

Book Reviews

INFLUENTIAL OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGIES

Recently, on Facebook, an editor asked some biblical scholars to share what books got us interested in biblical studies. As I look back, what really got me excited were books that invited me into knowing God more through the Old Testament in light of the bigger story of Scripture. In this reflection, I will share about three such books. None of these books would qualify as “Old Testament theologies,” yet I reckon that they have had a far greater theological impact upon me than anything I have read in the field of Old Testament theology.

Early in my seminary experience, a professor required us to read T. Desmond Alexander’s *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002). As I recall, it was a chore to read the first ninety-four pages! As I finished wading through the slough of critical approaches, the final sentence brought a spark to my glazed-over eyes: “While the ‘how’ question [of the Pentateuch’s composition] is never likely to be answered with complete certainty, the ‘why’ question directs us to the one who is the source of all true knowledge” (94). Boom. A paradigm shift began. The question of “why” was a direction of inquiry I could be excited about; it was an approach that might help the church grasp what God wanted to say through Old Testament books. So, even if uncertainty regarding the “how” might persist, a focus upon “why” a book exists and “why” it is arranged as it is helped release me from the paralyzing effect of many critical studies.

In the final two-thirds of *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, Alexander offers his perspective on the “why” of the Pentateuch by examining the most prominent themes within each book as part of the Pentateuch’s storyline. For example, in his four chapters on Genesis, he traces “Royal Lineage,”

“Blessing of the Nations,” “Paradise Lost,” and “By Faith Abraham.” He develops these themes in light of their literary context within the book, and at the end of every chapter offers a glimpse into how a given motif connects with the New Testament. Alexander’s chapters brilliantly draw one into a Pentateuch that is part of a much larger story revolving around the offspring of Eve and Abraham. The best books on Old Testament theology equip us to read the Scriptures more profitably. Alexander’s *From Paradise to the Promised Land* is exemplary in this regard.

Although I resonated with Alexander’s work in my early seminary days, I still was not sure how to read the Old Testament as bearing witness to Christ. Most of my influencers in Old Testament studies saw it as their mission to recover the value of understanding a passage within its original, historical context. I recall one of my professors saying, “If you are preaching Jonah, just preach the text in front of you! Don’t jump to the New Testament.” Although hyperbolic, the result of such instruction was a growing suspicion about the validity of making any connections between the Old and New Testaments. That was until I had Willem A. VanGemenen as a professor and we read his *Interpreting the Prophetic Word: An Introduction to the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). Providentially, that summer of 2005 became a turning point where I began to develop a vision for reading the prophets, indeed all of the Old Testament, as bearing witness to Christ.

The first section of VanGemenen’s book is not an expected array of introductory materials. It was anything but boring; it was more like an explosion of interpretive vision. As he situates prophecy within the broader development of Old Testament prophets, he provided powerful categories. For instance, *Realpolitik* and *vox populi* became a part of daily conversation among fellow students, not merely due to the novelty of expression but because of the potency of these categories for capturing how the prophets spoke against manipulative power structures and the values of their times. Most significantly, my heart burned as VanGemenen offered a vision for intertwining historical-cultural, literary, canonical, and redemptive-historical considerations in the reading of the prophets. I could value what God was saying through Hosea to eighth-century Israel, yet also legitimately consider how God preserved the book of Hosea for future generations along redemptive history. Indeed, even though the church is in an AD era (*Anno Domini*, the year of the Lord), the church like Israel is still living BC, before the coming of Christ. Although prophecy might find a level of fulfillment in Christ’s first coming, we can see layers of fulfillment before Christ in the exilic and post-exilic eras and after Christ during the age of the church

and ultimately in the new heavens and the new earth. The remainder of *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* is icing on the cake, as VanGemenen offers a survey of each book in light of its major themes. In my opinion, no other book is comparable in its ability to offer such a robust vision for reading the prophets. Here was a vision of interpretation that allowed Old Testament texts to have their say from the beginning to the final act of the progress of redemption.

