

DIVERSITY AND UNITY IN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY¹

by

JOHN GOLDINGAY

Nottingham

I

It is a striking fact that hardly a year goes by without the publication of at least one "Old Testament theology", while at the same time the Old Testament scholars who write, read, and enjoy such volumes continue to find themselves unable to agree on questions of method concerning the study of Old Testament theology. Further, related to this phenomenon is another striking fact. These methodological questions have been discussed by many actual authors of Old Testament theologies, either in preambles to their works or in articles elsewhere, and their views on method can be classified along various lines (for instance, whether the authors are seeking merely to describe Old Testament faith or also to prescribe what our faith should be; or how far they expect their Christian faith to affect their presentation). But it is not clear that it is their differences over the theory of Old Testament theology that produce the differences in the writing of Old Testament theology which appear in their actual presentations.

One aspect of this unresolved debate has been the quest for some central theme or key concept by means of which Old Testament faith in its diverse features can be understood as one whole. This quest must be deemed a failure. No one concept has the key importance we are looking for (unless it be one such as "the relationship between God and Israel" which is, however, so vague as to take our study little further). Understanding the Old Testament's faith overall resembles understanding a battle or a person or a landscape rather than understanding the layout of an architect-planned new

¹ A paper read to the Society for Old Testament Study in January 1982, revised in the light of members' kind comments.

town. Many starting-points, structures and foci can illuminate aspects of it; none is the key to the whole.²

My concern in this article, however, is another aspect to the question of diversity and unity. Many individual themes of Old Testament faith (such as covenant or law or history or hope for the future) appear with widely different significance in different presentations of them in the Old Testament; indeed the overall nature of that faith differs widely according to different presentations or in different periods. What, then, is the theological relationship between these varying versions of the faith? Compared with the first aspect to the question of diversity and unity, this one has been less discussed, both in classic works such as Walther Eichrodt's *Theology of the Old Testament*³ and in more recent ones, though for opposite reasons.

Eichrodt committed himself firmly to the view that studying the theology of the Old Testament involves identifying a uniform structure of faith underlying its outward diversity. We are now very conscious of the potential difficulties of this approach. For instance, it may treat the diversity of the actual Old Testament text as of only surface, inessential significance; it may severely limit what Old Testament theologians can say (if they confine themselves strictly to what all the Old Testament books have in common); it may highlight the similarity as much as the difference between Yahwism and other religions; and it has led to no agreed results regarding the nature of the objective structure of faith which is said to underlie the Old Testament books.

In particular, Eichrodt's assumptions about the unity of Old Testament faith seem implausible in an age which is particularly aware of the diversity of Old Testament faith. As we noted above, there is very great variety in the meaning attached to fundamental Old Testament themes and concepts and in the messages brought by different Old Testament books: histories, prophets, and wisdom books, for instance, or alternative narrative presentations of the same period, or varied contemporary responses to some historical

² See J. L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (New York/London, 1974), pp. 20-7, J. Barr, "Trends and prospects in biblical theology", *JTS*, N.S. 25 (1974), p. 272, and my *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Leicester/Downers Grove, Illinois, 1981), pp. 28-9.

³ *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Leipzig, 1933-1939), E. tr., London/Philadelphia, 1961-1967. For his methodological statements see especially ch. 1 and the excursus added to the E. tr. of vol. 1.

experience such as the exile. The other classic twentieth-century *Old Testament Theology* by Gerhard von Rad⁴ makes this very clear. Nor would such diversity in a literature written over hundreds of years against a variety of cultural, historical, geographical, and religious backgrounds surprise anyone, were it not for the fact that most people become acquainted with the various books of the Old Testament not individually but bound together as one volume. The Archbishop of York, Stuart Blanch, invites us to imagine "Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the collected poems of T. S. Eliot, the *Textus Roffensis*, *Hamlet*, Robinson's *Honest to God*, *The Canterbury Tales*, Holinshed's *Chronicle*, the Cathedral Statutes of Rochester, *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (Revised), Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Hammersjold's *Markings*, *The Thoughts of Chairman Mao*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the Sixteen *Satires* of Juvenal and the *Book of Kells*", deprived of indication of date and authorship, all printed in the same format and bound together as a single volume,⁵ if we are to appreciate the difficulties caused by turning this collection of *biblia* into a *biblion*. If there can be any legitimate study of Old Testament theology, it has to take account of the living realities constituted by the theologies of the Old Testament, and of the diverse approaches to the various aspects of faith which these varying theologies take up.

