

# Disputed Issues of Biblical Theology

Georg Fischer, SJ

## 1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a kind of renaissance of biblical theology. A large number of monographs have appeared since 1990, notably by Horst Dietrich Preuß, Brevard S. Childs, Walter Brueggemann, Paul R. House, Erhard S. Gerstenberger, R. W. L. Moberly, John Kessler, among many others.<sup>1</sup> Two of the newer books are *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible*, by Marvin A. Sweeney, which has an interesting first part dealing with the differences between Jewish biblical theology and Christian Old Testament theology, and *Ein Gott, der straft und tötet?*, by Bernd Janowski, treating the problem of a violent God who punishes and kills.<sup>2</sup>

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I thank Felicity Stephens for the correction of the English in this article.

1. Horst Dietrich Preuß, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1991–1992); Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998); Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Theologien im Alten Testament: Pluralität und Synkretismus alttestamentlichen Gottesglaubens* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001); R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013); John Kessler, *Old Testament Theology: Divine Call and Human Response* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013).

2. Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012); Bernd Janowski, *Ein Gott, der straft und tötet? Zwölf Fragen zum Gottesbild des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2013). “Newer” refers to the date when this paper was read in 2013.

These are just a few of the authors and titles that have emerged from a flourishing field of research and publications in several languages. Among recent articles, Manfred Oeming's "Viele Wege zu dem Einen" and Friedhelm Hartenstein's "Jhwhs Wesen im Wandel" are stimulating and reflect on critical problems.<sup>3</sup> On another level, Konrad Schmid's *Gibt es Theologie im Alten Testament* is valuable for providing historical background to our topic and for presenting various inspiring positions.<sup>4</sup>

Personally, biblical theology has held my interest since I encountered it in my early studies in the 1970s. Arnold Gamper, who had worked extensively on "Gott als Richter," was my teacher, and to him biblical theology was always the climax in dealing with the Bible. He regularly gave lectures on themes such as *Bund*, *Messias*, and *Erlösung*, covering main concepts of the Bible and their development throughout its various books.<sup>5</sup>

Following in his footsteps, I have continued to offer courses in biblical theology. Main themes in the first years were *Berufung*, *Sühne und Versöhnung*, *Gebet*, and *Heil und Heilung*.<sup>6</sup> However, my focus shifted slowly in the course of the following years. I started to concentrate more on the way in which God himself is portrayed in the biblical books and became ever more fascinated by the variety of presentations. This led to the desire to show to others the Bible's richness in talking about God and, in consequence, to the project of writing books on the subject, the first volume of which is *Theologien des Alten Testaments*.<sup>7</sup>

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3. Manfred Oeming, "Viele Wege zu dem Einen: Die 'transzendente Mitte' einer Theologie des Alten Testaments im Spannungsfeld von Vielheit und Einheit," in *Viele Wege zu dem Einen: Historische Bibelkritik—die Vitalität der Glaubensüberlieferung in der Moderne*, ed. Stefan Beyerle et al., BThSt 121 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012), 83–108; Friedhelm Hartenstein, "Jhwhs Wesen im Wandel," *TLZ* 137 (2012): 3–20.

4. Konrad Schmid, *Gibt es Theologie im Alten Testament: Zum Theologiebegriff in der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft*, ThSt 7 (Zürich: TVZ, 2013).

5. Arnold Gamper's thesis and his "Habilitationsschrift" appeared together as *Gott als Richter in Mesopotamien und im Alten Testament: Zum Verständnis einer Gebetsbitte* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1966). He was my predecessor in the chair of Old Testament Biblical Sciences and Oriental Languages at the Theological Faculty of the University of Innsbruck. The English equivalents of *Bund*, *Messias*, and *Erlösung* are, respectively, covenant, Messiah, and redemption.

6. In English, call/vocation narratives, atonement and reconciliation, prayer, salvation, and healing, respectively.

7. Georg Fischer, *Theologien des Alten Testaments*, NSKAT 31 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk Stuttgart, 2012).

Before starting to expose some of the major concerns in dealing with biblical theology today, I would like to confess my indebtedness to Jewish interpreters and exegesis. I have profited a great deal from medieval commentators such as Rashi and Ibn Ezra and, from the last century, Benno Jacob, Moshe Weinfeld, Moshe Greenberg, Jacob Milgrom, and others, besides many still living. I admire their thorough knowledge of the Bible, their acute observations, and their extraordinary sensitivity to even the smallest details. They have had a great influence on my thinking and interpretation.

