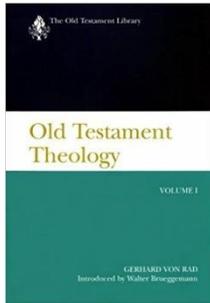


**Von Rad, Gerhard. *Old Testament Theology, Vol. 1: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*. The Old Testament Library. Trans. D. M. G. Stalker. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.**

**“Introduction” and “Part One, A” through “Part Two, A” (pp. ix-128)**

**By Kyle D. Rapinchuk**



Since the publication of the first volume of his *Old Testament Theology* in 1957, Gerhard von Rad has been a prominent figure in both OT studies and the more narrow discipline of OT theology. While being educated in and writing in the context of the history-of-religions approach to OT theology, von Rad was heavily influenced by its presuppositions. Nevertheless, while working from some of these presuppositions, von Rad significantly advanced the discipline of OT theology with his emphasis on kerygma.

Von Rad begins his theology with a discussion of origins, seemingly a word of dual-intention to refer to the origin of OT theological study and the origins of the Israelite religion. While recognizing the significance of the past half century of OT theological scholarship, particularly the contributions of Wellhausen, von Rad almost immediately distances himself from the movement by addressing a fundamental difference in the controlling question for OT theology. For Wellhausen and others, the question to be answered was the “what”, that is, the content of the record of Israel’s origins and the question of the historical course of events (4). For von Rad, however, this question was “put to the text too soon” (4). Rather, the first questions should relate to who is reporting it, the standpoint of the reporter, the historical and theological position of the reporter, what led him to report as he did, and with what tradition or viewpoint does he associate himself (4).

Following this discussion, von Rad makes a distinction between the religion of the Fathers and that of later Israel. Essentially, he argues that the former had no attachment to place and focused on a particular group and its fortunes, while the latter did not (7). This distinction becomes foundational for his subsequent analysis of the Jahwism of early Israel and its decline. The first crisis that leads to this decline of Jahwism is the conquest. Once Israel is in the land, the Canaanites and their cultic practices challenge the Jahwism of Israel. Von Rad suggests that the difficult adjustment to a new environment and cultic rituals “compelled [Israel] to express itself in a completely new fashion: and in this process of change many of the Canaanite ideas were of help to it, since Jahwism was able to flow into them, and in them to gain a new form” (25). Yet in the midst of Canaanite pressure, two aspects of Jahwism seemed to preserve itself. The first was the exclusive claims of the first commandment (26); the second was Israel’s positive doctrine of Creation that is evidenced by their refusal to deify sex and include it in the cultic practices (28). Thus, while the conquest of Canaan posed a crisis for Jahwism, it is not entirely corrupted or changed.

Perhaps surprisingly, von Rad insists that the second factor that diminished Jahwism was the formation of the state. He notes how during this period the people’s attention transitions away from the God of their Fathers to a new dynamic. He relates this transition to the wandering nature of the Fathers (see above) as opposed to the institution of Zion as the mountain of God and the temple as his dwelling place (46). Von Rad explains this new crisis in strong terms, suggesting that “its existence was once more at stake” because “it took on a change in form which brought in its train a

completely new emphasis, and new relations of the part to the whole” (48). This crisis was exacerbated by the previous crisis of the conquest, which continues to some extent because the institution of the state brought relationship with the Canaanites and other foreign cults much closer (48).

Yet in the midst of these two crises, von Rad argues that an astonishing phenomenon emerges—the prophets. In establishing his case, he again highlights the effect of the conquest and the state on the Jahwism of the Fathers. He lists four foundational points related to the background at the time of the emergence of the prophets: 1) degeneration of Jahwism due to syncretism; 2) “emancipation from Jahweh and the protection which he offered, due to the formation of the state”; 3) disintegration of social order within clans due to economic and social developments; 4) rise of Assyrian power and the threat towards Palestine (64-65). These four points set the context for the emergence of the prophets, which, for von Rad, meant a new direction and revitalization of Jahwism. The prophets come to proclaim that the threat posed by foreign nations is ultimately seen as Jahweh’s wrath upon Israel who uses the nations as instruments of judgment. Yet, while Jahweh himself is the initiator of this judgment, he is also bringing about “the beginnings of a quite new bestowal of salvation” (67). This new saving action of Jahweh had little continuity with the earlier Jahwism, but it did point to “a certain aetiological relationship with it (the new David, the new Covenant, the new Exodus, etc.)” (67).

