

# The Bible as “History” and Theology

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## Abstract

Our purpose in this study is to provide a *theological* and “*historical*” context into which we will be able to determine the *literary nature* of books in the Bible, or more specifically the books of the Old Testament. The same will be true for a critical examination of the New Testament Gospels. We will argue that understanding the Old Testament as a *history of Israel* is misleading and unnecessary. We will stress that the Old Testament or the Gospels are not historical documents but are rather *theological narratives* set in a *historical context* reflecting *God’s redemptive acts in history and his steadfast love for his creation*.

## The Old Testament as History

This brief paper will explain that although some scholars of the Old Testament *reject any possibility of a reliable historical view of the Old Testament* it is possible to trace in the Old Testament a *theological “history”*<sup>1</sup> of the development of Israel as a nation from its earliest *pre-history* days until it became a nation under covenant with God.

Since there is *little or no empirical testimony* to the first 11 chapters of Genesis it is common to question their real history, beyond oral tradition for the narrative from creation to Abraham. Much will depend on how one defines history! Karl Barth rejected much of Georg Wilhelm Hegel’s approach to an evolution of historical events in favor of a theology or faith almost totally denying history a role in faith development. Wolfhardt Pannenberg and a cohort of German

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<sup>1</sup> The student should note that a *theological “history”* is developed *thematically* and not *chronologically*.

academics re-defined historical epistemology in favor of the *preponderance, coherence, and consistency* of testimony to an event.<sup>2</sup>

I will approach this study with a suitable *biblical theological approach* to the Old Testament is to demonstrate God's *overt holiness, sovereignty, and unfailing love for his creation*, especially in regard to the Old Testament account of the nation of Israel.

I am impressed by several Old Testament scholars, notably Walter Brueggemann, Brevard Childs, and Thomas Olbricht.<sup>3</sup> In particular, I have for some years been captivated by Thomas H. Olbricht's theological overview of the Old Testament in his study, *He Loves Forever!*

To begin note that the Old Testament is *not a history book* in which Israel's story is told *as history*. It may touch on history and be developed in the context of history *but it does not intend to be approached as a history of Israel*.

Theologically the Old Testament sets *salvation* in the context of acts of redemption revealed in the "history" of Israel beginning with Genesis with a highlight focus on calling Abraham and his family out of Ur in the Chaldees, his covenant with Abraham, and his constant redemption of Israel from captivity. Biblical theologians use a term that describes *redeeming acts in history, Heilsgeschichte, "salvation history."*

The term *Heilsgeschichte*, "salvation history," emerged in the 18th century after certain theologians influenced by the Enlightenment had questioned and historiography from the biblical tradition. *Heilsgeschichte* was first described by Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann (1810–1877) in his work *Prophecy and Fulfillment in the Old and New Testaments. A theological Experiment*. From 1841 the term was introduced into the *theological discussion* in order to counter Enlightenment tendencies. In the middle of the 19th century, it became a permanent fixture in the theology of the German-speaking world and is also used in the English language as a *theological term*. In the middle of the 20th century, it became a central concept and theme of theology. *Wikipedia*.

Neither the Old Testament, nor any individual books in that *corpus*, is a *history or scientific book* that explains in *scientific or historical terminology how or when all things began*.

The Old Testament does, however, set the redemptive narrative of Israel in *historical contexts* of sovereign *setting boundaries for the behavior of his people as at Mt Sinai*.

The Old Testament is a *redemptive* narrative of Israel's origins decline and redemption thematically pressing back into its *pre-historical period*. It seeks to explain sovereign acts in the narrative of *Israel's fall* from grace, and mighty acts of redemption; thus *the Old Testament is primarily a recitation of God's election of Israel and of his saving acts in history* that explain *Israel's covenant relationship* with YHWH and *YHWH's steadfast love for his creation*, which love never fails in spite of man's refusal to keep God's covenants of blessings. The Old Testament sets out to explain *theologically* to Israel that YHWH who brought them out of Egyptian slavery is the same God who created everything in the beginning, and who has the power to sustain them forever.

The developing story of Israel is *theologically set* in a *broad thematic form* which begins with YHWH's creation in a time before history was recorded in written form, and then picks up in semi-historical form YHWH's calling of Abram out of Ur of Chaldea into Canaan. That it may not be possible to define that pre-history of Israel in modern forms of historiography does not mean that it is *ahistorical* in the sense that *the events did not happen*.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Fair, PhD dissertation, *Wolfhardt Pannenberg as a Reaction to Dialectical Theology*, University of Natal, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to the bibliography at the end of this paper for references to these and other significant scholars.

