IS OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY EQUAL TO ITS TASK?

A RESPONSE TO A PAPER BY ROLF P. KNIERIM

W. Sibley Towner

Even the most ingenuous reader of the Old Testament is confronted by the fact that it contains not one but many pictures of God and God's relationship with the world, just as the New Testament contains not one but many portraits of the Christ. Anyone who tries to persuade that reader that this pluralism is more apparent than real is doing that reader a disservice. Professor Knierim puts it plainly in his very first sentence: "The Old Testament contains a plurality of theologies."

Holistic approaches of various kinds in fact do the ordinary reader the disservice described above because their goal is finally to dissolve the multiple theological outlooks into dimensions of a central theological structure around which the whole Old Testament is organized. Speaking extremely precisely, Knierim argues that a holistic approach will discern in "the plurality of theologies in the Old Testament . . . an enriching phenomenon rather than . . . a critical problem because the whole, by definition, represents nothing other than the semantic homogeneity of the plurality" (p. 2). And that, says he, is bad because it is wrong.

Rather than denying the multiplicity of Old Testament theologies, Knierim proposes to make a virtue out of necessity. A plurality of theologies is both to be expected and to be affirmed. Such diversity arose over many ages of reflection by many writers using many genres and operating at
many levels of sophistication in the face of many and diverse historical situations. This being the case, it is inevitable that every proposed organizational rubric — be it a concept or a process — finally gets relativized. Far from providing the unity which von Rad thought it would, tradition history only demonstrates the constant complexification and amplification of older themes, leaving them at the end more plural, not less. Covenant proves to be a concept with so many faces that it can hardly serve as a single organizing principle. Let us reframe this problem as an advantage, proposes Knierim. Accepting and maintaining the incredible richness of the text, let us simply ask it to organize itself around its own skeleton, namely, the hierarchy of priorities intrinsic within it.

Setting out through the lush thickets of theologoumena of the Old Testament in search of those which are intrinsically of higher priority than others, Knierim identifies two paths along which to move. One of these paths can be called "modes" (that is, qualitative aspects of Yahweh's relationship with the world); the other is "realms" (that is, three quantitative aspects of Yahweh's relationship with the world — cosmic, national, and personal). These paths seem to lead directly to the top theological priorities. In the category of the realm of Yahweh's work in the world, the theological claim intrinsic to and of first priority in the Old Testament itself is the universal realm, expressed in creation theology. In the area of modes or qualitative aspects of Yahweh's relationship with the world, justice and righteousness emerge as the primary expressions of that relationship and thus the top priority categories around which to organize other theological material. Thus is the program set. All that remains is to discover the hierarchy of priorities within the text and exegetically to confront individual passages with these central and decisive theological criteria.