

# Gerhard von Rad (1901–1971): A Reluctant Modernist’s Approach to Wisdom Literature

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## Abstract

Gerhard von Rad defended the importance of the Old Testament for Christians in the face of Nazi pressure. Reacting to the sterility of a *Religionsgeschichte* approach, he was a part of the Biblical Theology Movement and sought to set forth the theological material of the Old Testament in roughly historical order as a summary of Israelite faith. Attempting to set forth the “saving acts of God,” his equivocal use of the category “history” failed to bridge his modernist assumptions that reality is unbreachably divided into the phenomenal and the noumenal. Though a number of his assumptions about wisdom literature have since been discredited, von Rad strove to approach Old Testament wisdom on its own terms, with poetic sensitivity, respect, and deep appreciation.

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## Introduction

**A**s we approach the fiftieth anniversary of his death, it is a timely moment to reflect on the contribution of Gerhard von Rad (1901–1971), one of the twentieth century’s most outstanding Old Testament scholars and theologians in the West. His is

a story of courage, integrity, and Christian commitment in the face of demonic political and intellectual challenges as serious and threatening as any ever faced by a theologian .... [He] provided a cogent and winsome example of a theologian and scholar who excelled in teaching and preaching the words of the living God.<sup>1</sup>

Von Rad has much to teach us: “Biblical exegesis understood as concentrated listening to the texts that reveal the mystery of God acting in history was his life-long passion,” and he continues to receive scholarly and popular attention today, despite basing much of his work on questionable higher-critical assumptions that have since been seriously undermined.<sup>2</sup>

Gerhard von Rad was raised in a Protestant home in Germany and became a minister in the Lutheran *Landeskirche* in Bavaria in 1925. He completed his dissertation, *The People of God in Deuteronomy*, at Erlangen under Otto Procksch. The book of Deuteronomy, and especially the creedal formulations found in it, became a lifelong focus for von Rad, and he returned to examine it again and again.<sup>3</sup> He went on to study Semitics with Albrecht Alt at Leipzig and was invited to teach there in 1930. Von Rad definitively established his academic reputation with the publication in 1938 of *The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch*. He was known principally for his work as an insightful form-critic, heir of the tradition of Hermann Gunkel.

Von Rad took a professorate at the University of Jena in 1934 just as the university started to become a stronghold of National Socialism. Under Nazi influence, the teaching of Hebrew was made optional for theological students, Old Testament studies were undermined and perverted in a variety of ways, and von Rad fought a lonely battle for the importance of the Old Testament for Christians. That of the forty-five dissertations submitted to the Faculty of Theology during his teaching there, not one was directed by von Rad shows his academic isolation. Confessing church leaders sent candidates to work with von Rad at Jena so that he would have at least two or three students in his classes.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James A. Brashler, “Editorial,” *Interpretation* 62.3 (July 2008): 227, 229.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 227. James Brashler’s article introduces an entire journal volume dedicated to von Rad. Cf. Bernard M. Levinson and Eckart Otto, eds., *Recht und Ethik im Alten Testament: Beiträge des Symposiums “Das Alte Testament und die Kultur der Moderne” anlässlich des 100. Geburtstags Gerhard von Rads (1901–1971) Heidelberg, 18.–21. Oktober 2001* (Münster: LIT, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Gerhard von Rad* (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard M. Levinson, “Reading the Bible in Nazi Germany: Gerhard von Rad’s Attempt to Reclaim the Old Testament for the Church,” *Interpretation* 62.3 (July 2008): 238–54. Von Rad consciously addressed a good portion of his work to counter the influence of Nazism and was unafraid either in church or academy to address directly the importance of the Hebrew Bible for his country. He even produced a book entitled *Das Alte Testament—Gottes Wort für die Deutschen!* He seems to have been in very strong agreement with the Confessing Church’s stance. Deeply concerned about the devolving state of the church in Germany, he lamented

At the tail end of the war, von Rad was conscripted and spent time in an Allied prisoner of war camp before returning to academia. In 1949, he settled into tenure at the University of Heidelberg, where he taught and wrote until 1967. A few of his more notable works are his *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (1951), *Genesis* (1956), *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols., 1957–1960), and *Deuteronomy* (1964). His *Wisdom in Israel* (1970), one of his final major works, will be the focus of this paper.

