

Preface

It is an exciting time to be studying the Old Testament. The general crisis of our society and the sense of displacement that is widespread among us constitute an invitation to return to the old and deep resources of faith that continue in the present with compelling authority. In some ways the Old Testament strikes one as ancient, odd, and remote from us. But in other ways it is clear that the Old Testament offers categories of interpretation and guidelines for life that are rich and contemporary in their force. The present volume is an attempt to articulate some of the categories of interpretation and guidelines for life that could make a difference in our present social context.

The big idea of this book (that echoes the big idea of the Old Testament) is that the God of ancient Israel (who is the creator of heaven and earth) is *a God in relationship*, who is ready and able to make commitments and who is impinged upon by a variety of “partners” who make a difference in the life of God. Such a notion of *God in relationship* that pervades the Old Testament is both a stark contrast to much classical theology that thought of God only in God’s holy self, and to the modern notion of autonomy whereby God and human selves as well are understood as isolated and independent agents who are only incidentally related to

each other. The view taken here is that such relatedness is intrinsic to existence and definitional for all agents, including the agency of the God of ancient Israel.

This suggests that the defining category for faith in the Old Testament is *dialogue*, whereby all parties—including God—are engaged in a dialogic exchange that is potentially transformative for all parties . . . including God. This constitutes a conviction that God and God's partners are engaged in mutual talk. That mutual talk may take a variety of forms. From God's side, the talk may be *promise* and *command*. From the side of the partners, it may be *praise and prayer*. The Old Testament is an invitation to reimagine our life and our faith as an on-going dialogic transaction in which all parties are variously summoned to risk and change.

The reason for this study—and like current study of the Old Testament—is that we live in a time and circumstance that require fresh articulation of faith. It is clear that some of the older, widely accepted categories of interpretation are no longer adequate or satisfying for either faith or intellect. There have been many attempts to reduce biblical faith to a single normative idea. But two things strike one. First, the variegated reality of the text allows for no single dominant idea. Second, the Old Testament is not reducible to “ideas,” but in fact features transformative interaction that may be reenacted and replicated in many performances of the text, whether in study, prayer, or public worship. That is, ours is a time when it is imperative to pay attention to the complex, dynamic, and fluid character of the faith of ancient Israel, with a recognition that fixity is not a quality of serious reality. The dynamism of recent psychology and of contemporary physics witnesses to reality that is in process and in on-going transformation. When we are freed of static categories of interpretation that are widely utilized among us, we are able to see that the articulation of God in the Old Testament partakes exactly of the qualities of complexity, dynamism, and fluidity that belong to the post-modern world. While such an open and thick articulation of faith may be threatening to some and may require unlearning by us all, it is evident that such a fresh perception of God in the Old Testament goes a long way toward letting this God be a contemporary partner in a world that is open and in process. Thus the work of this book is to offer an exposition of the faith of ancient Israel that connects to the dialogic world in which we now find ourselves.

The issue of dialogical faith is particularly important in our present societal context. Our society is now tempted to solve societal (and therefore personal) problems by old, predictable remedies. These remedies often seek to reduce solutions to power or to technology or to more commodity goods. Thus political threat is countered by more military power. Thus problems of illness or aging are managed by

more technology. Thus loneliness is overcome by more commodity goods, whether cars, new information technology, or beer. What we know, however, is that the most elemental human issues—social and personal—do not admit of such resolution. The reason is that human persons in human community are designed for serious, validating relationships that call for mutual care and responsibility; no amount of power, technology, or commodity can be substituted for relatedness. Thus Israel's great confession of faith is that at the bottom of reality there is the fidelity of a holy God who seeks relatedness with appropriate partners. Study of the Old Testament, when done on a sustained basis, consists in changing the agenda from the categories of modernity (knowledge, technology, commodity) to interactions that make for genuine, sustained creatureliness in the world of the creator God. This book is an invitation to think about and enact that changed agenda.

As I have thought about *God and God's partners*, I have focused on four such partners that are evident in the Old Testament, partners that continue to be front and center in our contemporary world.

1. There is no doubt that God's first partner is *Israel as the chosen people of God*. Israel emerges in the text through God's call to Abraham (Gen 12:1-2), through the emancipation of the slaves from Egypt (Exod. 15:1-18), and through the covenant made at Sinai so that this people will be a "priestly kingdom" among the nations (Exod. 19:6).

