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Kessler, John. Old Testament Theology: Divine Call and Human Response. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013.

Old Testament Theology

Divine Call and Human Response

John Kessler

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Waco, Texas 76798-7363

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Cover Design by Hannah Feldmeier

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kessler, John, 1951–

Old Testament theology : divine call and human response / John Kessler.
623 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60258-737-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Bible. O.T.—Theology. I. Title.

BS1192.5.K46 2013

230'.0411—dc23

2013004635

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper with a minimum of 30% post-consumer waste recycled content.

To Sandra, with love and gratitude

I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.

Psalms 118:17 NRSV

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1

READING THE OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGICALLY Challenges and Rewards

- 1.1 Introductory Overview
 - 1.2 The Challenge of Reading the Old Testament: A Series of Muddy Trenches and Impenetrable Walls
 - 1.2.1 Challenges Arising from the Content of the OT
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Your words were found, and I ate them,
and your words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart;
for I am called by your name,
O LORD, God of hosts. (Jer 15:16)

1.1 Introductory Overview

This is a book about reading the Old Testament¹ (henceforth OT) theologically. Putting it in its simplest formulation, a **theological reading** is

¹ I have chosen to use the designation “Old Testament” rather than “First Testament,” “Older Testament,” or “Hebrew Bible” because of its general familiarity for most readers. As will become apparent, when using the descriptor “old,” I in no way imply that the OT is outmoded or outdated. While terms such as “Hebrew Bible” and “Older Testament” may be more technically accurate for my purposes, they lack a certain clarity for most readers. For a further discussion of some of the issues involved cf. R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress,

one that seeks to understand the OT's assertions regarding the person and character of God, the nature of the divine-human relationship, as well as the divine purpose for all the other relationships in which humans find themselves.² However, reading for such matters is no simple task. Most people find the OT a difficult read. Its subject matter, vocabulary, conceptual world, customs, practices, and literary style are strange and often offensive. Some of this strangeness can be ameliorated by the study of a variety of matters regarding the world of the OT and the content and production of the biblical books. However, the present book is not about the sociopolitical, religious, and cultural world of the OT (either in Israel or the surrounding nations)—texts on OT backgrounds do that.³ Nor is this book a description of the contents of the OT—books on OT survey cover that material.⁴ Furthermore, it is not a book that explains the dating of the various OT books and the process through which they came to

1992), 147–75; idem, “Theology of the Old Testament,” in *The Face of Old Testament Studies*, ed. D. W. Baker and B. T. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 459–61; Richard B. Hays and Joel B. Green, “The Use of the Old Testament by New Testament Writers,” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 222–38, esp. 223–25.

² Bernhard W. Anderson and Steven Bishop, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 36.

³ This is an enormous topic about which much has been written. See, e.g., Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, Library of Ancient Israel (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, The Biblical Resource Series, trans. John McHugh (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); J. Andrew Dearman, *Religion & Culture in Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1992); Philip F. Esler, *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006); Leo G. Perdue, *Families in Ancient Israel*, FRC (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997); Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E.*, SBLABS 9 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005); Paula M. McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel*, Library of Ancient Israel (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1999); Karen R. Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002); John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (London: Continuum, 2001); John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, eds., *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993); Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250–587 BCE* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993); Steven L. Cook, *The Social Roots of Biblical Yahwism*, Society of Biblical Literature Studies in Biblical Literature (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Simon B. Parker, “The ANE Literary Background of the OT,” *NIB* 1:228–43.

⁴ Paul R. House, *Old Testament Survey* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992); William S. La Sor et al., *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

be written—studies of OT introduction undertake that task.⁵ It is not a work on the history of Israel or of Israelite religion. There are a number of specialized works that fulfill that role.⁶ Neither is it an attempt to come to grips with the ethical challenges presented by the specific aspects of OT (e.g., slavery)—works of OT ethics cover that ground.⁷ Finally, is not a word-for-word explanation of the biblical text—commentaries do that.⁸

This is a book dealing primarily with OT theology and OT hermeneutics. Works of OT theology seek to describe the OT's understanding of God. As the noted OT scholar Claus Westermann has stated, "A Theology

⁵ Rolf Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991); Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament: From Its Origins to the Closing of the Alexandrian Canon*, trans. John Bowden, 3rd ed., OTL (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1989); Werner H. Schmidt, *Old Testament Introduction*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, 2nd ed. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999); Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

⁶ Such works all proceed from hotly debated assumptions of various types. It is far beyond the scope of the present study to survey them here. See, notably, Rainer Albertz, "The History of Israelite Religion in the Post-Exilic Period," in *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, trans. John Bowden, 2 vols. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994); John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2000); Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, Library of Ancient Israel (London: SPCK, 2000); J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); Iain W. Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*; Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988); William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know, and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Philip R. Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History—Ancient and Modern* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008); Steven L. McKenzie, "Israel, History of," *NIDB*, 3:117–31; J. Maxwell Miller, "Introduction to the History of Israel," *NIB*, 1:244–71; Samuel A. Meier, "History of Israel 1: Settlement Period," *DOTHB*, 425–34. Longman provides a preliminary survey in Tremper Longman, "History and Old Testament Interpretation," in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God's Address*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and David J. H. Beldman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 96–121.

⁷ See, e.g., Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994); Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004); John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

⁸ OT commentaries generally form part of a broader series, each with its own approach, orientation, and intended readership. The general approach of the series can usually be found in the introduction to each individual volume.

of the OT has the task of summarizing and viewing together what the OT as a whole, in all its sections, says about God.⁹ **OT theology** is a subset of the discipline of biblical theology.¹⁰ Works of **biblical theology** deal with the OT and New Testament (henceforth NT) as a whole.¹¹ They identify the theological concerns of both testaments, address the relationship between the two, and trace key religious themes and ideas through one to the other. This is a gargantuan task and is rarely undertaken today.¹² More frequently, attempts are made to write theologies of either the OT or the NT, still an immense undertaking.¹³ Some works of biblical theology make the task more manageable by placing further limits on their area of study.¹⁴ Most OT theologians stress that the OT must be permitted to “speak for itself” before relating its statements to the NT. The OT is understood to have a “discrete voice”¹⁵ that must be listened to in its own right and that imparts faith-worthy teaching regarding the character of God, the role of humanity in the creation, and the nature of the divine-human relationship. We will return to the importance of OT theology and its relevance for the present study in the next chapter.

