



Speaking about God from an Old Testament Perspective

God-talk in light of Diversity in the Bible

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Introduction

This thesis, in the form of an academic article (yet to be submitted), explores the question: *How can the Old Testament Theologies of Brueggemann, Rendtorff and Schmid contribute to a contemporary understanding of speaking about God in light of the diversity of God-talk within the Hebrew Bible?*

Accordingly, the article will treat and compare how the three Old Testament Theologies by Walter Brueggemann (1997), Rolf Rendtorff (1999-2001), and Konrad Schmid (2019) deal with theology (speaking about God) in light of the diversity in the Old Testament. This comparison will be undertaken in order to formulate a perspective on how Christian faith communities can speak about God given the diversity inherent in their Scriptures. In this case the focus will be on the Old Testament, and the diverse – and even diverging – ways in which it portrays the God of Israel.

In the first section, the article will introduce briefly how diversity is an issue within Old Testament Theology. Afterwards, the distinct contributions of Brueggemann, Rendtorff and Schmid will be treated. The final section will offer a comparative analysis of these three theologians with a view towards the question of how God-talk is possible today from an Old Testament perspective.

The method used in this investigation is primarily comparative. The three authors are positioned, analysed and compared in view of a specific problem – in this case: speaking about God (today) in light of the diversity in the Old Testament. These specific authors have been chosen because they represent different approaches within Biblical Theology. Both Brueggemann and Rendtorff consider the Old Testament text primarily synchronically, though with different outlooks: Brueggemann focuses on the rhetorical import of the text as text, with his rhetorical criticism, while Rendtorff is primarily concerned with the canon. Schmid, alternatively, uses diachronic methods to study the redactional layering of the text, and (more than the other two) considers historical criticism valuable for Biblical Theology.

These authors do not represent the full spectrum of approaches and perspectives within Biblical Theology – as barely two projects in the foregone decades have looked alike within the rather fluent and creative discipline. However, they will be treated within the broader landscape and debates in Old Testament Theology as much as possible.

Speaking about God from an Old Testament Perspective. God-talk in light of Diversity in the Bible

Introduction

Within Jewish and Christian faith communities it has been, and still is, self-evident that the Hebrew Bible is an important source of theology; the way the Bible speaks about God, is in some way authoritative for how the faith community speaks about God. There are many potential problems with and challenges of this use of the Hebrew Bible. This article focuses on one such problem, conditioned by the rise of (modern) Biblical Theology, toward the end of the 18th century, namely: the issue of diversity within the Hebrew Bible.

The historical character of this discipline first led to a thorough historical-critical analysis of the diversity of the religious content of the Old Testament. Throughout the history of the discipline of Biblical Theology, one of its many questions has remained how a (historical) description of the material contained in the Old Testament can function as a normative source of theology for faith communities today (or: if it should at all). This problem is amplified by the increased awareness of the diverse, even contradictory, theologies contained in the Old Testament.

This article, therefore, explores the question of how Christian faith communities can speak about God in light of the diversity in the OT. This question will be considered in dialogue with three authors of Old Testament Theologies, namely: Walter Brueggemann, Rolf Rendtorff, and Konrad Schmid.¹ First, a brief overview of the debates surrounding diversity in the Hebrew Bible within the discipline is in order – to position these authors in a broader context. Then, the three authors will be analysed separately, before a comparative consideration of their respective approaches will be provided.

Understanding diversity as a problem relating to God-talk in Old Testament Theology

Johann Philipp Gabler's view of Biblical Theology, influential throughout the 19th, and even into the 20th, century, aimed at extracting universal truth from amidst the diverse particularities of historical data.² The question of theological normativity was external, and the Old Testament was a historical source to be strip-mined for reliable data about God. What constituted this reliable data was evaluated based on a presupposed concept of "religion". Religion (or revelation) was viewed as a developmental category growing ever closer to a more enlightened view of God.³ In this constellation, Old Testament Theology and History of Israelite Religion were closely intertwined.

¹ The main focus will be on their primary work of Old Testament Theology, with sporadic mention of other writings. See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Rolf Rendtorff, *Theologie des Alten Testaments. Ein kanonischer Entwurf* (2 vols.; Neuchkirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999-2001); Konrad Schmid, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Neue Theologische Grundrisse; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

² Johann Philipp Gabler in *De iusto discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus* (Altdorf: Monath, [1787]), 8, 11-12; cf. for this approach to history: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Ueber den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft. An den Herrn Director Schumann, zu Hannover* (Braunschweig: [s.n.], 1777).

³ Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology. Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1991] 1972), 23-25; some of these works, like those by Vatke (1835) and Bruno Bauer (1838) were Hegelian in their outlook, whilst others used distinctions such as *Hebraismus* and *Judentum* for the different phases of Israelite religion (such as De Wette (1813) and Cölln (1836)). The most influential crystallisation of such approaches was Julius Wellhausen's *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (repr.; 6th ed.; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001 [1878¹ 1927⁶]) – which offers an anti-Jewish and problematic evaluation of post-exilic developments in Israelite religion (cf. e.g. pp. 401-409).

With the rise of dialectical theology, such a developmental view of “religion” was critiqued.⁴ New relations to Gabler’s paradigm were forged. Otto Eissfeldt, for example, agreed with Gabler in distinguishing universal truth from historical relativity. However, unlike Gabler, he wanted to separate a historical treatment of the diverse traditions in the Bible (*Religionsgeschichte*) from a faith-based theological exegesis – aimed at speaking about God (Old Testament Theology).⁵ Walther Eichrodt, in contrast, pleaded for Old Testament Theology to remain a historical discipline, but modified its aim, from describing the development of religion, to systematically describing the faith world of the Old Testament.⁶ Eichrodt assumes there is an underlying, singular theology beneath the diversity at the surface of the OT.⁷

For Eichrodt, and others, it was important to find a centre around which Israel’s God-talk revolves – an axis onto which the faith world of the Old Testament can be mapped. Eichrodt found this centre in the covenant.⁸ This search for a centre illustrates a tendency to assume that the diversity in the Old Testament can, at least to some extent, be synthesised, given the right Archimedean point, into a system of coherent witness about God.⁹ At the same time, this search for a centre has been criticised, most notably by Gerhard von Rad,¹⁰ and within Old Testament Theology there is an ongoing trend to relativise the centrality of one concept or form of theology. Some theologians use central themes pragmatically to structure a work of Biblical Theology (without a pretention of exhaustiveness),¹¹ others employ such themes to bring out the diverse ways in which the Old

⁴ For the evaluation of “religion” among dialectical theologians, see (in)famously: Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (4 in 13 vols; Zollikon/Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1932-1967), I/2:324-356; for a broader analysis, see: Hartmut von Sass, ‘Between the Times – and Sometimes Beyond: An Essay in Dialectical Theology and its Critique of Religion and “Religion”’ *Open Theology* 6 (2020), 475-495, 480-490.

⁵ Otto Eissfeldt, ‘Israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte und alttestamentliche Theologie’ *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft [ZAW]* 44 (1926), 1-12; a year earlier Carl Steuernagel also proposed separating Old Testament Theology from the History of Israelite Religion in a *Festschrift*: Carl Steuernagel, ‘Alttestamentliche Theologie und Alttestamentliche Religionsgeschichte’ in Karl Budde (ed.), *Vom Alten Testament: Karl Marti zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag* (Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 41; Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1925), 266-273; cf. Ben C. Ollenburger (ed.), *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future* (Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 1; Winona Lake (IN): Eisenbrauns, 2004), 10-11.

⁶ Walther Eichrodt, ‘Hat die alttestamentliche Theologie noch selbständige Bedeutung innerhalb der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft?’ *ZAW* 47 (1929), 83-91; for “faith world” he uses the term *Gedankenwelt* in the 1929-article (p. 85), whilst using *Glaubenswelt* in *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (5th rev. ed.; 3 vols.; Stuttgart: Ehrenfried Klotz/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957 [1933-1939]), I:1; this was not an entirely new approach, many authors in the 19th century had already structured their Old Testament Theologies systematically, so e.g. the first Old Testament Theology: Georg Lorenz Bauer, *Theologie des alten Testaments oder Abriß der religiösen Begriffe der alten Hebräer. Von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf den Anfang der christlichen Epoche* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Wygand, 1796-1801).

⁷ Eichrodt, *Theologie des AT*, I:1-3.

⁸ Eichrodt, *Theologie des AT*, I:9ff; however, as has been noted by others, parts II and III of his work barely relate to “covenant” (hence already showing the questionable nature of “covenant” as centre), cf. Josef Scharbert, ‘Die Biblische Theologie auf der Suche nach ihrem Wesen und ihrer Methode’ *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 40, no. 1 (1989), 7-26, 8-9; Jörg Jeremias, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Grundrisse zum Alten Testament 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 4.

⁹ So e.g. Eichrodt, *Theologie des AT*, I:1-8; Otto Procksch, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1950), 713.

¹⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (2 vols; 6th ed.; Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1969-1975 [1957-1962]), II:386.

¹¹ E.g. such as with Claus Westermann’s centralisation of the question “*was sagt das Alte Testament von Gott*” (Claus Westermann, *Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzügen* (Grundrisse zum Alten Testament 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 5); or themes like God’s elusive presence (Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence. Toward a New Biblical Theology* (Religious Perspectives 26; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978)), or God as a living reality – “dynamic transcendence” (Paul D. Hanson, *Dynamic Transcendence. The*

Testament speaks about God, for example by using a dual centre, multiple centres or a central dialectic.¹²

Arguably, the first attempt to take the diverse traditions in the Old Testament seriously as a theological datum came with Von Rad. He emphasised the importance of interpretation – Israel’s retelling of its history is not in the first place a reliable historiographical source, but a *Heilsgeschichte*, an effort to understand its own (historically-conditioned) relationship to God.¹³ Hence, the diversity in the Old Testament is an expression of every new generation’s attempt to understand itself as Israel, YHWH’s people.¹⁴ Von Rad’s project is motivated, theologically, by his allegiance to (Barthian) dialectical theology and uses a kerygmatic lens: the Old Testament provides theological witness that is continually retold and thereby actualised.¹⁵

Theodoor Vriezen has a similar kerygmatic focus, but rather than claiming to describe the witness of the Old Testament, he views the task of the Old Testament theologian differently; namely to formulate a witness for and by the church based on the Old Testament.¹⁶ In other words, Old Testament Theology is a thoroughly Christian discipline, which attempts to shape its own God-talk for today based on the diverse materials contained in the Old Testament. He thereby anticipates newer approaches, such as Brevard Childs’ canonical approach. Childs starts from the Bible’s status as a book of the church; the preeminent context for interpreting the Old Testament theologically is the “canonical context” (of the church) that receives these books as canonical, and hence authoritative for its God-talk.¹⁷ This, not some inherent centre, is what justifies a systematisation of the material in the Old Testament.