There is no doubt that Israel as God's chosen people is a complex and difficult claim on many counts. For example, this designation of a special people introduces into the core of the tradition the "scandal of particularity," the conviction that God may take sides in quite concrete ways in the world, so that many peoples are "not chosen." Second, the idea of Israel's chosenness is a complicated issue for the Christian tradition, for the claim of Christ's ultimacy lives in some tension with the claim of Israel. Christians continue to struggle with such an issue. Third, there is no doubt that the theological claim of Israel as God's chosen people is made more complex by the contemporary state of Israel that both makes theological claims and operates by the force of *Realpolitik*. Fourth, at the very edge of the Old Testament there are hints that this same God may in the end select other chosen peoples as well (Isa. 19:24-25; Amos 9:7). What becomes clear is that our more-or-less settled judgments about this matter must be rethought in careful and disciplined ways.

Alongside such reality, it is useful to recognize that Israel is peculiar in its practice of interpretation that, in the hands of the rabbis and the on-going tradition, has refused the kinds of settled interpretation to which Western thought

is always tempted. Jews historically have refused “final interpretation” (by being open to continued dialogic interaction), and have been victims, in the twentieth century, of an attempted “Final Solution.” Thus much work remains to be done to see how the “scandal of particularity” is related to the unbearable violence against Jews in the twentieth century. It is clear in any case that “final interpretation” is a step toward “final solution.”

2. The same dialogic dynamics makes it possible for the Old Testament to offer quite fresh images of *human personhood*. It is by no means an accident that our contemporary understanding of human personality largely derives from Sigmund Freud who was a Jew who understood, from the ground up, that human persons are designed for dialogic interaction as a way of processing complex and conflictual personal and interpersonal reality. Much of what has developed in recent psychological theory is derived from that great insight of Freud and from the Old Testament model of engaged conversation. The book of Psalms, with its emotional and liturgical extremities of praise and lament, is a primer on human character and human relationship. Indeed, it is an easy case to make that what have become popular “Twelve Step Programs” are seeded in Israel’s ancient practices, for such dialogue is an indispensable antidote to modern pathologies of conformity, denial, and despair. The dialogical character of human personality resists both authoritarianism that imagines that full control can be exercised over human life, and autonomy that imagines that individual persons can go it alone. The twin practices of authoritarianism and autonomy are practiced together in a consumer society, autonomy as a pursuit of commodity but under the aegis of authoritarian economics in which everything is measure by productivity.

The faith of ancient Israel endlessly pondered the question, “What is Man?” (Ps. 8:4). It understood, moreover, that human persons are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14) and so cannot be “settled” in any modernist scheme that seeks to put a lid on the irascible yearning for freedom in community. Attention to the interpersonal dynamics practiced in ancient Israel is worth the effort, for the sense of healthy humanness imagined there is a response to a glaring deficit in our contemporary world.

3. The God of Israel is confessed to be sovereign over *the nations*. This is not an easy case to make in the modern world of autonomous national states. Much modern thought has solved the problem by leaving God to be engaged with individual persons, and letting the public sphere of life be “might makes right.” But of course the Old Testament is unwilling to leave any part of life—including international life—outside the scope of God’s dialogic engagement.

The great temptation of modern national states is to imagine independent autonomy without answering to anyone. There is, moreover, no more blatant example of such arrogant autonomy than the recent unilateralism of the United States that has conducted policy on the assumption that it could do anything it wanted, that it owed nothing to the other nations, and that there was no compelling moral limit to aggressive acquisitiveness.

But arrogant national states, all the way back to ancient Egypt and ancient Babylon, have assumed the same. The faith of ancient Israel, especially voiced in prophetic oracles, asserts that there are God-given, God-enforced limits and lines of accountability that curb and chasten raw power. A study of this dimension of Old Testament faith poses exceedingly difficult questions about the governing limits of God in internal affairs:

- Could it possibly be that South African apartheid reached its limit because such brutality was beyond the limit of God?
- Could it be that the fall of the Soviet Union occurred because the power of the state outran what could be borne in the world of God?
- And if one entertains such thought, then one may ask, What are the limits that are non-negotiable even in terms of US power?