⁹ Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, trans. Douglas Stott (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

¹⁰ For an excellent introduction to biblical theology, see James K. Mead, *Biblical Theology: Issues, Methods, and Themes*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2007). Mead’s work is both comprehensive and detailed, and accessible to the introductory reader.

¹¹ On the historical shift from biblical theology as encompassing the whole Christian Bible to the independent study of OT and NT theology, see Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 27–29; Scott J. Hafemann, *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002); Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House, *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

¹² See, most notably, Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). I omit here works of OT theology that conclude with a short section on the fulfillment of certain OT ideas in the NT. Comprehensive works of biblical theologies do more than that.

¹³ For a comprehensive survey of OT theology, with extensive bibliography, Leo G. Perdue and Joseph McDonald, “Biblical Theology of the Old Testament,” in *Oxford Bibliographies Online*.

¹⁴ Sometimes the designation *biblical theology* is attached to works that follow a single theme or concept through the OT or NT or both (e.g., the idea of wealth and poverty in the OT). Similarly the term may be applied to studies of the distinctive theological outlook of a particular section of the OT or NT (e.g., the theological outlook of Deuteronomy). Sometimes the two are combined, thus “wealth and poverty in the book of Deuteronomy.”

¹⁵ Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 76; Anderson and Bishop, *Contours of Old Testament Theology*, 9–15; Christopher R. Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 56–59, 191–203.

Closely related to the discipline of OT theology is the study of **OT hermeneutics**.¹⁶ This involves both the broader study of hermeneutics (a highly developed and complex discipline in its own right) and the study of hermeneutical matters specifically relating to the OT. Questions of OT hermeneutics often focus on how the various literary genres within the OT (law, narrative, poetry, prophecy) ought to be read so as to most closely approximate their ancient meanings.¹⁷ Studies of OT hermeneutics frequently involve discussions as to how modern readers can engage the OT and derive ethical or theological instruction from it. Some such studies operate from a specifically Jewish¹⁸ or Christian¹⁹ orientation. Other scholars, while affirming their own theological convictions, attempt to

¹⁶ For an overview, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Bernard T. Lategan, "Hermeneutics," *ABD*, 3:149–55; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006).

¹⁷ For a general and accessible introduction, see the relevant chapters in William W. Klein et al., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1993).

¹⁸ The study of ancient Jewish hermeneutics is vast and complex. For a general introduction, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); idem, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). We will touch on some aspects of it in the following chapter. For more recent Jewish approaches to OT theology and OT hermeneutics, see Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Jon D. Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 33–61; Benjamin D. Sommer, "Dialogical Biblical Theology: A Jewish Approach to Reading Scripture Theologically," in *Biblical Theology: Introducing the Conversation*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Robert Morgan, and Benjamin D. Sommer, Library of Biblical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 1–53; Gershom M. H. Ratheiser, *Mitzvoth Ethics and the Jewish Bible: The End of Old Testament Theology*, LHBOTS 460 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

¹⁹ This is currently a matter of lively discussion, sometimes described using the terms *figural readings* or *theological readings*. For a brief introduction to this approach, see Joel B. Green, "Theological Hermeneutics," *NIDB*, 5:555–56. For some examples of its practice and other issues, see Brevard S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001); idem, *Character of Christian Scripture*; Christopher R. Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight, eds., *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al., eds., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Vanhoozer, ed., *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), esp. 15–24; R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

approach the OT text in a more “neutral” fashion, seeking to appropriate the significance of its texts in line with its ancient context, apart (insofar as possible) from a distinctly Jewish or Christian confessional framework.²⁰ Works specifically devoted to OT hermeneutics are far less common than works of OT theology.²¹ Sometimes discussions of OT hermeneutics are subsumed within books of OT theology, while in other instances such matters are dealt with in light of broader considerations in philosophical hermeneutics and applied to the Bible as a whole.²²

This book thus shares several of the interests of OT theology and OT hermeneutics. From its inception, OT theology has been interested in both describing what the OT writers said about God in their own context, as well as in determining how such assertions could be meaningful for later readers.²³ I write as a Christian reader and interpreter, and this

²⁰ Thus Rolf Rendtorff, “Toward a Common Jewish-Christian Reading of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology*, trans. and ed. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 31–45; John Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*, Old Testament Theology 1 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 15–28. Goldingay asserts that the appropriate starting place for a Christian reading of the OT is the conviction that it is best read with a view to discovering “what we might believe about God and us if we simply use the Old Testament or let it provide the lenses through which we look at Jesus” (21). In his massive *Old Testament Theology*, W. Brueggemann similarly argues for an approach to OT theology that is independent of either Jewish or Christian orthodoxy. However, unlike Rendtorff or Goldingay, who seek appropriations of the text that are closely connected to its ancient function and meaning, Brueggemann maintains that since OT texts are by definition “elusive” (despite the best efforts of modern scholarship to pin down their meaning), they “insist on imaginative construal.” Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction*, The Library of Biblical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 731. The early Christians’ interpretation of the OT was thus a “bold imaginative construal” of the OT in light of the Christ event. However, the meaning of the OT cannot be limited to the imaginative construal placed upon it by the NT. Rather, Christian readers must go back to the OT texts and creatively and imaginatively reconstrue their elusive meaning for the needs of Christians today. As such the text’s *generative power* must be allowed to “evoke and authorize interpretations that lie far beyond the scope or intentions of the textual testimony as such” (732).

²¹ See John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (London: Dartman, Longman & Todd, 1984); Claus Westermann, ed., *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, trans. James L. Mays (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1963); Daniel Lys, *The Meaning of the Old Testament; an Essay on Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967); John Goldingay, “Hermeneutics,” *DOTP*, 387–401. Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell, eds., *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2012).

²² Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*; Craig G. Bartholomew, Colin J. D. Greene, and Karl Möller, eds., *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics 2 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001).