Along with this church-oriented contextualisation of Biblical Theology, other contextual approaches have appeared as well, such as feminist, Jewish and post-colonial contributions. These approaches call attention to perspectives on the Hebrew Bible different from those in the “mainstream” (generally: mainline protestant) of Biblical Theology, which had tended to (implicitly)

Correlation of Confessional Heritage and Contemporary Experience in a Biblical Model of Divine Activity (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); *The People Called. The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986)).

¹² Cf. Ollenburger, *OT Theology*, 118-119; Henning Graf Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 130-132; Hasel, *OT Theology*, 155-156; an example of such a dual center is Georg Fohrer’s proposal of *Gottesherrschaft* and *Gottesgemeinschaft* as the centre of the Old Testament (Georg Fohrer, *Theologische Grundstrukturen des Alten Testaments* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1972), 95-112).

¹³ Cf. Von Rad, *Theologie des AT*, I:18-19; Ollenburger, *OT Theology*, 37; James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology. An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 352-353, 559; see on the debate over Von Rad’s view of history: Reventlow, *Problems of OT Theology*, 65-71.

¹⁴ “Jede Generation stand vor der immer gleichen und immer neuen Aufgabe, sich als Israel zu begreifen. Jede Generation mußte erst in einem gewissen Sinne Israel werden.” (Von Rad, *Theologie des AT*, I:132; cf. p. 244).

¹⁵ Von Rad, *Theologie des AT*, I:134-135; cf. Jesper Høgenhaven, *Problems and Prospects of Old Testament Theology* (The Biblical Seminar; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 13-14; Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 22ff, 37.

¹⁶ Th. C. Vriezen, *Hoofdlijnen der Theologie van het Oude Testament* (3rd rev. ed.; Wageningen: Veenman & Zonen, 1966 [1949]), 152-162; Cf. for the distinction between “based on” and “of” see the article by Gerhard Ebeling on Biblical theology in which he distinguishes “the theology contained in the Bible” and “theology in accordance with the Bible”: Gerhard Ebeling, “The Meaning of “Biblical Theology”” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 6, no. 2 (1955), 210-225, 210ff.

¹⁷ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 99-107; cf. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 6-15; *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments. Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 70-79; cf. “In the theological debate of the twentieth century “canon” has come to mean the Bible in its function as the basis for the preaching and teaching of the Church.” (Høgenhaven, *Problems and Prospects*, 84).

claim a certain level of “objectivity”.¹⁸ Today, contributions are expected to have greater hermeneutical sensitivity; positionality makes normativity inevitable, and a purely descriptive approach is an illusion.¹⁹ These newer approaches also show a significant change, or even reversal, in relation to the Gablerian paradigm; theology in the Bible is no longer viewed as a timeless datum to be extracted, but as a contextualised (and diverse) phenomenon.

Relevant in this regard is the increasing awareness that *the* theology of the Old Testament does not exist. Throughout the discipline’s history, there have been tacit admissions that the Old Testament contains a plurality of theologies, increasingly so in the 60s and 70s.²⁰ However, Rolf Knierim, in a 1984-paper, called explicit attention to this issue.²¹ Since Knierim’s contribution, the plurality of theologies in the Old Testament has been treated more comprehensively, with some contributions attempting to synthesise the different theologies, while others focus on analysing how they differ (significantly) from one another.²² Within the context of these broader debates, this article will focus on three particular contributions, by Brueggemann, Rendtorff, and Schmid.

Brueggemann – bearing testimony to an unsettling God

Walter Brueggemann joins a trend in Biblical Theology to postulate “God” as the central focus of the Old Testament.²³ However, according to Brueggemann, the God that is at the centre of the Old Testament is a problematic, unsettling and elusive Character. YHWH is a baffling reality, who tends to defy the categories we impose.²⁴ This is also true for the way in which Israel speaks of its God:

¹⁸ An overview of the newer contextual approaches is provided in Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology After the Collapse of History* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

¹⁹ In a well-known encyclopedia-article, Stendahl distinguished between “what it meant” (descriptive) and “what it means” (normative), and argued Biblical Theology should be a descriptive discipline (Kirster Stendahl, ‘Biblical Theology, Contemporary’ *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (1962), 1:32-48) – and though Barr has defended Stendahl against the charge of a naïve belief in objectivity (Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 189-208) – it is generally held that this view is untenable (Ollenburger, ‘What Kirster Stendahl “Meant” - A normative Critique of “Descriptive Biblical Theology”’ *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 8, no. 1 (1986), 61-98; Hasel, *OT Theology*, 28ff).

²⁰ E.g. G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* (New York/Evanston/London: Harper & Row, 1969), 169; Fohrer, *Theologische Grundstrukturen des AT*, 51-55; Walther Zimmerli, *Grundriß der alttestamentlichen Theologie* (6th ed.; Theologische Wissenschaft 3.1; Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne: Kohlhammer, 1989 [1972]), 10-11; Westermann, *Theologie des AT in Grundzügen*, 6; Ronald E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology. A Fresh Approach* (Marshall’s Theological Library; London: Marshall, 1978), 26-27; Childs, *Biblical Theology of the O and NT*, 97ff.

²¹ Rolf P. Knierim, ‘The Task of Old Testament Theology’ *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 6 (1984), 25-57.

²² An example of the former would be Jeremias, *Theologie des AT* (2015), 7-8, while the latter can be seen in e.g. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Theologien im Alten Testament. Pluralität und Synkretismus alttestamentlichen Gottesglaubens* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001); Georg Fischer, *Theologien des Alten Testaments* (Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar: Altes Testament 31; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2012).

²³ Hasel, *OT Theology*, 168-171; Rudolf Smend jr. argued (against Von Rad) for “YHWH in relation to his people” as the centre of the OT, with particular importance given to the divine name (YHWH), see Rudolf Smend, *Die Mitte des Alten Testaments* (Theologische Studien 101; Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1970), particularly pp. 54ff; Zimmerli was the first to implement a similar centre in his Old Testament Theology (specifically: the name of “YHWH” as centre): Zimmerli, *Grundriß der alttestamentlichen Theologie*, 9-11. See also: John L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (New York/London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1974), 24-25; Westermann, *Theologie des AT in Grundzügen*, 5.

²⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 42, 68, 70-71, 84, 117, 144, 146, 175-176, 206-207, 231, 249, 262, 268, 272, 281-282, 303, 325, 348, 552, 563, 574; see also his *An Unsettling God. The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), in which this is the central claim (the book essentially consists of reworked and expanded materials from *Theology of the OT*).

One can indeed thematize Israel's great and characteristic utterances about Yahweh – but not for long. Then one must return to listening to the tales and songs and poems and liturgies in which the Subject lives.²⁵

Brueggemann wants to take the *logos*-part of theology seriously; theology always concerns God-talk. Our only access to this God, the only way in which the God of the Old Testament is real to us, is “in, with, and under” the text.²⁶ Brueggemann views historical reconstruction, based in “Enlightenment epistemology”, as suspect, especially for the purposes of Biblical Theology. He, rather, opts for a synchronic reading of the Old Testament. The concern of Old Testament Theology is Israel's testimony – Israel's God-talk – as contained in and mediated by the text. The enterprise of the discipline is rhetorical, not ontological, accordingly Brueggemann uses the method of “rhetorical criticism”, influenced by scholars like James Muilenberg and Phyllis Trible.²⁷

This means that for the purposes of Old Testament Theology, “*the utterance is everything*.”²⁸ Brueggemann explores Israel's utterance (about God) using the metaphor of “testimony”, summoning the image of a court of law, which has to determine the truth based only on the testimony presented.²⁹ The court in this metaphor is the “(ecclesial) community” that assigns truth to Israel's testimony about God:

If we describe this process [of a court of law] theologically – or, more specifically, in the practice of the Old Testament – we may say that testimony becomes revelation. That is, the testimony that Israel bears to the character of God is taken by the ecclesial community of the text as a reliable disclosure about the true character of God.³⁰

There is a tension here in Brueggemann's view of what Biblical Theology (as a discipline) is. On the one hand, he insists that “utterance is everything” – the text and the diverse expressions of testimony it contains are the only reality available. It is presumably the task of the Biblical theologian to describe Israel's testimony in its diversity, and even: inner contradiction (this is what Brueggemann does in

²⁵ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 209; only the “sheer multiplicity and polyvocality” of the Old Testament nouns can witness fully and faithfully to YHWH (p. 262).

²⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 66, see also pp. 58, 69, 165-166, 575, 713-714; “in, with and under” has sacramental connotations in the Lutheran credal tradition (see Edmund Schlink, *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Einführung in die evangelische Theologie VII; Munich: Evangelischer Verlag Albert Lempp, 1940), 234-240; cf. Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 576). This becomes more apparent when Brueggemann treats the “modes of mediation” of YHWH's presence, cf. pp. 574ff. Brueggemann's claim that YHWH is not “there” beyond the text is not a metaphysical claim, in so far as it is, it acknowledges metaphysical agnosticism (see p. 575). At one point he even says: “Of course, Yahweh is neither fully known nor completely exhausted in Israel's testimony, because Yahweh is hidden, free, surprising, and elusive, and refuses to be caught in any verbal formulation.” (p. 231). Though thereby he seemingly wants to recognise a datum of the testimony itself, i.e. its recognition of YHWH's elusiveness and sovereignty.

²⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 64ff, 117-120, 135; cf. e.g. Jaren J. Jackson, Martin Kessler (eds.), *Rhetorical Criticism. Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series 1; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Publications, 1974); Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism. Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship, Old Testament Series; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

²⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 122.

²⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 117-126; he was influenced by Paul Ricoeur in using this metaphor, since a trial is one of the few instances where it is clear that reality depends on speech (see p. 134-135, cf. Paul Ricoeur, ‘Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation’ [1976] in Lewis S. Mudge (ed.), *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 73-117, 105-117).

³⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 121; cf. *An Unsettling God*, 3-4, 16.

Theology of the Old Testament). However, there is also a sense in which, like Childs,³¹ the church evaluates this utterance normatively as true – this is how testimony becomes revelation.³²

The tension seems, for Brueggemann, to manifest itself at the level of the canon; this corpus of testimony contains (apparent) contradictions. The community receives the testimony of the canon as true, however, this testimony contains a diversity of testimonies within itself. These divergent testimonies within the canon present themselves as (competing) truth claims to “the court”. Brueggemann does discern a core testimony that is characteristic of Israel’s God-talk (characteristic in the sense of: most usual, quantitatively dominant) – not unsimilar to what Knierim, in his 1984 article, proposed Biblical Theology should isolate in the Old Testament.³³ However, unlike Knierim, Brueggemann does not attach special normative value to this core testimony, since there is also countertestimony, which challenges Israel’s most dominant God-talk, and which, at least for Brueggemann, deserves equal attention and scrutiny.³⁴ Furthermore, the core testimony itself is struggling to come to terms with a tension, in YHWH’s character, between sovereignty (self-regard) and solidarity (regard for Israel, or even: the world).³⁵ Even when this tension is tentatively resolved in the core testimony, the countertestimony, rooted in lived realities, stands against such resolutions. Ultimately, such tension cannot be resolved and we should not try to do so.³⁶

The core testimony is normative only in the sense that it is most imposing, but this is precisely what makes the countertestimony worthwhile – it presents to the court an alternative perspective. Countertestimony arises from those circumstances where the core testimony becomes inadequate or incredible – it arises from a cross-examination of the core testimony.³⁷ The primary normativity, for Brueggemann, derives from the reality of the text as text – this is the theologian’s (and the church’s) only recourse to the truth about God; dismissing certain testimony is potentially damaging to this truth.³⁸ A verdict – to stay with the court-metaphor – is rendered at the level of the canon (mostly implicitly), i.e. this is the testimony the church accepts.³⁹ However, a verdict is not rendered at the level of a canon within the canon; the Old Testament does not have a (normative) centre.⁴⁰

³¹ The difference with Childs is a difference in emphasis: Childs focuses on the function of the canon for the church’s discernment of the Word of God (e.g. *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 99ff); while Brueggemann directs more attention to the interpretive community itself. Their respective theological backgrounds are relevant here, which for Childs is more distinctly Barthian, whilst for Brueggemann (though not unsympathetic towards Barth) is more decisively influenced by post-liberalism, cf. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

³² Brueggemann writes about this tension, between descriptive and normative in the essay ‘Futures in Old Testament Theology’ [1984] in Patrick D. Miller (ed.), *Old Testament Theology. Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 111-117.

³³ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 122ff; cf. Knierim, ‘The Task of OT Theology’, 40-43, 46.

³⁴ Cf. e.g. Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 313, 317-318.

³⁵ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 268, 282, 302-303, 400, 410-411, 552.

³⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 348, 400-403.

³⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 317.

³⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 318ff; so, for example, the wisdom traditions offer an alternative, Brueggemann says in that context: “Whatever else is to be made of [Israel’s countertestimony], this venture (...) makes unmistakably clear that Yahweh must be uttered in many ways. One of the alternative ways of utterance is to speak about a life-authorizing, life-giving, life-sustaining mystery, that is completely beyond the horizon of Israel’s core testimony.” (p. 348).

³⁹ Brueggemann does not speak of the “canon” explicitly – but his work assumes the Hebrew canon, including the pre-eminence of the Torah (e.g. core testimony based on “pentateuchal themes” (Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 205ff), see also pp. 578-599).

⁴⁰ He discusses issues of centre vs. central dialectic and canon within a canon explicitly in ‘A Convergence in Recent Old Testament Theologies’ [1980] in *OT Theology*, 95-110, especially pp. 104-108; cf. ‘Futures in OT Theology’, 114ff.

One might ask if the metaphor of the court does not break down here. Some have criticised Brueggemann for his refusal to take into account the (historical) reality behind the text, since the correlation of testimony and the reality behind the testimony is precisely the goal of a court case.⁴¹ Based on what has been noted here, one could also ask what use the judgement of the court is, if the truth it ultimately validates is self-contradictory; i.e. if the canon contains such diverse testimony. This, however, goes to the heart of Brueggemann's theological evaluation of the diversity of Israel's testimony.

What Brueggemann proposes is that the dynamics and interplay of diverse testimony form an almost Hegelian dialectic;⁴² the Bible's witness to YHWH's (problematic) character is not compromised by the diversity of the testimony, but constituted by it.⁴³ The truth only comes out in the interaction of testimony and countertestimony. Since "utterance is everything", the complexity of this truth is directly correlated to the complexity of YHWH as an elusive and unsettling God.⁴⁴ YHWH is unwaveringly committed to YHWH's partner (Israel/the world), but YHWH is also completely free and unbounded; these perspectives of solidarity and sovereignty clash.⁴⁵ And although Israel characteristically tends to resolve this tension (in varying ways, using narrative rhetoric), even the most characteristic speech about YHWH can be cross-examined. The primary dialectic is that of God's self-regard and God's regard for Israel (and: the world) – from which other tensions flow – which is similar to God as the One loving in freedom (Barth).⁴⁶ These two dimensions in God are both fundamentally connected and fundamentally at odds.⁴⁷ That they are connected is expressed in Israel's core testimony, while the countertestimony holds them at odds.

The paradox at the heart of Israel's God-talk – and all theology for that matter – is that God can never be fully caught in speech, but speech is also the only way in which YHWH can become real.⁴⁸ If God is fully caught in speech, God becomes ideology – but God also has to be spoken. This is particularly evident in Israel's testimony in nouns, its most daring form of rhetoric: implying the substantive constancy of YHWH. Here Israel uses metaphors, which indicate, at the same time, that

⁴¹ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 25-27; cf. also Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 541-562, especially pp. 545-547.

⁴² This is most clear in Brueggemann's contrasting of the Deuteronomistic (focus on justice and presence through God's Name) and Priestly theologies (focus on holiness and presence through God's Glory), that stand in a tense synthesis in the canon – the canonical process is a "compromise" between these two strands, without fully solving their tension. Perdue has noted, quite rightly, that unlike a Hegelian dialectic, Brueggemann wants to retain the tension (stemming from the conviction that the canon does this as well) – the synthesis is the "refusal to choose", see Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 187-196, 429-430, 444-445, 598-599, 670-674 ; cf. Perdue, *Reconstructing OT Theology*, 255. Brueggemann himself tends to use the term "dialectic" explicitly (probably more influenced by Barth than Hegel), cf. e.g. pp. 83, 400-401, 411, 563, cf. programmatically 'A Convergence in Recent OT Theologies' [1980].

⁴³ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 317-332; he already proposes a similar conception of Old Testament Theology – more focused on the relationship between Israel and the Ancient Near East – centred in a dialectic of structure legitimation and pain embrace, in 'A Shape for Old Testament Theology I: Structure Legitimation' [1985] in *OT Theology*, 1-21; and, 'A Shape for Old Testament Theology II: Embrace of pain' [1985] in *OT Theology*, 22-44.

⁴⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 303.

⁴⁵ E.g. Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 268, 283, 350ff, 400, 552, 639.

⁴⁶ Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, II/1:288ff.

⁴⁷ That they are also at odds is not so clear in Barth, but is expressed more fully in Jürgen Moltmann – especially in Jürgen Moltmann, *Der gekreuzigte Gott. Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie* (Munich: Kaiser, 1972) – whose theological project is committed to the eschatological tension of "already" and "not yet". Brueggemann explicitly credits Moltmann for his own understanding of Christian faith (Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 311-312).

⁴⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 122.

God is and is not like the semantic referent.⁴⁹ Brueggemann stresses that “[a] sheer multiplicity and polyvocality of [nouns are necessary] in order to speak Yahweh fully and faithfully.”⁵⁰ In other words, only the (at times contradictory) diversity of testimony can faithfully point to YHWH without becoming idolatry.⁵¹

The unsettling and revolutionary character of YHWH is mediated by and tied to the witness of Israel. Brueggemann emphasises the Jewishness of the Old Testament, which he strongly contrasts with the ontological focus of western Christianity and Enlightenment epistemology.⁵² This contrast appears somewhat too stark, and tends towards the mystification of “Jewishness”.⁵³ However, Brueggemann’s basic point is that the Old Testament brings out the particularity of YHWH, rather than universalising the notion of “God”.⁵⁴ Brueggemann combines insights from Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutical theory and postcolonialism to show how the Old Testament, as a Bible by and for exiles,⁵⁵ uses imaginative, narrative rhetoric to reject “real” (imperial) circumstances in favour of an alternative “new reality”. This new reality is made possible by YHWH’s subversive and transformative action – witnessed in concrete sentences with strong transformative verbs, and YHWH as Subject.⁵⁶ The text discloses this new reality to the community that reads it (‘world in front of the text’).⁵⁷ This view of YHWH, and the relationship to the community, is close to Norman Gottwald’s sociological view of “YHWH”, though Brueggemann seems more weary of potential reductionism.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 229ff.

⁵⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 262.