## I. *The Biblical Theology Movement and History*

Von Rad's academic career spanned the years of the Biblical Theology Movement and was connected with it. Early-twentieth-century Old Testament scholarship was noted not only for a mounting skepticism regarding the historicity of the biblical materials but also for an increasing atomism. More and more layers were being discovered in the Pentateuchal materials, and more and more glosses were posited in prophetic texts. Commenting on the period following the 1878 publication of Wellhausen's *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, Gerhard Hasel remarks,

For over four decades OT theology was eclipsed by *Religionsgeschichte* [history of religions]. The full-fledged historicism of the "history-of-religions" approach had led to the final destruction of the unity of the OT, which was reduced to a collection of materials from detached periods and consisted simply of Israelite reflections of as many different pagan religions. This approach had a particularly destructive influence both on OT theology and on the understanding of the OT in every other aspect.<sup>5</sup>

However, in the 1930s there was a growing sense of the sterility of such an approach. The Biblical Theology Movement sought to preserve what many saw as the "assured results" of a historical-critical approach and yet to leave room for an effective speaking of God to his people through the biblical text.<sup>6</sup> Many hoped that one could accept a tradition-critical approach to the

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that "the connection between the communities [i.e., churches] and Old Testament scholarship has been almost completely broken for more than a generation." Von Rad as quoted in Henning G. Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 27. He pressed the relevance of the Hebrew Bible for the German church and insisted on retaining "the reference to Jesus Christ which the Christian claim to the Old Testament must make" (*ibid.*).

<sup>5</sup> Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 30.

<sup>6</sup> "In the decades following World War I several factors, aside from the changing *Zeitgeist*, brought about a revival of OT (and NT) theology. ... (1) a general loss of faith in evolutionary naturalism; (2) a reaction against the conviction that historical truth can be attained by pure scientific 'objectivity' or that such objectivity is indeed attainable; and (3) the trend of a return

Bible and yet remain theologically orthodox.<sup>7</sup> In Old Testament studies, the history-of-religions approach dominated until the 1933 publication of Walther Eichrodt's *Theology of the Old Testament*. The Biblical Theology Movement, which flourished well into the sixties, found inspiration in this work, which identified the centrality of the covenant concept and sought to systematically set forth a cross-section of the theological concepts of the Old Testament.

James Crenshaw, the doyen of von Rad scholars, described von Rad's point of view at one point as "skepticism bathed in evangelical fervor."<sup>8</sup> Von Rad embraced a critical skepticism as regards the historicity of many biblical traditions.<sup>9</sup> He sought to interpret the Old Testament in keeping with the history-of-religions approach, and yet he sought to carve out a significant place for the saving acts of God as confessed by Israel. His *Old Testament Theology*, therefore, was a presentation in roughly historical order of the theological material of the Old Testament as a summary of Israelite faith.

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to the idea of revelation in dialectical (neo-orthodox) theology. The historicism of liberalism was found to be totally inadequate and a new approach needed to be developed." Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> The connections between the Biblical Theology Movement and neo-orthodoxy are well known. Cf. David G. Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies: A Comparative Evaluation of the Contributions of Eichrodt and von Rad to our Understanding of the Nature of Old Testament Theology*, SBT 2/30 (London: SCM, 1994), 2. Karl Barth's theology was a factor behind this movement and a strong influence on von Rad. We can say that various of von Rad's weaknesses and strengths correspond to similar ones in Barth, but this is outside the purview of this paper. Walter Brueggemann notes, "The legacy of Barth may be said to have dominated the field of biblical theology until about 1970. In the center of that period is the magisterial work of Walther Eichrodt who took covenant as his mode of normativeness, and the even more influential work of Gerhard von Rad, whose definitive essay of 1938 surely echoes the credo-orientation of Barmen. While the normativeness and constancy of Barth's perspective can take different forms, both Eichrodt and von Rad sought to provide a place of normativeness in which to stand in the face of the huge barbarisms of the twentieth century, for it was clear that the domestications of historical criticism provided no standing ground at all." Walter Brueggemann, "The Role of Old Testament Theology in Old Testament Interpretation," in Walter Brueggemann, *The Role of Old Testament Theology in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. K. C. Hanson (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 4.