What follows here is based on the fruits of recent discussions, together with the relevant literature, part of which is mentioned above, and also on experiences gleaned over more than thirty years of teaching and writing. After a short reflection on the need to engage with biblical theology (§2), I will concentrate on the decisions and the steps to be taken to achieve this goal (§3) and finally, in conclusion, indicate some results (§4).

## 2. The Necessity for Biblical Theology

Before addressing this issue, a short clarification of the term *biblical theology*, already used several times above, might be appropriate. In my view, the Greek origin of “theology,” *θεός* and *λόγος*, in its specific sense as “word/speaking (about) God,” directs us to keep the focus on God (see also below, §3.2) rather than on other issues.<sup>8</sup> The other word, *biblical*, is fluid in its meaning, according to the various denominations; this will be discussed under the topic *canon* (below, §3.4.2) and for the moment can remain open. As a “working agreement,” we may understand biblical theology as those studies dealing with statements about God present in the Holy Scriptures whose extent varies according to the different faith groups.

After this clarification, there arises the question of whether biblical exegesis is necessary at all. Why isn't it sufficient simply to read individual biblical texts and interpret them, that is, do the *exegesis* of distinct passages, without caring about their theological intentions and their connections? I can offer three main arguments against that approach:

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8. This is also one outcome of my recent article on various biblical theologies: Georg Fischer, “Biblical Theology in Transition—an Overview of Recent Works, and a Look Ahead at How to Proceed,” in *Biblical Theology: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Carey Walsh and M. W. Elliott (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 79–90, esp. 87.

(1) One cannot understand single theological statements correctly without taking into account related texts and the broader background. The following two examples demonstrate this.

First, in Ezek 9:3–11:23, YHWH's glory is depicted as leaving his temple in three steps.<sup>9</sup> Unless one also considers Ezek 43:1–5, any interpretation of Ezek 8–11 will remain limited and not do full justice to the motif of God's glory, namely, that these chapters only describe a *temporary* absence.

Second, Jer 12:8 says that God hates his inheritance.<sup>10</sup> To conclude from this passage that the biblical God is misanthropic fails to take into account passages such as Jer 31:3: "I have loved you with eternal love." Interpreting Jer 12:8 without bringing in other texts would result in a one-sided, incorrect picture of God.<sup>11</sup>

Thus it seems necessary to interpret single passages within a larger context. In the cases mentioned here, this is, in the first instance, the respective book. Statements about God, especially when they do not seem to fit into "normal" concepts of him, need to be considered within a broader framework.

(2) The actual discussions about divine violence are urgent, and one must address them.<sup>12</sup> As the last example, Jer 12:8, shows, one cannot do this by referring to single texts. One needs systematic, critical reflection, such as Janowski has provided paradigmatically in his recent book.<sup>13</sup> This is all the more important as recent worldwide developments raise the issue

9. For its importance, see Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, AB 22 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 176, 191, 195.

10. The passage coming closest to it is Hos 9:15. There, too, God's hatred is directed against humans, and he dispels them from "my house"; the latter occurs in Jeremiah in the context immediately preceding (Jer 12:7).

11. The same contrast between God's hatred and love is also found in Hosea: 3:1; 11:1; 14:5, so that there, too, the harsh, negative divine attitude towards his people is reversed and brought to a good solution.

12. A decade ago, Jan Assmann, kicked off a heated debate by his thesis that maintains that monotheistic religions would be "inherently violent" (*Die mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* [München: Carl Hanser, 2003]). More recently, Notger Slenczka has attacked the Old Testament in a similar vein and demanded its removal from academic teaching; for a criticism of such unfounded misinterpretations, see, among others, Rolf Schieder, ed., *Die Gewalt des einen Gottes: Die Monotheismusdebatte zwischen Jan Assmann, Micha Brumlik, Rolf Schieder, Peter Sloterdijk und anderen* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2014).

13. Janowski, *Ein Gott*; earlier works dealing with the problem are, e.g., Manfred Görg, *Der un-heile Gott: Die Bibel im Bann der Gewalt* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1995);

of the connection between religion—or rather, portrayals of God—and resulting human behavior, so that sometimes the Bible is held responsible for intolerance and violence.

(3) More fundamentally, and on a theoretical level, all human understanding is contextual. This hermeneutical principle is also valid for biblical texts, scrolls, and the Bible as a whole. Single signs or expressions, like words and phrases, need to be seen in an environment that establishes their meaning. This means that there can be no correct interpretation of a verse or a chapter without taking into account its connections, and that includes, at a minimum, the entire book in which it is found, and often much more, and not limiting investigation to certain passages, chapters, or sections.<sup>14</sup>

From the above, it should now be clear that on a practical, political (referring to its social relevance today), and theoretical level, it is necessary to go beyond doing *mere* exegesis solely of distinct passages, interpreting them within a limited perspective. One must incorporate a wider background and dedicate interest and effort to biblical theology. The flowering of recent publications is a sign that this need is widely felt. If any biblical exegesis is not inserted in theology, it risks being heavily flawed and runs the danger of misreading the texts because the necessary framework is missing.