⁵¹ Hence, Israel needs countertestimony so YHWH does not become an idol: Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 332; cf. ‘Old Testament Theology as a Particular Conversation: Adjudication of Israel’s Sociotheological Alternatives’ [1985] in *OT Theology*, 118-149, 124.

⁵² Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 80-83, 107-112, cf. also 185, 325, 331-332, 450, 595, 730.

⁵³ “Jewishness” becomes almost programmatic, and a convenient alternative to western Christianity and Enlightenment epistemology. However, Brueggemann seems to lose sight somewhat of the diversity of Judaism, seemingly basing his portrayal of “Jewishness” primarily on the Judaism of the Midrash (cf. Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 325-327). The broader Jewish tradition, however, also includes medieval philosophers like Maimonides, as well as Spinoza and representatives of the *Haskalah*, like Mendelssohn, who worked in and contributed to the western tradition of philosophy, and even Enlightenment epistemology.

Brueggemann has also been critiqued for his rather one-sided criticism of Enlightenment epistemology, as if he himself was not indebted to these paradigms, see Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 553-554. At times, Brueggemann’s contrast is reminiscent of the Biblical Theology Movement’s opposition of Hebrew and Greek thought (e.g. Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 110, 325), particularly in books like Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (The Library of History and Doctrine; London: SCM Press, 1960). This distinction has been thoroughly critiqued, see for a summary: Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 44-47, 70-72.

⁵⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 81, 282; cf. *An Unsettling God*, 1-2.

⁵⁵ That the Hebrew Bible, notwithstanding its use of older traditions, is the product of the crisis of exile is a noteworthy characteristic of Brueggemann’s project (cf. Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 74, 77, 171, 209ff, 301-302, 435, 710; see already ‘A Shattered Transcendence? Exile and Restoration’ [1993] in *OT Theology*, 183-203). It should be appreciated to what extent this insight (based on historical-critical study!) helps him stick to his synchronic reading of the text, as he (can) assume(s) that most texts are somehow interacting with the crisis of exile; curiously there is precedent for this synchronic approach coupled to a reading of the Old Testament as a Bible for exiles in Vriezen, see *Hoofdlijnen*, 52-55. There are more such overlaps, such as the recognition of inner tensions in the OT, which Vriezen designates with terms close to testimony-countertestimony (namely: “stem” and “tegenstem”), cf. *Hoofdlijnen*, 91.

⁵⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 134, 144, 145ff; cf. ‘The Rhetoric of Hurt and Hope: Ethics Odd and Crucial’ [1989] in *OT Theology*, 45-66, 50ff; there is precedent in Westermann for this focus on words and sentences (though not with the same methodology), Westermann speaks of “verbale Strukturen” (*Theologie des AT in Grundzügen*, 6).

⁵⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 68, 78-79, 134, 747-750.

⁵⁸ Cf. Brueggemann: “Yahweh as the subject of these transformative verbs is characteristically said to be a restless agent of social newness.” (*Theology of the OT*, 179); and Gottwald: “Yahweh as the deliverer of oppressed peoples from imperial-feudal thralldom into autonomous egalitarian “tribal” existence.” (Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes*

This specific process of YHWH's transformative action is not something that happened, in some external, reconstructable history, but it happens in the community's faithful reading of these texts – in the adjudication of the court – as well as in accompanying practices.⁵⁹ Only the diversity of Israel's testimony can witness to the truth about this God, and where testimonies contradict one another, that contradiction is overcome in the process of adjudication itself. That is to say: it is the community of faith, in affirming the canon with its diversity, that struggles to find the truth about God in and for its concrete context and circumstances – a struggle constitutive for faith.⁶⁰ In fact, the God of the Old Testament can only be mediated (sacramentally) when the testimony of Israel is faithfully embodied.⁶¹ In this sense, Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* is a contextual project, or rather: it assumes the dynamics of contextuality for a theological reading of the Old Testament.⁶² This grounding in community allows the text to be enacted anew.

Brueggemann, in short, insists that the uncertainty of the discipline of Old Testament Theology – with its most important task being thematisation of Israel's testimony – is inevitable given the diversity of Israel's testimony. That diversity, in turn, is given with the open-endedness and unpredictability (the "incomparability") of the Character of YHWH – which is precisely what makes the action of this Character liberating and, at times, destructive.⁶³ There is a profound connection between Israel's utterance and YHWH – in the sense that they constitute one another.⁶⁴ This faith is not risk-free, just as YHWH is not a risk-free God – that is what makes YHWH (and Israel's witness) revolutionary, and it is also how, in the community's reading of these texts (the process of adjudication), a new and subversive reality becomes possible. Though always keeping in mind the (at times oppressive) context in which that "world in front of the text" is projected.⁶⁵ The Old Testament witnesses to a waiting – for God and God's reality – within the shambles of lived experience; Christianity or the New Testament cannot supersede or break that tension.⁶⁶ Such a perspective can be helpful towards a constructive evaluation of biblical diversity in the search for reliable God-talk within faith communities.

Rendtorff – the canonical *Endgestalt* and different experiences of God

In contrast to Brueggemann, Rolf Rendtorff shows more continuity with older approaches of Biblical Theology. Rendtorff understands his own project primarily in line with Von Rad.⁶⁷ For Rendtorff, this appears to mean that the biblical material is not treated systematically, but is rather considered with

of Yahweh. A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.E. (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 38, cf. pp. 700-709). Whereas Gottwald insists on a strictly sociological approach (see also: *The Hebrew Bible. A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985)), that provides a demystification, deromanticization, dedogmatization and deidolization of Yahwism (*Tribes*, 708), Brueggemann instead insists on a thoroughly theological approach that does not reduce YHWH to a particular human concern (*Theology of the OT*, 149, 567, 717-718; *An Unsettling God*, 2).

⁵⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 574.

⁶⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 400-403; cf. 'OT Theology as a Particular Conversation', 144-149.

⁶¹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 703-704.

⁶² E.g. Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 721-725.

⁶³ Cf. Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 303; "If God's name were not so holy and if God's habitat were not with the humble, our interpretive task would be very different, surely more palatable to the ways things are in the world." ('OT Theology as a Particular Conversation', 149).

⁶⁴ See YHWH as a dialogical Character in *An Unsettling God*, 1ff.

⁶⁵ Brueggemann's commitment to liberation theology through subversive (prophetic) imagination of an alternative reality, uttered in courageous counter-narratives – which he believes is also deeply ingrained in the dynamics of the Old Testament texts – has been a pervasive feature of his work ever since the publication of *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978¹ 2001² 2018³).

⁶⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 402-403

⁶⁷ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:1.

particular attention to its own internal interconnections (*Zusammenhänge*).⁶⁸ However, rather than Von Rad's focus on the diachronic interconnections of tradition history, Rendtorff is concerned with intertextuality, taking a synchronic approach to the Old Testament, which he himself terms "canonical".⁶⁹

His relation to Childs' canonical approach is one of stated indebtedness,⁷⁰ but Rendtorff's approach to canonical theology differs noticeably from Childs'. Most relevantly, Rendtorff understands "canonical" to refer to the *Endgestalt* of the Hebrew Bible, and focuses much less attention on the communities that recognise the canon as an authority for their faith.⁷¹ Rendtorff does use the continued relevance of the *Endgestalt*, for both Jews and Christians, as an argument for his synchronic approach.⁷² Although, he also argues, more pragmatically, that diachronic approaches do not provide certain results (nor a *Gesamtschau* of the canon).⁷³ In this regard, Rendtorff differs from Childs⁷⁴ and Brueggemann, for whom the "ecclesial community" and the ongoing adjudication of the testimony are vital. Rendtorff retains the historical view of the discipline – Biblical Theology is concerned foremost with the final form of the text as a document (*Urkunde*).⁷⁵ He insists this document should be read theologically, since the final redactors intended it to be read this way.⁷⁶

Whereas Brueggemann (or Childs) might stress the necessity to account for the context in which we are interpreting the Bible theologically, Rendtorff wants to separate the (theological) voice of the text itself and the way it is read in Jewish and Christian communities respectively.⁷⁷ For

⁶⁸ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:281; cf. 'Theologie des Alten Testaments. Überlegungen zu einem Neuansatz' [1989] in *Kanon und Theologie. Vorarbeiten zu einer Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991), 1-14, 8-11.

⁶⁹ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:1ff, 153.

⁷⁰ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:281; 'Nach Vierzig Jahren. Vier Jahrzehnte selbsterlebte alttestamentliche Wissenschaft – in Heidelberg und anderswo' [1990] in *Kanon und Theologie*, 29-39, 37-39; see also more extensively (concerning both his indebtedness and disagreements with Childs): "'Canonical Interpretation" – A New Approach to Biblical Texts' *Studia Theologica* 48 (1994), 3-14.

⁷¹ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:1, 153, 2:283, 288; only in the last part of the work does he reflect on the hermeneutical issues connected to the communities of faith for whom the *Endgestalt* is canonical (see pp. 2:301-312); cf. 'Zur Bedeutung des Kanons für eine Theologie des Alten Testaments' [1983] in *Kanon und Theologie*, 54-63; 'Die Hermeneutik einer kanonischen Theologie des Alten Testaments' [1995] in *Der Text in seiner Endgestalt. Schritte auf dem Weg zu einer Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001) 61-70, 63-66.

⁷² Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:2.

⁷³ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:3, 2:1-2, 107-108, 287-288; This scepticism towards the explanatory power and stability of historical-critical hypotheses also has to do with his own career, in which he played an important role in questioning the existence of the Yahwist (the hypothesised author of the J-source), which in turn assisted the collapse of the classical documentary hypothesis (on the continent), cf. *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 147; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1976); 'The 'Yahwist' as Theologian? the Dilemma of Pentateuchal Criticism' *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 1, no. 3 (1977), 2-9; cf. also 'Zwischen historisch-kritischer Methode und holistischer Interpretation. Neue Entwicklungen in der alttestamentlichen Forschung' [1988] in *Kanon und Theologie*, 23-28; 'The Paradigm is Changing: Hopes – and Fears' [1993] in *Der Text in seiner Endgestalt*, 83-102, 83-96, especially p. 93; 'Directions in Pentateuchal Studies' [1997] in *Der Text in seiner Endgestalt*, 103-125.