<sup>8</sup> James L. Crenshaw, "Von Rad, Gerhard," in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 527. He was referring in particular to von Rad's 1940 book on Moses, *Mose*.

<sup>9</sup> Von Rad viewed "Moses, Abraham, Joseph, David, and Jeremiah" as "for the most part fictional descriptions" which "enabled Israelites to experience the agony and ecstasy of the centuries." Crenshaw, "Von Rad," 529. "Although he accepted history as the essential category of Old Testament revelation, von Rad refused to equate history and faith. His students (Rolf Rendtorff and Wolfhart Pannenberg) may have launched an attempt to establish faith historically, but von Rad never went that route. On the contrary, he moved much closer to a skeptical stance in regard to what scholars could actually know about historical events." Crenshaw, *Von Rad*, 167-68.

Von Rad believed that the historical credo, crystallized in texts such as Deuteronomy 26:5b–9, served as an outline for the entire Hexateuch.<sup>10</sup>

Many scholars have critiqued von Rad for his equivocation over the meaning of the term “history.” On the one hand, he refuses to consider the history as presented in the Old Testament as historical in the modern historiographic sense.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, he insisted, “The Old Testament is a history book.”<sup>12</sup> Von Rad constantly refers to the history of redemption and the history of God’s saving acts in history. What is the relationship between these two?<sup>13</sup>

Von Rad presents the theology of Israel along the lines of the history of Israel, but this is not the history of Israel as contemporary critical scholarship knows it. It is rather the history of God’s saving acts as confessed by Israel itself. He writes a history of Israel’s faith assertions.<sup>14</sup> In setting up this bifurcated sense of the history of Israel, von Rad was very much an heir of Kant. A typical modernist, he accepted Kant’s division of reality into the phenomenal (the arena for “objective” historiography) and the noumenal (the history of Israel’s faith). There is in von Rad’s work a tension between these two understandings of reality. He seems to shift back and forth between the two as it suits his purpose at times. He never fully gets off the horns of the fact/meaning, history/theology, and *Geschichte/Historie* dilemmas. Setting aside the question of what really happened to Israel, we extract a history of Israelite religious traditions of faith and base our own faith there.<sup>15</sup> For von Rad our faith is based on the mighty acts of God in which Israel believed.<sup>16</sup> For orthodox Christian scholars, of course, it is a matter of great

<sup>10</sup> Crenshaw, “Von Rad,” 528.

<sup>11</sup> “This separation of the ‘objective history’ of scientific research and salvation history is fundamental to von Rad’s *Theology* and it has far reaching repercussions.” Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology*, 63.

<sup>13</sup> “Systematic theologians have bristled at his imprecise categories, especially his use of history in both senses, factual and mythic.” Crenshaw, “Von Rad,” 529.

<sup>14</sup> Crenshaw, *Von Rad*, 170.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology after the Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 42–43. This view enabled the extraction of a theological maximum from a historical minimum.

<sup>16</sup> Josef Greig deftly examines von Rad on history in Josef A. Greig, “Some Formative Aspects in the Development of Gerhard von Rad’s Idea of History,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 16.1 (Spring 1978): 313–31. Von Rad has pushed the assumptions of source, form, and tradition criticism as far as they will go, but under the influences of rationalism, pietism, and romanticism he assumes that the phenomenon of the faith cannot be explained in a rational or logical way. “Von Rad who, like his nineteenth century predecessors, thinks that theology should take the form of *Heilsgeschichte*, rejects the idea that the *Heilsgeschichte* should be subjected to historical criticism. Rather, he declares that Israel’s faith is unrelated to the critical picture. This negative attitude is surely at least partially dependent upon his historical

concern whether the acts of salvation history took place in space-time history or not.<sup>17</sup> In short, von Rad wrote a phenomenology of Israelite religious beliefs, not an Old Testament theology in the traditional sense. So it comes as no surprise to us that virtually upon its release, von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* came under the sharpest criticism, including for its equivocal use of the category "history." While seeking to be theologically relevant, he sidesteps the question of truth.