Furthermore, this does not mean that pre-history narrative is *not a reliable narrative of how Israel's story began and progressed to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons/tribes of Israel*. In ancient times *oral tribal communication* was considered to be normative.<sup>4</sup> *How the historical narrative components became part of Israel's written story is not the purpose of a biblical theological study, but falls within the broader scope of the heritage and development of oral national traditions.*

Whatever one's persuasion may be regarding the origins of the written form of the Old Testament canon does not fall under the categories involved in this study, nor do those concerns impact the study of religious traditions.

It is the view of most Old Testament scholars, who are able to read the Hebrew version of the current *Masoretic* text, that the text style and syntax of the Hebrew reflected in the *Masoretic text postdates* whatever alphabet and text style that would have been available to Moses, ca. 1500 BCE. *The possible current language when Moses led Israel out of Egypt was a form of proto-Phoenician language from which most ancient Eastern Mediterranean languages developed.*

When Moses is attributed to have written Genesis, etc. the *Hebrew Alphabet and language* were still being developed by Israel and other Near Eastern regions.

The point being the Hebrew Old Testament text reflected in the Masoretic text, the one that is used as a base-line for our modern Bibles, was not present in 1500 BCE or when Moses was active! The scribal editing and transition from multiple resources of the Masoretic text, ca. 1,000 CE, when compared with multiple sources such as the Greek Septuagint, ca. 230 BCE, and the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1947 bear testimony to the care of the Masorete's transcription work.

*How the earliest oral traditions resulted in the manuscripts we have in our canonical view of the Pentateuch may be an interesting study, but again such interests are not the purview of this study. It is possible that what "Moses said" as reflected in the Gospels and Paul refer to the oral traditions with possible reference to Moses' experience with YHWH and Israel that were eventually coded in a proto-Hebrew Canaanite or Phoenician written form, and due to their Mosaic tradition attributed to Moses.*

There are several Scriptures that record "**Moses wrote**"! **Exodus 24:4** – "Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said." **Deuteronomy 31:9** – "So Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests..." **Numbers 33:2** – "At the Lord's command Moses recorded the stages in their journey..." These verses suggest Moses was actively recording God's instructions and Israel's journey. The point is that what Moses wrote was *not in the Hebrew dialect or script*, but most likely in a *proto-Phoenician Egyptian script*, eventually translated into a *Hebrew script and alphabet*.

## **The History of Ancient Semitic-speaking people or Proto-Semitic people**

The following is a brief summary of the spread of early semitic languages, including the proto-Phoenician languages like Egyptian, Canaanite, and early Hebrew.

Speakers of Semitic languages who lived throughout the ancient Near East and North Africa, including the Levant [Syria, Lebanon], Mesopotamia, Anatolia, the Arabian Peninsula and Carthage from the 3rd millennium BCE [300 – 200 BCE] onward.

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<sup>4</sup> Walton, John H. and Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority*.

Some, *Arabs*, Arameans, Assyrians, *Jews*, Mandaeans, and *Samaritans* having a historical Semitic continuum into the present day.

Their languages are usually divided into three branches: *East*, *Central* and *South Semitic languages*. The *Proto-Semitic language* was likely first spoken in the early 4th millennium BC in Western Asia, and the oldest attested forms of Semitic date to the early to mid-3rd millennium BC in *Mesopotamia*, the northwest Levant and southeast *Anatolia* [Asia Minor].

*Speakers of East Semitic* include the people of the Akkadian Empire, Ebla, Assyria, Babylonia, the latter two of which eventually gradually switched to still spoken dialects of Akkadian influenced East Aramaic and perhaps Dilmun.

*Northwest Semitic* languages include the *Arabic*, the *Canaanites*, the *Phoenicians*, Punics, *Amorites*, *Edomites*, *Moabites*, the *Hebrews*, Arameans and the Ugarites.

*South Semitic* peoples include the speakers of Modern South Arabian languages and *Ethiopian Semitic languages*.

### **The Hebrew Script of the Masoretic text, that of our modern Hebrew Old Testament**

The earliest form of the “Hebrew” text type we find in the Masoretic text does not predate 1,000 BCE, and whenever you date Moses in the biblical narrative he surely predated 1,000 BCE by at least 200 to 500 hundred years!

Therefore, the Hebrew script of the Masoretic text [800-1,000 CE] could not have been written by Moses, but reflects the careful editing and transcription of numerous sources.

The history and philological study of the Hebrew language development from the Canaanite Phoenician language is an interesting study, but not the purview of this study.

*In this study we will begin with the received canonical Hebrew Bible and study the development of Israel’s religious faith as reflected in the Old Testament.*

However, we need to recognize that the Old Testament manuscripts that have ended up in the canonical Hebrew Bible had gone through many scribal forms before they were finally acknowledged as canonical by the religious scribal schools in Israel at the closing of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE.

I particularly appreciate Brevard Childs’ observation in this regard, remembering that Childs held firmly to a view of *canonical theology* [which primarily means the version of the text we accept as canonical].