Some of Eichrodt's methodological statements might lead one to expect him to neglect this diversity in the body of his work, but in fact he does not limit himself to a cross-section of what the Old Testament books have in common. When he studies topics such as covenant, law, the spirit of God, or the relationship between the individual and the community, he does so historically, not merely systematically (chs. 2, 3, 13, 20). He can thus draw attention not only to features that are consistently characteristic of the material, but also to insights which emerge in different books or in different periods, and achieve much more in his exposition of Old Testament faith than his methodological statements might lead one to expect.

Eichrodt's allowance for diversity makes his work not after all so profoundly different in approach from much produced by scholars writing nearly fifty years later, for whom the diversity of Old Testament faith is the necessary starting-point of study. This can be

⁴ *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich, 1957-1960), E. tr., Edinburgh/New York, 1962-1965, reprinted London, 1975.

⁵ *The World Our Orphanage* (London, 1972), p. 16.

illustrated from the current Fortress Press series of *Overtures to Biblical Theology*. In their foreword to the series, Walter Brueggemann and John R. Donahue echo the present atmosphere of methodological uncertainty: this "is not a time for massive tomes which claim too much. It appears not even to be a time for firm conclusions which are too comprehensive ... The certainties of the older biblical theology *in service* of dogmatics, as well as of the more recent biblical theology movement *in lieu* of dogmatics, are no longer present."⁶ The "overtures" in their series are seen as steps towards biblical theology; they do not wish to risk too much by making larger claims than that.

Volumes 1 and 3 of this series concern central themes of Old Testament faith which have been strangely neglected by many Old Testament theologians, *The Land* (by Brueggemann himself—see n. 6) and *Blessing in the Bible and in the Life of the Church* (by Claus Westermann).⁷ Neither topic receives significant treatment in works such as Eichrodt's. But this is not for methodological reasons. The themes could have been treated by Eichrodt, and—if they had been—could have been treated in similar ways to the ones adopted by these volumes. This point is made clearer by the fact that volume 5 on *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (by L. R. Bailey; Philadelphia, 1979) bears direct comparison with Eichrodt's treatment of this theme. Consequently, if one takes too literally the series editors' talk of articulating new categories and exploring new intuitions (Brueggemann, p. xi), these volumes themselves may be a disappointment. Reviewing Brevard S. Childs's *Biblical Theology in Crisis* a decade ago, Patrick D. Miller, *JBL* 90 (1971), p. 210, commented that, despite Childs's claim to advocate a new method, some of his work really constituted only "a very good example of biblical theology in the old style", and one might similarly see some of these "overtures" as more like reprises.

The situation as I see it is this: in terms of content, works such as Eichrodt's will long remain of very great value for enabling us to appreciate themes of Old Testament faith. Subsequent studies of topics such as the Land or Blessing or Death supplement these without replacing them. In terms of methodological discussion,

⁶ W. Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia, 1977/London, 1978), pp. x-xi and reprinted in succeeding volumes of the series, their italics

⁷ (Philadelphia, 1978), English title of *Der Segen in der Bibel und im Handeln der Kirche* (Munich, 1968)

Eichrodt's explicit articulation is not very helpful. But these recent studies have not particularly taken us further, at least regarding the relationship between diversity and unity in the treatment of Old Testament themes.