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Walter Dietrich and Christian Link, *Willkür und Gewalt*, vol. 1 of *Die dunklen Seiten Gottes*, 5th ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009).

14. The transmission of single scrolls, such as exist for Genesis, Exodus, etc., is a sign that they were conceived as a unity, no matter whether it is the result of a redactional process or was originally planned this way. For examples of the necessity to consider whole books, see above (1). For example, the links relating the book of Genesis to 2 Kings—e.g., God's promises to the forefathers to give them the land in Genesis—cannot be adequately understood unless one also takes into account their fulfillment in the book of Joshua. There are intended connections between them, and they require incorporation into one's interpretation of the respective texts—otherwise the portrayal of God could become flawed, in this case as one who makes many promises without actually carrying them out. Lohr's critique in his response in Baltimore misses the point: one must investigate individual sections *as well as* their insertion into a larger context. These two approaches do not exclude each other but are complementary (see also below §3.3).

### 3. Disputed Issues

The fields of biblical theology are so vast that I can address here only some fundamental questions. I will limit myself to seven areas and present them briefly.

#### 3.1. Where to Begin<sup>15</sup>

In the past, *concepts* have often dominated the approaches. *Heilsgeschichte* was a dominant idea for Gerhard von Rad.<sup>16</sup> Preuß placed more emphasis on *Erwählung*, and he subsumed large parts of his two volumes under headings informed by *election*.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Bernhard Lang focuses on YHWH's *lordship*.<sup>18</sup> These and other authors have detected important themes and have overlaid these general ideas on the texts and books, using them as a sort of universal key to the understanding of the entire Bible.

Compared with this, and in contrast to it, it seems more appropriate to start with the texts and their variety. God's word, as communicated in the biblical books in a rich diversity, must have priority over human categories and theories, which, imposed on the individual texts, can narrow the wide spectrum of the Bible's messages.

An additional aspect of the first question touches on the *choice of text*. Responsible interpretation requires going back, as far as possible, to the "original." In the case of the Tanak, this is the Hebrew text of the MT, which in my opinion, even in disputed cases of other scrolls, offers the most reliable textual basis.<sup>19</sup> The LXX shows throughout all the signs of a

15. This question touches on the issue of the initial orientation for one's approach, not on the choice of specific texts (e.g., Gen 1, Isa 6, or Ps 2) with which to start.

16. Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 7th ed., 2 vols. (München: Kaiser, 1978–1980). He often uses "Heilsgeschichte" (= salvation history; e.g., 1:135, 143) and "Heilsgeschehen" (= salvation events; 2:254, 380, etc.). This notion is taken from outside and applied to the Bible.

17. Preuß, *des Alten Testaments*: The title of §2 in part 1 of vol. 1 starts with "Erwählungsaussagen," and part 2 therein describes "JHWH als Subjekt des geschichtlich erwählenden Handelns." In vol. 2, part 3 deals with "Die Auswirkungen und das Weiterdenken der Urerwählung," and part 4 concentrates on "Folgen und Folgerungen der geschichtlich erfahrenen Erwählung."

18. Bernhard Lang, *Jahwe der biblische Gott: Ein Porträt* (München: Beck, 2002). All his five main sections start with "Herr" (= Lord, of wisdom, war, animals ...).

19. E.g., the Books of Samuel and of Jeremiah, *pace* recent developments giving

translation, so that it cannot be taken as testimony for an originally different text, and the best Qumran manuscripts generally support the version of the MT.

### 3.2. What to Search For

What in recent years have been published as biblical theologies sometimes hardly deserve the name. Gerstenberger himself admits to concentrating on the “Sozialgeschichte Israels.”<sup>20</sup> A. H. J. Gunneweg and Rainer Albertz have focused on the “Religionsgeschichte,” whereas Bernhard Lang, Othmar Keel, and others have more been interested in the connections of the biblical God with the ancient Near East.<sup>21</sup> As important as the links with all these related fields and the respective studies are, they cannot form the center of what is called biblical theology. The legitimate application of this label is bound to the Bible and to how it speaks of God.