“It is a basic tenet of the canonical approach that *one reflects theologically on the text as it has been received and shaped*. Yet the emphasis on the normative status of the canonical text is not a denial of the significance of the canonical process which formed the text ... The final canonical literature reflects a long history of development in which the received tradition was selected, transmitted and shaped by hundreds of decisions. This process of construing its religious tradition involved a continual critical evaluation of historical options which were available to Israel and a transformation of its received tradition toward certain theological goals.<sup>5</sup>

In an enlightening examination of the transmission of religious traditions from oral tradition to written autographs and manuscripts, John Walton and Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* have documented the move from oral tribal tradition, and scribal activity to written documents.

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<sup>5</sup> Brevard S. Childs. *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985, p. 10, 11, Kindle Edition. Childs is well aware of the critical studies involved in the canonical process.

Perhaps we can agree that some form of transition from oral tradition to pre-history in a *historical/theological narrative* crystalized with God's call of Abraham.

The *theological component* of the Old Testament narrative as it was handed down through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob moves through retelling the significance of God's covenant with Abraham.

The story of Isaac's descendants moving into Egyptian slavery, their Exodus from Egypt as an extended tribal group under Moses through a period of wandering as a migrant people in the desert wilderness of Sinai solidified into a national history originally conveyed through family and national oral traditions into a national "*theological historical narrative*."

Toward the closing of the Mosaic era we have in Deut 6:1-9 an indication as to how this oral tradition became a national "history."

*"Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God **charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy,** <sup>2</sup> so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. <sup>3</sup> **Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.***

*<sup>4</sup> **Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.** <sup>5</sup> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. <sup>6</sup> **Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.** <sup>7</sup> **Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.** <sup>8</sup> **Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, <sup>9</sup> and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.**"*

The wandering twelve tribes of Israel after the Mt. Sinai covenant giving of the Law (*Torah*<sup>6</sup>) finally resulted in the **maturing of the tribes into a nation** under judges, prophets, and kings. The "settled" conditions of residence in the Promised Land, Canaan, became the geographic "home" of Israel.

Once the Tabernacle of the wilderness became the "settled presence" of YHWH, with priests and scribes, the combination of oral tribal traditions developed into a historical theological corpus as in the Chronicles. The narratives combined in 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, tell the story of a nation struggling to find its faith under YHWH.

Establishing an exact *chronological history* of these primitive centuries, although it might be possible and interesting, is not the purpose of the Old Testament. *The Old Testament is not a history book, it is a theological book* in which Israel tells the story of YHWH's redeeming acts in their history. The purpose of the Old Testament is therefore a *theological narrative* expressed in the acts of YHWH which *explain Israel's development as YHWH's chosen people*, his making covenants with Abraham and his descendants, and his extended love for his people who constantly failed to keep YHWH's covenants.

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<sup>6</sup> *Torah* is a theological term used by Jews to speak of the first five books of the Old Testament which we call the Pentateuch. Eventually the whole of the Old Testament was defined as *Torah*. *Torah* actually means *instruction* indicating how the Jews understood their sacred Scriptures; instruction from God regarding living in a covenant relationship with him. A term commonly used by the Jews to define the whole of the Old Testament is *Tanakh* which is built off an acronym of TNK; T from *Torah* (the Pentateuch), N from *Navi'im* (the Prophets) and K from *Ketuvim* (the sacred writings).

The purpose of this brief introduction to Old Testament is therefore, to enable the student to set the individual books of the Old Testament in the context of God's redeeming and steadfast love and Israel's *Torah* driven faith and religious practice.

When critically examining a Biblical text reflecting a narrative of Israel's antiquity the first question one should ask the biblical text is what kind of genre<sup>7</sup> it purports to be! Literature can be presented in many different genre (ways of kinds) each with its own characteristics as to literary genre and purpose in writing. With this in mind, one should ask the Old Testament whether it intends to be considered as critical historiography<sup>8</sup>; an archaeological narrative<sup>9</sup>; historical fiction, historical narrative<sup>10</sup>, fairy tale, myth, political narrative, or theological narrative. Each of these genre carry within them their own unique characteristics and standards of evaluation.

It is the view of most conservative scholars that the biblical text, especially the Old Testament does not purport to be historiography, a political narrative or simply mythological. It is the general view of theologians of both the Old Testament and New Testament consider the biblical texts to be primarily theological, each variously including some historical import, political concerns, and mythological content, but nevertheless being theological in nature. Consequently, biblical texts should not be evaluated by the standards of pure historiography or political science especially when the standards of historical method do not encompass the contingent and supernatural.

To call this study a history of the Old Testament or a history of biblical Israel is therefore somewhat of a misnomer since at the minimalist<sup>11</sup> empirical level the topic of biblical history is difficult to sustain since in the view of the minimalist contingent one-time events and actions relating to divine intervention cannot be empirically verified.