For Eichrodt, the unity of Old Testament faith constitutes his starting-point. He recognizes diversity of viewpoint, but this diversity appears methodologically in that determinative context. For contemporary writers such as Brueggemann or Bailey, diversity is the starting-point, and unity or coherence or interrelationship is a much more problematic question, if it arises at all. The question of the relationship between diverse presentations of the Old Testament themes which they study is rarely raised either by Eichrodt or by the *Overtures*. Neither approach goes on from a recognition of diversity in the handling of different themes to a theological analysis of this diversity and theological construction on the basis of it. Eichrodt has little consideration of the relationship between diversity and unity because methodologically he subordinates the former to the latter; Brueggemann and Bailey do not consider that relationship for the opposite reason.

It is possible, then, to study the individual theologies of specific Old Testament books; it is possible to seek the one theology which underlies the books generally; but what of the overall theology which might be suggested by the individual books with their particular viewpoints when they are considered together? How can diverse viewpoints within the Jewish scriptures be acknowledged, interrelated, and allowed to function theologically? I wish to examine two approaches which I think offer some insight on that question, a historical or contextual approach, and a unifying or constructive one.

II

One approach to theological diversity in the Old Testament is simply to acknowledge the variety of viewpoints and to accept all of them as potentially instructive when understood against their appropriate context. The Old Testament writings might then be likened to a collection of paintings of a landscape, portrayed from various angles during different seasons and in various periods, some in the manner of van Gogh, some in that of Cezanne, some in that of Picasso, some portraying a whole vista, others concentrating

on a stream here or a ruin there. Our response to such a collection is not to try to unify them in some way, but to enjoy each of them individually. The Old Testament books, in turn, constitute a range of responses to various situations, and precisely the range of these opens up the possibility that among them I may find some insight that relates to the situation I find myself in. Bailey makes this point explicit in discussing *Biblical Perspectives on Death*. "It is precarious to speak of *the* biblical response to death. Rather, there are a variety of responses, depending on the time and circumstances ... Since more than one stance was 'normative' for its time and proved to be an effective coping mechanism, all of them may have a contribution to make to the attitudes of members of the believing communities (synagogue and church) in the present." We are invited not to decide among them where lies *the* truth; rather, "the communities' situation in the present will ultimately determine which biblical response is the most meaningful" (p. 97). In a context like our own where some people find it increasingly difficult to accept the idea of an afterlife, we may find it more helpful to keep in mind other biblical perspectives, such as the general Old Testament acceptance of mortality as natural, and its rejoicing in the ongoing life of one's own people, in the survival of one's own memory, and in the eternity of God himself (pp. 102-3, 105-6). We give formal recognition to a wide range of insights, then, but we find that certain of them especially grasp us, because the message addressed to their particular context is also one which speaks in the context in which we live.

With other Old Testament themes, the contextual approach may function in a different way. There is such a gulf between the contexts addressed by the Old Testament and our own that many aspects of the Old Testament cannot be imagined to address any context we could conceivably find ourselves in; conversely there are many contexts which the Old Testament cannot conceivably be expected to address directly. Here the diversity with which Old Testament themes are developed contributes to our understanding in a different way. As we trace the path taken by the trajectory of a particular Old Testament theme or motif as it reacts to questions raised by different contexts in Old Testament times, we may be able to extrapolate what course it might be expected to take in relation to questions not raised in Old Testament times. The motif of creation, for instance, is applied within the Old Testament to questions such

as the relationship of Israelite to Babylonian religion (Gen. i), the apparent insecurity of this world (Ps. xciii), the need to maintain trust when God's faithfulness seems to fail (Job), the possibility of judgement (the creation hymn in Amos) or of restoration (Isa. xl), and to various other issues that concerned Israel in different contexts. Many of these may be directly suggestive for our context; but even where they are not, the contextual nature of the Old Testament provides us with a model for our attempt to see what new thing God may have to say in a context different from ones known in ancient Israel. We can thus consider the path the creation trajectory might be expected to take in relation to post-biblical questions such as ecology, world development and world food needs, or the search for meaning in life.