Another type of “deviation” from biblical theology is apparent in my own biography and in similarly oriented publications. Sweeney, in his introduction, distances biblical theology from *anthropology*.<sup>22</sup> It is true that all our talk of God in the Bible and elsewhere is tied to our human experience and that this must be reflected; however, human affairs and interests cannot be allowed to take center stage in biblical theology.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to the orientations mentioned above, a biblical theology worthy of the name must concentrate on God and the way in which the Bible portrays God. As the central character and the most important figure

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preference to the LXX. Sweeney, too, takes the Masoretic Text as basis for Jewish biblical theology and gives good reasons for doing so (*Tanak*, 28–30).

20. Gerstenberger, *Theologien im Alten Testament*, ch. 3.

21. See the respective (sub)titles of A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments: Eine Religionsgeschichte Israels in biblisch-theologischer Sicht* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1993), and of Rainer Albertz, *Religionsgeschichte Israels in alttestamentlicher Zeit*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., GAT 8/1–2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996–1997). See Lang, *Jahwe der biblische Gott*; see also the various publications of Othmar Keel, Christoph Uehlinger, and Silvia Schroer.

22. Sweeney, *Tanak*, 26: “Biblical theology is differentiated from biblical anthropology.”

23. Joel N. Lohr, in his response, emphasized the divine commandments, yet there is no contradiction in that. God himself is more important than his precepts, and the obeisance to them is only a consequence of the relationship to him, a second step (see the passages in the next note), with minor weight.

in it, God therefore deserves the utmost attention. The Greek origin of the word *theology*, too, requires such a primary orientation on God.<sup>24</sup> In this approach lies also the hope of being able to perceive what is most important in the Bible.

### 3.3. How to Approach It

Who now believes in the once enthusiastically received theology of von Rad? His presentation of the “geschichtlichen” and “prophetischen Überlieferungen” is heavily dependent on theories that are outdated.<sup>25</sup> In a similar way, studies like those of Albertz, which use to a high degree redaction-critical models, literary-critical strata, or sources, carry the danger of being based too much on hypotheses; furthermore, such interpretations are widely disputed, even among colleagues inclined toward these approaches.

For these and other reasons, a more solid methodology is recommended. It must start with the text, observe all it says about God, collect the various enunciations, try to sift and to order them without leveling their differences, and take into account all relevant statements, at least within one book.<sup>26</sup> Only this combination of attention to the details (in singular phrases, expressions, verses) *together with* a global (encompassing a whole literary unity) perspective can lead to firm results.

In my research I have found several features especially helpful: to note the titles given to God, to detect what is unique (e.g., “king of the nations” in Jer 10:6) or rare, and to detect what is repeated and thus forms a focal point. In many books of the Bible there are passages or chapters where

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24. I agree with Lohr that right behavior, submission to the divine will, is important, but it *follows* from knowing God. How God is, and is perceived, is a model for those believing in him, as Lev 11:45 (“holy”), Deut 10:18–19 (“love the stranger”), and similar constructions in the New Testament—as there are in Matt 5:48 (with “perfect”) and Luke 6:36 (with “merciful”), applying the same expressions to God and his faithful—show.

25. These are the respective subtitles of the first and second volumes of von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*.

26. See above the example with God’s hatred and love in Jeremiah and in Hosea. *Text* does not mean a reconstructed form of it or supposed layers but in its *final form*. Marvin A. Sweeney, in his chapter “What Is Biblical Theology?” in this volume refers to Bernard S. Childs and opts for the same orientation in dealing with the proposed topic.



theological ideas are concentrated (e.g., Deut 4; 10:12–22; 32).<sup>27</sup> Often these texts are also prayers (e.g., Exod 15; 1 Sam 2; Dan 9) and deserve special attention.

### 3.4. How Far Should the Study Extend?

This is a very decisive question, bearing on various delicate issues of which a few are mentioned below.

#### 3.4.1. Theology in the Singular or Theologies in the Plural?

Who would mix an apple, a stone, and a car tire? What difference does it make if we talk about *the* theology of *the* Bible? Such a generalized way of speaking presupposes that all of its books contain nearly the same ideas and thus convey a similar message.

I do not deny the unity of the Bible as a canon or the interconnect-edness of its respective parts; however, theologically, the various books differ quite widely, and, in my opinion, this must be respected more than has previously been the case. The book of Exodus shows a portrayal of God different from that of the book of Joshua.<sup>28</sup> Prophetic books such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Jonah vary in the ways in which they speak about God.<sup>29</sup> For these reasons, I think it is more appropriate to speak, even within the Bible, of theologies in the plural. This in no way suggests that there is more than one God; it only accounts for the large diversity of portrayals and presentations of YHWH in the various biblical scrolls.

