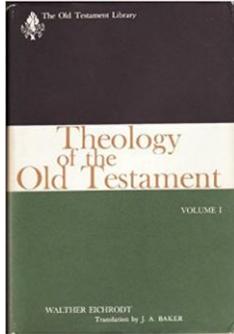


**Eichrodt, Walther. *Theology of the Old Testament, Vol 1. The Old Testament Library.*  
Trans. J. A. Baker. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1961.**

**“Chapters I and II,” (pp.25-69)**

**By Kyle D. Rapinchuk**



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. At the time when Eichrodt published his work, the discipline of OT theology was firmly entrenched in an emphasis on a history-of-religions approach. The work of Wellhausen, Gunkel, and numerous others had brought about a virtual end to theological methodologies. Eichrodt was one of the first to challenge this approach successfully. 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 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 rightly 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 was to give an even better context for establishing how the authors of the various parts of the OT reinterpreted 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 Deuteronomistic 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; c.f. 44). The Priestly strata (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 deuterio-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 two lines of thought (following the dual concerns of P) along which the covenant concept has been developed (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's contribution to the field of OT theology and to the church is significant. Regarding OT theology, Eichrodt's work made such huge impact on the discipline that Ollenburger presents a history of the discipline up to 1933, the date when Eichrodt's first volume on OT theology was published. Eichrodt also impacted the discipline through his emphasis on a cross-section approach and a search for a unifying theme. Both of these emphases have dominated OT theology since his publications. Furthermore, his emphasis on covenant has not only developed the discipline of OT theology but has also impacted the church. While many in the church have likely never heard of Walther Eichrodt, his emphasis on history and theology in conjunction with one another has become the commonplace understanding of what it means to apply an historical-critical or historical-grammatical approach to the OT, which is likely the most widespread understanding of OT interpretation in the church. Additionally, his emphasis on covenant, especially how the OT writers foresee the inclusion of Gentiles into the covenant, has a fundamental place in the church's interpretation and understanding of the OT. Many in the church understand the OT entirely in terms of God's covenant with Israel, followed immediately in the New Testament with the New Covenant. Whether one agrees or disagrees with this dichotomy (or whether Eichrodt would be happy with such a simplistic connection) is secondary to the likelihood that Eichrodt's emphasis on the covenant as a unifying theme of the OT has found its way into the church through this avenue.