Panel Review of

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Rolf Rendtorff’s *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Deo, 2005; German original 1999, 2001) constitutes a monumental advance in the study of biblical theology. His proposal for a canonical reading of the Hebrew Bible as the basis for theological reflection builds upon earlier work by Brevard S. Childs, who called for a canonical reading of the Old Testament in conversation with the New Testament to produce a Protestant Christian biblical theology, but it differs from Childs’s work by insisting that the Hebrew Bible be read in and of itself as theological literature without reference to the New Testament. Rendtorff’s work contrasts with that of his mentor Gerhard von Rad, who called for a tradition-historical reading of the Old Testament that would emphasize the role of *Heilsgeschichte*, “salvation history” or more properly “sacred history,” as the fundamental lens for reading the Hebrew Bible. By focusing on the full canonical form of the Hebrew Bible, Rendtorff promises to overcome von Rad’s failure to account fully for the non-historical elements of the Bible, particularly the wisdom literature, which von Rad had attempted to subsume under his overarching historical paradigm. Insofar as he calls for a common Jewish and Christian reading of the Hebrew Bible, Rendtorff’s work reflects the influence of post-Shoah theology in Germany and elsewhere in an attempt to lay a foundation for Jewish-Christian dialog that takes seriously the theological identity and grounding of both Judaism and Christianity in the Hebrew Bible. His call
for a synchronic and diachronic reading of the canonical Hebrew Bible likewise reflects the influence of his engagement with Jewish biblical scholars, particularly Moshe Greenberg, who emphasizes a “holistic” reading of biblical literature that emphasizes the importance of the final literary form of the text while recognizing its historical dimensions.

Rendtorff’s work therefore promises to engage the entirety of the Hebrew Bible as the basis for theological reflection rather than the relatively selective approaches of the past, sometimes characterized as defining a canon within the canon, that emphasized and often distorted selected elements of the Bible deemed compatible with Protestant Christianity, e.g., those that emphasized universal salvation, history, faith in G-d, prophetic word, messianic elements, etc., in their efforts to render the Hebrew Bible intelligible and relevant to Christian readers. Rendtorff is to be commended for this effort, particularly since his work entails a call to Christian readers to attend to Judaism and a Jewish reading of the Bible that had been neutralized by various means in the past. His work thereby promises to lead to a holistic reading of the Bible and renewed conversation concerning the interpretation of the Bible by Jews and Christians working together toward a common goal to understand scripture, G-d, and each other.

These laudatory remarks should not, however, be interpreted as precluding critical discussion of Rendtorff’s work or as indicating that he has settled all issues. Although his work does represent an important advance in the theological interpretation of the Bible, it also raises important points for continued discussion and constructive disagreement. Many aspects of Rendtorff’s work call for closer examination, e.g., his understanding of canon, his call for a common Jewish and Christian reading of the Bible, the bases for his synchronic reading of a number of the books of the Hebrew Bible, and his selection and treatment of theological themes in the Bible, among others. It is to these that I now turn.

The first question to be raised is the choice of the canonical structure of the Hebrew Bible and its implications for theological interpretation of the Bible. Rendtorff’s work clearly presupposes the canonical structure of the Tanak, i.e., the three-part structure of the Bible, including the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, employed in Judaism as the foundation for all Jewish tradition and thought. He is, of course, aware that Christian