Walter Brueggemann refers to the time when such tensions (or paradoxes) led to the discrediting of the broader theological movement:

It is now common to cite 1970 as the break point of what came to be called pejoratively the "Biblical Theology Movement," that interpretative enterprise propelled by Barth and especially voiced by von Rad and Wright. The "ending" of that monopolistic interpretive effort was occasioned by many factors. It is conventional to cite the work of Brevard Childs and James Barr as the decisive voices of the ending.<sup>18</sup>

## II. *Wisdom and History*

Now let us focus more narrowly: How much does von Rad's approach to wisdom literature suffer from this weakness of a bifurcated view of history? On the one hand, von Rad admits that the wisdom literature does not lend itself to historical categorization. In his *Old Testament Theology*, he places it in a separate heading, "Israel before Yahweh," since it does not fit nicely

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skepticism, a trait born largely out of his acceptance of the Alt-Noth school of historical research, and nourished by his own historical criticism utilizing the same methods of research" (*ibid.*, 319).

<sup>17</sup> Walter Kaiser notes, "Thus the history of Israel was to be bifurcated from this time forward, consisting of an actual history and a 'kerygmatic' or confessional history (a word illustrating von Rad's dependence on dialectical theology)." Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 34. "He believed the Old Testament laid the foundation for the New Testament by providing a religious language—that of confessional saving deeds." Crenshaw, "Von Rad," 529. "Revelation resides within these creedal expressions, not within the ongoing history of the nation." Perdue, *Reconstructing*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Brueggemann, "The Role of Old Testament Theology," 5. James Barr critiques von Rad: "If God really acted in history, and if history is to be so very central, then the history involved must not be the history as the documents confess it but the history as it really happened; 'really' here means, 'as the modern historian states it' .... Thus it is a real difficulty in many views centred in a revelational history that, in spite of a primary assertion of God's actions in history, they come to have their actual centre in a historical emphasis, or a historical way of thinking, or a historical form of self-understanding or perception of life, rather than in an actual history. This embarrassment seems to rise from the antinomy ..., namely that between history as the milieu of God's confessed action and history subject to human critical examination." James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 67, as quoted in Robert D. Bell, "An Examination of the Presuppositions and Methodology of Gerhard von Rad in His *Old Testament Theology*" (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 1970), 212–13.

into his historical reconstruction. On the other hand, *Wisdom in Israel* is dependent on a specific historical reconstruction that forms the background to his entire understanding of wisdom.

For von Rad, wisdom as we know it developed during the period of the monarchy. This development can be spoken of as a Solomonic enlightenment, a “secularization ... [a] discovering of man ... a humanization ... the beginning of a rational search for knowledge ... a strong, intellectual movement [which] must have been preceded by an inner decline, the disintegration of an understanding of reality which we can describe in a felicitous expression of M. Buber’s, as ‘pan-sacralism.’”<sup>19</sup> Before the development of wisdom there was “a very old-fashioned faith which believed that every event was encompassed by rites and sacral ordinances, and for this reason, we can call it a pan-sacral faith.”<sup>20</sup> Leo Perdue notes:

Von Rad traced the development of wisdom through two stages. He characterized the first stage largely as “wisdom deriving from experience.” This early wisdom represented “practical knowledge of the laws of life and of the world, based upon experience.” The goal of the wise person was to master life by the adherence to maxims that were an “art for living,” or a “technique for life.” .... Von Rad argues that the second stage is theological wisdom, which develops during the post exilic period. Now wisdom is God’s call to people, the mediator of revelation, the teacher of nations, and a divine principle permeating the world since creation. Wisdom was a divine gift to humans and revealed to them the will and nature of God.<sup>21</sup>

### Von Rad argued that

wisdom’s developing theological capacity, moving from human experience to cosmology and from anthropology to theology, paralleled the development of creation theology in Israel, which, in his judgment, did not gain full acceptance and mature formulation until the time of the exile in the sixth century B.C.E.<sup>22</sup>

Von Rad infers “that the concept that all wisdom comes from God is to be attributed to specific, theological considerations which came to the fore only at a fairly late stage.”<sup>23</sup> Crenshaw summarizes: “In short, von Rad interprets

<sup>19</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 58.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>21</sup> Perdue, *Reconstructing*, 24. Von Rad notes, “If we now turn to the older sentence wisdom as it is collected especially in Prov. 10–29, then there appears an enormous gulf between this and what we have just said, for there is absolutely no trace here of such a serious, theological motivation.” Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 57. Such a view, as we will see below, is highly reductionistic.

