

Smith, Ralph L. *Old Testament Theology: Its History, Method, and Message*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993. 528 pp. \$32.99.

Biblical scholars have long sought to reduce the Hebrew Scriptures to one overarching theme—such as that of covenant—for convenient study. But the OT resists such thematic reduction. It is just too varied and complex to fit into any single concept. Ralph L. Smith, Distinguished Professor of OT, Emeritus, at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary is among those who resist the reductionist approach.

Instead, Smith breaks the OT into nine major topics: “The Knowledge of God”; “I Shall Be Your God; You Shall Be My People”; “Who Is a God Like Yahweh?”; “What Is Mankind?”; “Sin and Redemption”; “Worship”; “The Good Life”; “Death and Beyond”; and “In That Day.” Then under each large topic he divides the biblical material into more narrow and specific teachings or themes. For example, under the topic of sin and redemption, he examines what OT Scripture has to say about sin’s nature, source, effects, and removal.

The book begins with chapters on the history, nature, and methodology of OT theology. An excursus explores Jewish-Christian relationships and their impact on OT theology.

In his study of the biblical material, Smith first presents what Scripture says or teaches, then cites a wide range of scholars. He does not restrict himself to quoting only conservative scholars.

In the chapter on the OT teaching on death, he does not force it into the modern, popular concepts of heaven and hell. He acknowledges that the OT has no systematic or organized presentation of life after death and presents the totality of biblical evidence without forcing it to conform to his own tradition. Whenever possible he also correlates and compares biblical material with what archaeology has discovered about the beliefs of the surrounding biblical world. He has woven in archaeological background material in a number of places (such as his excursus “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?”).

In the chapter on eschatology (“In That Day”) he avoids interpreting the biblical material within the framework of dispensationalism or any other eschatological theory. The sections on the Suffering Servant and the Messiah present the biblical material in its OT context without reading in christological allusions from a NT perspective.

Smith makes his OT theology even more useful by providing an extensive bibliography and including subject, author, text, early literature, and Hebrew indexes.

The book is both an objective examination of what the OT teaches on a wide range of topics, and of how scholars have approached and understood the biblical text. Smith’s stated goal was “to provide university and seminary students a textbook that gives a partial report of what others have said and done about OT theology and then suggest ways the theological materials in the OT may be organized, interpreted, and appropriated.” Both teachers and students should find that he has accomplished much of that goal.