears to be necessary for God to fulfill his purpose of dwelling among his people. In the end, it did not work, for even God's presence in Solomon's temple with its sacrifices and other rituals did not suffice to keep the kings themselves on the right track.³³

Secondly, when read in its historical context, the story of God's promise to David shows how God interacts with people, in particular those whom he charges with a special task. The relationship intensifies over time, as can be seen in 2 Samuel 7, where God responds to David's zeal for the ark. Moreover, the promises of this chapter concentrate on David's son Solomon and his building of the temple, without making the fulfillment of the core of the promise of an everlasting dynasty conditional. Subsequent passages focus more on later descendants of David and are more explicit about the conditions, probably in connection with what had happened in the meantime.

Finally, these passages show that God's promises must be received by faith and in obedience. This is so obvious that there is no need to say it every time, though God may also make it explicit later when circumstances require.

3. Judgment or Mercy in Amos

Amos's prophecies primarily address the northern tribes when they had lived outside the Davidic kingdom and away from the temple in Jerusalem for about two centuries. Nevertheless, these two "houses" hold a prominent place in the book. Amos 1:2 says that "the LORD roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem," thus drawing attention to the fact that Solomon's temple is still his dwelling place among his people, even for those living in the North. Amos 9:11 announces the restoration of David's house as the

³² For a succinct nuanced discussion of the topic, see Vannoy, "Samuel," 708a.

³³ For this paragraph and this whole section, I have benefited much from Henk de Jong, *Van Oud naar Nieuw: De ontwikkelingsgang van het Oude naar het Nieuwe Testament* (From Old to New: The Progressive Development from the Old to the New Testament; Kampen: Kok, 2002), esp. chs. 1 and 2. For the role of the temple, see also Gregory K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

first step towards Israel's bright future. Thus, the two "houses" figure at the beginning and the end of the book, forming an *inclusio* encompassing all other oracles.

Israel's separation from David and Jerusalem was due to Solomon's infidelity, but also corresponded to their own choice. Although they were outside the mainstream of the fulfillment of his project, God had not abandoned them. At the same time, their conduct demonstrated how hard it was to remain faithful to him in such conditions. That may explain why Amos offers them so little prospect, affirming that God's irrevocable judgment will soon put an end to the existence of their nation, long before the downfall of Judah.³⁴

The theological import of all this is that the life of God's people and the fulfillment of his promises cannot be guaranteed for those who prefer to live apart from the Davidic king and God's dwelling place. Even if it is possible to be saved living in such conditions, one really runs the risk of missing the boat of salvation. Just as this message may have encouraged the Judeans to appreciate their privileges, it should convince people of our time to seek their life in him who is the Davidic king and the fulfillment of the temple (cf. Matt 12:6; John 2:19–21).

So far, closer attention to the relation between a biblical book and the history of redemption seems to be fruitful. It is doubtful that this also holds for the apparent tension between Amos's proclamations of irrevocable doom and the call for conversion as a possible means of escape (Amos 5:4–6, 14–15). One way out of the problem may be to date these prophecies before or in the same period as the first two visions in Amos 7:1–4, when it was still possible for the prophet to avert judgment. Still, it is more natural to account for the difference in terms of prophetic rhetoric. An oracle of irrevocable doom warns those hearing it not to entertain the illusion of easy escape. There may be a moment at which God decides not to change his mind anymore but to punish even his own people, whatever they do. The serious nature of this element is given its due by the phrase "it may be," which goes with the call for conversion in Amos 5:15 (cf. also Joel 2:14; Jonah 3:9; Zeph 2:3). For their part, such calls, which still open up the possibility of escape, do not encourage illusions, but instead argue against those who would use the message of irrevocable doom as a pretext for their unwillingness to change their lives.

³⁴ Admittedly, Amos 2:4–6 proclaims Judah's irrevocable doom too. If one rejects the fairly common view that the passage is a later addition, it remains that Amos's prophecies address primarily the northern kingdom.

4. *Jonah and Nahum and Nineveh's Fate*

Similarly, the difference between Jonah and Nahum as regards their message on Nineveh might relate to what the city had done between the era of Jonah (most probably the eighth century BC; cf. 2 Kgs 14:25) and that of Nahum (i.e., between the fall of Thebes in Egypt in 663 and that of Nineveh in 612 BC; cf. Nah 3:8–10). It makes at least as much sense, however, to account for it in connection with the different purposes of these books.

Although Nahum addresses Nineveh, his prophecies are directed no less to the people of Judah, whereas the story of Jonah mainly concerns Israel. The purpose of Jonah is to warn the Israelites not to resent God's compassion for others, as this is the only basis of life for them as much as for all other sinners, irrespective of their belonging to God's people. As for Nahum, his task was to comfort the people of God, by telling that God had not forsaken them but would certainly intervene against his and their enemies and eliminate them. In that connection, it was not useful to speculate about a possible conversion of the Ninevites.

Conclusion

It turns out that paying close attention to the redemptive-historical context of the contents of Old Testament books can yield fresh insights that may remain hidden for those who primarily focus on thematic elements. It would, however, be an exaggeration to state that this is always true. In some cases, the benefit of the approach explored in this study mainly consists in seeing the same things more clearly or in refining the interpretation of the message of the biblical books under scrutiny. Furthermore, it could be established that the approach may protect biblical theologians against asking the wrong questions. In short, it is a helpful and a necessary perspective worth considering by all who study the Old Testament, in order to find its theological message for today.