⁷⁴ Cf. what Rendtorff understands by "canonical context": "[Der christliche Ausleger] muß die alttestamentlichen Texte zunächst in ihrem «kanonischen» Kontext betrachten, d.h. als Bestandteil des vorchristlichen jüdischen Bibelkanons." ('Theologie des AT', 13).

⁷⁵ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:2ff, see also pp. 1:153, 384; cf. Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 445-447.

⁷⁶ "Das Alte Testament ist ein theologisches Buch. Es ist sowohl von denen, die es in seiner Endgestalt geformt haben, als auch von den Verfassern der großen Mehrheit seiner Texte als theologischer Literatur verstanden worden." (Rendtorff, 'Die Hermeneutik einer kanonischen Theologie des AT', 62-63); see also: *Theologie des AT*, 1:1-3, 2:208, 288.

⁷⁷ Rendtorff, 'Die Bibel Israels als Buch der Christen' [1995] in *Der Text in seiner Endgestalt*, 30-46, 35-38.

Rendtorff, who involved himself extensively in Jewish-Christian dialogue, the recognition of this double history of the canon is vital.⁷⁸ Rendtorff's concept of an *Endgestalt*, however, can be scrutinised for his assumptions about the intentionality of the final redactor-authors of the Hebrew Bible and his prioritisation of the Hebrew canon (Tora-Nevi'im-Ketuvim) over other shapes.

To start with the last point, Rendtorff shares this prioritisation of the Hebrew canon with several earlier Old Testament Theologies.⁷⁹ It seems to be based on an assumption that this canonical shape is somehow inherent to the final redaction of the Hebrew Bible. This assumption does not hold up in light of recent research into the history of the canon, which recognises a longer process of canon formation as well as different canonical shapes current in the Second Temple period.⁸⁰ There is a bigger issue here: though Rendtorff admits the openness of the *Endgestalt*, he assumes its relative stability, hence making it a viable object of synchronic study. There seems to be a notion at work here that the final redactors were consciously structuring and (more or less) closing the canon, even if Rendtorff never makes this claim explicit. This may hold up to an extent, however, both textually and tradition-historically, such a concept of *Endgestalt* is problematic in light of the fluent state of the biblical text in the Second Temple period.⁸¹ Rendtorff further connects theological conclusions to the three-partite structure of the Hebrew canon, namely: that the Nevi'im and Ketuvim need to be read in subordination to the Tora.⁸² This assumption can be seen in his prioritisation of Pentateuchal themes.⁸³ He argues that this is justified by an early unanimous acceptance (among both Jews and Christians) of the three-part canon⁸⁴ – however such unanimity probably never existed.⁸⁵

Rendtorff is not concerned with plurality for its own sake, rather the diversity in the Bible is relevant in its interconnectedness (*Zusammenhang*). This interconnectedness becomes manifest – not from the tradition-history of the Old Testament, but – in the intertextuality within the canon. Rendtorff gives account of this rich intertextuality through the distinctive cross-references in the margins of the pages of his work.⁸⁶ The structure and methodology of his Old Testament Theology are aimed at doing justice to the diversity *and* (or: in) its interconnectedness.⁸⁷ There seems to be a tendency for him to interpret these separately; whereas the density and plurality of the texts are explained by their long tradition-history (the diachronic element), the interconnectedness is ascribed to the process of final redaction – the *kanonbildende Periode*.⁸⁸ In response to previous devaluations of the final redactors –

⁷⁸ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:301ff; cf. Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 444-445; see also e.g. Rendtorff, 'Zur Bedeutung des Kanons für eine Theologie des AT'; 'Wege zu einem gemeinsamen jüdisch-christlichen Umgang mit dem Alten Testament' [1990] in *Kanon und Theologie*, 40-53; *Christen und Juden heute. Neue Einsichten und neue Aufgaben* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998).

⁷⁹ E.g. Zimmerli, *Grundriß der alttestamentlichen Theologie*, 9; Clements, *OT Theology*, 16; Anderson, *Contours of OT Theology*, 39.

⁸⁰ See Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Biblical Canon* (2 vols.; London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1:22ff.

⁸¹ Cf. McDonald, *The Formation of the Biblical Canon*, 1:3-13.

⁸² Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:4-7, 82, 2:1-2; other, contemporary, Old Testament Theologies also tend to do this, see e.g. Anderson, *Contours of OT Theology*, 39ff; Otto Kaiser, *Der Gott des Alten Testaments* (3 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993-2003), I:329ff.

⁸³ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:2-3; 'Die Hermeneutik einer kanonischen Theologie des AT', 66-70; Brueggemann also does this, see Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, 205ff; in continuity with Martin Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1948); and, Von Rad, *Theologie des AT*.

⁸⁴ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:312; cf. 'Wege zu einem gemeinsamen jüdisch-christlichen Umgang', 45-46.

⁸⁵ McDonald, *The Formation of the Biblical Canon*, 1:462ff.

⁸⁶ Cf. Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:8-9, 2:6.

⁸⁷ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:3, 7, 82-83, 384, 2:1, 93, 207-208, 287-296, 315, 317; cf. also e.g. 1:290-291.

⁸⁸ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:2-3, 2:1-2, 220; cf. also e.g. pp. 1:46, 51, 59-60, 151-152, 187-188, 294, 331, 355, 358, 2:61, 107, 121; cf. 'Der Text in seiner Endgestalt. Überlegungen zu Exodus 19' [1991] in *Der Text in seiner Endgestalt*, 71-82, 72-73. On the *kanonbildende Periode* (which is basically the period from the exile onwards),

whom Rendtorff intentionally designates as “(final) authors” – he ascribes to them immense (theological) creativity.⁸⁹

With this view of the canon, he blunts the sharp edges of the diversity in the Bible somewhat (at least compared to Brueggemann). Instead of a conflict between countertestimony and testimony taking place within the canon itself, the major tension, termed *Widerstreit*, is located outside of the world of the text – the canon is contending with parties, external to itself, that it counts among “Israel” but that are not in agreement with the canonical assumptions about, e.g., divine unity or the implications of YHWH’s justice.⁹⁰ At the same time, Rendtorff readily admits that the canon contains not just diverse but even contradictory perspectives.⁹¹ Rendtorff, for example, attempts to do justice to the importance of the figures of Moses and David, as ideals for Israel’s faith – describing how they are viewed in radically different ways throughout the canon.⁹²

But why is this interconnected diversity in the canon relevant theologically? According to Rendtorff, it has everything to do with the structure of theology itself – and what constitutes a theological statement. Rendtorff assumes that all the authors of the Old Testament (at least those contributing to its final shape) believed God to be one, they were monotheists.⁹³ At the same time, they evidently had, or preserved, very different views of who that one God is and how that God acts. For Rendtorff, this is because they are not actually describing the one God, YHWH, as God is *an sich*, but always as God in relation (*in Beziehung*).⁹⁴ The diversity in the canon reflects different experiences of God; God’s acting *towards us* is diverse and hence also results in diverse knowledge of God – which can be expressed diversely.⁹⁵ As Rendtorff himself summarises it:

*Kein Mensch kann wissen, wie Gott ist. Menschen können Gott auf vielerlei Weise erfahren: Seine schöpferische und gestaltende, aber auch seine richtende und zerstörerische Macht, seine Zuwendung und seine Nähe, seine Verborgenheit und seine Abwesenheit. Und sie können diese Erfahrungen zum Ausdruck bringen. Sie können sagen, wie sie sich Gott und sein Handeln vorstellen, und sie können ihn darstellen in sprachlichen und auch in sichtbaren Bildern.*⁹⁶

Below these diverse theological expressions lies our existential diversity as human beings. Rendtorff describes this in terms of *Lebenswelten*.⁹⁷ A *Lebenswelt* is closely correlated to the different literary forms or *Gattungen* in the OT. A *Lebenswelt* is, in a way, a relational reality which involves God; that is to say, a theological consideration of Israel (or an individual) in relation to a particular part or

see pp. 2:297ff; the concept is derived from Frank Crüsemann, 'Religionsgeschichte oder Theologie?: elementare Überlegungen zu einer falschen Alternative' *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 10 (1995), 69-77, 71.

⁸⁹ Cf. e.g. Rendtorff, *Das Alte Testament. Eine Einführung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983¹ 1988³), 304-305; 'The Paradigm is Changing', 100-101; 'Die Bibel Israels als Buch der Christen', 40; *Theologie des AT*, 1:3; cf. also: 'Das Bild der nachexilischen Israel in der deutschen alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft von Wellhausen bis Von Rad' [1988] in *Kanon und Theologie*, 72-80.

⁹⁰ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:207-219.

⁹¹ Cf. Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:159, 207-208; "'Canonical Interpretation" – A New Approach to Biblical Texts', 7-9.

⁹² Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:121-149.

⁹³ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:83, 2:159, 207, 239-241.

⁹⁴ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:159; cf. pp. 1:37, 61, 2:5.

⁹⁵ Cf. "Das Handeln Gottes wird von Menschen auf vielerlei Weise erfahren. Davon sprechen die Texte der Bibel. Sie bringen diese Erfahrungen in ihre Vielfalt und auch in ihrer Widersprüchlichkeit zum Ausdruck. Darum ist die Rede von Gott in den biblischen Texten alles andere als einheitlich. Oft spiegeln die Texte Auseinandersetzungen um die Gottese Erfahrungen wider und zeigen deshalb ganz unterschiedliche Aspekte und Meinungen." (Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:159).

⁹⁶ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:181.