A minimalist "empirical" view of history has for over a century raised questions regarding the possibility of sustaining a real history of Israel due to the sparsity of sustainable empirical or archaeological evidence that can support certain biblical events such as Enoch's ascension into heaven, the feeding of the Israelites in the wilderness with manna, or the actual crossing of the Red Sea during the Exodus<sup>12</sup>. The problem with such reluctance and denigration of the biblical account of Israel's history lies in the model of critical history adopted, notably in the era of Liberal Theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and modern ethnocentric and liberation theologies each of which moves from one cultural or political context or persuasion to another. It is noteworthy that

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<sup>7</sup> Genre, which derives from a French word, primarily means *kinds, styles, or means of communication*.

<sup>8</sup> *Historiography*, "the writing of history; especially the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods." Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Historiography thus is the writing of history based on scholarly disciplines such as the analysis and evaluation of source materials, and in the post enlightenment era, the use of empirical models of evaluation, IAF.

<sup>9</sup> Archaeological history is the composition of archeological finds determining whether a tradition can be considered historical. Cf. Hershel Shanks, ed., *Ancient Israel*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> For instance the literary style of James Michener in his major works *Texas, Poland, or The Covenant* in which Michener selects the historical developments of nations or peoples and ascribes to the narratives fictitious names.

<sup>11</sup> Minimalist is a technical term used of liberal scholars who reduce the biblical text to views defined along empirical and post-modern categories. The minimalist biblical historian rejects any historical value to the biblical text.

<sup>12</sup> I am aware of several supposed archaeological attempts to locate and support the actual crossing of the Red Sea but none of these have been sustained by serious scholarly research and examination. Cf. Hershel Shanks, *Ancient Israel*, pp. 35ff.

the minimalist approach of liberal theology has not been able to arrive at any consensus regarding norms or standards of historical or literary criticism which consequently results in a maze of confusing conclusions.

Opinions regarding excessively narrow empirical definitions of critical history have been seriously challenged at scholarly levels<sup>13</sup>. Any overview of the conclusions of critical historians reveals the wide ranging approaches to the editorial opinions of most modern critical biblical scholars, many of which I have previously designated as minimalist. Such a survey reveals that there is no consensus regarding the history of the formation and editing of the Hebrew canon of Scripture. In most cases the critical scholars pay little attention to the validity of their own philosophical presuppositions and ignore the possibility of other persuasions. As a demonstration of this tendency to overlook one's own presuppositions Childs makes this observation regarding his "esteemed teacher" Gerhard Von Rad's theological analysis of the Old Testament.

*Nevertheless, my disagreement with von Rad's historical approach lies in the hermeneutical inconsistency in which he develops his theological approach. Von Rad begins his theology by separating off the 'real history' of Israel, reconstructed much after the fashion of M. Noth, from his own kerygmatic approach (3-102). He then confesses his inability to reconcile Israel's 'confessional history' with that reconstructed by modern critical scholarship (107), which is at least a frank, if inadequate, statement of the problem. Then in the sections which follow in his *Theology* von Rad continues to build his interpretation of Israel's confessional witness directly upon a variety of critical and highly theoretical reconstructions regarding the patriarchal deity (Alt), cultic renewal (Mowinckel), and the origins of passover (Rost), which of course greatly affects how he hears the 'voice of Israel'. Or again, von Rad constructs a form of Heilsgeschichte on the basis of his so-called credo and refocuses the canonical material according to this theoretical pattern. In this latter case, the fragile nature of his hypothesis and the false implications which he derived from it have become increasingly clear and cast suspicion on much of his brilliant interpretation in his *Theology*. The subtle dialectical relation between Israel's inner and outer history which at places is so stunningly espoused, is seriously undercut.<sup>14</sup>*

A survey several of the minimalist critics leaves one with the impression of considerable "confusion" with a new critical persuasion appearing almost every decade<sup>15</sup>.

However, as Brueggemann points out in his *Introduction to Old Testament Theology* the Bible in no manner seeks to set itself up as empirically supported historiography, nor should it be so finely or narrowly defined. In the mindset of Ernest G. Wright and his school of Old

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Revelation as History*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968; *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vols 1-3, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970 – 1973; Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008, Kindle 2011; Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel*, Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998, Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008; Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Brevard S. Childs. *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, Kindle Locations 1492-1499.

<sup>15</sup> For discussion of this point cf. Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008, Kindle 2011; Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel*, Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998; Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008; Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, 1985; Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*.

Testament theology the Bible is better understood as a recital of God's saving acts which have taken place in history. Wright was a distinguished professor of Old Testament and Old Testament Theology at Harvard Divinity School who attracted scholarly attention in 1958 when he published a significant work in Old Testament theology, *The God Who Acts*. In this work Wright challenged the ultra-critical liberal view of biblical history and the Old Testament that had prevailed in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since Wright's day several outstanding scholars have addressed the issue of Old Testament history/theology, defining the Old Testament as a theological work set in a historical narrative<sup>16</sup>.