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27. Deut 32, e.g., is marked by the sevenfold theological use of צור “rock” (starting in 32:4).

28. In Exodus, God gives laws to the people and instructions for the sanctuary, themes that are dominant for many chapters in the second half of the book. These aspects are nearly absent from the book of Joshua, which, in turn, has the motif of God “giving rest,” נוח in the hiphil, five times (1:13, 15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1), more often than in any other biblical book, whereas in Exodus it occurs only once, in the divine promise in 33:14.

29. The book of Isaiah entitles YHWH twenty-six times as “the Holy One of Israel,” which elsewhere is found only six times, and emphasizes this aspect, e.g., in 6:3, with the triple repetition of “holy” for him. The book of Ezekiel shows deep compassion for a female baby cast aside at birth (16:4–6) and portrays his splendor leaving the temple (various steps in 9:3 to 11:23). In the book of Jonah, God’s compassion even encompasses foreigners known for their cruelty.

Practically, this requires a procedure that first takes into account the single books of the Bible and presents their theologies on their own merits.<sup>30</sup> Only afterward, in a second step, may links between the various theologies be established.<sup>31</sup>

Going further, one cannot stop with one book of the Tanak. *Biblical* theological research involves repeating the same procedure for every book, collecting observations about God on various levels.<sup>32</sup> The outcome is a rich variety in his portrayal, with several nuanced, distinct aspects in the individual books, and some common features connecting various books.<sup>33</sup> The Bible presents God in unlimited ways, corresponding to his essence, his freedom, and his universal character. Only the term *biblical theologies*, plural, can—and then only approximately—render justice to what he is.

#### 3.4.2. Which Canon?

Marvin A. Sweeney and Dalit Rom-Shiloni, and similarly others, rightly insist on the difference between the Jewish Bible and the Christian Old Testament.<sup>34</sup> Must theologies of the Tanak and of the Old Testament therefore be different? In my view, no, for the following reasons.

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30. Some books, however, e.g., those of the Torah or of the Deuteronomistic History, are interrelated, which means that investigation into their connections in the way they speak about God is required too. In the case of the Psalms, conversely, the individuality of every Psalm must be respected first, before bringing together similar divine features.

31. The motif of God's holiness may serve as an example: In God's invitation to the covenant in Exod 19:6, he offers the people the opportunity to become a "holy nation." The book of Leviticus continues on this line by exhorting the community to sanctify themselves and, by taking divine sanctity as a model and criterion for their own holiness (11:44–45), thus expands and emphasizes this motif.

32. See above the last paragraph in §3.3, indicating fruitful avenues for investigations.

33. Andrea L. Weiss, in her paper in this volume, speaks of the "multivocal nature of the Bible" and, quoting Jon D. Levenson, of "the unsystematic and polydox materials in the Hebrew Bible."

34. Sweeney, *Tanak*, 20–25. Dalit Rom-Shiloni, "Hebrew Bible Theology: A Jewish Descriptive Approach," *JR* 96 (2016): 165–84, republished in this volume, addresses two fundamental issues, the question of the borders of biblical theology, and of the terminology used for it, pointing out the differences from (usual) Christian conceptions that are based on presuppositions.

(1) To interpret a text requires first and foremost trying to understand it *as it was written*; it is not legitimate to apply foreign ideas or inappropriate categories to it. This means that even as a Christian I have to respect the “original intention” immanent in the text, without presuppositions, seeking to detect what the text wanted to say when and for whom it was written. I must not bring in anachronistically later developments to its interpretation. In this sense, there is no distinction between Jewish or Christian exegetical and theological research.

(2) The different *sequence* of the books of the Old Testament with respect to the Tanak is no real obstacle. On the contrary, there are good arguments for following the order of the Tanak, at least for the Torah and the Nevi'im, and I have done so myself.<sup>35</sup> For the Ketuvim there is no need to stick to their arrangement, as historically these biblical books have very different backgrounds, and their order differs even within the Jewish tradition.<sup>36</sup>

Generally speaking, coming first does not necessarily and *per se* imply increased significance. Is the last book of the Latter Prophets, Malachi, less important than, for example, the first book of the Former Prophets, Joshua? On the other hand, however, the position of the Torah at the front gives special weight to it, and this prominence of the first five books is widely respected in all confessions. The order of the books is less decisive than the appreciation and dedication shown to every individual book of Scripture and to all of them taken together. The sequence does not influence heavily the understanding of biblical theologies. It indicates, in part, a development in time and establishes a build-up in the knowledge of God.