The third book that has had a profound impact on my engagement with the Old Testament's theology is Christopher J. H. Wright's *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006). While a PhD student, I was asked to teach an Old Testament Theology class for seminary students at an extension site on the south side of Chicago. As I designed the class, I had to select a textbook. I did not think Gerhard von Rad, Walther Eichrodt, Elmer Martens, Paul House, or even Bruce Waltke would work in the context where I would be teaching. I needed something that did not divorce biblical theology from contemporary reflection. I decided to give *The Mission of God* a chance. When I had a student stand up in class during a discussion of the book and start preaching about God's desire for the church to be a blessing in light of God's call for Israel to be a blessing, I knew I had selected the right book.

The first sixty pages of *The Mission of God* make a case for reading the Old Testament and the entire Bible through the lens of God's mission. Wright uses the triangle of God, people, and place to capture God's mission. He begins with the God of mission, where he emphasizes God's desire to make himself known as greater than other rivals via displays of grace and judgment within Israel's history and in Jesus Christ. Next, Wright considers the mission of the people of God. Wright beautifully intertwines the spiritual (evangelism) and the social dimensions (justice) of the holistic mission of God's people in light of God's choice of Abraham, the exodus event, and the ethics of Israel. In the final section of the book, Wright argues that the "arena" of God's mission through his people spans across all nations, all segments of society (nations, states, cities, etc.), and realms of creation (including the environment). Since Wright is an Old Testament scholar, the vast majority of the book leans heavily upon the Old Testament, yet he also connects this with the mission of God as it continues in the New Testament. *The Mission of God* is remarkable in its ability to help us the church find its place in God's mission as presented in Scripture.

Although there are many good works in the area of Old Testament theology, God in his providence used these three books to draw me into better knowing him through the Pentateuch and prophets and to enable me to live

more faithfully in light of God's mission. I will close with a quote from Willem VanGemenen that captures much of what I appreciate about the works noted above: "I am ... concerned that the *whole of Scripture* be heard and that the individual parts be related to each other. Further, I am concerned that the people of God be rooted in the *progress of redemption*—a redemption that involves all God's people from creation to the new creation—and that they, too, involve themselves in advancing redemption to the ends of the earth" (VanGemenen, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 355).

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Richard P. Belcher Jr. *Finding Favour in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*. NSBT 46. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018.

Richard Belcher Jr. is Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina. Belcher engages in scholarly discussions while he demonstrates the Christocentric nature of wisdom literature, providing pastoral and practical insight and implications. The book has a brief "Series Preface" by D. A. Carson (xi-xii) and an "Author's Preface" (xiii-xiv). It starts with a journey and a question about "the problem of wisdom literature in Old Testament theology" in chapter 1 and is followed by ten chapters. The author ends the book with a bibliography, which is a valuable resource for the study of wisdom literature, and an index of authors and an index of Scripture (213–42).

The author explores "The Message of Proverbs 1–9," "The Hermeneutics of Proverbs," and "The Theology of Proverbs" in chapters 2 to 4 (17–73). Evaluating diverse scholarly opinions of the authorship of Proverbs, Belcher takes a conservative approach, stating that "Solomon had a major role in either writing or collecting most of the proverbial sayings in Proverbs 1–29" (18). Also, he pays special attention to "the personification of wisdom," which he identifies as "Lady Wisdom's Teaching," especially in Proverbs 1:20–33; 8; and 9 (29–37). In particular, he makes an insightful contrast between Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly in his analysis of Proverbs 9: "Lady Wisdom is also personified in Proverbs 9 as a banquet hostess. The significance of Proverbs 9 is that Lady Wisdom is contrasted with Lady Folly in order to highlight the choice between them" (34).

The author's analysis of the "Christological implication of Lady Wisdom" deserves close attention (37–38). He explores various scholarly opinions