To pay serious attention to the diverse viewpoints expressed in the Old Testament thus makes a good starting-point for an attempt to allow the Old Testament to function theologically. But it is only a starting-point for this task. Often the Old Testament text has more the character of raw material for a portrayal of some aspect of the faith (e.g. the person of God) than that of an actual coherent portrayal. Simply accepting the Old Testament's statements about God falls short of the properly theological task of analysing these statements reflectively and building with them. This point is conveniently illustrated by recent study of the land as an Old Testament theme, both by Brueggemann and by other writers.⁸ That study is strong on diachronic theological consideration of the theme as it appears in various periods in biblical times, but stops short of the theological questions raised (for us, at least) by the material as a whole.⁹

There is a second sense in which tracing the diverse Old Testament viewpoints on a particular theme is only the starting-point for an attempt to allow the Old Testament to function theologically. The tensions between these viewpoints mean that even if all of them contain insights, not all these insights can be normative in the same

⁸ See especially R. Rendtorff, "Das Land Israel im Wandel der alttestamentlichen Geschichte", in W. P. Eckert et al. (ed.), *Judäisches Volk - gelobtes Land* (Munich, 1970), pp. 153-68; H. E. von Waldow, "Israel and her land", in H. N. Bream et al. (ed.), *A Light unto my Path* (J. M. Myers volume; Philadelphia, 1974), pp. 493-508; P. Liepold, *Israel's Land* (Berlin, 1972); H.-R. Weber, "The promise of the land", SE/16 in *Study Encounter* 7/4 (1971).

⁹ See R. C. Dentan's comments on Brueggemann's *The Land* in *JBL* 97 (1978), p. 578.

way at the same time. The interpreter has to move from a theoretical commitment regarding the whole Old Testament to a practical commitment regarding some aspects of it rather than others, or to seeing some aspects as more significant than others. Bailey's approach to *Biblical Perspectives on Death* illustrates how we may make such a choice of commitments on the basis of what we find helpful, of how we understand the world and the community to which we wish to relate the Old Testament's insights. But from the Old Testament's own perspective, our approach is then arbitrary. It ignores the possibility that some perspectives may be inappropriate to situations to which they seem attractive (or vice versa), or that some are theologically preferable to others. Apart from the question whether or not we find the relatively late Old Testament affirmation of an afterlife to be helpful, we need to consider the question whether or not it be true. Otherwise, using the Old Testament in its diversity merely means treating it as a bran-tub in which we rummage until we find something that gives us the pretext for accepting what we wanted to believe anyway.

In referring just now to the trajectory of an Old Testament motif, I took up a notion which comes from the work of James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester on New Testament theology.¹⁰ To adapt a remark of Robinson's, although the unity of Old Testament faith has often been overestimated in the context of monolithic theology, it would be as mistaken to settle simply for mere acceptance of diversity in Old Testament faith. An emphasis on the contextual variety of theologies in the Old Testament may be just as much an unhistorical mirroring of modern pluralistic culture and theology (or of existentialist concerns) as the older emphasis on one system of biblical doctrine was an unhistorical mirroring of a monolithic culture and faith.

So how may we acknowledge diversity without canonizing arbitrariness? Robinson and Koester note that statements about God's activity gain their meaning from their place and function in a trajectory. This both facilitates and hinders the grasping of what the event means. As well as making it clear, it obscures it, because the terms used bring the overtones and nuances that history has given them, and these contribute negatively as well as positively to the ap-

¹⁰ *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971), for what follows, see p 69

prehension and expression of the point which needs making. There is a potential tension between point and language.¹¹ Further, the cultural conditions that facilitate an apprehension of certain aspects of an event's significance also prevent the apprehension of other aspects, where that same context lacks the symbols or questions or framework which makes a response possible.¹² So different statements are appropriate in different contexts, all may be illuminating, and all are of theological significance. Nevertheless, some contexts allow more of an event's or a concept's intrinsic meaning or depth to emerge; some ways of thinking, questions, symbol-systems, or frameworks provide a better match than others do to some realities. The fullest and most challenging understanding of any reality, the one which is most illuminating and of most theological significance, is the one which emerges from that particular context which happens to allow it to emerge most fully.