⁹⁷ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:220ff.

aspect of life. Hence, Rendtorff distinguishes the prophetic, where God is experienced as the one who speaks (critically), from the sphere of *Gottesdienst* and prayer, where God is experienced as the one addressed (cultically).⁹⁸ Similarly, Rendtorff also treats wisdom; Israel among the nations; Israel's history; and, Israel's expectation.⁹⁹

When one compares him to Brueggemann, Rendtorff is more pragmatic with regards to the theological task of Biblical Theology.¹⁰⁰ That is to say: Brueggemann engages more extensively with what could be considered topics of systematic theology (e.g. revelation, sacramentality and mediation, the existence and character of God). However, the Bible clearly has a revelatory, or even sacramental, role for Rendtorff as well; God, for him, is not a theme of the Bible but is present in it.¹⁰¹ There is a sense that the unity of God demands from theologians that every experience of the Divine, reflected textually in the diversity of the canon, should be taken seriously; since, if God is one, than every experiential witness to divine (in)action somehow refers credibly to *this* God – the God of Israel.¹⁰²

More broadly, though Rendtorff does not himself make this connection explicitly,¹⁰³ this relates to a pervasive characteristic (and problem) of monotheism; that every experience of transcendence somehow has to relate to the same (one and only) God. Especially in a postmodern setting, this is far from obvious and straightforward, hence e.g. Gerstenberger in his *Theologien des AT* is quite sympathetic towards non-monotheistic traditions (of Yahwism) in Israel's religious history, and there are other positive contemporary re-evaluations of polytheism as well.¹⁰⁴ Essentially, Rendtorff seems to claim that it is inherent in a biblical faith (whether Jewish or Christian) to take the unity of God seriously, that entails searching for the *Zusammenhang* of rather diverse perspectives on God (grounded in diverse experiences of that God).¹⁰⁵ This *Zusammenhang*, crucially, should not explain the diversity away but rather enable it, only in that way can God's unity truly be taken seriously – i.e. can every experience of transcendence be referred to the one God. The struggle to attempt this is visible in the work of Rendtorff. This struggle of preserving both the unity of God and the legitimacy of different experiences of transcendence – whether or not it is useful to attribute it to the redactors of an elusive canonical *Endgestalt* – can also be central for a community of faith in thinking about its own God-talk.

Schmid – Inner-biblical interpretation and implicit theology

Konrad Schmid's *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, which he himself characterises as “merely” an *Entwurf*,¹⁰⁶ is tentative and ambitious at the same time. Unlike Brueggemann and Rendtorff, Schmid views historical-criticism and diachronic perspectives on the Old Testament as valuable for a Biblical Theology.¹⁰⁷ He actively correlates the literary development of the Hebrew Bible to the history of

⁹⁸ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:221-233.

⁹⁹ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:233-279.

¹⁰⁰ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:317; cf. “Canonical Interpretation” – A New Approach to Biblical Texts’, 13.

¹⁰¹ Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:5, 159.

¹⁰² This is also how Rendtorff argues the canon came about: cf. Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 2:205-207.

¹⁰³ He comes closest in reflecting on Jaspers' thesis of the ‘axial age’ and the role the Hebrew prophets played in it, see Rendtorff, *Theologie des AT*, 1:149-150.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. n.22; see also for example: Jordan Paper, *The Deities are Many. A Polytheistic Theology* (SUNY Series in Religious Studies; New York: State University, 2005).

¹⁰⁵ Rendtorff, referring to Hebrews 1:1, argues that God's revelation in Christ has not undermined but underlined the diverse perspectives of the OT, cf. *Theologie des AT*, 2:315.

¹⁰⁶ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, vi.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 81ff, 105, 240; see also: 'Sind die Historisch-Kritischen kritischer geworden? Überlegungen zu Stellung und Potential der Bibelwissenschaften' *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 25 (2011), 63-78; 'Mythe oder Geschichte? Die historische Kritik an der Bibel und ihre theologische Bedeutung' in Pierre Bühler

Israel.¹⁰⁸ This has to do with his view on Biblical Theology; though he recognises that the discipline has become methodologically diverse, and that this is legitimate, he opts for a historical-descriptive approach himself.¹⁰⁹ Like Rendtorff, he appears confident that we can consider the theologies of the Old Testament on their own terms – somewhat tautologically, he wants an *alttestamentliche* Theology of the Old Testament, not a Christian or Jewish one.¹¹⁰ At the same time, he is aware of the interrelatedness of the Bible with its reception histories.¹¹¹

Schmid does not want to distinguish too strongly between the redaction history and the reception history of the Hebrew Bible.¹¹² The Old Testament is characteristically *Fortschreibungsliteratur*, meaning that these texts are not just in horizontal dialogue with one another (synchronic intertextuality) but also in vertical dialogue; the redactors are both (re)writing and commenting on texts simultaneously.¹¹³ Thus, to understand the Old Testament in its full (theological) depth, one needs diachronic approaches. In many ways, this is a more sophisticated version of Von Rad's tradition-historical approach: historical-criticism can help one understand how Israel continuously (re)interpreted its traditions.

In contrast to Rendtorff, Schmid is reluctant to recognise a definitive final shape of the OT.¹¹⁴ Even the closed canon takes different shapes in different traditions, which reflect different (implicit) theologies. The tripartite Jewish canon espouses a different theology than Christian canons, which themselves are quite varied. Schmid even treats the different theologies implied by the order of the books in three major early Christian unicals (κ, A, B).¹¹⁵ Furthermore, since Schmid views the character of the Old Testament as *Fortschreibungsliteratur* as fundamental to understanding it, he reads different parts or layers of the canon both as end products in themselves, and as they relate to their redactional history. The former reading departs from the diachronic argument that they were at one point independent entities – and thus can be read on their own terms.¹¹⁶ Schmid recognises that not every reconstructed layer or phase may have been an independent literary work, but this does not mean that the material does not have its own voice. This means Schmid can treat the non-P material of Genesis 1–11 separately, while recognising that it may never have been an independent literary entity (but had different roles in the redactional history of the Hebrew Bible).¹¹⁷

(ed.), *Die Bibel und die Wissenschaften. Wechselwirkungen in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Zürcher Hochschulforum 43; Zurich: Hochschulverlag, 2019), 31-49, especially pp. 45-49.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 177ff; in this regard, his approach is comparable to Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible. A New Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁰⁹ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 5-6.

¹¹⁰ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, ix, 399.

¹¹¹ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 389-398.

¹¹² Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 105; cf. 'Literaturgeschichte des Alten Testaments – Aufgaben, Stand, Problemfelder und Perspektiven' *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 136 (2011), 243-262.

¹¹³ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 2-3, 179, 238-241, 385-387.

¹¹⁴ "Dem Alten Testaments kommt allenfalls eine wirkungsgeschichtliche Einheit zu, aber keine historische oder sachliche." (Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 97).

¹¹⁵ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 113-122; see on the theologies of κ, A, and B: pp. 118-122; cf. 'Christologien antiker Bibelcodices. Biblisch-theologische Beobachtungen zu den Bücheranordnungen im Codex Sinaiticus, im Codex Alexandrinus und im Codex Vaticanus' in Thomas Günter, Andreas Schülle (eds.), *Gegenwart Des Lebendigen Christus: Festschrift für Michael Welker zum 60. Geburtstag* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007), 43-55.

¹¹⁶ Hence, chapter 5 and 6 are dedicated to the theologies of different shapes of the canon (ch. 5) and different parts of the canon and the components of which they are made up, respectively (ch. 6). He e.g. treats the Torah as a whole, before doing the same for the different parts from which it is made up (P, non-P *Urgeschichte*, Patriarchal narratives, Moses-Exodus, Deuteronomy). Cf. the redaction-critical background of this multi-levelled synchronic reading, enabled by diachronic insights: Schmid, et al. (eds.), *Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Ennateuch?*

¹¹⁷ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 135ff.

Like Rendtorff, Schmid is looking for connections and coherence within the Old Testament, but he does so in a more variegated way. Schmid also recognises a deep interconnectedness within the Old Testament canon(s), but connects it to a long redactional history.¹¹⁸ At different phases, different connections were forged between different traditions and different textual elements.¹¹⁹ Whereas Rendtorff has a tendency to connect diversity to the early histories of the texts and unity to the *kanonbildende Periode*, Schmid sees the tendency to preserve diversity in a structured way (unity in diversity) in every phase of the history of the text. At one point, he calls this *polyphonische Anthologie*.¹²⁰ The density of the text, which historical criticism makes us aware of, reveals a collection of diverse voices – the theology of the Old Testament always has to contend with many theologies in dialogue with one another.¹²¹

Again, this has to do with Schmid's refusal to separate literary and redaction history from reception history: the redactors and authors of the Old Testament received (oral) traditions and texts, and their interpretations and commentary subsequently became part of the text. Only after the closing of the canon did interpretation become an external process, as it had beforehand been internal to the Bible.¹²² It is worth pointing out that this narrows the gap between what the biblical authors are doing and what contemporary readers are doing.¹²³ The diachronic perspective is essential in being able to read the text as "*einen multiperspektivisch wahrnehmbaren theologischen Diskurs*."¹²⁴ Schmid does not opt for a canonical approach, as a (largely) synchronic reading of the text – as it was transmitted after the closing of the canon – because historically the closure of the canon was somewhat arbitrary and relative.¹²⁵ This affords undue normativity to the final shape of the Old Testament.¹²⁶ The theological process of interpretation did not and should not stop after the closure of the canon; the redaction history of the Old Testament is over, but its reception history is not – the only thing that has fundamentally changed is that interpretation is now external to the text.

Schmid insists that the question of normativity is one of reception history; the way the structured diversity of the Old Testament is interpreted theologically in communities of faith is and should be new every time.¹²⁷ Biblical Theology, as a historical-descriptive discipline, can help to show how this theological interpretation took place at different points of the redactional history of the Old Testament. Concretely, Schmid discerns a process within the Old Testament texts that he calls "stereometric reading".¹²⁸ Stereometric reading entails that layers of meaning (*Sinndimensionen*) are gradually added to the text by its interpreting reader-writers. Concretely, Schmid observes increasingly explicit theological meaning being attributed to the same event or phenomenon. Theology tends to start out implicitly, and given enough reflection becomes increasingly explicit.¹²⁹ For example, in how

¹¹⁸ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 385-386.

¹¹⁹ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 383-384.

¹²⁰ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 98; cf. 386-387.