I am persuaded along with Brevard Childs<sup>17</sup> and Walter Brueggemann<sup>18</sup> that one cannot do Old Testament history or theology from a narrow German Lutheran minimalist persuasion, or its scholarly heritage as in John Van Seters and Thomas Thompson, ignoring the interests of modern Jewish historians and Christian theologians of a scholarly evangelical persuasion who adopt a canonical context<sup>19</sup> approach to biblical theology. It is my opinion, as it apparently is of several scholars, notably Childs, Brueggemann, Eugene Merrill, and Walter Kaiser that a history or theology of the Old Testament must be done within a canonical context of the text as in the Hebrew canonical bible and not from the context of constantly morphing Wellhausen documentary hypothesis and its heritage in a history of religions source persuasion<sup>20</sup>.

It seems apparent that the early Christian faith was connected to Old Testament theology through a canon of Old Testament scripture which the church had inherited! It has always impressed me that Paul, or Saul of Tarsus, which sophisticated and well trained legal Pharisaic scribe and scholar of the great scribal Pharisee Gamaliel who surely was representative of the Sanhedrin, simply worked within the canonical context of the Scriptures as he had received them! Surely he must have realized and understood the problems of working with a text of such antiquity and with such an oral and written tradition. It apparently did not confuse him or hinder him when he spoke out of a canonical context of the Septuagint or Hebrew text. Surely Gamaliel and Saul were aware of the history of the development of the Hebrew text when they developed their theology but this did not reduce the confidence they had in the theology of the Old Testament! It is obvious that Paul had a clear understanding of Old Testament history and theology, leaning as heavily as he did on God's working through Abraham and a covenant deeply imbedded in a history of Israel.

But then, as you should observe since I introduce Paul's theological understanding of the Old Testament, I am working within a *canonical context* of both the Hebrew Old Testament and Christian New Testament, as I have received them in my religious tradition! My point is that working within the context of a canonical view of the Old Testament one can be aware of the

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<sup>16</sup> John Bright, *A History of Israel*, London: SCM, 1960; Bernard Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament*, London, Longmans, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1967; Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*; Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel*; Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction*; Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*; Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*.

<sup>17</sup> Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*.

<sup>18</sup> Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction*, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> A canonical context as Childs expressed it in its various forms and in which I will speak of it relates to accepting the text as we have it in our respective religious context rather than in a context of trying to suppose what it might have been or how it developed in the centuries of its history.

<sup>20</sup> It is apparent that one need not be a scholar steeped in the studies of Ancient Near Eastern Religions to realize that the confusion of much of the discussion and wide ranging disagreement among the minimalist movement and liberal scholarship is not a sound basis for developing a sound theological and historical understanding of the Old Testament, however its history may be defined.

history of the development of a tradition and an understanding of critical history while building one's theology of the received canon of Scripture. One can do this since one does not view the Old Testament simply as a critical history of Israel but as a theological view of God working on Israel's history to reveal his steadfast love for Israel. As I understand it this is what Child and others who work with a canonical view of theology function.

## The Old Testament as Theology

### G. Ernest Wright, 1952

In his ground making work *The God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, 1952, advanced the presupposition that the Old Testament is *not a history of Israel as a nation of YHWH's people*. A prominent *biblical scholar and archaeologist*, Wright was known for his work in Old Testament *history and theology*. He emphasized the idea that *biblical faith is best understood through the narrative of God's actions in history*, earlier identified as *Heilsgeschichte*,<sup>21</sup> "salvation history," rather than through abstract historical or theological propositions.

Wright proposed that **biblical theology is fundamentally a "recital" of God's actions in history**, rather than a system of abstract historical and theological propositions. He challenged the dominance of **systematic theology**, which he saw as overly influenced by Greek philosophical categories and disconnected from *the narrative nature of Scripture*.

Wright's key concepts were:

**Theology as Recital:** Biblical faith is expressed through *storytelling—recounting what God has done in history*, especially in events like the Exodus. Theology, then, is not just about doctrine but about proclaiming God's acts.

**Historical Revelation:** God reveals Himself through *real historical events*, not through timeless truths or metaphysical speculation. *The Bible is a record of these events and their interpretation by the community of faith*.

**Critique of Propositional Theology:** Wright critiqued the tendency to reduce theology to a set of propositions or attributes. *He insisted that God's character is best understood through His actions, not abstract qualities*.

**Narrative and Faith:** To confess faith in God is to *tell a story—the story of redemption, covenant, and divine intervention*. *This storytelling is central to Israel's theology and identity*.

