
The discipline of biblical theology has seen numerous changes since its more formal recognition as a distinct discipline after Gabler’s address in 1787. Among these movements was the history-of-religions school that dominated late 19th century and early 20th century attempts at Old Testament theology specifically. One of the first, and certainly the most successful, attempts to challenge this predominant view was Walther Eichrodt’s theology, first published in 1933.

**Summary**

In Walther Eichrodt’s *Theology of the Old Testament*, he begins with a brief discussion on introductory issues regarding the discipline of Old Testament theology.¹ He argues at the beginning of his *Theology* that OT theology ought to be concerned with a double aspect (25). The first aspect involves a comparative study of religions. The second aspect involves looking toward the New Testament. He argues that the unity of the two testaments finds its greatest expression in the irruption of the kingdom of God in history (26). He furthers his discussion on this relationship with an identification of a two-way current between the OT and NT. Just as the OT sets the stage for, transitions into, and finds its fulfillment in the NT, so also the current moves backwards from the NT back to the OT. This relationship between the testaments, Eichrodt argues, is a necessary task in OT theology (27).

He next identifies the manner in which one can deal with both of these issues. In order to consider both historical and theological aspects of the OT, he asserts that a cross-section method is the best way to accomplish the task. The purpose of this cross-section approach is “to

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¹This review will only cover chapters 1-4, 6, and 24 due to assignment requirements.
undertake a *systematic examination* with objective classification and rational arrangement of the varied material” (27). After briefly discussing this approach, Eichrodt clarifies his understanding of the significance and role of history in OT theology. As he is departing to a great extent from the typical methodology of the day, Eichrodt seeks to address the value and detriment of the current trends head on. The value, he argues, is significant. He suggests that “it is impossible even to conceive of a historical picture that does not make use of its findings, and to that extent not one of us can help being in its debt” (30). However, while the historical approach was beneficial in some respects, it also had “a particularly fatal influence both on OT theology and on the OT in every other aspect, because it fostered the idea that once the historical problems were clarified everything had been done” (30). Eichrodt recognizes the danger of such implications and seeks to move beyond a merely historical approach to one that addresses the problem of understanding both the religious environment of the OT and its relationship to the NT, in order “to illuminate its profoundest meaning” (31).

Before moving into his own proposal, Eichrodt makes one final point regarding methodology. He suggests that those doing OT theology need to avoid a dogmatic scheme for organizing their work, and instead focus on developing an OT theology as much as possible “along the lines of the OT’s own dialectic” (33). With these considerations in place, Eichrodt then proposes his own approach to OT theology.

Eichrodt offers the notion of covenant as a unifying theme by which one can construct an OT theology. Eichrodt notes that the covenant concept is an original element in all sources, a claim he will go on to prove later in the chapter (36). Yet in order to show that covenant is a unifying theme, he must first define clearly the theological meaning of covenant. To this end he makes five points. First, he highlights the importance of recognizing the factual nature of divine
revelation (37). Second, he addresses how the covenant concept is necessarily accompanied by a clear understanding of divine will (38). Third, he notes the awareness of the human party of the unique position of YHWH (39). Fourth, he states that “faith in the covenant God assumes the existence of a remarkably interior attitude of history” (41). Not only was faith founded in history, but it is also the arena in which this faith and covenant is lived out in practice. Finally, Eichrodt maintains the importance of distinguishing the covenant relationship of YHWH and his people from the popular Nature religions of the ancient Near East. He distinguishes YHWH’s covenant from these Nature religions in three ways: the Israelite covenant sacrifice is once for all and cannot be repeated; the Israelite covenant ritual had a moral basis and orientation that the others lacked; and Israel’s covenant is toward the goal of personal communion between God and man, something not a concern in Nature religions (43). On the basis of this discussion, Eichrodt determines that the covenant is an agreement which God entered into freely and could dissolve at any time (44).

Eichrodt then moves on to discuss the history of the covenant concept which entails two parts. First, he addresses the jeopardizing of the covenant. Second, he moves on to discuss the refashioning of the covenant concept. In addressing the jeopardizing of the covenant, Eichrodt notes three concerns: “approximation to the Canaanite idea of God, one-sided development of the cultic aspect of religion and the according of a false independence to the national power” (45). The reason for addressing these three ways that the covenant was jeopardized is to give an even better context for establishing how the authors of the various parts of the OT interpreted or recontextualized the covenant concept in their day.