²³ Some would describe the task of determining the theological significance of a text in its ancient context as the exegetical task of biblical theology and that of moving from the ancient text to the modern world as its hermeneutical task. See also Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 8. Moving from the “then” of the biblical text to the “now” of the world of the reader constitutes one of

doubtlessly shapes my approach to the text. I nevertheless attempt to hear the “authentic” voice of the text, even if it may cause dissonance with my own confessional reading tradition.²⁴

Works of OT theology generally address not only what the OT has to say about the character of God but that to which God calls Israel and Israel’s responses to those demands.²⁵ This will constitute a central part of our analysis. We will focus much attention on the qualities of life and character to which God’s people are called in the various parts of the OT. I will refer to these as **relational responses** to God. We will examine how the various OT texts conceive of the relationship between Yahweh and the people of God, and the *qualities of character* that God’s people are called to display as a result. This involves allowing *the understanding of God*, and the *core values and virtues* that are emphasized in the OT *to guide and shape one’s character, attitudes, and behaviors* as one lives in relationship to God. OT theology frequently underlines that a true understanding of God serves as the basis for the ethical and spiritual formation (and transformation) of individuals, communities, and ultimately all of creation (cf. Jer 9:24). Thus our theological examination of the OT intersects with the growing contemporary interest in OT spirituality²⁶ and the disciplines involved in spiritual formation,²⁷ the praxis of character formation,²⁸ and

the most foundational and controversial questions in OT theology and OT hermeneutics. We will return to it again and again in the course of our discussion.

²⁴ My approach is thus very similar to that of Rendtorff and Goldingay, noted above.

²⁵ So, e.g., Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., trans. John Baker (London: SCM Press, 1967), 2:268–495; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1962), 370–417; Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 194–244.

²⁶ Rolf P. Knerim, “The Spirituality of the Old Testament,” in *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Substance, Method, and Cases* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). An earlier work (in Italian) paved the way for this kind of important analysis. See Antonio Bonora, *La spiritualità dell’ Antico Testamento* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1987).

²⁷ Cf. Hallvard Hagelia, *Coram Deo: Spirituality in the Book of Isaiah, with Particular Attention to Faith in Yahweh*, ConBOT 423 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001); Deryck Sheriffs, *The Friendship of the Lord: An Old Testament Spirituality* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996); John F. Craghan, *Love and Thunder: A Spirituality of the Old Testament*, Counterpoints (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1983); Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2010); David A. DeSilva, *Sacramental Life: Spiritual Formation through the Book of Common Prayer* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2008).

²⁸ See esp. the essays in M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2007). See also William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Dave Bland, “The Formation of Character in the Book of Proverbs,” *ResQ* 40 (1998): 221–37.

the ongoing significance of the OT's ethical demands.²⁹ Finally, like many works of OT theology, this book takes a *specific approach* to how the theological vision of the OT is structured, to how its theological vision is accessed, to the OT's relationship to the NT, and to how it can shape the lives of individuals and communities today. I will develop these matters in the following chapter. Thus while this book is far more *limited* and *focused in scope* than many works of OT theology³⁰ it nevertheless stands within a tradition of works that attempt to set forth the OT's vision of God and God's purposes and invite contemporary individuals and communities to appropriate³¹ that vision to their own particular situations. As Mead notes, OT theology has always had one foot in the scholarly world and the other in the church.³²

This book is directed at a specific readership. It is meant to be an accessible, yet technically sophisticated, theological reading of the OT, directed primarily toward readers studying the OT in academic contexts, who at the same time desire that their OT study contribute to their theological and spiritual formation. It sets forth a **reading strategy** for introductory students of the OT who wish to understand its leading theological

²⁹ See above n. 28 and J. W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies, and M. Daniel Carroll R., eds., *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium*, JSOTSup 207 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995); Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1991); H. Lalleman-de Winkel, *Celebrating the Law?: Rethinking Old Testament Ethics* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004); Jeffrey F. Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee*, JSOTSup 155 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

³⁰ E.g., it does not take the reader through a history of the discipline, a survey and evaluation of the major approaches to OT theology, or a discussion of why the author's approach is to be preferred. Nor does this text make any effort at comprehensively rendering the OT's theological vision. Certain areas, such as messianism, apocalypticism, or the emergence, role, and message of the prophets, are only discussed in more general terms. It does not devote much attention to the development of the key OT ideas and themes over time. Most full-blown OT theologies pay significant attention to these matters. Thus, while this book is not a fully developed OT theology, it can, however, serve as a preparation for further study of OT theology, since it deals with numerous issues taken up in far greater detail in most such works.

³¹ I prefer the term "appropriation" to "application" since the latter term could imply that the reader can objectify the text and apply it to a present need in much the same way as paint is applied to a wall. Rather, as we shall see, moving from the text to ourselves and our world is a careful, reflective, and prayerful process, involving many elements and variables. Far from objectifying a text and using it, appropriation involves seeing how the values and virtues in the text itself can shape our perspectives and actions. Modern biblical scholarship makes use of the theoretical formulations of relevance theory and appropriation theory in an attempt to define this process more closely. See Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). For an excellent summary of relevance theory and its usefulness for biblical interpretation, see Tim Meadowcroft, *Haggai Readings: A New Biblical Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), 15–28.

³² Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 24.

interests and vision as expressed and understood in ancient Israel and to appropriate these concepts to their own experience today. At the broadest level, I address all readers interested in the theological vision of the OT, whether they have a stake in the outcome of the discussion or not. Yet I have sought to engage readers who seek to understand the theological perspectives of the OT because they are reading it as *Scripture*. They believe that the OT is a text through which God speaks and may be known. They understand it to be a part of their canon.³³ It is contained in the Bibles they read. It is preached and studied in the communities of which they are a part. By according the OT a place in their Bibles alongside the NT, they affirm their conviction that spiritual nurture and direction may be found through its words. In some academic institutions the theological ideas of the OT are treated in a purely *descriptive* manner—that is they provide an account of the thought of the ancient writers or the history of the religion of ancient Israel. However, in many academic contexts (or other situations where careful Bible study is undertaken), there is a profound interest in these matters at the level of *theological significance*. It is such situations that I wish most specifically to address. How can these OT texts contribute to an understanding of who God is, to theological reflection, and to theologically meaningful responses to the great challenges of life? This book is written for such readers, in such institutions. I want to enable the contemporary reader to engage the OT *both* as an ancient Near Eastern (henceforth ANE) document with all the academic rigor necessary for such an endeavor, *and* as Scripture—texts believed to provide a true knowledge of the character of God, the ways of God, and the calling that God addresses to humankind.