### Eugene Merrill, 2008

In the preface to his book *Kingdom of Priests*, 2008, (the title alone should indicate that Merrill did not see the Old Testament simply as *historiography* but as a *theological book*).

Merrill made this significant observation:

*"The title of this work— Kingdom of Priests—suggests at once the peculiar nature of a history of Israel: it cannot be done along the lines of normal historical scholarship because it relies primarily upon documents (the Old Testament) that are fundamentally*

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<sup>21</sup> The term *Heilsgeschichte*, "salvation history," emerged in the 18th century, after theologians influenced by the Enlightenment had questioned and historiography from the biblical tradition. *Heilsgeschichte* was first described by Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann (1810–1877) in his work *Prophecy and Fulfillment in the Old and New Testaments. A theological Experiment*. From 1841 the term was introduced into the *theological discussion* in order to counter Enlightenment tendencies. In the middle of the 19th century, it became a permanent fixture in the theology of the German-speaking world and is also used in the English language as a *theological term*. In the middle of the 20th century, it became a central concept and theme of theology. *Wikipedia*.

*ahistoriographic in character. The Old Testament is first and foremost theological and not historical literature; this means that theological and not historical approaches must be brought to bear if its underlying purpose and message are to be discerned.*

*Contrary to much contemporary scholarship, however, we must assert that just because the Old Testament is by definition “sacred history,” this does not nullify its claim to authentic historicity as that term is commonly used. It is indeed the record of Yahweh’s covenantal relationship with his special people Israel, a record that constantly calls attention to the divine interpretation and even prediction of events, but this always presupposes that those very events actually occurred in time and space. The theological message, in other words, is grounded in genuine history.”<sup>22</sup>*

Merrill continues as he discusses the nature of the biblical record:

*“The Nature of the Literature*

*We now turn from philosophical and methodological considerations of the Old Testament as a historical record to matters more formal and substantial. Contrary to most ancient historical texts, the Old Testament is dominated by narrative or story. Biography, a subcategory of narrative, is particularly prominent and, with narrative in general, provides a primary vehicle for the communication of Israel’s story. Even so-called legal texts make their contribution to the overall account, as do the prophetic, poetic, and sapiential literatures. Careful attention to genre distinctions is crucial in determining the relative worth of the various literary categories in historical reconstruction, but if used with discretion, they all contribute to a full-orbed understanding of Israel’s past.*

*One reason for the plethora of genres employed in narrating Israel’s history in the Old Testament is—to repeat—the fact that the Old Testament is fundamentally a theological oeuvre and only secondarily and almost incidentally historical. Thus its purpose dictates the mode and garb in which it presents itself. Failure to appreciate this point is to lay historical demands on the Bible that were never intended by its authors.*

*Finally, the Old Testament reveals structural clues that set it apart from historiography as commonly practiced.”<sup>23</sup>*

Merrill’s views the characteristics of Old Testament history by noting that *chronological concerns are not a major interest in the writing and presentation of the biblical history of Israel.*

The authors of the biblical history presented in the Old Testament were not concerned, or even interested, in writing *biblical historiography* according the persuasions of modern critical historians no matter what the criteria of the critic may be. Contrary to writing a history of chronological accuracy according to modern historiography the biblical historians, Merrill favored a *thematic order* rather than a *chronological order*. Merrill astutely observed that “*considerations other than chronological order define much of the Old Testament approach to history writing.*”<sup>24</sup>

### ***Heilsgeschichte and Eschatology***

Two theological concepts or terms coming into the picture of the metanarrative of the Old Testament that are somewhat historically related but whose interest is not primarily historical are *Heilsgeschichte* and *Eschatology*. These terms reflect a view of time that is *significantly Jewish*,

<sup>22</sup> Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, p. 13.

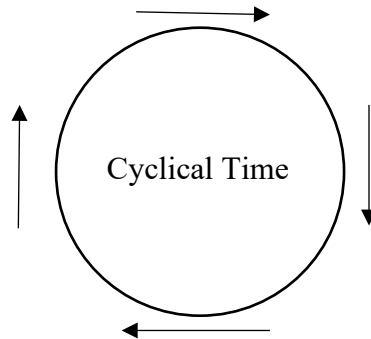
<sup>23</sup> Merrill, p. 33-34.

<sup>24</sup> Merrill, p. 34.

*Christian*, and *Islamic* in contrast to the view of time encountered in ancient Greek, Hindu, and Buddhist views of time.