(3) With regard to the *textual basis*, my remark above (in §3.1) giving priority to the MT is in accordance with many Jewish exegetes. In contrast, we can find today Jewish colleagues who favor the LXX in some cases.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, this border between Jewish and Christian exegesis no longer exists; the front line is among the confessions themselves.

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35. Fischer, *Theologien des Alten Testaments*, 21–138, with justification on p. 20.

36. Various positions are indicated even for the Book of Jeremiah. According to b. Bat. 14b–15a, it ranks first among the Latter Prophets, immediately following after the book(s) of Kings.

37. Emanuel Tov favors, in several instances, the Greek version as representing supposedly an earlier form of the text (*Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd rev. ed. [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001], esp. ch. 7).

(4) The different *number* of books regarded as Jewish Bible or Old Testament is no hurdle either. The Old Testament canon of the Protestant churches is equal to the Tanak. The Catholic Church accepts seven more books as canonical, the Greek Orthodox Church still more.<sup>38</sup> The large number of biblical books regarded as canonical is identical, is a common basis, and has decisive weight.

Thus the additional books *need not be a reason for division*. Their main theological emphasis corresponds with that of the other biblical scrolls, and their interpretation is normally based on them. They are less frequently dealt with, although recently they have received more attention.<sup>39</sup> They do not essentially change the portrayal of God but may lay additional weight on some particular aspects that are already known.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.4.3. The Relationship with the New Testament

This is probably the most critical issue, resulting from the different conceptions of the canon. It is true that up to now Christian Old Testament theology was often biased. Many Christian interpreters throughout history have regularly seen texts and ideas of the Hebrew Bible almost exclusively in the light of Jesus and the New Testament, and they relativized it from

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38. The so-called deuterocanonical books, accepted in the Catholic Church in addition to the Hebrew Bible, are Judith, Tobit, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch. The Orthodox Churches regard still more books as canonical, e.g., 1 Ezra, 3 and 4 Maccabees, and Psalms of Solomon.

39. The commentaries on the book of Baruch by Odil Hannes Steck (Odil Hannes Steck, Reinhard Gregor Kratz, and Ingo Kottsieper, *Das Buch Baruch, der Brief des Jeremia, Zusätze zu Ester und Daniel*, ATD 5 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998]) and on the book of Wisdom by Helmut Engel (*Das Buch der Weisheit*, NSKAT 16 [Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1998]) are examples that have fostered a great deal of interest and research in their respective areas since their publication.

40. The book of Tobit, e.g., excels in God's sending of his messenger/angel (Tob 5–12), picking up a motif present since Gen 16. For the book of Baruch, God's identification as the "Eternal One" is specific (eight times, from Bar 4:10 onward; see Ps 90:2; 92:9; 93:2, etc.), and its extended confessional prayer (Bar 1:15–3:8) follows along the lines of similar texts, like Neh 9 and Dan 9. The dedication of the temple mentioned in Ps 30:1 finds an echo in 1 Maccabees, with the cleansing of the temple and the dedication of the altar (4:36–59).

this perspective.<sup>41</sup> This has received ever more criticism in recent years, and rightly so, in Jewish as well as in Christian circles.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to such a depreciation of the Tanak—and at the same time also of the Old Testament, the first part of their own Bible—among Christian theologians as being only of secondary importance, these biblical books forming the Jewish Bible are God’s primary revelation. As such, they remain the indispensable foundation for every biblical theology and must be regarded and respected in their own right. To judge them from outside is biased and unhelpful. Still more, it is dangerous to devalue God’s first words and thus one’s own roots.

A *hermeneutical decision* is connected with this issue. Methodologically, it is not sound to interpret a text with concepts foreign to it or criteria taken from outside; rather, every utterance must first be understood in the way it was originally meant (see also above in §3.4.2, point 1). This implies that a responsible reading of, for example, Isa 7:14 must first bring forth the meaning it has within the book of Isaiah and its time. It is not legitimate to connect the interpretation of this passage, right from the start, with its quotation in Matt 1:23. However, in a second step, clearly to be distinguished from the exegetical analysis of Isa 7:14, the citation in the Gospel of Matthew may be adduced as part of the *Wirkungsgeschichte*. This can be done, but it need not be.<sup>43</sup>

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41. This procedure takes later developments as a measure by which to evaluate earlier positions. Such a “projecting backward” leads to unfair judgments and, from a historical perspective, is irresponsible.

