THE LIMITED TASK OF
OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

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The field of biblical studies has needed this lucid, ground-clearing essay for many years. But it arrives at a time which may be propitious indeed, for many are ready and indeed eager to consider the fresh start that the author proposes. When one observes how Professor Knierim cuts through the plethora of perspectives, approaches, and notions, illuminating all of them as he orders and systematizes the materials of the field, one can only be deeply grateful for the clarity and the fresh perspectives that are provided.

This is a programmatic essay in the best sense of that term. It indicates our lack and need; it offers a few germinal theses and supports them with brief but weighty arguments; it shows what is wrong with alternative approaches; it gives clues for the wiser application of the approach laid out; it makes clear how such an approach avoids parochial or narrow perspectives; it claims for biblical studies some philosophical and theological undertakings that have been too long pushed off onto our colleagues; it is elegant and esthetically appealing and persuasive as well as closely reasoned; and it is sensitively put, avoiding all unnecessary or cheap polemics. I find the paper to have served the purposes for which it was sought, and written, magnificently.
My comments will be brief and will be limited to two points of some weight and one of perhaps minor interest and importance. The first concerns the author's understanding of Old Testament theology, an understanding that I share but which I believe needs to be identified very clearly for what it is and is not. Otherwise, the mode of argument in the paper may well not carry the weight and persuasive power that it can be claimed to have. The second is concerned with the way in which creation seems to dominate the discussion as the author deals with Yahweh's universal dominion. And the last, little point has to do with the use of the term "Yahweh."

The existence of many theologies in the Hebrew Bible constitutes the problem of Old Testament theology, Professor Knierim argues (pages 1-8). What is wrong with a rich pluralism, a lush variety, a many-faceted picture of the relation of God to the world, to Israel, to the individual? What demands the relating of these, the ordering of them into some hierarchy, the discovery of what is central and what is subordinate? One thinks of Gerhard von Rad's reply to the criticism of Walther Eichrodt. One can of course look finally for central and dominant perspectives in the theological outlooks of the traditions of Israel, but must one have a single, controlling concept or form of relation between God and the world, Israel, the individual in order to have an Old Testament theology as such?

Yes, says Knierim, if one intends to fulfill what is the actual, specific, indispensable task of Old Testament theology, or for that matter, to fulfill the actual theological task of interpreting the religious literature and heritage of any community. Why? Because theology by definition has to do with the systematic ordering of thought, it involves comparison and contrast, the relating of this understanding or practice to that one, and the critical evaluation of life,