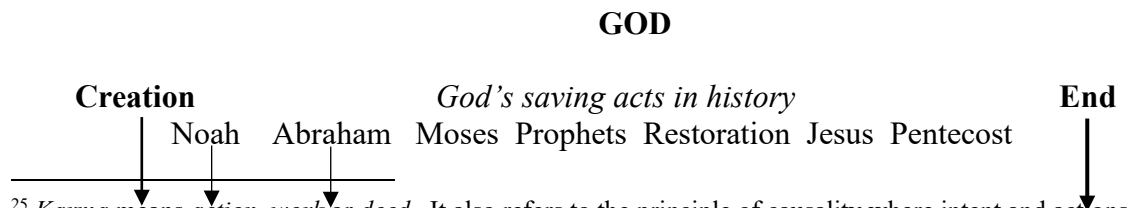
**Ancient Greek, Hindu, Buddhist, and other Eastern religious views**

Systems influenced by ancient Aryan views of time see *time in a constant cycle of events without emphasis on beginning or end*. Life continues in a constant cycle of events. In the Hindu view life continues through a cycle of reincarnations of birth and life with the individual eventually reaching the stage of non-existence and unity with the ultimate reality. The present *karma*<sup>25</sup> of life is related to the future with little regard for the past. The future reincarnation is shaped by the present *karma* of life in which the future reincarnation is shaped by the how one lives and dies in the present.



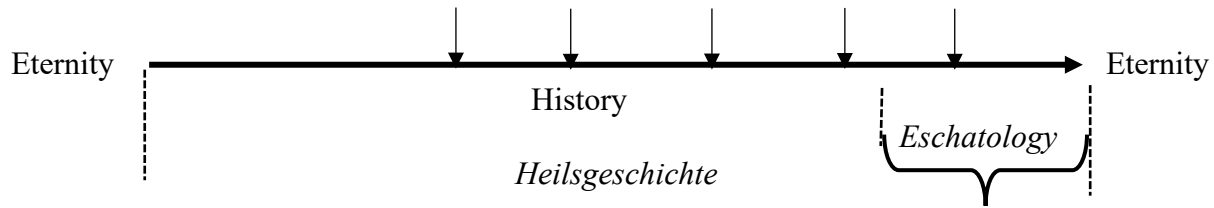
**Jewish, Christian, and Islamic views**

In contrast to a cyclical view of time see time as having a beginning and end, both of which are in control of an eternal God. In this view the world and all creatures are a creation of this almighty God, *Yahweh, God, or Allah*, who has set principles of behaviour and the consequences of misbehavior. All three views of the divine (*Yahweh, God, or Allah*) hold that the divine has a plan for redeeming his fallen creation and that this plan is revealed in His divine acts of redemption which have taken place in history. In this view time is bound between the *beginning* and the *end* with the “existence” before time and after time defined as *eternity*. The following diagram depicts this view with God’s saving activity taking place along the line of history. In theological terminology the time-line of history in which God’s saving acts in history is referred to as *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation in history). *Eschatology*<sup>26</sup> which derives from the Greek *éschatos* meaning *end of finality* refers to the *final days* in which God preform his saving activity.



<sup>25</sup> *Karma* means *action, work or deed*. It also refers to the principle of causality where intent and actions of an individual influence the future of that individual. Good intent and good deed contribute to good karma and future happiness, while bad intent and bad deed contribute to bad karma and future suffering. *Karma* is closely associated with the idea of rebirth in some schools of Asian religions. In these schools, karma in the present affects one’s future in the current life, as well as the nature and quality of future lives ... With origins in ancient India, it is a key concept in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, Shintoism and other eastern religions. Cf. Wikipedia, *Karma*.

<sup>26</sup> For discussion of the terms *Heilsgeschichte* and *eschatology* refer to these terms in the School of Theology Glossary of Theological Terms.



### ***History as Heilsgeschichte***

When we speak of Bible “History” or Old Testament “History” we have in mind the *record of God’s saving acts which have taken place in history* which may or may not be empirically verifiable. Thus Bible “History” is theologically determined and not historically determined by empirical standards of history and is thus spoken of as *Heilsgeschichte*, *God’s saving activity taking place in history*.

In theological terminology two words have been used to describe what in English we might call *history*; *Historie* and *Geschichte*. *Historie* refers to those events that can be empirically verifiable and *Geschichte* refers to those events we know of by reliable testimony. It is the view of Judaism and Christianity that the Old Testament is reliable and trustworthy testimony to God’s saving activity. In the view of Islam the *Quran* is therefore viewed as reliable testimony of Allah’s saving activity.

In *Geschichte* there are in the absence of empirical evidence standards of determining reliability. They are *sufficient support of a claim*, *the consistency of the evidence*, and *the coherence of the evidence*.

### **Old and New Testament Theology and God’s Eternal Purpose**

I keeping with Childs’ and other observations regarding approaching biblical theology within a canonical context, and since Christians naturally do theology within a Christian tradition and canonical view of Scripture, I am suggesting that we briefly comment on Paul’s opening theological theme in Ephesians 1:2-11<sup>27</sup>.

