REVIEW OF ERHARD S. GERSTENBERGER'S
THEOLOGIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Scholarship now has in hand a book exploring Old Testament theology based exclusively on a socio-cultural reading of the Hebrew Bible. It is unique in this regard. It is certainly not a revival of the "biblical theology movement," but could be considered another mark of its demise.

Gerstenberger brings to one possibly logical conclusion what Johann Salomo Semler bravely started in his Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon in the eighteenth century, the first serious attempt to compose a biblical theology based on the then new, budding historical-critical method.1 But Gerstenberger uses what Semler could never have imagined, a socio-political approach. Most Old Testament theologies since Semler have been based on critical study of the Bible, but none so unrelentingly perhaps as this one by Gerstenberger. Most have sought some kind of perceived "unity" or overarching principle within the diversity and pluralism critical study of the texts has revealed, or they have at least pointed to a Reality behind the metaphors in the biblical text.

Like Walter Brueggemann, Gerstenberger compares and contrasts differing views of God at different points in the Bible's history of formation.2 In contrast to Brueggemann, who labored valiantly with the rhetoric and metaphors for God in the text, Gerstenberger tries, with some help from archaeology, to go in back of the text to the perceived social constructs in ancient Israelite society. He attempts to reconstruct the actual theological thinking in the lives of an ancient people. In this re-


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gard it reminds one of Johannes Pedersen's *Israel, Its Life and Culture*,3 which was a very valuable, non-historical, socio-psychological analysis of the culture of ancient Israel. Gerstenberger does not go into the psychology of the blessing/curse or the "soul" (individual self) as Pedersen did; nor did Pedersen have any real interest in the views of God lying in back of the different aspects of the culture, as Gerstenberger does.

Gerstenberger attempts to ferret out of the various strata of ancient Israel's life and culture the views of gods held at the different levels of Israel's social history: the family and the clan, the village and small town, tribal alliances, the monarchical state, and the totally new situation with the beginnings of Judaism brought on by destitution and exile in Mesopotamia. These make up the bulk of the book in the first eight chapters. Then in the ninth chapter Gerstenberger offers his view as to how the exilic and post-exilic communities, which called themselves Jewish or Judahites, came to a "Yahweh only" theology that evolved into brave, early efforts at monotheism, not just henotheism. Finally in the last chapter he attempts to relate his findings to Western culture today, especially the situation in modern Germany and Europe, and North and South America. This is an important effort, to be sure, but studies show that Christianity is growing so rapidly in Africa and Asia that those forms of it may dominate the latter part of this century, while others show that an explosion of new religions in the world will soon shake the foundations of Western thinking.4

What Gerstenberger means by "theologies" are views of God held in the various social structures of ancient Israel, not theologies that have been based on systematic categories, such as creation, anthropology, sin, redemption, soteriology, eschatology, etc. There is none of that here. Gerstenberger, on the contrary, pays considerable attention to the "popular religion" of the people, only vaguely hinted at in the text but bearing a high measure of authority for Gerstenberger. Because popular
