Ten Themes of Old Testament Theology

Lawrence Boadt

The Old Testament is such a rich book, written over many centuries by many different authors, and containing such a wide variety of Israel's religious traditions, that readers often have difficulty finding any threats to *unify* it. The same reaction may have struck us as we read about the early books of the Pentateuch and then turned to the prophets or wisdom sections. In order to appreciate the whole Bible it is very important for us to be able to discover some unifying themes which make this a single Testament of faith *and* which enable us at the same time to treasure its many different voices expressing the breadth and beauty of the human experience of God over the ages.

The first question biblical theologians ask of the Old Testament is whether there is one *viewpoint* that characterizes all the books. Some have said that its central theme is *historical*—that is, the Bible tells the factual story of God's interventions into human history on behalf of the Israelites. This would not be ordinary history, but a special "salvation history" which concentrated attention on moments when God revealed himself in certain *events* or in the giving of divine words for human guidance through Moses or the prophets. Other scholars suggest that the major thrust is that of a "proclamation" or "confession" of God. It is Israel celebrating its relationship with God. This view especially takes account of how much of the Old Testament is not *historical* in nature, but rather *praise* and *questioning*—for example, the Book of Psalms or Job or Ecclesiastes. If it is "confession," then we must ask a further question, "Does the Old Testament have a *single* central theme that is proclaimed?" Some possible ones might be God's *choice* of Israel above other peoples, or the lasting *covenant* that God made with Israel, or God's *holiness* manifest in the world, or the *promise* which runs through both Old and New Testaments.

But those who emphasize the historical nature of Israel's traditions, and those who emphasize its proclamation of God's relationship, emphasize important truths, and to select one exclusively over the other would be to lose much of the power of the Scriptures. Israel was an intensely *historical* people; and more so than any of its neighbors, it was conscious of where it had come from and what had happened to it in different moments of its past. But it made that awareness of history alive by announcing the continual praises of God, and in living an established way of life that challenged every new generation.

The only fair candidate for a single dominant theme in the Old Testament would be the *person of God*. The implied questions—"Who is God?" "What does God do?" "Why does God do it?"—fill every page and every level of tradition of the Bible. Naturally, the Old Testament is also the story of the people of Israel, for this one God interacted with them, and they began to understand God through their experience as a people. But it is not primarily the story of God and Israel *alone*. Although the people remembered what God had done for them, they also

spoke about what God does for the *whole* world and all its nations. The Bible testifies to the universal greatness and love of God. Israel made no claim that God acted only on its behalf, nor did it insist that its knowledge of God was *entirely* special and revealed only to itself. In several passages of the Bible, Israel acknowledges the insights *other peoples* have had by borrowing their language and thoughts. One example is the flood story of Genesis 6-9, another is the description of God as Lord of the storm like Baal, found in Psalm 29.

Because Israel had a strong sense of God's special intervention into its history, it saw its duty both to *remember* the wonderful things God had done for it alone and to *proclaim* and affirm the truth about this God to the whole world.

The Only God

Thus the *first and most important* theological theme found in the Old Testament is that *God is one*. This may seem like a small statement, but it governs everything. Israel lived in a world with many competing gods and many debased ideas about divine power. The polytheism of its neighbors was based on an attempt to understand the forces of nature and the mysteries of life that faced humans every day. Why is there drought, sickness and death? How do we find blessing of good crops, children, security and peace? The common answer was to recognize different divine powers everywhere, often with the competing aims and attitudes toward human beings. The means of relating to these gods was, in effect, to *manipulate* them into doing what we needed or wanted. Elaborate rituals and rites that *imitated* the force of storms or the generating acts of sex gradually led to an attitude toward divine beings as glorified humans complete with all our envies, pettiness, moods and self-interest. The world and its gods were nearly identical. In contrast, Israel insisted on a single divine being who ordered and controlled everything out of love for the goodness of creation. The creation story in Genesis 1 makes this clear. And God never acted from whims nor tolerated immoral behavior as part of worship – Genesis 2 and 3 make this clear. Nor were there to be any rivals nor struggles of other forces threatening to overwhelm God—the flood in Genesis 6 and the tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 make this clear. Above all, this God ruled human history and actively guided, protected, cared for and was involved in human affairs—the whole Bible tells this story. It affirms everywhere that God was never to be confused with the created things of the world. The Old Testament returns again and again to the themes that God is *holy*, God is *King*. God is *Shepherd* or *Father*, God is *Creator*—always to emphasize the transcendence of God. God is near the world but never of it. As Jeremiah 23:23 puts it, "Am I a God nearby, says the Lord, and not a God far away?" "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" Perhaps the highest point in Old Testament theology is reached in the famous prayer of Deuteronomy 6 on this very point: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your spirit and with all your power."