¹²¹ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 3, 49.

¹²² Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 387; on the Old Testament as *Auslegungsliteratur*, cf. 'Ausgelegte Schrift als Schrift. Innerbiblische Schriftauslegung und die Frage nach der theologischen Qualität biblischer Texte' in Reiner Anselm, Stephan Schleissing, Klaus Tanner (eds.), *Die Kunst des Auslegens: Zur Hermeneutik des Christentums in der Kultur der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 115-129; 'Innerbiblische Schriftauslegung: Aspekte der Forschungsgeschichte' In Kratz, Thomas Krüger, Schmid (eds.), *Schriftauslegung in der Schrift. Festschrift für Odil Hannes Steck zu seinem 65. Geburtstag* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2000), 1-22.

¹²³ See explicitly, Schmid, 'Ausgelegte Schrift als Schrift', 128-129.

¹²⁴ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 49.

¹²⁵ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 77-79.

¹²⁶ This "final shape" is itself complex, cf. Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 53ff.

¹²⁷ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 108-111.

¹²⁸ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 49-50.

¹²⁹ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 50-52, 178, 228; cf. also e.g. pp. 142, 167, 324-325; see already: Schmid, Peter Altmann (trans.), *Is There Theology in the Hebrew Bible?* (Critical Studies in the Hebrew Bible 4; Winona Lake (IN):

the advance of the Babylonian armies is interpreted within an increasingly theological frame in different layers of the book of Jeremiah.¹³⁰

This observation appears to be central not just to Schmid's understanding of the Old Testament but also to his view of the task of Biblical Theology. He explores extensively how the notion of "theology" can be applied to the Old Testament, and, accordingly, traces the history of the concept of "theology".¹³¹ He concludes that our modern view of theology was shaped by a highly-reflective scholastic conception of "theology" (developed in the Middle Ages), and that this type of "theology" is not found in the Old Testament.¹³² Rather, the Old Testament contains theologies that are (to varying degrees) implicit.¹³³ Since, however, the text shows signs of stereometric reading, a tendency towards greater explication can be observed – a scholastic-type theology could potentially be viewed as a further explication of the Old Testament's implicit theology (or theologies).

Here Schmid's descriptive account has a normative dimension as well. He views the Reformation's reinterpretation of "theology" as an existential one; theology is not concerned with speculative ideas about God but about existentially relating to God (*Gottesbeziehung*).¹³⁴ He shows particular affinity with Rudolf Bultmann's programme of *Entmythologisierung* and the existentialism behind it: theology and anthropology essentially have the same subject matter (the human being *coram Deo*).¹³⁵ Hence, we should expect earlier texts, that are (presumably) more involved with existential realities (history, experience, etc.) to be more implicitly theological – only in the process of interpretation, whereby the text becomes the proper object of consideration, and the lens on existential questions, is the theological dimension made more explicit.¹³⁶ Schmid's view of the Old Testament as *Elitenliteratur* might play a role here as well: more explicit theology, tending towards the scholastic, requires a certain reflective luxury.¹³⁷

Schmid is not too far off from Rendtorff's view that the diversity in the Old Testament is caused by the diverse experiences of God. However, Schmid stresses the role of interpretation in the realisation of this diversity, and he also emphasises the ambiguity of theologically interpreting experience. The implicit nature of early theology has to do with the fundamental ambiguity of our existence, which also means: the fundamental ambiguity of God. As he says, concerning a passage from Proverbs:

Es scheint also eine Eigenart dieser poetischen Gestaltungsweise zu sein, Gottes Handeln im Hintergrund anzudeuten, ohne darüber explizit ein Wort zu verlieren. Man darf davon ausgehen, dass diese Darstellungsform auf einer theologischen Entscheidung beruht, die

Eisenbrauns, 2015), 48-113, 116 [originally published as: *Gibt es Theologie im Alten Testament? Zum Theologiebegriff in der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2013)].

¹³⁰ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 49-50; cf. Jer. 6:1, 4:6-7, 1:13-14 (in that order).

¹³¹ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 13ff; based on the material already found in *Is There Theology in the Hebrew Bible?*, 5ff.

¹³² Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 15.

¹³³ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 45-49.

¹³⁴ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 16-17.

¹³⁵ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 103-104, 371-373; he actually derived the idea of "implicit theology" from Bultmann as well, see pp. 46-47; cf. particularly: Rudolf Bultmann, 'Welchen Sinn hat es, von Gott zu reden?' [1925] in *Glauben und Verstehen. Gesammelte Aufsätze* (4 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1964-1965), I:26-37; 'Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung' [1963] in *Glauben und Verstehen*, IV:128-137.

¹³⁶ Cf. Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 178.

¹³⁷ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 8ff; this characterisation is quite a contrast to Brueggemann's view of the Old Testament as a Bible for exiles writing back against the empire – though the perspectives are not incompatible: externally-speaking Israel was marginalised by the empires around it, while internally-speaking the scribes working on the Hebrew Bible would have belonged to the upper class (cf. P.R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel': A Study in Biblical Origins* (Cornerstones; 2nd ed.; London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 9).

*bewusst gewählt wurde, um der Komplexität und Uneindeutigkeit der Identifizierbarkeit von Gotteshandeln in der Welt Rechnung zu tragen.*¹³⁸

This elusiveness of God – so important to Brueggemann – is central for Schmid as well, and to understanding his prerogative for doing Biblical Theology. He explicitly claims that: “*Was immer religiös oder theologisch von Gott ausgesagt wird kann nicht in den Status einer letztgültigen Aussage eintreten, sondern bleibt vorläufig.*”¹³⁹ As he argues elsewhere, it is one of the fundamental tasks of theology in the context of the modern university to emphasise the *Begrenztheit menschlichen Wissens* – in the sciences too, we cannot reach fundamental certainty.¹⁴⁰ As humans, we are unescapably tied to our existential situation which precludes us from absolute certainty, from grasping God definitively.¹⁴¹ Hence, we need continuous re-interpretation, that is: to find new *Sinndimensionen*, that help us make sense of the depth dimensions of our existential condition.¹⁴²

This is the “hidden” normativity in Schmid’s description of the Old Testament as a textualised process of continuous theological interpretation – the canon cannot be an *exklusive und unmittelbare Kodifikation von Offenbarung*, rather it is a witness (*Zeugnis*) to this continuous search for God.¹⁴³ Not unlike authors such as Erhard Gersterberger and Georg Fischer, Schmid calls for an embrace of the plurality of theologies in the Old Testament, especially in the context of the 21st century where pluralism is an everyday reality.¹⁴⁴ Different (and at times contradictory) witnesses help to stress the complexity and ambiguity of God’s presence and action – which is akin to the complexity and ambiguity of our existential predicament – and the provisional nature of all theology.

Schmid’s preference for a descriptive-historical approach to Biblical Theology seems aimed at a relativisation of normativity. However, Schmid does not disapprove of theologies *based on* the Old Testament, in fact, he claims that a diachronic consideration of the Old Testament itself (theology of the Old Testament) shows a sustained process of theological (re)interpretation; implicit theological claims being made explicit. Perhaps then, it is not primarily the content of the Old Testament that should be normative for us, but the way in which its author-redactors (generally) practiced theology – though this conclusion remains, fittingly, implicit in Schmid.

Comparative Analysis: how to speak about God today?

Brueggemann, Rendtorff and Schmid all recognise and positively value the diversity of the Old Testament. They see no use in relativising or needlessly harmonising the different traditions in the Old Testament, so that a single normative, theological voice can emerge. This recognition is valid, since one cannot ignore the diachronic density of the Old Testament text, resulting from centuries of redactional work; even Brueggemann and Rendtorff, who do not value diachronic approaches in the

¹³⁸ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 52.

¹³⁹ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 385.

¹⁴⁰ Schmid, 'Das Geheimnis der Welt. Die Begrenztheit menschlichen Wissens als Thema der Theologie' in Sara Kviat Bloch, Martina Dubach, Gabriele Rippl (eds.), *Grenzen in den Wissenschaften* (Berner Universitätsschriften; Bern: Haupt Verlag, 2017), 41-60.

¹⁴¹ Cf. his reading of Gen. 2-3, which he does not interpret as the fall from a positive *Urzustand* into a negative present, but rather as “*der Weg von einer ambivalenten Situation in eine andere*” (Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 282 – see further pp. 278-283); Schmid wrote a number of articles and chapters on this topic, see e.g. 'Eine andere biblische Freiheitsgeschichte: Die Paradieserzählung als Adoleszenz-Mythos der Menschheit' *Religionunterricht Heute* 47, no. 1 (2019), 4-7.

¹⁴² Cf. “*Theologische ist dieser Umstand[, dass das AT Fortschreibungsliteratur darstellt,] von elementarer Bedeutung, denn er verdankt sich dem Bewusstsein, dass ein Text mit der Zeit gehen muss, wenn er seine Bedeutung bewahren will.*” (Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 239).

¹⁴³ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 398.

¹⁴⁴ Schmid, *Theologie des AT*, 384-385.

context of Biblical Theology, are still recognisably building on a historical-critical analysis of the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, the context of faith communities (in the West) is one of pluralism and post-modernity, which means any “definitive reading” of the Old Testament (or any other normative text) is bound to be challenged.

Such a recognition of the diversity of the Old Testament leads all three authors, in different ways, to emphasise the ambiguity of theology, of speaking about God. In the 21st century, the Old Testament in its diversity and open-endedness can provide a caution for speaking about God too definitively or controllingly – as theologians have often done and still do. Faith communities that speak too controllingly about God are confronted, in their own Scriptures, with a livelier diversity of God-talk. Biblical theology can help here by exposing that diversity.

Brueggemann offers a distinctly theological reason for this diversity in relating it directly to the character of God. Here, Brueggemann’s rhetorical criticism is advantageous, circumventing the ontological questions and treating YHWH as a character in the textual world of the Old Testament. As such, Brueggemann is able to offer a constructive account of the ambiguity of theology: the diverse rhetoric about YHWH reflects a paradox within YHWH’s character, who is caught in a tension between self-regard and regard for YHWH’s partners. Precisely this tension allows these texts to constitute a liberating reality for communities reading them faithfully. But it also takes seriously the particularity of YHWH – whereas Rendtorff and Schmid seem to presume a more generalised concept of “God”, Brueggemann starts from the specific God witnessed in the Old Testament.