In seeking to enable such readers to appropriate the OT, I take a very specific kind of approach to it—one that recognizes that within the OT there are very real distinctions in theological outlook and perspective. Each one presents a *different way* of expressing what it means to be in relationship with God. Sometimes the differing visions characterize the biblical books as a whole. However, not infrequently, these distinctive visions may be found in various sections of the biblical books as we have

³³ This would include Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox readers. Each of these communities holds a slightly different position on which texts are to be included in the canon of the OT. Teaching, as I do, in the context of a broader, nondenominational, largely (but not exclusively) Protestant institution, my reflections concern primarily the Hebrew and Aramaic texts that constitute the canon in the traditional Jewish and Protestant understandings. The contribution of the Deutero-canonical works read by the Catholic and Orthodox communities to the matters under discussion here is an important one. Nevertheless, because of limitations of space and personal expertise, I will not deal with them to any great extent.

them. Thus, as readers move from passage to passage, they may encounter changes in the way in which relationship with Yahweh (the personal name of the God of Israel) is understood and expressed. This book will help its readers identify these distinctive visions and the kind of response to God each one requires.

One might think that another book on such matters would be superfluous. However, having taught the OT for twenty years in a theological context, I am convinced that this is not so. Year after year I have seen students miss clear points of connection between the texts they are studying and the life of faith. Or, if they do attempt to make connections, the inferences they draw are frequently fanciful, unrelated to the concerns of OT text, and largely the reflections of their own theological assumptions. Such readers are often simply reading their convictions back into the text, rather than allowing the text to engage and challenge them. Furthermore, this inability to appropriate the OT to life experience is not only a problem for untrained readers or introductory-level students. It can be a frustrating and difficult task even for those who have a good working knowledge of OT scholarship! I believe that when readers learn to identify the key relational responses called for within the OT, some of this difficulty can be overcome.

The purpose of this monograph then, is to offer readers (especially those who are beginning their academic study of the OT) a “way in” to the OT that is respectful of its historical meaning and of the vast amount of scholarship that has been directed to it and yet still yields an understanding of God and God’s purposes. My aim is to present *a way*, not *the way*, to accomplish such a goal. I have rarely encountered an exegetical or reading strategy or theological approach to the OT that did not highlight some aspect previously overlooked or that did not meaningfully engage some problem raised by the text itself. I put forward the approach presented in this text simply because I have found it to be extremely effective. Study of the OT can be baffling. Students frequently leave OT courses extremely frustrated and bored, without the slightest idea of what to *do* with these texts. I want to address this very real problem. In a work such as this, some readers will inevitably disagree with one or another of the details of my arguments. I would ask such readers to look rather to the overall thrust of my argument and approach and to assess their utility as a means of bringing together the OT and the needs of contemporary hearers.

To begin, we must set the scene and lay down some foundations. In the next part of this chapter, we will examine *why* the OT has proved to be such a difficult text to read theologically.

1.2 The Challenge of Reading the Old Testament: A Series of Muddy Trenches and Impenetrable Walls

Anyone can read the “safe” and “accessible” texts of the OT and engage them theologically. Psalm 23 (“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want”), Isaiah 40:31 (“those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength”), and Jeremiah 29:11 (“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope”) are easy to read and appropriate. However, this is not the case for the bulk of the OT! Readers who start with Genesis with the intention of reading through the OT or who randomly choose a section from Leviticus or Ezekiel frequently stop in short order—frustrated and disappointed by what they encounter. In some instances readers encounter seemingly impenetrable “walls”—aspects of the text that are incomprehensible to them. In other instances they fall into interpretive “ditches”—aspects of the text that they understand all too well but that seem irrelevant, outdated, or profoundly offensive. Let us examine some of the most important of these.

1.2.1 Challenges Arising from the Content of the OT

Numerous factors make the OT difficult. Modern readers encounter an unfamiliar world. Much seems strange, confusing, and problematic. There is an enormous quantity of data: names, dates, places, cultural practices, ritual details, and the like. There are many repetitions and seemingly trivial details. Some passages seem crude or seemingly riddled with magic and superstition (e.g., Jacob’s ploy of placing spotted sticks in front of mating goats to influence the markings on their offspring, Gen 30:37–43). Beyond these points of detail, it is frequently difficult to see the *purpose or meaning* of a given text. Large sections of the OT consist of narrative whose *raison d’être* seems obscure or unimportant. Why allocate more space to Abraham’s negotiations for a piece of land in which to bury his wife Sarah (Gen 23) than to the creation of the universe (Gen 1)? What about the narratives that appear improbable, such as the story of Noah’s flood (Gen 6–9), the tower of Babel (Gen 11), or the origins of the Moabites and Ammonites through Lot’s daughters getting him drunk and seducing him (Gen 19)? Even more offensive are those passages that seem violent and vengeful—texts such as the sexual assault of Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, and the subsequent deception and massacre of the local population by her brothers (Gen 34) or the rape and dismemberment of the concubine of a wandering religious practitioner (Judg 18). The legal

materials are similarly problematic. Is the concept of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” a barbaric one, and one that Jesus specifically rejects (Exod 21:24; Matt 6:38-42)? Why forbid the planting of two types of seed in the same field (Deut 22:9) or the weaving of two types of cloth into the same garment (Deut 22:11)? Is the death penalty really appropriate for such offenses as striking or cursing a parent (Exod 21:15, 17)? What is the point of reading about the extensive ritual requirements regarding a tabernacle or temple that no longer exists? Of what relevance are details about the various sacrifices and the rituals accompanying them (Lev 1-6), the purification of lepers (Lev 14), or the ordination of priests (Lev 8)?