God Active in History

This brings us right to the heart of the *second important theological theme* in the Old Testament. God is an actor in history. Israel is literally created by the action of God. God reveals that history is not neutral, but is a stage for the discovery of the self-revealing God. Israel thus proclaims that pagan ideas of circular time, those unending repeating cycles of events in which nothing is ever really new, must be discarded for good. History is *ever new*, it moves ahead, and we can grow better or worse in it, and we can certainly learn from it. This insight flows from the worship and adoration of a transcendent God. If God is not merely part of nature, tied to its ups and downs and its wet seasons and dry, God can act *upon* it. Some years ago, the term "salvation history" for the Old Testament was very popular. It expressed the sense that Israel remembered and learned from those moments when God acted in the events which were most crucial to its past existence. But theologians are now less willing to use that term, because it fails to call attention to the vital element of worship and philosophizing that makes up a large part of what the Bible says of itself. At the same time, we should not totally lose sight of this salvation history" approach because it underscores Israel's breakthrough insight that God not only *cares about* humans but operates in a carefully *ordered* and loving way for the *good* of humans—and always has.

Above all, this insight into divine activity declares that God was a *Liberator and Savior*. God delivers the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; God saves Moses and the slaves at the Red Sea; God hears the cry of the poor and listens to them in the psalms; God frees the servant who gives witness through suffering in the Book of Isaiah; God pleads with Israel to return and change its heart and be liberated in Hosea and Jeremiah. There is perhaps no stronger theme anywhere in the biblical tradition than this one. It forms the background for understanding the New Testament proclamation of Jesus; it is the *central motif* of the later themes of *messiah* and *hope*. And it certainly has vital ramifications for our world today.

Personal Response and Prayer

The *third important theological theme*, which follows from the second about God as *actor in time*, asserts the necessity of *human response* to what God does. The Old Testament never accepts that a worship of God can be adequate which is grateful only for the preservation and daily working of nature. Ours is a personal God who demands from us a *personal* response of friendship, loyalty, obedience, and communication. In Scripture this truth takes many forms. It can be seen in the passages that recognize God's "glory" in the world, or in the temple in Jerusalem, and that lead Israel to awe and wonder. It takes shape in the spirit of trust and even complaints freely offered form the fabric of the psalms. It makes possible the existence of the great prophets who not only speak in God's name but watch over and *insist upon* concrete replies by Israel in both deeds and words. The very creation of the Bible as a sacred book stems from the awareness that Israel must express itself fully before God—both in the telling of its story and in the constant praise of the living and present God in its midst, and even in the

rather daring questioning by wisdom writers who seek to understand their relationship with God more deeply.

Our *fourth theme* is really a concrete application of this human response—*prayer*—or the *praise of God*. The Bible is history and catechetics, speculative thought and poetry and entertaining tales and much more, but all of it is praise of God. Israel was a community that learned to place its purpose and hopes and self-understanding only in God. So when we read the Scriptures, we should not consider just the psalms as our prayer. *All of the biblical texts* tells the glory of God. It is not always easy to see praise of a good God in the violence of Joshua or Judges, or in the doubts of a Job and an Ecclesiastes; but Israel saw God present in blessing even there, and could still pray in the midst of a very real sense of curse all around them. Today many people would like to blot out the harshness of human sin and divorce God from it, and demand of God an end to injustice before they give praise. Instead, the Bible teaches us something about our continual need to struggle for what is right while proclaiming that only God can accomplish it.