However, there are weaknesses tied up with these strengths. One can be critical of Brueggemann’s undue polemics towards the “Enlightenment” and his sympathetically-intended caricature of “Jewishness”. More centrally, however, Brueggemann’s approach functions as a slightly-fideistic project, internal to a Christian faith community; it offers a specific way of speaking about God from an Old Testament perspective. However, it does not address any of the questions that one might critically pose to a faith community, from the outside, concerning its God-talk. In a way this is rather the point, since Brueggemann departs from a post-liberal position for which the internal logic of a community has a degree of incomparability.

Particularly the question of the reality behind this God-talk is left in somewhat of an unsatisfying limbo with the assertion that “utterance is everything”. In attempting to circumvent ontology, Brueggemann nonetheless raises ontological questions: if the rhetorical reality of YHWH is both constituted by and constitutive for Israel’s God-talk, which came first? Gottwald, by whom Brueggemann was influenced, takes a clear stance here: Israel’s God-talk comes first, YHWH is a social reality, a (highly-effective) construct of an oppressed community.¹⁴⁵ While many others might opt for the opposite stance, Brueggemann sees the merit of Gottwald’s approach but also views it as reductionistic. Ultimately, this leaves the question open (or perhaps: it respects the paradox or mystery).

From reading Rendtorff, one might wonder what Brueggemann does with the question of monotheism. If the God (YHWH) of the community is believed to be the one and only God, should that not have implications beyond the community’s life – or beyond the text? Accordingly, Rendtorff is more concerned with how the diverse ways the community speaks of its God reflect different experiences of and with God. Implying that a monotheistic faith community (like Jewish or Christian communities) might have a vested interest in relating broader *Lebenswelten* to their God – which is in fact what the universalistic tendencies of classic systematic theological projects show (e.g. questions of God’s world governance).

Rendtorff views (Old Testament) theology more as a struggle to relate different experiences to the same God, without losing either the specificity of different existential situations nor the

¹⁴⁵ Cf. n.58.

universality of YHWH's capacity for relationality. In light of this, a faith community might foster both a curious openness towards unfamiliar experiences of transcendence, and a vested interest in relating them to its own understanding of God. Which is also where the question of canon comes in: how and why does the canon – specifically, in this case: the Old Testament – factor into the God-talk of a faith community today?

This question of the authority of the canon is posed and answered differently by the three authors. Rendtorff's conception of an *Endgestalt* (as detailed above) is problematic for various reasons. It seems to be an attempt to justify a synchronic reading of the Old Testament from the perspective of a particular historical situation or epoch (the "*kanonbildende Periode*"). This in turn allows a stable foundation for the two histories of the canon (Jewish and Christian) to depart from – and presumably a straightforward basis for a Jewish-Christian dialogue. It is however, rather artificial. The specific reverence it gives to the author-redactors is also not expanded upon by Rendtorff – though, presumably (like Brueggemann), it is a status they have due to their reception in the canonical communities. Taking Schmid's approach, however, one can ask if this final shape of the text – in so far as it even exists – should be given such weight from a historical perspective; other interpretations and perspectives are layered into the text (and emerge from its subsequent reception histories).

Schmid is perhaps most explicit about the contingency of "the" canon. By relativising the gulf between the redactional and reception histories of the Old Testament, he is able to bring the ancient writers and the modern readers of these texts closer together – without providing the former with some inexplicable, especially authoritative status. The struggle of speaking about God is interpreted existentially: the depth-dimension of our ambiguous existentiality is expressed in God-talk – with a tendency for increasing explicitness relative to the degree of reflection. This process of theologising is common to the authors of the Old Testament and its modern readers; our interpretations stand in a continuous line with theirs, except that ours will not become part of the (biblical) text anymore.

This postulates the canon more as an ongoing conversation, which has the advantage of allowing even voices from outside the community to potentially join, without having to assent to a given basis of theological truth (i.e. it allows external questions). This is reflected perhaps in Schmid's wish for an *alttestamentliche* theology of the Old Testament. However, if this idea is pushed too far, one might wonder if the concept of a canon is thereby not eroded altogether. Schmid does not raise the theological questions surrounding the canon (explicitly), but, in Jewish and Christian communities, the Hebrew Bible also functions as Scripture which (somehow) accords it special authority in the ongoing conversation on how we should speak about God.

Going full circle here, the post-liberal positioning of Brueggemann actually emerges as a relative strength: there is a certain irreducibility in accepting the Old Testament as basic to the community's God-talk – call it faith – for which (principally) no apologetical reasons can be given. At the same time, a faith community should, nonetheless, (paradoxically) open this internal court-room to external questions, in order to do justice to the broader orientation of its own God-talk – i.e. there is a claim to universality in speaking about God (especially in monotheistic faiths). Here, the ways in which Rendtorff and Schmid (differently) relate theology to existential questions is helpful; these questions are also relevant outside of the faith community, and from the perspective of monotheism: the community's God-talk should (if it is reliable) be expected to be applicable beyond itself; because God's influence extends beyond the community. Hence, making Brueggemann's "court-room" not quite such an internal affair.

There is a curious parallel between Brueggemann's unwillingness to go behind the texts (i.e. by using diachronic methods constructively) and the irreducibility he claims for Israel's God-talk. While the way Schmid does go behind the texts helps relate their own theological diversity to broader existential questions and debates. For communities of faith, looking to speak about God reliably while remaining open to an increasingly pluralistic context of (different) voices, a balance between these

two can be productive. On the one hand, the Old Testament constitutes a witness to the God of Israel (and by extension: the Father of Jesus Christ), which is central to the community's own God-talk. On the other hand, the Old Testament's God-talk also connects to broader struggles to understand our human predicament. It is the monotheistic commitment of Jews and Christians, the conviction that their God is the one and only God, which bridges the divide between these two. While, at the same time, the diversity contained in the Old Testament itself, retains an open-endedness to our talk of this God, and makes the conversation an ongoing one.

Conclusion

For faith communities speaking about God today, with the Old Testament as an (authoritative) source for such God-talk, a positive valuation of the diversity in the Old Testament can be helpful in different ways. In a pluralistic context, speaking about God requires a basis of reliable God-talk internal to the community (the matter of their faith), for which Brueggemann's constructive approach to Old Testament diversity is helpful. It is necessary to take all the voices in the Old Testament text seriously, since only in such a faithful reading can YHWH be "uttered fully". It is precisely in the tensions within the text that YHWH emerges as an unsettling but also as a liberating character. This transforms the theological interpretation of the Old Testament into a struggle. Such a struggle might also be productive, for example, in preaching: speaking about God in a liberating way sometimes requires intensive listening to the countertestimony (recognising the questions before looking for answers).

However, the community also requires an openness to (external) questions and other voices, for which particularly Schmid's conception of the canon as an open-ended conversation is useful. This allows a contextualisation of Israel's witness to YHWH within the broader realm of existential questions. Not just believers but any human being can relate to the questions raised in the Old Testament, since they are grounded in history and human experience. This also makes the explicitly theological interpretations – both in the text and given in the community – ambiguous and fragile; others might disagree with them or provide a different perspective. If the mystery of God and divine revelation is to be taken seriously, however, this open-endedness and dialogue should be embraced.

The monotheistic outlook of Jews and Christians, thematised by Rendtorff, can help connect both the outward and the inward trajectory of God-talk. The pervasive tendency in the Old Testament towards embracing the unity of divinity, within YHWH, implies that all reality, both external and internal to the community, is related to the God of whom the community speaks. Such a faith needs to keep the balance between caution of speaking too controllingly of God and courage by continuing to speak of God. The God to whom the Old Testament witnesses is neither restricted by human God-talk, nor mediated without it.

Evaluation

In hindsight, the comparative element in this study could potentially have been handled differently; instead of separate sections for each author, the themes relevant to the research problem could have been the topic of the different sections. This may have helped the argumentative build-up of the article. On the other hand, I prefer to give each author their due before using their perspectives (comparatively) in order to answer the research question.

Since Biblical Theology is such a varied discipline, where many basic questions about the discipline's purpose and results are contested, questions can always be posed concerning the selection of the authors that were compared. Whereas these three authors present rather different ways of approaching the Theology of the Old Testament, a case could be made that they are rather homogenous – e.g. all three are mainline protestant, white males from the West. However, for this reason, I have attempted not to treat them in a vacuum (by introducing the broader context of the debates in the discipline), as well as limiting the research problem to challenges facing (primarily: Christian) faith communities in western pluralistic and postmodern contexts.

This research touches on the constructive role that Biblical Theology may have in relation to the church (or other faith communities), rather than it being a purely descriptive, historical discipline. This lines up with a trend in Old Testament Theology in the last decades. A question such as the one posed in this article comes close to questions of systematic theology (or alternatively perhaps even practical theology) – as it concerns how contemporary faith communities theologise. Further research could delve deeper into this connection between Biblical Theology (and biblical studies – since all authors of an Old Testament Theology are biblical scholars) and systematic theology, or practical theology.

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TITLE OF THE RESEARCH / THESIS:

Speaking about God from an Old Testament Perspective. God-talk in light of diversity in the Bible

SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND METHOD(S):

This investigation considers (theological) diversity in the Old Testament as a problem within the discipline of Old Testament Theology, with a view towards how God-talk, in light of said diversity, is possible today – within faith communities (especially: Christian churches) for whom the OT has a status as Scripture.

A comparative approach will be taken, comparing three authors (Brueggemann, Rendtorff, Schmid) in relation to this problem, and bringing their perspectives in dialogue with one another.

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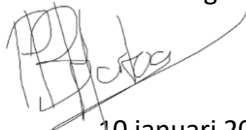
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