

Book Review

Old Testament Theology. Vol. 1, Israel's Gospel

John Goldingay

(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) 883 pages

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John Goldingay accurately calls his first of three volumes on Old Testament Theology “a theological commentary on the Old Testament story” (p. 13). He seeks to express the message God has for humanity through the narrative of the Old Testament or, as Goldingay prefers, the First Testament. The second volume will pick up on the books of the prophets and focus on the traditional theology of who God is and who humans are. Finally, in the third volume, he will deal with the lifestyle of the people of God, largely from the poetry books.

The chapters are long, with only 11 for 858 pages, but they are well-organized with numbered, informative, headings and subheadings, which often expound principles from a section of the Scriptures. For example, pages 512-521, the subject of the land from Genesis through Joshua: “7.8 The Gift of God: The Land; A Land for Settled Life; A Land Yhwh Gives; A Land Yhwh Owns; A Broad Land; A Good Land; A Land for Implementing Torah.”

The book reads well as it follows Israel's story, but the detailed exposition seems to be most useful as a commentary on the various passages on which Goldingay chooses to focus or a source of very good topical studies triggered by the narrative, such as on leadership or family life. Both of those can

be found through the table of contents but are not listed in the brief subject index.

Goldingay insightfully deals with the major subject of the sovereignty of God versus the responsibility and will of humans. Here, it becomes clear that he is not a Calvinist; he expresses a much more centrist position, with which I identify. Perhaps this is related to the fact that he is “an Oxbridge educated, middle-aged, Episcopalian priest” (p. 872).

I found his explanation of the intent of Genesis chapter one to be one of the most helpful I have heard, particularly his suggestion to view it like Nathan's parable about David's sin of taking Bathsheba (p. 879). The parable was symbolic but it represented real events and made God's point clear. He makes another very insightful assertion regarding God's prohibition of physical idols: something that is not a living personal being, can never properly represent God who speaks and acts (p. 103).

However, occasionally, there were some statements that sounded strange to me, especially theologically, such as: “The laments' incoherence mirrors Yhwh's, . . .” (p. 703). The context seems to modify the effect, but I am not totally clear on what he meant.

Goldingay shows depth and breadth of scholarly research in his footnotes, including a broad awareness of the content of ancient parallel texts, and at the same time, a refreshing affirmation of the divine authority of the texts of the canon and their relevance. For instance, he declares, "One hundred percent of the Old Testament has theological significance" (p. 19). In his excellent postscript on OT theology and history, he carefully and thoroughly explains his respect for historical, critical, and sociological studies, but recognizes that not enough evidence exists to establish dogmatic perspectives about the biblical contexts. He concludes, "I assume that God reckoned that the books need not mislead us in that state" (p. 872). Therefore, he focuses on the theology of the text through canonical intertextual study along with interaction with ancient texts. He even freely admits that some traditional explanations of Old Testament passages are simply guesses.

With all the scholarly sources cited, I was disappointed to find that Goldingay never made any reference to Bruce Waltke or any other notable North American, conservative Old Testament theologians. His references to Numbers 11 and other passages referring to God's Spirit and charismatic phenomena and ministry ignore those aspects, which are very significant to us Pentecostals. He did not treat the passage negatively, but they were not viewed as important. He emphasized subjects such as the positive roles and contributions of women, the negative patriarchal practices, and violence.

The author consistently applies the teaching of Israel's texts to current issues. Personally, I think his very specific references to U.S. history and current politics go too far and date his material, thereby limiting the scope for future readers. This would also relate to his frequent references to recent Hollywood movies as illustrations.

In conclusion, my critical remarks are minor in the context of such a massive and profound work. My one serious concern and difference with Goldingay is his limited view of the gospel in the Old Testament. I understand his intent to only discuss the theology of the text as the writers would have understood it without the benefit of seeing the fulfillment and culmination in the New Testament. He does use the term gospel, but only as it pertains to the general story of God's continued working in Israel's history. In the end, never specifies God's goals in Israel's history. I believe the theology of the Old Testament focuses on the goal and promise of salvation and restoration of fellowship between all people and God through the mission of a person sent from God through the God-established nation of Israel to self-sacrificially accomplish this victory over sin and death. Despite the need for this clarification, I highly recommend Goldingay's work as an Old Testament theology that thoroughly expounds the text as the Word of God and provides many significant insights.