The question of the relationship between divine and human activity in history as the Old Testament sees it provides an example of this process. For some years, it was a truism of Old Testament study that the Old Testament is the story of Yahweh's acts in history. As G. E. Wright put it, "Biblical faith" is concerned with "history as the arena of God's activity ... Biblical man confesses his faith by reciting the formative events of his history as the redemptive handiwork of God."¹³ But such an emphasis on the acts of *God* suggests a distinctly interventionist, supranaturalist understanding of God's involvement with the world, one which underplays the significance of man's role in making history. In fact, this view of history appears most clearly in apocalyptic's portrayal of events which are future from the perspective of its visions, though mostly already past from the perspective of the visionaries' own experience. In apocalyptic, human initiative does affect history, but mostly in a negative way. The positive achievements of history, the events which bring history to its climax, come about "by no human hand" (Dan. viii 25).

In a book such as Exodus which gives more classic expression to the theology of "God who acts", we find clear assertions of the contribution played by human activity alongside the stress on God's

¹¹ Cf. J. M. Robinson, "A critical inquiry into the scriptural bases of confessional hermeneutics", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 3 (1966), pp. 42-3.

¹² So Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, pp. 208-9.

¹³ *God Who Acts* (London/Chicago, 1952), p. 38.

acts. There are aspects of the "heroic" about Moses' role in the Pentateuch,¹⁴ and the wars of Yahweh involve a "synergism", "a fusion of divine and human activity".¹⁵ In the exodus story the emphasis is on the divine; in the story of Joseph before it, and in those of the judges, Ruth, Saul, David, Solomon, Ezra, and Nehemiah after it, the emphasis lies the other way. These do express the conviction that God is at work in history, yet they also strongly emphasize the initiative of human actors. This focus becomes all-important in the story of Esther. Here there is no overt reference to God's activity. Even if his providence is to be seen behind the events in the story, all the stress lies on human initiative in history and human responsibility for history. We are at the opposite pole from apocalyptic, and here, at least, decision history (*Entscheidungsgeschichte*), Georg Fohrer's term for the prophetic view of history,¹⁶ seems as appropriate a description of the Old Testament as *Heilsgeschichte*.

The prophets, indeed, generally give clear expression to the conviction that God is at work in history, as well as assuming that history reflects human acts and initiatives. Paul D. Hanson, in setting his work on *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia, 1975) in a wider context, suggests that the prophets take up and develop the interweaving of divine and human which is present in the traditions of the wars of Yahweh. Like the apocalypticist, the prophet has a vision of Yahweh's plan for Israel and for the world, but unlike the apocalypticist he "translates [it] into the terms of plain history, real politics, and human instrumentality" (p. 11). The prophets "forged the visionary and the realistic aspects of the religious experience into one tension-filled whole" (p. 17).

The Old Testament overall, then, has various ways of seeing the relationship between divine and human responsibility for making history. At different points on its trajectory the theme of divine and human activity in history appears in different forms, each expressing its insight and each appropriate to some context. But the ministry of a prophet such as Isaiah allows this theme to emerge in its most profound form. "In the eighth century", Hanson com-

¹⁴ See the work of G. W. Coats, e.g. "Legendary motifs in the Moses death reports", *CBQ* 39 (1977), pp. 34-44.

¹⁵ P. D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior* (Cambridge, Mass./London, 1973), p. 156.

¹⁶ "Prophetie und Geschichte", *TLZ* 89 (1964), cols. 498-9 = Fohrer, *Studien zur alttestamentlichen Prophetie* (1949-1965) (*BZAW* 99, Berlin, 1967), pp. 289-91.

ments, "Isaiah illustrates perhaps better than any other prophet the delicate balance achieved by prophetic Yahwism between the visionary element and the pragmatic integration of the cosmic vision into the events of the time. Isaiah, the visionary who received his call by being drawn into Yahweh's divine council (Isaiah 6), was at the same time the statesman standing at the side of the king and relating every major event of his nation to divine will" (p. 19). Circumstances may make it difficult for this dialectic to be maintained in many contexts, but that is the dialectic which the Old Testament at its most profound encourages.