Covenant and Tradition

The *fifth theological theme* might be called *community* and *covenant*. The Old Testament came into existence as the remembering by an on-going community who received what had been the testimony of others and took responsibility for it. Above all, they clung stubbornly to a conviction that God had indeed entered into a special relationship of *covenant* with them—a covenant that established bonds of loyalty and responsibility between God and humanity in the person of Israel. We recognize how this formed and preserved the true *inner bond* of Israel as a *community* which maintained a profound respect for the worth and love of the neighbor—as Leviticus 19:18 points out so strongly when it demands *love of neighbor* as much as of oneself.

A *sixth important theme* follows from the last one. Israel is above all a people of *tradition* and *institutions*. It is *Torah*, "teaching" or, even better, "way of life." Israel does not shrink from including sacrifice laws and regulations about bodily ailments and sanitary practices right next to moral and ethical demands for justice and humility and caring. The Old Testament is a rather awkward collection of materials because it reflects *all* the different sides of life in community. We should keep in mind that the traditions come from a very long period of time, at least a thousand years, and probably much more. Anyone who has seen the musical "Fiddler on the Roof" knows the importance of tradition to keeping alive a sense of community in a difficult and often hostile world.

The greatness of biblical revelation is that it uses the structure of society to help a community function religiously, but at the same time moves beyond these structures. Thus Israel could demand *fidelity* and *obedience* to God's law that no other Near Eastern monarch had to face. Or it could demand from individual tribes a cooperation and submission of their own purposes for the good of all Israel. When the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of ten tribes, the rest could move on to a new understanding that God worked even when you did not have the

promised land to live in; and when the temple and king were destroyed by the Babylonians, they moved on to perceive that these too could be dispensed with, and that God would now act in new ways. The Scriptures themselves are written so that Israel can be freed from any single human social structure or government or land and continue to meditate and proclaim the *enduring covenant* through time.

The Prophets and Justice

A significant seventh theme **that follows from an honest wrestling with Israel's sense of concrete existence in the world is found in the *tension between God's will and our often sinful and selfish response***. Israel was no pollyanna that thought of human nature as always good and God as always forgiving of any and every fault. The Israelites never failed to proclaim God to be a God of mercy, as Exodus 34 expresses it, "slow to anger and rich in kindness," but they tempered it with a true awareness of *justice*. God does indeed make demands on the community, demands that they be *like* God. If the claim of Genesis 1:26 means anything when it says that humans are made in the image and likeness of God, it means that we too have moral choice and moral responsibility. Leviticus 19 insists over and over that Israel obey God's laws because God is *holy*. If God indeed faithfully treats the world in an ethical and right fashion, acting solely out of love and goodness, then the *proper* human response must be in kind.

This explains the central vitality of *prophesy* to the Old Testament tradition. The prophets are the *ethnical watchdogs* par excellence. They should not be seen only as radical innovators or rebels against the laws and traditions. They recalled tradition to the people, showing them how God had acted in the past, and what the covenant had taught, and insisting that Israel not forget the freedom of God to act in new ways or the faithfulness of God that would not overlook repeated violations of the covenant. The prophetic word indeed stands in judgment on Israel's behavior only because Israel *forgets*. Ethics is therefore not divorced from the great sense of tradition but stands within it. There is no picture of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, unlike in many of the pagan myths and prayers, that ever *forgets* that he is a God of *action* who demands *actions* in return. God always acted rightly, and all Israel must act rightly because they remember as their sacred duty what God is. "Forgetting" negates the meaning of history and establishes evil practices because they seem helpful or useful for our present desires. Prophecy challenges these. As a result, prophecy has often been seen as a highlight of Old Testament revelation, and perhaps it is, but, if so, only because it roots itself forcefully in the covenant and narratives of the Pentateuchal revelation.

