The current generation of biblical scholars has inherited a pressing task from its predecessors: "How to understand the realm of Old Testament belief in its structural unity and how, by examining on the one hand its religious environment and on the other its essential coherence with the New Testament, to illuminate its profoundest meaning." Walther Eichrodt's well known proposal to develop a theology of the Old Testament under the single heading of "covenant" constitutes one of the most creative contributions to the dialogue. While no consensus supports his specific suggestion that covenant must be the center of an Old Testament theology, his method can be detected in an ever increasing number of publications. Rudolph Smend proposed that the center of the Old Testament should be understood as the tension in Israel's experience highlighted by the covenant formulary: "I am the Lord and you are my people." Walter Kaiser follows this suit by defining the unifying theme for an Old Testament theology as the creative relationship between God and his people. Gerhard Hasel reduces the combination of terms by arguing a case for God himself as the center of the Old Testament. And finally, Walther Zimmerli and Samuel Terrien round off the more recent contributions to the quest. For Zimmerli, the one who is known by the Tetragrammaton is the one who creates in Israel a theology derived from unique experience. And for Terrien, the "elusive presence" of God for his people forms the center for expressing the unity of Old Testament theology. Particularly for the last two, however, the question elicits a new kind of answer. The issue is formulated as an effort not so much to find a conceptual center of the Old Testament, but rather to locate the dynamic tension that in itself establishes the matrix for Israel's theological life.
The question is, however, more complicated than would be suggested simply by a quest for the right term. Some members of the current discussion owe their position to those founders of the debate who argue that no single heading can represent an adequate point for describing the unity of the Old Testament, much less the unity of the entire canon. Gerhard von Rad reminds us rather sharply that in his opinion the Old Testament will not submit to a single theme as the key for the unity of biblical theology. Rather, the Old Testament alone reveals various and widely diverse formulations of theology. And each of these various stages has its own voice demanding its own hearing. A biblical theology must, then, work out a method of procedure that can hear the variety of claims. Without a workable method, the Old Testament and indeed, the entire Christian canon would remain a cacophony, confusing at best to any who would hear its words and proclaim them to the contemporary church. With a method that does not distort, however, the variety can emerge as a symphony constructed in its own native dress and communicating its themes in its own peculiar way. The method he suggests carries the technical name, tradition history. It explores the manner in which an old tradition can be seen in new ways, by the new eyes of a new generation. It should be clear here that the issue between Eichrodt and von Rad is not simply a matter of choosing the right theme, the covenant or tradition history. The issue is rather methodological. Can the unity of biblical theology emerge under the stamp of a single conceptual theme, or does such a procedure obscure the radical diversity resident within the text?

Despite the persistence of Eichrodt's method, with new themes suggested as the center of the Old Testament by a series of Eichrodt's successors, it seems to me that von Rad's objections are in order. I am not convinced that any single heading will do justice to the whole structure of Old Testament theology, much less to the diversity and tradition history embraced by the Christian canon. Yet, the quest for a central theme has served the discipline well by pin-pointing principal themes that compose the variety. It seems to me appropriate, therefore, to continue the exploration of the canon in an effort to expose the constitutive themes that comprise its theology.

One recent contribution to this program of study in biblical theology, from the perspective of New Testament theology, is the essay by Peter Stuhlmacher in the inaugural volume of this journal. For Stuhlmacher, a single heading that produces a summary description of New Testament thought is "reconciliation in Christ." Significantly, his concern is not simply