It seems, then, that the world and the people of God are nearer to or further away from fullest insight regarding different aspects of the faith at different periods. Some contexts lead to perception in one area but blind-spots in another (I do not imply that the high-points always come in eighth century prophecy). The theological aspect to studying Old Testament themes will include the attempt to identify the interrelationships between perspectives that emerge in different contexts and to look for the highpoints, the points of most creative tension, reached by the various trajectories that themes follow. As in other forms of theological study, the insight of interpreters themselves will contribute to their perceiving these highpoints. But there will be potentially a kind of objectivity about their analysis of them, which makes their work nevertheless still part of Old Testament theology's descriptive task. They can say of their work, "Here is a way of interrelating the various Old Testament viewpoints on this particular theme, a way of seeing in them a pattern which is natural to them rather than imposed on them." Whether one then accepts that (for instance) Isaiah's striving to hold together vision and reality is a paradigm we will accept for ourselves will, however, depend on how one assesses its inherent cogency and the extrinsic authority which belongs to it as a high-point of biblical perspective.

III

Such is a contextual, historical approach to diversity and unity in Old Testament theology. This issue is also open to a constructive approach, which takes the varied materials offered to theology by the Old Testament and builds with them.

I have noted above that Eichrodt, though best known as an advocate of the "cross-section approach" to the theology of the Old

Testament, which seeks to identify "the unchanging truth hidden under its bewildering diversity" (vol. 1, p. 266; E. tr., p. 490), does acknowledge in an excursus that "the variety of the OT testimonies" is "the result of observing a complex reality from various angles in ways which are in principle concordant with one another" (E. tr., p. 517). The nature of God is such that, he acknowledges, sometimes only contradictory formulations do justice to it (e.g. pp. 45, 101; E. tr., pp. 104, 205). There is thus a tension in Eichrodt's work between his emphasis on "common basic features" and his talk of combining apparently conflicting descriptions of a complex reality. In his critique of the work of Eichrodt and von Rad, *Two Old Testament Theologies* (London/Naperville, Illinois, 1975), p. 89, David Spriggs notes the plurality of approaches to diversity and unity in the Old Testament in Eichrodt's work, and suggests that his fundamental view is the one which allows various insights to contribute to a larger whole. I think this is what Eichrodt should have meant, but it is not clearly what he did mean. Only rarely does he seek to portray the whole to which the various testimonies refer. He does, for instance, offer a "synthesis" of the Old Testament picture of God, as holding together the idea of power without limit (with which holiness and wrath are associated) and the idea of self-limitation in making himself known as a person in love and righteousness through his entering into his special relationship with Israel (pp. 149-50, E. tr., pp. 286-8). He also analyses the interweaving of "the individual and the community in the Old Testament God-man relationship", acknowledging that the Old Testament is not to be seen as evolving from primitive community thinking towards the developed individualism of the New, but as holding together an individual and corporate view (see ch. 20). But such analyses are the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, Eichrodt cuts the ground from under much constructive theological work by appealing to a divine entity beyond reason who cannot really be described in human language, an appeal (which perhaps reflects the neo-orthodox background of his theology) which must at least be qualified if theological work on the Old Testament material is to proceed and we are to attempt to think theologically about the truth as the Old Testament witnesses to it.¹⁷

¹⁷ See N. K. Gottwald's comments in R. B. Laurin (ed.), *Contemporary Old Testament Theologians* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania/London, 1970), pp. 54-5.