Study of this topic invites engagement with the prophetic rhetoric of the Old Testament that knows that the entire political enterprise has a theological dimension to it that cannot be disregarded. Such thinking is reflected in the language of the church that prays regularly, “Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory.” The terms of the prayer, faithful to the Old Testament, are political in a way that places all other political claims in question. Study of this topic must resist “silly supernaturalism,” but may nonetheless take seriously the claim of God that renders all other claims as penultimate.

4. With the current accent upon the environment and a sense of the ecological crisis, it is urgent that *creation* as God’s partner should be a topic of study. We have tended, in the modern world, to reduce “creation” to “nature,” and regarded it as a given on its own terms; the recovery of the language of “creation” will serve to refer the world back to the creator who has ordained into the world limits, and order, and fruitfulness. It will make a difference if and when we are able to recognize that all creatures—beavers, radishes, ore, birds and lilies, oceans—are creatures of the creator who relate to God in terms of obedience and praise. Recently, I saw a beautiful sight in our town when the sun shone brightly on every ice-covered tree and bush. Without being romantic about it, it was not difficult to imagine that the

trees and bushes in their beauty were enacting praise to their creator. Nor is it difficult to imagine that creaturely life that has been distorted (by combat, by neglect, by abuse) is alienated from the creator and yearns for a restored relationship. Such a view is an important challenge to our usual reductionism that sees the world as a collage of commodities for our use, enjoyment, and exploitation.

When we consider God in relation to God's partners, it is clear that we are not engaged in an ancient, esoteric question. Rather, we are at the edge of the most crucial contemporary issues. The study of the Old Testament is an opportunity to rethink, from the ground up, the most demanding issues before us and particularly before the younger generation that must live with our crisis into the coming years. Concerning these four partners, we will have to ask:

- how chosenness is maintained without idolatrous hardening;
- how human persons in dialogic modes can resist authoritarianism and autonomy;
- how nation-states can be understood in terms of penultimate answerability;
- how creation can be re-embraced as a living organic connection, limited and sustained by the creator.

In all of these dimensions, partnership is a summons away from modernist misconstruals, from theological naiveté, and from spiritualization that shuns the hard work of interaction. In fact this menu of partnership may suggest, in a more or less programmatic way, an agenda for our common work of interpretation that is a life-or-death matter in a society that has been too long uncritically committed to a path of death.

The burden of my argument is to recognize that *Israel* (with its ideological temptation), *human persons* (with the seductions of authoritarianism and autonomy), *nation-states* (with an imagined ultimacy), and *creation* (tempted to mechanical reductionism) are to be understood in a dialogical way.

The God of the Bible, of the Old Testament, is a God *in relation*. That in turn means that God's sovereignty is governance-in-relation, marked not only by power but also by fidelity and infidelity. This recharacterization of God is enormously important, because it requires that God be acknowledged as agent; the agency of God is decisive for the life of the world. But Enlightenment reductionism—in the wake of classical theology—has worked long and hard to expel *agency* from religious reflection. Without agency, however, there can be no partnership. Thus God as agent in partnership is a God who is always impinged upon, who is capable of a range of emotional engagement, and who is seen in Israel to be capable of

remarkable interventions. Such a God cannot be reduced to code or formula, but requires rendition in narrative and song and oracle; God, in the discourse of Israel, is always an originary character not to be slotted in any of our familiar categories.

To stand before the Old Testament as a student is a demanding place to be. There is, however, no better place to be if one wants to engage the most critical, elemental questions facing us. I am glad to offer this guideline for study and anticipate a rising generation of readers who will go boldly into this tradition that has revolutionary, subversive, and constructive consequences.

These chapters are a revision of materials from my book of 1997, *Theology of the Old Testament*. I am pleased to republish this material because I believe that the notion of “partnership” as a theological datum is of acute importance in a technological society that refuses the interaction championed in this textual tradition. This large model of interactionism, a peculiarly Jewish insight in a modernist Enlightenment culture, moves in many directions in the text and touches many dimensions of faithful imagination. Thus I suggest that the notion of “partnership” that I have explicated provides important grist for critical reflection that concerns both the faithful practice of the church and larger public issues of humanness that pervade our society.

I am glad for a host of dialogic partners, some more severe than others. Along with Neil Elliott, I am grateful to Tia Foley who prepared these material for republication and to Richard Blake who patiently did the library work so essential to my own work. Finally, I am grateful to the company of dialogic companions who engage in resistance and subversion in the pursuit of an alternative world that is strange and new, always again, in the goodness of God.