42. For Jewish criticism, see recently Sweeney, *Tanak*, 10, who calls it “vilification” (*Tanak*, 10), and Rom-Shiloni, who notes that terminology of “supersessionism” is based on illegitimate “retrojection” (“Hebrew Bible Theology,” 172–73). One of the most outspoken Christian critics was Erich Zenger. In his influential introduction to the Old Testament he challenged problematic understandings of the relationship between the two Testaments; he strongly opposed the idea of seeing the New Testament as standing in “contrast” to the Old Testament, as relativizing it, or as taking it as an evolution of the former one, surpassing and outdating it (Zenger et al., *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, ed. Christian Frevel, 8th rev. ed., KST 1 [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012], 17–19). Christoph Dohmen, Norbert Lohfink, and others have argued similarly in various publications.

43. Generally, many New Testament passages highly appreciate the Tanak; examples are Matt 5:17–18, Luke 24:44–45, and Rom 11:16–18, among others. There is no opposition or rivalry between the biblical God and Jesus.

### 3.5. What Is the Role of Faith?

Some exegetes regard their profession as mere literary analysis of some ancient texts or as a kind of *Religionswissenschaft* dealing with a limited corpus, namely, old Hebrew literature. As every understanding presupposes a common “horizon,” there must be some sort of affinity between the biblical text and its interpreters.<sup>44</sup> If now the biblical books are based in faith communities and describe their experiences with God, a similar belief in those interpreting them is in no way an obstacle but rather a helpful qualification for sensing the real character and the profound message of the texts of the Bible.

Recently this has been acknowledged more and more. Walter Brueggemann’s insistence on “testimony,” Friedhelm Hartenstein’s perception of the Old Testament as “geglaubte Geschichte,” Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann’s portrayal of YHWH as “Gott der Lebendigen,” and many other contributions in the past years clearly demonstrate the central role of faith in biblical theology.<sup>45</sup>

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44. This principle has been amply described by Hans-Georg Gadamer and further developed by Emerich Coreth. Their observations are not only valid for philosophical reasoning but apply generally for all areas and dimensions of understanding. See Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1960), translated into English as Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975); Coreth, *Grundfragen der Hermeneutik: Ein philosophischer Beitrag* (Freiburg: Herder, 1969).

45. See the titles of the first four parts of Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*: “Israel’s Core Testimony”; “Israel’s Countertestimony”; “Israel’s Unsolicited Testimony”; and “Israel’s Embodied Testimony.” Friedhelm Hartenstein, “JHWH’s Wesen im Wandel: Vorüberlegungen zu einer Theologie des Alten Testaments,” *TLZ* 137 (2012): 3–20, here 4, quoting Jan C. Gertz. On pp. 8–10, picking up ideas of Paul Ricœur’s “Hermeneutik des Zeugnisses” (in *An den Grenzen der Hermeneutik: Philosophische Reflexionen über die Religion*, ed. Veronika Hoffmann [Freiburg: Alber, 2008]: 7–40), he qualifies the Bible’s way of speaking as “Glaubensaussagen” and “Bekennnis.” Steven Kepnes, in his excellent presentation given at the Society of Biblical Literature conference in Atlanta on November 23, 2015, has stressed the essential role of faith and of a believing community for the understanding of the Bible. “Gott der Lebendigen” is in English “the God of the living”; see Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *Der Gott der Lebendigen: Eine biblische Gotteslehre*, Tobith 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 2; see God’s own teaching (“Lehre durch Gott selbst”) as a source for the Bible and the faith rooted in it.

In fact, one's own belief is methodologically a key to it. How can one talk about the biblical God without an inner knowledge of God? How can one feel the unlimited force and fascinating beauty of the biblical texts if one has no sensitivity to what makes them so special and unique? A personal experience of faith and even a longing for God (e.g., Pss 42; 63) provide an apt resonance chamber within which biblical texts and the ways in which they speak of God can resound, and where interpreters may come into harmony with them.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.6. Descriptive or Also Critical?

Why is it not sufficient to render the results of the theological analyses by listing the main ideas or by paraphrasing them in one's own words? The task of describing the findings of the research is only the initial step. Discussion, reflection, and critique must necessarily follow, as is shown by the example above of Jer 12:8 in contrast to Jer 31:3 and affirmed by colleagues such as Rom-Shiloni.<sup>47</sup>

It does not suffice simply to enumerate the tensions, discrepancies, and even contradictions to be found in the vast variety of the Bible's depictions of God. To set one concept beside another one without clarifying their relationship would not account for their different positioning and importance. In fact, there are passages bearing more relevance than others.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the *dynamic* of a literary work also helps one to discern the significance of individual expressions; in the case of Jeremiah,

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46. The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Council (1965) expresses this in the following way: "Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written" (12). Lohr, in his response to my paper in Baltimore, referring to Gershom Ratheiser, emphasized the role of an observant life and a practical sympathy for the Bible's commandments. Yet this is no contrast to the role of faith here, as I only want to show how its epistemological function for understanding the Bible and as true faith will lead to a corresponding daily pattern of behavior.