Hope and the Future

The office of the prophet was watchdog and critic and challenger of Israel's evil ways is balanced by the fact that the prophetic office also brings comfort and hope in times of trouble and loss. **The is the *eighth theological* theme: *hope* and *optimism* about the future. Biblical theologians often speak about "eschatology" in the Bible and mean by it the dynamic expectation that God will act in the future.** This is not just the natural assumption that God will

work tomorrow as God did today, but the much greater confidence that God has all of time and human history under a plan and that there will be moments of profound change when God intervenes. This conviction took shape in any number of crisis moments facing Israel in the Old Testament—the rise of the kings in the tenth century, the loss of northern Israel and ten of twelve tribes in the eighth century, and the loss of land, temple, king and independence in the sixth century. Never in any of these crises did Israel come to the conclusion that God would *not act* again. They interpreted disasters as punishment for their own evil for the most part, and the prophets frequently warned the people that God had future punishment in mind if they would not *convert* their ways. But there always remained a conviction, even when the prophets used the most absolute and damning language condemning Israel, that God would *renew* or *restore* because above all God was faithful.

This led to the hope of a *messiah*, a figure sent by God, greater than any king of the past, who would bring about the full flowering of Israel. Such hopes were really quite late in the Old Testament period and are only mildly reflected in the actual books of the Bible—an example is Daniel—but were very common among other writings and in Jewish groups just before the time of Christ. As Christians think of the Old Testament's relation to the New, they must be careful not simply to say that Jesus *fulfilled* all the unfulfilled messianic words of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus acted differently than even the Old Testament expected and revealed what the Israelites always knew through the prophets—God *does not do* what you hope for; he acts in new and surprising ways. We cannot expect it, but we must know God well enough to *accept it*.

The sense of hope should be coupled with *another theme—the goodness of the world* and of the creation that God has made. Hope is rooted ultimately in the knowledge of a good God. Israel has many beautiful passages in its Scriptures that express this deep conviction of God's majestic power and blessing on all of creation. It can be found in the creation story of Genesis 1 and 2 in the blessing that God brings on the earth, and the fact that for each day of the creation story, God "saw that it was good." It can be seen in the blessing and promise themes to Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the wisdom poems of Job 28 or Proverbs 8 or Sirach 24, and in the overwhelming imagery of praise in the Book of Psalms.

Many scholars wondered why the Bible had so little to say of an *afterlife*. Only in one of the latest books of the Bible, Daniel, does such a belief emerge clearly. Perhaps Israel focused itself so strongly on the covenant with the *now-community* that it had little room for wondering how that bond could be continued after death. But eventually the radical belief that *God was good* without fail—from beginning to ultimate end—led to an equal assertion that God could raise the dead who had suffered unjustly. God could preserve the faithful Israelite into the life to come. It remains a minor theme in the Hebrew Scriptures but takes a much more central place in light of the resurrection of Jesus.

The Mystery of God's Ways

Finally, we should conclude with a *last theme of importance:* the Bible is *wisdom*. Wisdom books are not just appendages but form a very important layer of tradition that affirms that God made humans *rational and free*, with divine powers of *searching* and *choosing* and behaving ethically. Wisdom writings boost the goodness of being human and seek to explore dimensions of God and the problem of relating to God that troubled everyone. Israel never developed philosophers like the Greeks who exalted human reason as a power that answers to nothing but itself. Israel maintained that the *search* for wisdom *must be done* in awe and fear of the Lord. Greeks were skeptical of how the gods could actually interact with the created world. Israel *never doubted* how active and directly present God was to the world. Israel's wisdom thinkers instead turned the believers' questions and difficult problems of suffering and inequalities among people toward the *mystery of existence*. God's ways were not our ways, and while we can see God at work we cannot understand with our insights the what or why. But covenant love for the one God demanded both proper reverence for divine transcendence and bountiful hope for divine nearness.

The legacy of the biblical traditions of Israel that have been brought together in the Scriptures is a *combination* of divine *nearness* and *distant* greatness, of intimate, individual love side by side with reasonable, orderly governance. These ten theological themes help bring this out about the God of Israel. Continued reading and study of the Old Testament will serve to nourish these truths more deeply and to open up innumerable *other aspects* of our relationship to God.

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