<sup>22</sup> Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 42.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

wisdom literature against the evolutionary yardstick of pansacrality, modified secularism and religious devotion.”<sup>24</sup>

### III. *Weaknesses in von Rad's Approach to Wisdom Literature*

All three of these historical typifications have been questioned: The concept of pansacrality has been questioned, the hypothesis of a Solomonic enlightenment has been rejected by Old Testament scholarship, and the idea that the theological orientation of wisdom came mostly later has been seriously questioned. Crenshaw asserts, “A thorough examination of the evidence ... has convinced me that no such enlightenment existed. Instead sacral and secular strains of thought coexisted throughout Israel’s history.”<sup>25</sup> On these points, von Rad has been hampered by his *Religionsgeschichte* assumptions.

Other serious weaknesses in von Rad’s *Wisdom in Israel* include an overdependence on nonwisdom literature and postbiblical wisdom literature. The section on “Polemics against Idols” makes extensive use of Deuteronomy and Isaiah, as well as the postbiblical “Letter of Jeremiah,” the additions to Daniel, and the Wisdom of Solomon. But it makes hardly any use of canonical wisdom literature itself.<sup>26</sup> This is telling because the protest against idols is hardly typical of biblical wisdom literature.

Another of von Rad’s assertions that has been widely questioned is that apocalyptic is an outgrowth of wisdom literature and is not connected organically with prophetic literature.<sup>27</sup> His discussion here is mainly based upon the postbiblical Jewish wisdom tradition and on a dichotomy between an apocalyptic belief in “determinism” and the prophetic belief in the “freedom and sovereignty of Yahweh.” At least within the biblical materials, this dichotomy seems forced and artificial.

Other areas where von Rad can be critiqued in his approach to wisdom are his assumption of a court-oriented, school-based origin of many proverbs, an overemphasis on the cult and wisdom, and an underemphasis on ethics and wisdom.<sup>28</sup> Also, his tripartite approach to Hebrew poetry does not

<sup>24</sup> James L. Crenshaw, “Wisdom in Israel (Gerhard von Rad): A Review,” in *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 306.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> One additional concern with his approach is that he makes almost no distinction between canonical and postcanonical wisdom literature. Von Rad is quite comfortable including Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom of Solomon (and even the late Letter to Aristeas) in his treatment.

<sup>27</sup> Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies*, 42. “In fact, there seems little reason for following von Rad’s claim that apocalyptic developed solely out of wisdom material and has no vital connections with prophecy.” Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 15–23. “His basic assumption that the texts were composed

advance much beyond that of Robert Lowth's late-eighteenth-century analysis.<sup>29</sup> But perhaps to complain at this point is to demand of him the advances in poetics that have only happened during the last forty years.<sup>30</sup> In recent decades, currents in Old Testament scholarship have been moving away from von Rad in many ways.

The shift away from form and tradition history, particularly outside Germany, has been so substantial that some interpreters envision a shift in paradigm from historical criticism to literary analysis, from diachronic to synchronic studies. Similarly, sociological theory, often using ethno-anthropological models, has emerged as another mode of reading ancient texts. This change has also witnessed the emergence of secular approaches, championed by faculty in religious studies, and increasing aversion to anything theological.<sup>31</sup>

The day of Gerhard von Rad's dominance, including his work in the field of wisdom literature, has passed.<sup>32</sup>

#### **IV. Strengths in von Rad's Approach to Wisdom Literature**

Despite these weaknesses, evangelical interpreters can find much of value in von Rad's approach to wisdom literature. The most outstanding strength that von Rad brings to his work of interpreting wisdom literature, in my view, is his profound respect for the ancient Israelite perspective and a correspondingly profound suspicion of imposing modern categories.

Von Rad is deeply interested in understanding and communicating to his readers a very different view of the world from what twentieth-century Europeans were accustomed to. "We must not transfer uncritically our accustomed ways of thinking to Israel. We must, rather, face the exacting demand of thinking ourselves into ideas, into a 'view of life,' which are unfamiliar to us."<sup>33</sup> He wants us to respect the ancient worldview and not subject its views to a narrow imposing of our own categories.