More significantly, many readers experience great difficulty with what they understand to be the **character of the God of the OT**. They believe that the God it portrays (designated in many texts by the personal name Yahweh) to be fixated upon law and ritual, and prone to displays of petulant wrath and violent judgments for very minor offenses. After all, does the self-description of Yahweh not include the phrase a “jealous God” (Exod 20:5)? Was not Uzzah, whose intentions were good, struck dead when he put out his hand and sought to prevent the Ark of the Covenant from falling off a cart (2 Sam 6)? Furthermore, many readers (erroneously, as we shall see) view forgiveness as a profoundly foreign concept to this God or, where such forgiveness does take place, as only the result of this bloodthirsty God’s willingness to accept animal sacrifices as a means of appeasement. What is more, this God is ethically suspect. How could Yahweh appropriate the land belonging to another nation (the Canaanites) and give it to Israel, commanding them to destroy and dispossess the local population, including women and children (Deut 2:34, 3:6, 7:2)? And how could a good God command a person such as Abraham, who had heretofore manifested great faithfulness, to go up to a secluded place and slaughter his own child (Gen 22)? In addition, this God seems to play favorites. Yahweh is seen as having chosen and cared for Israel alone. Gentiles seemingly had no value or significance. Many conclude that this is surely nothing but a local, tribal deity.

These kinds of objections to the content of the OT go back a long way. Throughout the ancient Hellenistic and Greco-Roman world (including certain forms of hellenized Judaism and the early church), steeped as it was in Greek philosophy, much of the content of the OT was viewed as profoundly offensive. For example, some passages, such as Genesis 6:6 (“And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart”), appear to imply that God lacked foresight and could regret earlier decisions and actions. Such ideas were

intolerable to the philosophical tradition that viewed God as a perfect being who could never exhibit change or regret (because of the qualities of omnipotence and omniscience). Similarly, the many OT passages that expressed God's sorrow or joy or suffering caused significant difficulty for the Greek conceptualization of God as a perfect being who could not experience suffering caused by any external person, act, or event (this is sometimes called the *impassibility* of God). Still other passages seemed factually impossible. Such matters caused the early Christian interpreter Origen (185–254 CE) to question whether many of the details contained within the OT could be taken literally.

Perhaps the two most offensive elements of the OT to Greek thought and culture were its *material* focus and its *exclusivism*. Many of the blessings promised to Israel are material (health, long life, abundant harvests, prosperity) and political (freedom from slavery, safety from attack, exaltation over other nations). The OT focuses on Yahweh's choice of Israel and demand for exclusivity of worship. Ancient readers asked, Why place so much emphasis on the transitory, material world? Why focus on one people alone? Is God not the God of all humanity? Does God not care for all the peoples of the world? Are the great philosophical, cultural, scientific, and technological achievements of the Babylonians, Assyrians, Canaanites, Egyptians, and Greeks to be scoffed at and written off as irrelevant? Jews within the Greek-speaking world (such as the influential philosopher and theologian Philo) spent much time trying to explain many of these features of the OT to their contemporaries and to bridge the two cultures.

Most of these criticisms were reiterated by the early Christian church, especially as it became progressively composed of Gentile members.³⁴ As we shall see, while the church did not reject the OT, it found itself in great tension with many aspects of it and sought ways to distance itself from its content. To relieve much of its discomfort with the OT, the church saw offensive themes such as the election of Israel, the subjugation of the nations, and the critique of non-Israelite peoples as being radically overturned through the revelation of the *inclusiveness and love of God* as seen in Christ. The material, ritual, and political aspects of the OT were dismissed as no longer relevant. The OT's dietary and economic laws were seen as unimportant for Christians. The offensive cursings of enemies, expressed in such notorious texts as Psalm 137, were dismissed as unworthy of Christian piety. Furthermore, the church employed a reading strategy that saw deeper, Christian meanings beyond the surface meaning of

³⁴ I will examine something of this process later in the chapter.

the text. We will examine this reading strategy, usually called allegorism (see §2.1.3.1 “Allegorical Readings”).

Contemporary readers face challenges raised by the intellectual climate of our own age. The OT is frequently viewed as an *oppressive text*. It is seen to have supported various structures of oppression in the social, sexual, and economic realms. To take one example among many, its content is frequently read as disparaging of women and reflects an oppressive, patriarchal value system: Is not a woman blamed for the first human act of sin (Gen 3)? Are women not treated as the property of their husbands in the law (Num 30)? Are there not numerous instances where women are subject to the whims of men and shuffled around with little regard for their own feelings (1 Sam 25:44; 2 Sam 3:6, 15; 12:10-11)? Is not Yahweh’s anger against the covenant people of God depicted by means of a betrayed and enraged husband brutalizing and publicly humiliating his wife (Hos 2; Ezek 16 and 23)? Similarly, our age is profoundly aware of the horrors and brutality of war. Accounts of battles and bloodshed (Josh, Judg, 1–2 Sam) fill us with disgust and disdain. Historians point to numerous instances where the OT has been used to justify slavery, oppression, violence, environmental destruction, injustice, and victimization. Readers seeking theological perspective or spiritual nurture thus often find that before they have gone very far they bump up against impenetrable walls or fall into perilous ditches.

1.2.2 Challenges Arising from the Literature Written about the OT

Not only is the OT difficult in itself, the enormous quantity of literature written to *aid* contemporary readers in understanding of the OT can create further obstacles. The sheer number of books and articles about the OT would be more than any one person could read in a lifetime. What is more, on virtually every point, scholars differ. How can one ever decide among these experts? The very language of these materials is often opaque and baffling. Technical terms such as *etiology*, *theophany*, *amphictyony*, *suzerainty covenant*, *eponymous*, *sancta*, *hierodule*, *traditio-historical*, and *Überlieferungsgeschichte* abound. OT scholars employ a dizzying array of methodologies. Students read of the historical-critical method, textual criticism, form criticism, traditions criticism, rhetorical criticism, canonical criticism, new literary criticism, narrative criticism, and ideological criticism, to name just a few.³⁵ Furthermore, each methodological

³⁵ Concise definitions of these and most other significant terms in biblical studies appear in Richard N. Soulen and N. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001). Fuller treatments can be found in most of the major

approach uses its own jargon and technical terminology. Debates as to the validity and utility of these approaches have been ongoing, sometimes for hundreds of years. Furthermore, scholarly opinion is constantly in flux. Is a mastery all of this material necessary for the contemporary reader or reading community to be able to understand and appropriate the text?