At this point, Eichrodt begins to support his earlier proposition that the covenant concept is an original element in all sources (36). He begins in the earlier narratives of the Pentateuch,
the Yahwist and Elohist strata, and concludes that they portray “a remarkable retrojection of the covenant concept into the earliest periods of the national life,” primarily by basing “Israel’s consciousness of her election on the fortunes of the patriarchs” (49). He then examines the covenant concept in the classical prophets, noting that while it is surprising that the covenant concept is somewhat in the background, they nevertheless continue this theme through an emphasis on Yahweh’s inconceivable grace (51). In the Deuteronomic Law, while the term is still used “to designate the once-for-all establishment of the covenant in history,” it also speaks of an enduring relationship (53-54). He also returns to the notion stated earlier that man cannot annul the covenant; only Yahweh alone can dissolve the relationship, yet He never does so (54; cf. 44). The Priestly stratum (P) makes two contributions. First, a covenant relationship of grace replaces the idea of covenant as legal relationship with mutual duties (57). Second, P expresses how in Noah, the covenant is for the whole human race, while in Abraham, the covenant is for Israel alone (58). Eichrodt then discusses covenant from the prophets of the seventh century onward. In this section there is an emphasis on God’s relationship with Israel as one of marriage, Father-Son, and shepherd (59). Similar to P, these latter prophets, particularly deuterо-Isaiah and the servant passages, show that Yahweh’s decree of salvation extends to all nations of the earth (62). Among the post-exilic writings, the Psalms focus on the covenant in terms of covenant regulations (64), while Chronicles portrays the covenant as a renewal of the religion of the Fathers and a saving relationship unchanged from the beginning (64). In summary of these issues, Eichrodt notes the development of the covenant concept along these two lines of thought (following the dual concerns of P, 66). While one may be tempted to put these at odds with one another, Eichrodt stresses the importance of recognizing them in conjunction so as to understand the whole content of the covenant concept (66).
Eichrodt asserts agreement among all sources “that the inauguration of the divine covenant involved a fresh ordering of the legal side of the nation’s life under the authority of the covenant God” (70). Consequently, he explicates the covenant statutes in chapter three and considers their role in highlighting covenant as the central theme of the OT. Eichrodt argues that although the dominant view for a long time was that the law was only orally transmitted by Moses and not written until much later (70), “the soundest opinion would seem to be that which derives these ancient collection of laws ultimately from Moses himself,” though Eichrodt adds that it would have faced some “interference and alteration of one kind and another” (72). Eichrodt’s main contention in this section seems to be that the “fundamental religious temper,” which is a main significance of the Mosaic law, led to an increased “understanding of the total ordering of the people’s life as a revelation of the saving will of God” (92). In this way, law functions as part of the covenant in such a way as to proclaim the saving purposes of Yahweh in the OT as a whole.

Chapter four continues the discussion on covenant statutes, but directs the attention to the cultus, which Eichrodt defines as “the expression of religious experience in concrete external actions performed within the congregation or community, preferably by officially appointed exponents and in set forms” (98). Although secondary to the immediate human experience (98), Eichrodt argues that in the “outward actions of the cult the power of the divine blessing is communicated to the actual mode of man’s existence” (100). In this manner, the action becomes a sacrament and “implies a social and material integration of religious feeling as the manifestation of the divine activity” (100). Eichrodt proceeds to discuss the significant of sacred sites, sacred objects, sacred seasons, and sacred actions as they relate to the cult in Israelite religious expression. The varied forms that arise in each of these sections is evidence for
Eichrodt of “the living relation between belief and cult” that reveals “the massive power of assimilation inherent in the religion of Yahweh” (176).

After a discussion of the name of the covenant God in chapter five, Eichrodt then considers the nature of the covenant God in chapter six. In this chapter Eichrodt argues that “the statements about the Divine Being which are directly connected with the setting up of the covenant may be classified under three heads” (206): God as personal, God as spiritual, and God as one. That God is personal is significant in distinguishing him from some impersonal force, and this was accomplished largely through the close relationship of the name and nature of Yahweh whereby the name becomes “an alternative term for Yahweh himself” (208). That God is spiritual is significant in ensuring that he is not approximated too closely to the human (211). That God is one is significant in demonstrating “the experience of God’s close and living reality” (227).

**Critical Evaluation**

Eichrodt’s work is breath-taking, insightful, and timeless. Despite the changes and advances in Old Testament theology, Eichrodt’s work remains a central voice in the conversation. Much could be said about the strength of Eichrodt’s work, from the clarity of his thought to the depth of his argumentation. One example of his clarity and depth is his discussion on the OT’s relationship to the NT. It is commonplace for the NT to take precedence over the OT to such an extent that the OT can only have meaning as it is explained in the NT. Eichrodt, however, argues that there is a two-way current. The NT does indeed speak back into the OT. In fact, Eichrodt argues that the OT can only be understood rightly when “it is seen as completed in Christ” (27). Nevertheless, the OT no less speaks forward into the NT. Nowhere is this more evident for Eichrodt than in the theme of the irruption of the kingdom of God in history (26),
which Eichrodt posits as the theme “which binds together indivisibly the two realms of the Old and New Testaments” (26). Eichrodt makes a strong case in this section that a cross-section approach to the OT aids the interpreter in seeing this theme projected into and advanced by the NT. Although Eichrodt could do more at this point to link the theme of the irruption of the kingdom of God with his view that covenant is the central theme of OT theology, he does work towards this synthesis in chapter two.

Despite many strengths, the most significant weakness of Eichrodt’s work as a whole is common to OT theologies in general, namely a failure to defend adequately his central theme when it comes to the wisdom literature. Although demonstrating convincingly that covenant is a central theme in the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, Yahweh’s salvation in the OT, and the daily life of the Israelite, Eichrodt does not adequately defend the theme of covenant in the wisdom literature. The value of the type of cross-section approach that Eichrodt uses is that it takes seriously both the overall witness of the OT and the development of theology in each individual book and section of Scripture. However, Eichrodt’s failure to defend covenant as a central theme of the wisdom literature leaves a hole in his cross-section approach and leaves the reader wondering if covenant can truly be the central theme of the OT as a whole if it is not also the main theme of its constituent parts.

**Conclusion**

Although Eichrodt may not convince readers that covenant is the central theme of the OT as a whole, his work is nonetheless a must-read for OT scholars. The depth of his insight and the clarity of his argumentation not only changed the direction of OT theology, but it continues to speak loudly in the contemporary conversation, which has in many ways adopted his cross-
section approach and a search for a central theme. To this day, few if any have succeeded in
matching the importance and significance of Eichrodt’s work.