47. Rom-Shiloni, although insisting on the "descriptive" aspect, as given in her title "Hebrew Bible Theology: A Jewish Descriptive Approach," also reflects on the various modes of biblical theologies throughout her entire paper and calls her procedure a "descriptive critical approach" (172).

48. E.g., God's long revelation on Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus weighs more than the Pharaoh's short statement about him in Exod 9:27. Additionally, as is clear in this case, what God himself is saying has a higher authority than how others describe him.

the passage in 31:3 relativizes the earlier one in 12:8, attributing to it only limited value. Finally, the biblical books not only contain divine revelation but are also written down in human words and ideas that may differ from what God wants or change within the stream of history.<sup>49</sup> Thus biblical theologies, while accepting the paramount authority of the Tanak, must also be attentive to its human limitations and weaknesses.

### 3.7. Is There a Core to the Biblical Theologies?

There has been a long search for a *Mitte*, a kernel in the Bible's portrayal of God, with various suggestions being offered.<sup>50</sup> In my view, those seeing YHWH's self-definition in the *Gnadenrede* on Mount Sinai in Exod 34:6–7 as the key are on the right track.<sup>51</sup> There God reveals himself to be both merciful and just, with mercy predominating. This idea is repeated various times throughout the Bible, and there is no book in it that as a whole would oppose it.<sup>52</sup> Thus mercy and justice also become keys for human behavior.

This step, of showing the concurring main features, the characteristics, in some way the *unity* within the manifold ways in which the biblical books talk about God, is necessary too. It does conform to the central confession of biblical faith: that YHWH is אֱלֹהִים—“one” and “unique” (Deut 6:4). It is the task of biblical theologians to elucidate both aspects: God's unfathomable richness, resulting in the vast diversity of talk about him, and his being at the same time *one*.

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49. Both dimensions, the divine and the human, are sometimes combined within a short section of text (see Deut 1:1, 3; Jer 1:1–2 [MT]), thus making the audience aware of the double character of the following.

50. For an overview of various (German) approaches, see Mark W. Elliott, *The Reality of Biblical Theology*, RD 39 (Frankfurt: Lang 2007), 106–17. For a new suggestion, see Oeming, “Viele Wege zu dem Einen,” whose subtitle uses the term “transzendente Mitte,” which he exemplifies on pp. 92–95.

51. The term *Gnadenrede* has been coined by Matthias Franz in *Der barmherzige und gnädige Gott: Die Gnadenrede vom Sinai (Exodus 34,6–7) und ihre Parallelen im Alten Testament und seiner Umwelt*, BWANT 160 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2003). Because of the variations in the expression (see Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8, etc.), it is more appropriate than the term “Gnadenformel,” which had earlier been introduced by Spieckermann.

52. Although it may be contested for a limited time or for a certain situation, as in Ezek 9:10 and Jer 13:14, there is no biblical scroll that at the end or in its dynamic would deny God's mercy.



#### 4. Results

Looking back over the above comments, biblical theology appears in a new light.

There are many good reasons why it is necessary for exegetes to make a strong commitment to biblical theology. This task can no longer be done in the singular; rather the variety of ways in which the Bible speaks about God demands that we consider plural biblical *theologies*.

Hermeneutical decisions with respect to contextual reading, the role of the interpreter, the interpreter's stance and interests, and a critically reflective methodology are essential for a correct and fruitful approach to biblical themes and theology.<sup>53</sup>

Biblical theologies should put their focus on God. Related fields, like the history of Israel, science of religion, and social sciences, may contribute and should be taken into account but should never be allowed to take priority over the concentration on God.

Although often, in the past, Christian Old Testament theologies have differed from theologies of the Jewish Bible, this need not be so. There is no inherent opposition between them, and Christian interpreters should unquestionably, as a first step, read the Hebrew Bible in a similar way to their Jewish colleagues.

A faith perspective is an appropriate stance from which to approach God's word, and this is true, too, for the study of biblical theologies. However, it needs a critical attitude as a complement. Belief without critical distance tends to become blind; too sharp a criticism of the Bible without an inner sympathy for it risks missing fundamental issues.

Central to YHWH's character as portrayed in the Bible are his mercy and justice. This has enormous relevance for today, and for the whole world. Biblical theology has the opportunity and the mission to exert an influence in this direction, making the earth more divine and at the same time more human.

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53. A good example is Kessler, *Old Testament Theology*, who in his first three chapters discusses at length the relevant issues and various stances taken with regard to them (1-107).

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