1.2.3 Challenges Arising from the Distance between the World of the OT and Our Own

How can an ancient text like the OT speak meaningfully today? This is not an easy question to answer, even if one believes that text to have been given by God to the community of faith for its nurture. As we noted in the previous sections, contemporary readers who seek to read the OT for theological and spiritual nurture are immediately confronted by a profound gap or distance between the text itself (the world in which it was written and the culture and thought-forms and purposes of its author or authors) and themselves.

At this level, both Jewish and Christian readers face similar questions regarding how this distance can be overcome and how such texts can be meaningful today. Many OT texts deal with the Jerusalemite temple and its ritual, with regulations for the priesthood, with the words of various prophets, or with the emergence and future of the monarchy. Jewish readers must wrestle with how these texts are to be understood in a world where the temple no longer exists, priests no longer function, and the monarchy has disappeared.³⁶ The reading stance of the Christian community is even more complex and the distance between it and the OT even greater. From its inception the church read the OT as its Scripture.³⁷ When they gathered, the early Christians thus read the OT as a guide for faith and ethics. In point of fact, a significant number of years passed before the NT as a collection of texts came to stand alongside the OT as Scripture. However, from its earliest days the church struggled with how to appropriate this essentially Jewish or Israelite³⁸ text to its own life. As such, for Christian

Bible dictionaries and Encyclopedias including *IDB[S]*, *ABD*, Allen C. Myers, ed. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), *NIDB*, and others. See also Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*.

³⁶ Judaism has wrestled with such matters over the course of the centuries, beginning with the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 587 BCE, then again in 70 CE, beginning with the Mishnah and Talmud. Space precludes a fuller discussion of these matters.

³⁷ See esp. Seitz, *Character of Christian Scripture*, 17–19.

³⁸ In general parlance, in the study of the OT the term “Israelite” is used to refer to the community of Yahweh during the period described in the biblical text, that is from the beginnings of Israel’s history either until the Babylonian exile (587–539 BCE) or until the end of

readers, it was not immediately apparent how a given text of the OT, read at face value or in its “plain” or literal sense³⁹ related to their own spiritual experience. How did the dietary laws, oracles against foreign nations such as Edom, Moab, and Tyre, or predictions of the ingathering of the Judean exiles dispersed in the Babylonian incursions of the early sixth century BCE relate in any way to them?

Many Christians’ understanding of the NT’s teaching about the OT adds to their antipathy toward it and difficulty in appropriating it. They view Jesus Christ as revealing a God of love and forgiveness in contrast to the irascible, wrathful, and nearly merciless God of the Old Testament. They view the NT as offering humanity access to God through faith by grace, as opposed to the Old Testament, where such access came by the performance of ritual and by obedience to the law. After all does the NT not state that the law was given through Moses, but that grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ (John 1:17)? The NT God, it is thought, is concerned with all of humanity, in contrast to the OT’s God, who loved Israel alone. Jesus’ conflicts with the Pharisees over Sabbath observance, clean and unclean foods, and other matters are viewed as proof that the OT legal and ritual system was essentially hypocritical and unfair and a hindrance to the true knowledge of God—a hindrance that Jesus decisively removed.

This perspective is often seen in the way certain Christian preachers and theologians have sometimes made Jews, Judaism, and the OT the “whipping boy” of their arguments. They thus extol the virtues of Christianity by contrasting them with the oppressive, hypocritical, and crassly materialistic perspectives of “Judaism.” The uncleanness and social

the Persian Period (333 BCE). The terms *Jewish* and *Judaism* are used for the same community in all later periods. These distinctions are doubtlessly simplifications, but they are a helpful reminder that the religion within the text of the OT is related to, yet substantially different from, the Judaism of later periods. In point of fact, during the biblical period, the term “Israel” is sometimes used to designate the northern kingdom of Israel (that is the ten northern tribes) in contrast to Judah, the southern kingdom (including the tribes of Judah and Benjamin). Similarly, within the biblical period the term *yehudi*, from which the terms Jewish and Judaism are derived, is used for all members of the southern kingdom (cf. Jer 34:9) and also in a more restrictive sense for those who returned to Judea from exile (cf. Ezra 5:5).

³⁹ This face value is generally called the *sensus literalis* or “literal sense” in Christian parlance. Jewish scholarship frequently refers to it as the *pesbat* or “plain” sense. Put simply, this sense would be the meaning a speaker or hearer of these words would attribute to them in the context in which they were uttered. For a summary and definition of this see Richard N. Soulen, “What Is the Literal Sense of Scripture?” in Soulen, *Sacred Scripture*. We will explore this important concept in greater detail in chapter 2, in the section “A Foundational Definition” (see §2.1.1).

isolation of lepers, for example, is portrayed as merely a cultural bias that Jesus chose to reject and overcome, instead of as a part of the Sinai legislation that Israel was bound to keep. Christian feminists sometimes took the same tack. They blamed all the church's systemic gender inequality on the influence of "Judaism," especially as evidenced in Paul's writings.⁴⁰ All of this has doubtlessly, and as we shall see, quite erroneously, contributed to the negative stereotyping of Judaism, Jewish people, and the OT.⁴¹

1.2.4 Challenges Arising from the Structure, Form, and Genre of the OT

A significant aspect of the difficulty in reading the OT theologically lies in the fact that it does not read like a systematic theology textbook. Such books frequently follow a structure such as God: origin of, characteristics of, acts of, etc. Rather, the theological perspectives of the OT are woven into texts of various types (principally narrative, law, poetic expression of speech to God, prophetic speech, and apocalyptic). When readers open the OT, they encounter law, proverbs, genealogies, songs of prayer and praise, prophetic warnings and encouragements, and above all *narratives*. How can one get from such texts to *theology*? Biblical theologian Gerhard von Rad insightfully observes, "We are . . . confronted with the bewildering fact that that this theological thinking is absolutely lacking in theological 'systematics.'" Rather than "following the demands of theological systematics, . . . they [the biblical writers] simply follow the sequence of historical events."⁴²

⁴⁰ This kind of overly simplistic argumentation is now far less frequent. See Mary C. Boys, "Patriarchal Judaism, Liberating Jesus: A Feminist Misrepresentation," *USQR* 56 (2002): 48–61; Susannah Heschel, "Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology," *Tikkun* 5 (1990): 25–28, 95–97; Katharina von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, American Academy of Religion Cultural Criticism 1 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994); Judith Plaskow, "Christian Feminism and Anti-Judaism," *Cross Currents* 28 (1978): 306–9; Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes, "Feminist Theology and Anti-Judaism in the Netherlands," *JFSR* 7 (1991): 117–23; Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz, "The Discussion of Anti-Judaism in Feminist Theology—A New Area of Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *JFSR* 7 (1991): 95–98.