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in a school associated with the royal court fails to take into account the overwhelming evidence for the popular origin of Proverbs in small villages. . . . His preoccupation with the cult resulted in an overlooking of ethics." Crenshaw, "Von Rad," 530.

<sup>29</sup> Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 24–34.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques*, JSOTSup 26 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Crenshaw, "Von Rad," 530.

<sup>32</sup> See also Rudolf Smend, "Gerhard von Rad," in Rudolf Smend, *From Astruc to Zimmerli: Old Testament Scholarship in Three Centuries*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 71.

The modern exegete is always tempted to read into the old texts the tensions with which he is all too familiar between faith and thought, between reason and revelation. Accordingly, there has been a tendency to infer too much from the preponderance of worldly sentences over religious ones. The conclusion has, for example, been drawn that this old proverbial wisdom was still scarcely touched by Yahwism. ... Against this, it can be categorically stated that for Israel there was only one world of experience, and that this was perceived by means of a perceptive apparatus in which rational perceptions and religious perceptions were not differentiated. ... The reality surrounding Israel was much more comprehensive than we would imagine, either in political or socio-ethical or any other kind of terms. ... Just as real for them was the burden of guilt, the involvement in evil and in disobedience and the consequences of this; and as real as anything could be was Yahweh's word which thrust deep into Israel's life as both a destructive and a constructive force. All this lay on one and the same level of man's potential experience. One can, therefore, only warn against trying to see the specific factor in wisdom simply as the manifestation of a rationality which was independent of faith.<sup>34</sup>

Von Rad resolutely insisted that we not impose on wisdom literature our modern categories.<sup>35</sup> You can begin to feel his discontent with the modernistic *Weltanschauung* as he states,

It is demanded of us, however, that we abandon the rigidity of the modern, popular scientific understanding of reality and try to enter into that ancient biblical idea of reality which was aware that the world in which man lived was so much more favourably disposed towards him.<sup>36</sup>

Von Rad resisted, for example, any facile evolutionary imposition that the earlier wisdom traditions were thoroughly secular in orientation and that it was only later in wisdom literature when a Yahwistic point of view came to the fore.<sup>37</sup> He is critical of the hubris of a modernistic point of view:

Anyone who is of the opinion, then, that man's desire for knowledge can be validly expressed in the last resort only in the language of the so-called exact sciences, can, in view of their poetic form, rate Israel's perceptions, with which we are here concerned, only as the outcome of a "pre-scientific," "pre-critical" and still very naïve

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 61–62.

<sup>35</sup> It is ironic that he effectively did just this in his treatment of the historical materials of the Bible. One can only speculate whether he would have included this treatment in the "Retractions" he considered publishing at the end of his life. Cf. Manfred Oeming, "Gerhard von Rad as a Theologian of the Church," *Interpretation* 62.3 (July 2008): 236.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>37</sup> "Gerhard von Rad also rightly chastised those like William McKane who would apply an evolutionary pattern to wisdom by suggesting that earlier wisdom was at first fundamentally secular and then it was 'baptized' and theologized into the Yahwistic religion." Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 174.

endeavour. There can be no question, however, that even in this poetic form a very discriminating power of intellectual distinction is at work.<sup>38</sup>

Von Rad “sought to expose the poverty of modern thought” and the weakness of some of its categories.<sup>39</sup>

### **V. Epistemological Openness**

In contrast, von Rad deeply explored and was open to the epistemological perspective of the biblical authors. He had a great appreciation for it, even though it contradicted the modernistic, critical, secular German perspective of his background.<sup>40</sup> The following quote demonstrates not only a high regard for Israelite intellectual achievement but suggests a longing.