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup> even as **he chose us in him before the foundation of the world**, that we should be holy and blameless before him. <sup>5</sup> **He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,** <sup>6</sup> **to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.** <sup>7</sup> **In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us. <sup>9</sup> For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup> **as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*****

*<sup>11</sup> In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, <sup>12</sup> we who first hoped in Christ **have been***

<sup>27</sup> It matters little whether one considers Ephesians to be the work of the Apostle Paul, or someone close to Paul who understood his theology well, that this text sets Paul’s theology within a Christian canonical context view of biblical theology. I, however, am satisfied that Ephesians is the work of the Apostle Paul; cf. my comments on this in my brief commentary on *The Theology of Ephesians*, Heritage Christian Media, 2014.

*destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.* <sup>13</sup> *In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,* <sup>14</sup> *which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”*

The fact that Paul refers to *a plan for the fulness of time that God made before the foundation of the world* in which he *destined* (προορίζω *proorízō*, *destined, predestined, decided beforehand*) us to be his children in Christ, and that we were *predestined* and appointed to live for the praise of God’s glory *indicates that Paul saw in Scripture a divine plan stretching from before creation to after the end.* It was within this canonical context that Paul worked through his theology of God’s covenant call to Abraham (Rom 4: 1ff; Gal 15f), Israel’s servant mission (Rom 1:16, 17), and the death and burial of Jesus *in fulfillment of God’s plan.*

The same could be said of the writer of the New Testament book Hebrews who argued for the authority of Christ out of an Old Testament canonical context that Christ was better than the Moses, and the Aaronic priesthood (Heb 1:1-3; *passim*).

It is only from within a *canonical context of the Old Testament, and not from within a historical framework of the Old Testament that the New Testament and Christianity makes any sense.*

### ***The Steadfast Love of God***

A cursory survey of the Old Testament reveals, as Professor Thomas Olbricht has argued<sup>28</sup>, that possibly the dominant theme of the Old Testament is the steadfast love of the lord for his creation and fallen man. Perhaps the best known expression of this theme is Lamentations 3: 21-23:

*“But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
<sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
<sup>23</sup> they are new every morning;  
great is thy faithfulness.”*

Set in the turmoil of the capture and destruction of Jerusalem and Babylonian exile, this beautiful confession of faith has today become a favored song of Christian praise and hope.

In order to appreciate the theme of steadfast love one has either to read from the Hebrew Bible or the RSV/NRSV for the Hebrew term *hesed* (pronounced *chesed* with a semi-guttural *ch*) that is translated *steadfast love* is a broad term meaning *"loving-kindness, kindness, mercy, loyalty, or love."*<sup>29</sup> The NIV reads “Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, *for his compassions never fail.*

A quick survey of the RSV reveals that this expression occurs 373 times in 181 verses. The first instance of this expression is found at Gen 24:12 when Abraham’s servant went out to find Isaac a wife. Coming to a spring near the city of Nahor in Mesopotamia the servant prayed these words,

<sup>28</sup> Thomas H. Olbricht, *He Loves Forever*, Joplin Missouri: College Press, 2000, *passim*.

<sup>29</sup> Biblical scholars have often complained that the word *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible is difficult to translate into English, because it really has no precise equivalent in our language. English versions usually try to represent it with such words as "loving-kindness," "mercy," "steadfast love," and sometimes "loyalty," but the full meaning of the word cannot be conveyed without an explanation, such as the one given in the article below. Norman H. Snaith, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, edited by Alan Richardson New York: MacMillan, 1951, pp. 136-7.

***“O LORD, God of my master Abraham, grant me success today, I pray thee, and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. <sup>13</sup> Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. <sup>14</sup> Let the maiden to whom I shall say, ‘Pray let down your jar that I may drink,’ and who shall say, ‘Drink, and I will water your camels’—let her be the one whom thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac. By this I shall know that thou hast shown steadfast love to my master.”***

The expression is also found 242 times in 150 Psalms, indicating the importance of this expression to the worship liturgy of Israel.

It is the repeated statements of God’s steadfast love for Israel that leads Thom Olbricht to open his theology of the Old Testament with this observation:

*“The story line of the Old Testament exudes love, excitement, and hope. It tells how this universe was made, and how humans, these inscrutable beings, occupied such a prominent position. It asserts that the Creator, before the creation of man and the universe, spoke into existence the vast reaches of space. Then he created man in his image. It tells of the Creator’s love affair with creation and man. It affirms an undying, relentless, unceasing love, but not so much from the human side. Man not only is inexplicable, he is unstable, fickle, vacillating, and often faithless. But God is not man. As the Old Testament tells it, Israel’s God loves – intensely – forever ... The God of the Old Testament is an incessant lover.”*

Here in one paragraph Olbricht sums up the story of the Old Testament! It is a story of a God who creates and loves his creation, who works steadily in history to redeem his fallen creation.