⁴¹ In recent years scholars have devoted significant attention to "anti-Judaism" and anti-Semitism in Christianity. For some helpful entry points, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament: Decision Points and Divergent Interpretations* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010); Craig A. Evans and Donald Alfred Hagner, *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); R. Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt, and F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, eds., *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Peter Richardson et al., *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, 2 vols., *Studies in Christianity and Judaism* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986).

⁴² von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:116.

Furthermore, the biblical material is presented in the form of “books.” These biblical books contain differing forms and genres, deal with differing time periods, and use differing means of expression. Sometimes these books are clearly self-contained units (such as Proverbs). Sometimes these “books” stand in relationship to one another and, when read together, tell a larger story. The basic story of Israel runs from Genesis through 2 Kings, sometimes called the **Enneateuch**, that is, “nine books.” Yet even within such larger units there are points of unevenness. Genesis through Deuteronomy is frequently seen as a unit (the **Pentateuch**, or five books of Moses), yet the story seems to draw to a close in Numbers 27:12–23 and 31:1 with the anticipated death of Moses outside the land, and the instructions for its partition among the tribes (as well as other matters of importance) in Numbers 34–36. Then, surprisingly, in Deuteronomy we encounter a literary unit that seems to interrupt the narrative flow of the books that precede it. In Deuteronomy 1–11 Moses recapitulates Israel’s experiences at Horeb/Sinai, repeats the Decalogue, gives a long exhortation to the generation about to enter the land. Then chapters 12–26 includes numerous detailed laws sometimes related to but sometimes different from those given in Exodus to Numbers. Finally Deuteronomy 28–32 contains materials diverse in form and structure. Furthermore, Deuteronomy has its own distinctive vocabulary and phraseology. This leads some scholars to speak of Genesis through Numbers as the **Tetrateuch** (four books) and to view Deuteronomy as separate from them. On the other hand, many of the themes begun in Genesis through Deuteronomy carry on into Joshua, thus leading other scholars to speak of a **Hexateuch** (six books).⁴³ All of this creates much consternation for those seeking a theological understanding of the text.⁴⁴ Additional confusion is created by the fact that the OT contains parallel versions of the same events from differing perspectives, leaving out or emphasizing different details.⁴⁵ Furthermore, sometimes the books use distinctive vocabulary

⁴³ For a recent scholarly treatment of these issues, see the essays in Thomas B. Dozeman, Thomas Römer, and Konrad Schmid, eds., *Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Enneateuch: Identifying Literary Works in Genesis through Kings*, SBLAIL 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁴⁴ Traditionally, the various OT books are organized into three larger groupings: the Torah, otherwise known as the Pentateuch (Gen–Deut), the Prophets or *nebi'im* (Jos–2 Kgs [Former Prophets] and Isa–Mal [Latter Prophets]), and the Writings (*ketubim*, Ruth–Chr) giving the acronym *Tanakh*. The Septuagint retains the Hebrew order for the first division but varies the order of the books in the last two. Most notably the Latter Prophets, culminating in Malachi, are placed at the conclusion.

⁴⁵ Cf., e.g., the contrasting presentations of King Manasseh in 2 Kgs 23:36 and 24:3 with the favorable portrait of him in 2 Chr 33:10–13.

and theological conceptions. Often, such vocabulary and conceptions flow across the boundaries between the individual books (e.g., Deut to 2 Kgs) and at other times there seems to be a movement from one kind of vocabulary of conception of God to another *within* the same book (Gen, Zech).

The various **genres** (or kinds) of literature in the OT further complicate the quest for theological meaning. How does one derive theology from narrative? Are all of Israel's laws valid for Christians? How determinative should the prayers to God in the Psalms be for understanding God's character? How normative are proverbial expressions about life rooted in the observations of ancient Israelite sages? Moreover, the OT presents the activity and knowledge of God in the context of *history*. This in itself presents huge challenges for theological interpretation. How does one derive theology from history? Furthermore, the OT presents a particular version of history that frequently stands at odds with the reconstructions of history proposed by archaeologists. How important is it that the Bible's version of history conform to the version of history rendered by modern historiography? Finally, the OT exists in two versions: Greek and Hebrew. Each has a different order for the final two sections, and there are certain variations of order in the manuscript evidence for each version.

In sum then, problems arising from the content of the OT itself, from the complexity of OT scholarship, from the distance between the modern reader and the ancient text, and from the form of its presentation have led many to despair of finding any enduring theological expression in the OT. These obstacles are real and must be acknowledged as such. My purpose here is not to provide answers to all of these questions or to defend the OT to its critics. It is, however, to offer readers a way in to the theological world of the OT and to engage its substantial elements, even if many of these avowedly difficult matters have not been resolved.

1.3 Why Does the Church Need the OT and Choose to Retain It?

As we shall see in the next chapter, some in the early Christian era (and beyond) decided the church would be better off without the OT. However, to dismiss the OT as an antiquarian and irrelevant text whose ethical and theological perspectives are deficient and whose God is sub-Christian if not defective in character would be both a theological anomaly and a tragic loss. As we conclude this chapter, let us look at three reasons that make this so.