There is no knowledge which does not, before long, throw the one who seeks the knowledge back upon the question of his self-knowledge and his self-understanding. Even Israel did not give herself uncritically to her drive for knowledge, but went on to ask the question about the possibility of and the authority for knowledge. She makes intellect itself the object of her knowledge. The thesis that all human knowledge comes back to the question about commitment to God is a statement of penetrating perspicacity. In the most concise phraseology it encompasses a wide range of intellectual content and can itself be understood only as the result of a long process of thought. It contains in a nutshell the whole Israelite theory of knowledge. ... One becomes competent and expert as far as the orders in life are concerned only if one begins from knowledge about God. To this extent, Israel attributes to the fear of God, to belief in God, a highly important function in respect of human knowledge. She was, in all seriousness, of the opinion that effective knowledge about God is the only thing that puts a man into a right relationship with the objects of his perception, that it enables him to ask questions more pertinently, to take stock of relationships more effectively and generally to have a better awareness of circumstances. ... Faith does not—as it is popularly believed today—hinder knowledge; on the contrary, it is what liberates knowledge, enables it really to come to the point and indicates to it its proper place in the sphere of varied, human activity. In Israel, the intellect never freed itself from or became independent of the foundation of its whole existence, that is its commitment to Yahweh.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 25.

<sup>39</sup> Pannenberg, as quoted in Crenshaw, *Von Rad*, 38.

<sup>40</sup> “Only the man who has allowed his senses to be dulled in his dealing with the materials or who does not know the real purpose of this poetic wisdom can be deceived as to the magnitude of the intellectual achievement of our wisdom teachers.” Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 50. In this same paragraph, von Rad refers to the character of knowledge as a game and references Hans-Georg Gadamer. The interactions between von Rad and his contemporary Gadamer would be a fascinating study but beyond my present scope.

<sup>41</sup> Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 67–68.

Not only is von Rad a deft interpreter of Israelite epistemology, but certain passages of his work suggest that he wishes he could adopt this integrated outlook himself. He can say wistfully, “Israel’s understanding of the world was more comprehensive ... [and] included many more realities than that of modern man.”<sup>42</sup> Von Rad is impatient with modernist thinkers who are dismissive of precritical perspectives and their supposed naïveté and narrowness. Perhaps we can see von Rad as moving toward a postmodern point of view in such statements.

Many passages seem to express von Rad’s neo-orthodox Christian point of view:

The fear of God not only enabled a man to acquire knowledge, but also had a predominantly critical function in that it kept awake in the person acquiring the knowledge the awareness that his intellect was directed toward a world in which mystery predominated. This fear of God has trained him to openness, to readiness for an encounter even with the inscrutable and the imponderable.<sup>43</sup>

Von Rad admires the integration of thought and experience under God that the ancient sages enjoyed: “Did not Israel, in all her attempts to perceive the course of human experience, always come back to Yahweh who comprehended all things in his power?”<sup>44</sup> He said of passages such as Proverbs 16:7–12, where “experiences of the world” alternate with “experiences of Yahweh,” “It would be madness to presuppose some kind of separation as if in the one case the man of objective perception were speaking and in the other the believer in Yahweh.”<sup>45</sup> He found a beautifully circular and integrated epistemology in Israel:

The statement that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom could even be turned round to the effect that knowledge and experience lead to the fear of God. My son, if you accept my words and keep by you what I command you ... then you will understand the fear of Yahweh and find the knowledge of God (Prov. 2:1, 5). For Israel, there was no insight which did not imply trust, faith, but there was also no faith which did not rest on insights.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 72. “We hold fast to the fact that in the case of the wise men’s search for knowledge, even when they expressed their results in a completely secular form, there was never any question of what we call absolute knowledge functioning independently of their faith in Yahweh. This is inconceivable for the very reason that the teachers were completely unaware of any reality not controlled by Yahweh.” Ibid., 64. I imply no connection, but would not be surprised to read such a statement in a thinker like Abraham Kuyper.

<sup>45</sup> Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 174.

<sup>46</sup> Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 194.

Von Rad waxes lyrical at times in describing the integration of faith and life that the Hebrew sages enjoyed. Combined with his sensitivity to how his tradition-historical presuppositions work clumsily with this literature, I believe he is struggling in this book on the wisdom of Israel to break free from some of the limitations and tensions he lived with for most of his intellectual career.<sup>47</sup> I think that von Rad is longing for the day when fact and meaning will not be dichotomized. He is enamored of the integrated worldview of the Israelites and seems to want to adopt it. Ah, for the day when there would be “no hard divorce between the secular and sacred, faith and knowledge, learning and believing, faith and culture”!<sup>48</sup> He wants to transcend the limitations of his own inherited worldview.