After tracing the changing "forms of the Old Testament hope of salvation" Eichrodt does consider their implications for "a right understanding of the divine revelation" as a whole: that they portray salvation as something historical, concrete, and earthly (and such therefore is the God who brings it); that nevertheless salvation is of supernatural origin; and that the eschatological hope opens up the possibility of resolving the tensions of Israel's unfulfilled destiny as a nation, of her unfulfilled calling before God, and of the relationship of the individual to the community (vol. 1, pp. 255-68; E. tr., pp. 472-94). But he does not go on to reflect on the diverse and contradictory features of her hope of salvation which he notes (whether that hope is for Israel or for all nations, whether it is achieved by political/military means or by non-political/peaceful ones, whether a personal redeemer figure is integral to it or not). Nor, in consequence, does he seek to identify the truths these tensions witness to or the way the alternatives complement each other. Nor does he make it clear how such theological needs are "fully met in the NT confession of Jesus as the Messiah" (p. 266; E. tr., p. 490).¹⁸

In considering the question of the place of an individual redeemer in Israel's hopes for the future, for instance, one needs initially, indeed, to ask what are the features of Israel's hope which appear both where an individual redeemer features and where he is missing (such as the expectation of justice for the needy and on the wicked), but then also to consider what are the important distinctive implications of hoping for an individual redeemer (such as the fact that history generally reflects the creative role played by individuals, and that God did commit himself somewhat unequivocally to David), what are the important distinctive implications of omitting reference to an individual redeemer (such as the greater prominence this gives to Yahweh himself, and to Israel as the beneficiaries of his coming act), and in what ways each of these two types of hope is qualified or safeguarded in the Old Testament in regard to the concerns expressed more directly by its opposite. In this way one can seek to take further the kind of survey of Israelite hopes which a writer such as Eichrodt offers, not merely looking for some view which underlies all of them, nor merely stating their

¹⁸ Earlier he does illustrate how these needs are fulfilled in the context of another theological issue, the tension between the historical and the eschatological or that between judgement and mercy (see p. 82; E. tr., pp. 171-2).

diversity, but seeking to construct a whole which does justice to the distinctives of all of them. One can express the Old Testament theologian's task at this point in terms of a mathematical analogy: Eichrodt's cross-section approach suggests that Old Testament theology seeks the Highest Common Factor in the various versions of Old Testament faith. Preferable is the view that Old Testament theology seeks the Lowest Common Denominator of the various versions of Old Testament faith, the entity into which all the insights that emerge in different contexts can find a place because it is large enough to combine them all; it does so taking seriously the historical particularity of concrete Old Testament theological statements, yet setting these in a broader context shaped by the Old Testament's total range of particular, concrete theological statements.

In the case of a number of Old Testament themes, a constructive approach requires consideration of the relationship between opposed but related polarities. Gerhard Ebeling has suggested that Luther's thought is constructed around polarities of this kind, such as letter and Spirit, law and gospel, faith and love, the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of this world, freedom and bondage, God hidden and God revealed.¹⁹ Elsewhere Ebeling notes that such a polar structure goes back to scripture itself, and that scripture's polar structure reflects "its comprehensive relation to life. If life itself is determined in a polar way—one thinks of birth and death, creating and receiving, subject and object, passivity and activity, the fulfillment and the failure of life, and the like—then when the question involves true life, attention must be directed to the polarities that are determinative and that set it right."²⁰ In the Old Testament, Ebeling goes on to observe, it is the (polar) relationship of Yahweh and Israel, counterparts who belong together and stand in contradiction, which constitutes "the red thread of the Old Testament", and which draws attention to further tensions, between election and universalism, Israel as a political entity and Israel as a religious community, cultic piety and prophetic piety, individual and community in relation to God, openness to the world

¹⁹ *Luther* (Tübingen, 1964), p. 16; E. tr., *Luther* (London/Philadelphia, 1970; reprinted London, 1972), p. 25; cf. "Dogmatik und Exegese", *ZThK* 77 (1980), pp. 276-7.

²⁰ *Studium der Theologie* (Tübingen, 1975), p. 20, E. tr., *The Study of Theology* (London/Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 19-20.

or to other religions and insistence on distinctiveness or purity, suffering and confidence in God, judgement and grace, law and promise (pp. 35-6, E. tr., p. 34). It is easy to extend this list: creation and redemption, exodus and exile, word and event.