First, the NT views the OT as its own Scripture. It affirms the OT to be a faithful representation of the character and purposes of God (Matt 5:17; 2 Tim 3:16). Jesus' first disciples saw in him the one "about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" (John 1:45). Elsewhere in the NT Jesus is similarly understood to be the fulfillment of the OT law and prophets (e.g., Luke 24:44; Matt 2:5-6 citing Mic 5:2; Matt 12:17-21 citing Isa 42:1-4; Luke 4:18 citing Isa 61:1; Rom 1:1-3). Paul refers to the OT in relation to Christian worship (Eph 5:19) and ethics (Rom 12:20).⁴⁶ Numerous other examples could be given. The OT was the only Bible the early church had, and it treasured it as its own Scripture. Far from viewing it as inadequate, Jesus and the earliest Christians *affirmed* the theological worth of the OT.

Second, at its very heart, the OT is the story of a relationship. In one of its central declarations, Yahweh states, "And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev 26:12, cf. Exod 3:12; 6:7; Deut 29:13; Jer 24:7; 30:22; 31:33; 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 36:28; 37:27; Zech 8:8). Thus God establishes a relationship with a human community (Abraham and his seed) in which various **patterns of response** and **qualities of character** are demanded. God enters into a real relationship with Israel in which both parties are called to faithful commitment to each other. One very important OT word, *hesed*, describes the heart of that relationship. It is a hard word to translate, but it denotes loyalty, steadfast love, tender mercy, and unmerited forgiveness.⁴⁷ These are qualities that Yahweh shows to Israel, and that, in turn, God demands from Israel (see Hos 6:6; Mic 6:8) to be shown both toward God and to other persons. When we come to the NT, the very same situation continues. The same God (often called by the proper name Yahweh in the OT and revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the NT) enters into relationship with a human community, the church. This relationship stands in continuity with the relationship established between Yahweh and Israel (Rom 9:1-5). Within this relationship God still calls for faithfulness and obedience and qualities of character that reflect the character of God (John 14:15; Eph

⁴⁶ I will return to the NT's use of the OT later in this chapter and at numerous places throughout the book. Here it is sufficient to demonstrate that the OT cannot be summarily detached from the NT. Rather, the NT views the God and purposes of the OT as one with itself.

⁴⁷ See also Exod 34:6-7; Num 14:18-19; Deut 7:9-12; Isa 54:8; Hos 10:12; 12:16; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Mic 7:8; Ps 25:6-7. We will return to a fuller discussion of this important term in chap. 6. For an excellent introduction to its meaning, see Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

5:1). Jesus tells his hearers that the *hesed* God demanded of old was still called for from them (Matt 9:13 quoting Mic 6:8). Paul cites the experiences of Israel in the wilderness as a cautionary example to the church, underlining the continuity between the two (1 Cor 10:5). Similarly the writer to the Hebrews sees the people of God as an unbroken line moving from Abel to Abraham to Moses and the prophets, culminating in the Christian church (Heb 11). Numerous OT commandments are repeated in the NT with reference to the Christian community (e.g., 1 Cor 10:14; cf. Exod 20:4-5; Eph 6:2; cf. Exod 20:12 and Deut 5:16). The church, therefore, has much to learn from the OT about what it means to live in relationship with God.

Third, the church needs the OT's comprehensive vision of life. The NT was written in the space of approximately eighty to a hundred years. Its vision was profoundly apocalyptic, in that its writers expected Jesus to return in their lifetimes. Their focus was mainly on that great coming event. The early Christians were largely an oppressed and despised people, living on the margins of society, without political power or social prestige, and unable to effect any social or political change. Great emphasis was placed upon the cataclysmic events that were soon to break forth upon the world, bringing an end to the present age and ushering in the age to come. Much of the NT's message concentrates on enabling the followers of Jesus to persevere in faith until the return of Christ, close at hand. The OT has a very different perspective. It views life in this world as an ongoing continuity that stretches out before the people of God. It is profoundly interested in the material aspects of human existence. It views God as having created humanity as creatures of flesh and blood and having placed them in a material world. Many of God's blessings to them came in the form of material comforts (Deut 6:11). The OT emphasizes that the material aspects of human existence—food, work, sexuality, sleep, aesthetics, creativity and human relationships—are the gifts of God. It encourages one generation to live in such a way as to bring blessing upon the generations that follow. It speaks of the joy of a long life well lived and of seeing one's children and children's children. It invites humanity to care for God's creation as stewards and keepers. In the OT we see God's people occupying all levels of society, from kings to the poor and needy. The OT invites the people of God to practice justice and righteousness, to work toward freedom and justice for all who are oppressed, and to bring relief to the needy. Biblical theologian John Goldingay stresses that, although a number of aspects of the theological agenda of the OT are absent from that the NT, this does not mean that such parts are meaningless or irrelevant. Rather,

for Goldingay, they are a part of God's "broader agenda,"⁴⁸ which is no less a revelation of God's character and purposes for humanity than those aspects presented in the NT. Similarly, Rolf Knierim asserts that it is precisely in those areas where the OT differs from the NT that the OT can provide needed perspectives for the life of the church. He maintains that, since the Christian community participates both in the new life in Christ (characterized by eschatological expectation) and the broader structures of life in its material, social, and political dimensions, the perspectives of both testaments are desperately needed.⁴⁹

As time passed, the church recognized that the return of Christ would not come as soon as had been originally thought. As it became aware that life on this earth might continue for a long time, it turned to the OT for insight into areas absent or scarcely touched upon in the NT but extensively addressed in the OT. It came to realize that the NT did not supersede the OT, but rather that the OT and NT stood in creative dialogue with each other and both needed to be heard on their own terms. Since the church lived between the "now" of life in this world and the "not yet" of the world to come, many of the OT's insights regarding life here and now were of tremendous value. This book approaches the OT in just such a way.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, significant problems confronted the Christian community as it sought to read the OT for itself. In the next chapter we will examine how both Christian and Jewish readers sought to retain the OT as a resource for ethics, theology, and spirituality while overcoming some of the obstacles we have just considered. It is to these reading strategies that we now turn.

⁴⁸ Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel*, 26.

⁴⁹ Rolf P. Knierim, "On Biblical Theology," in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium: Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective*, ed. Wonil Kim et al., Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 2000), esp. 16–20.