## VI. *Poetic Sensibilities*

Von Rad demonstrated remarkable poetic sensibilities both as an interpreter of the biblical writings and as a writer himself. His interpretative work helped paved the way for literary approaches that have become so dominant in Old Testament studies since his death.

Von Rad taught us to read the Old Testament aesthetically. Entering a discipline that has lacked genuine literary analysis, for the most part, he did much in paving the way for an appreciation of the Old Testament as literature.<sup>49</sup>

He had a “propensity for poetics. His appreciation for aesthetics gave him a sense of the rich ambiguity of the biblical text. That background inherent to the sacred text yielded to his patient probe, opening up insights for those willing to hear.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Von Rad wants to go beyond the interpretative limitations of his previous work. He is more in touch with the literary context of passages than form criticism tended to be, more willing to sit at the feet of the text and allow it to lead us toward the interpretative categories we should use to unfold its riches. He can be impatient with the form-critical approach: “Till now, too much prominence has been given in research to the various forms of the sentences. An examination of the didactic poems which spread over a wider extent is still lacking.” Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 38. He even seeks to overcome the atomism that tended to dog form-critical efforts. “Here ... we come ... to the most difficult problem, namely the question of the general religious and ideological sphere, of the context from which any given sentence comes and on the basis of which it is to be understood.” *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>48</sup> This is Kaiser’s expression in reflecting on wisdom literature. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 174.

<sup>49</sup> Crenshaw, *Von Rad*, 169.

<sup>50</sup> Crenshaw, “Von Rad,” 531.

His own engaging and persuasive ability to express himself contributed much to make him a popular preacher in Germany and a popular author throughout the world.

His sensitive reading of the Old Testament enabled many other to span the vast chasm separating them from the ancient text. The sheer beauty of his prose captivated minds and the passion with which he explored such topics as knowledge and its limits, thrust and attack, and divine abandonment came through with enormous force.<sup>51</sup>

For example, in speaking of the “Doctrine of the Self-Revelation of Creation,” he says,

If there was, somewhere in Israel, a surrender, verging on the mystical, of man to the glory of existence, then it is to be found in these texts which can speak of such a sublime bond of love between man and the divine mystery of creation. Here man throws himself with delight on a meaning which rushes towards him; he uncovers a mystery which was already on its way to him in order to give itself to him.<sup>52</sup>

He can say, “[The composing of proverbs] involved also the production of a pattern of humane behaviour. In the fixing of each gnomic saying there also occurred a humanizing of man.”<sup>53</sup> Alternatively, in a discussion on literary forms and with reference to 2 Kings 14: 9, he exclaims, “What a period, when kings, in diplomatic communications, wielded the intellectual weapon of the fable!”<sup>54</sup>

## Summary

Von Rad can be considered both a product of and a revolutionary against what Perdue calls

once traditional paradigms of biblical studies that produced theologies that largely reflected the philosophies and cultural products spawned by the Enlightenment, idealism, empiricism, and then positivism and the resulting historical method, then and now dominant, [which] have come under serious assault.<sup>55</sup>

A careful student of the biblical text, von Rad appreciated the powerful literary forms encountered in Scripture and the abiding relevance of the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 530.

<sup>52</sup> Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 169.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 43. How poignant a statement when we consider it against the background of a twentieth-century Germany that had largely turned its back on such humanizing Hebrew influences.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>55</sup> Perdue, *Reconstructing*, 3.

messages encapsulated there for the Christian church today.<sup>56</sup> “Refusing to choose between the two ways of interpreting reality, the ancient and the modern, von Rad sought to bring about a dialogue between modern readers and the biblical text, which cast a question mark over our own understanding at any point in time.”<sup>57</sup> As he attempted to engage faithfully with wisdom literature, von Rad struggled manfully against the limitations of the modernistic assumptions of his own time.

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<sup>56</sup> He was a churchman concerned to let the Bible speak powerfully today. “Certainly Gerhard von Rad provided a cogent and winsome example of a theologian and scholar who excelled in teaching and preaching the words of the living God.” Brashler, “Editorial,” 229.

<sup>57</sup> Crenshaw, *Von Rad*, 38.