WHAT IS WRITTEN

A Response to Brevard Childs'

INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT AS SCRIPTURE

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I

Writing an introduction to any field of study is an immense undertaking. It requires a command of the total range of material, knowledge of the history of discipline, a critical grasp of the relevant methods of study, and a vision of the field as a whole. Few reach the comprehension and vantage necessary to essay the task. Once achieved, a work of this kind is certain to become a point of reference in the study of its subject.

The purpose and responsibility of an Introduction to the Old Testament is to describe the literature collected in it; to present an analysis of its books appropriate to their character and useful for their study. The importance of an Introduction is apparent in its function. Those who study the Old Testament for whatever purpose are given an impression of the material. How one is introduced to these books is especially fateful for theological students, theologians, and ministers. How and whether the Old Testament is received and understood is at stake. Because the Old Testament is a structural component of the Christian faith, the integrity and cogency of belief is at stake. For these reasons the publication of an Introduction is not an event to be viewed only in relation to professional Old Testament scholarship and its ongoing research, or to publishing enterprises, book sales, and bibliographies. It raises the question of the Old Testament anew for all who have any relationship to it. How exegesis is to go about its task; how the Old Testament is to enter into theological constructions; how its text ought to be employed
in preaching and liturgy are involved. An Introduction to the Old Testament is necessarily a statement about the basic foundation of all these enterprises in the literature itself. When an Introduction, instead of continuing the assumptions and patterns which dominate the mainstream of Old Testament study, makes a sustained effort to recast and redirect the approach to the subject in a decisive way, it represents a moment of potentially great significance.

In the history of the Christian faith, the study and use of the Old Testament has been engaged with two primary issues. The first is the relation between the scriptures of Israel and the community established by the event of Jesus Christ, between, as we came to say, Old and New Testaments. How is the Old Testament to be understood as canonical literature of Christian faith and practice? That question was addressed in the New Testament itself, and was dealt with in the early church in a variety of ways. The second issue, which arose in its full and urgent form only at the beginning of the modern period, is the relation between history and faith—between a literature whose origin is sought in historical causes and whose meaning is seen as a function of its ancient setting and a theology which seeks to read it as authoritative scripture for contemporary believing. This second question has been common to the entire theological enterprise. But it has worked with a special virulence in Old Testament study, exacerbating the first, and steadily divorcing the Old Testament from theological investigation. In his Introduction, Childs has bracketed out the first question for direct consideration because it is not raised by the Old Testament when studied on its own terms. His aim is to rethink and reconceive the way Old Testament study has generally come to deal with the second.

A passion congruent with the urgency of the subject infuses the book and gives it in some ways the character of a personal manifesto. From beginning to end the author never relents in his persistent insistence that the approach of Old Testament Introduction must be redirected. It is a hot, not a cool book. Its dust cover should have been red instead of black. The author is personally present in the text, criticizing, evaluating, arguing, delimiting, advocating. He frequently uses the first person style—a feature surprising to those of us accustomed to the terse analytical uninvolved manner customary in such tomes. A brief autobiographical statement in the preface situates the work in his own theological and vocational pilgrimage and hints at the factors which nourished, as he puts it, "a growing realization that there was something fundamentally wrong with the foundations of biblical discipline. . .I am now convinced," he says, "that the relation between the historical critical study of the Bible and its