Following his argument that the prophets brought about a new vision of Jahwism, von Rad addresses three further points that show this development. First, he considers what he terms “endeavors to restore the past.” In this section he discusses the “D” and “P” documents primarily to establish how they “lay down the ordinances of Jahweh revealed for Israel’s salvation during the history, and to legitimate them by showing their specific place within the saving history” (78). In the next section he considers the post-exilic literature to highlight a return to the law, asserting that it was actually by interpretation of the law that one determined if he was or was not a part of Israel (90). The third point relates to the “Sacral office and charisma.” Von Rad discusses how God’s will for order finds expression in a concern for authority (95). However, with the failure of the priests and kings rightly to exercise authority, it became the job of the prophets to perform this charismatic leadership (99). Von Rad makes the additional important note regarding charisma, suggesting that it is mainly active in worship, but also in instruction and teaching. Moreover, it finds its most significant expression in the Psalter (101).

After these preliminary considerations, von Rad moves on to establish his methodological presuppositions. While admitting the importance of history, von Rad suggests that the proper object of OT theology is “Israel’s own explicit assertions about Jahweh” (105). He establishes the crux of his position on the distinction between history and kerygma. He states the distinction as follows: “Historical investigation searches for a critically assured minimum—the kerygmatic picture tends towards a theological maximum” (108). He adds that while historical investigation can aid a picture of history, the phenomenon of faith itself and its attention on salvation is beyond the power of historical investigation to explain (108). Instead, what is needed is a kerygmatic presentation of the confession of Israel. Before explaining what this is, he warns against the tendency to view one as historical and the other as unhistorical. Kerygma is also based on actual history and has as one function to present real history (108). Von Rad then explains what this

kerygmatic view is. He argues that testimonies ought to be the subject of OT theology, and these testimonies never point to Israel's own faith but to Jahweh. In this manner, faith is the mouthpiece, "not the subject of Israel's confessional utterances" (111). Von Rad then presents two further warnings. The first warning is that the OT does not appear to have a theological center, thus attempts to organize a work around that central theme is futile (115). Second, he warns against arranging the theological material (understanding of Israel's witness) around theological categories that, however appropriate to our day, are not in accordance with Israel's theological thinking (121). To guard against such tendencies and properly present Israel's confession, von Rad argues that "re-telling remains the most legitimate form of theological discourse on the Old Testament" (121). Finally, von Rad gives some discussion of the primary creeds that inform an understanding of Israel's witness. These texts are Deuteronomy 26:5-9, Joshua 24:2ff., and several Psalms (i.e. 78, 105, 136) [121-123]. According to Brueggemann, he also elsewhere addresses Deuteronomy 6:20-24 in this manner (xiii).

Von Rad has made numerous contributions to OT theology as a discipline, many of which Brueggemann notes in his introduction. Though Brueggemann argues that von Rad's *credo* categories are untenable due to a late date (xxiv), von Rad nevertheless influenced OT theology through attempts to once again make the theology in OT theology in accordance with the OT on its own terms. By this I mean that von Rad's kerygmatic presentation which emphasizes the *credo* formula seeks to determine the theology of the OT along the lines that the Israelites confessed it. This emphasis, more than most other approaches of his day, allows the Scriptures, rather than history, to speak. Additionally, while re-telling may not be the best way to do OT theology, contrary to his assertion, it nevertheless has reminded scholars that they are dealing with narratives, not merely a list of historical facts. As much of the OT is in narrative form, one ought to read it as a "story," provided story is properly defined, and thereby grow in understanding from re-telling (re-reading).

Von Rad has also impacted the church. The number of ways in which he has done so is likely impossible to trace. Nevertheless, von Rad's emphasis on the confessional kerygma of Israel in the OT has likely influenced the way in which many pastors preach the OT. There is an increasing trend in preaching OT narratives and placing them in the context of salvation history, which in many ways sees its roots in von Rad's work. Von Rad's emphasis on the prophetic message of a new David, new Exodus, etc. is also influential for the church.