One such example of opposed but related polarities which require this form of theological consideration is the relationship between faith and uncertainty. In keeping with Ebeling's thesis that the polar structure of scriptural thinking reflects a polar structure which determines life itself, behind this polarity one may perceive a dialectic between orientation or equilibrium and dislocation or disorientation which characterizes human experience in general.²¹ Equilibrium or faith is generally seen (and certainly felt) as preferable to disorientation or uncertainty. But it is as likely that the latter is to be viewed positively, for faith develops not least in the light of experiences which cannot be accommodated by an existent orientation. A new orientation can develop only as the subject accepts and embraces such dislocation, rather than resisting or denying it in holding on to the old orientation. Thus a hermeneutic of suspicion encourages the relinquishing of an old orientation, while in dialectic with this a hermeneutic of recovery encourages the recapture of meaning in a renewed orientation. It is this dialectic that is at work in the alternation between lament and praise in the Psalms. Faith and questioning are essential in relation to each other. Without the context of faith and reorientation in faith, questioning would end up as pessimism. But without the context of doubt and a continuing openness to questioning, faith would cease to develop.²² It is because faith and questioning belong together that Ecclesiastes manifests both, whether because an originally more unequivocally sceptical book has been tempered by the assurances of the orthodox, or because the assurances of the orthodox are Ecclesiastes' own point of departure. It is also for this reason that an uncertainty about basic affirmations of Israel's faith such as God's goodness and accessibility is not confined to Israel's late, decaying years or to periods of historical crisis but appears

²¹ Cf. W. Brueggemann, "Psalms and the life of faith", *JSOT* 17 (1980), pp. 5-16, 24-30, building on the work of Paul Ricoeur.

²² See R. Davidson's study of "Some aspects of the theological significance of doubt in the Old Testament", *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 7 (1970), pp. 41-52.

from early times in reaction to over-certainties which seem to ignore contrary evidences.²³

Westermann's treatment of *Blessing* in the *Overture to Biblical Theology* series draws attention to another of these polarities, "blessing" (God's regular, reliable sustaining and giving of life to the world, and the believer's enjoyment of that), and "deliverance" (God's essentially occasional interventions which bring release from specific dangers or meet particular needs). Nature and history or wisdom and salvation history²⁴ constitute other versions of this polarity. It is of the essence of polarities that they are difficult to hold in tension, and the over-emphasis on deliverance/history/salvation history at the expense of blessing/nature/wisdom in Old Testament theology exemplifies this problem. Even the most recent and in some ways most creative of these *Overtures*, Dale Patrick's discussion of *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament*,²⁵ ends up "relegating the origin of the cosmos and the rhythm of nature to the status of backdrop for the human drama" (p. 123).

A descriptive Old Testament theology involves holding together polarities such as universalism and election, politics and religion, faith and love, cultic piety and prophetic piety, individual and community relationships to God, openness and purity, suffering and confidence in God, creation and redemption, exodus and exile, word and event; it involves seeking to clarify their interrelation rather than abandoning one member of each pair. Such a study will then enable one to perceive whether such a theology demands the theologian's own appropriation. For myself, I doubt if anything which does less justice to the complexity of reality itself is likely to do so.

²³ See J. L. Crenshaw, "The birth of skepticism in ancient Israel", in J. L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel (ed.), *The Divine Helmsman* (L. H. Silverman volume, New York, 1980), pp. 1-19.

²⁴ I have discussed the latter in *Evangelical Quarterly* 51 (1979), pp. 194-207.

²⁵ (Philadelphia, 1981). Since the completion of this article a further volume has appeared, *The Diversity of Scripture* by P. D. Hanson (Philadelphia, 1982). It takes further the treatment of polarities in scripture begun in Hanson's earlier work (noted in section 2 above), emphasizing their contextual aspect.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.