

Walther Zimmerli as Biblical Theologian

Lee Irons
January 2001

Walther Zimmerli belongs in any list of the major Old Testament scholars of the twentieth century. Although overshadowed somewhat by Gerhard von Rad, his prolific labors in the areas of biblical scholarship and theological exegesis are unique and valuable in their own right. Although he did not do any extensive exegetical work in the New Testament, Zimmerli always performed his labors as an *Alttestamentler* with an eye toward the establishment of a theological connection with the New testament, and attempted on several occasions throughout his career to sketch an outline of the form that connection ought to take. He was deeply concerned in his work to assist the church in its task of proclaiming Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel, insisting that "the two testaments do not witness to two different gods, but to one single Lord."¹

But how to correlate the witness of the Old Testament and that of the New in a hermeneutically sound manner, without forcing the Old Testament into an interpretive straitjacket which views it merely as a collection of testimonies about Christ, is a thorny problem. Zimmerli wrestles with it by advancing a specific understanding of Yahweh's self-revelation as a progression from promise to fulfillment. The Old Testament does bear witness to Jesus Christ, but not in such a way that we may simply read Christ off the pages of the Hebrew Bible. According to Zimmerli the entire history of God's people is

¹ Zimmerli, "Biblical Theology," *HBT* 4 (1982) 95.

“stretched in an arc of tension from promise to fulfillment.”² The redemptive purposes of God proceed from the promise to the giving of the law, which creates tension with the promise, to the resolution of the law-promise tension in a new work of God that lies beyond the Old Covenant order. The purpose of this paper is to examine Zimmerli’s unique approach to the promise-fulfillment schema, and its role in the formation of a biblical theology of both testaments.

Orientation

Born in Schiers, Switzerland in 1907, Zimmerli studied theology and Semitic languages in the Universities of Zürich, Bern and Göttingen. After lecturing in OT in Göttingen from 1930 to 1933, he became a pastor in the Reformed tradition in Aarburg, Switzerland. In 1935 he moved to the University of Zürich, where he taught OT, history of religion, and oriental languages. In 1951 he returned to Göttingen, where he succeeded von Rad as chair of the OT department. He retired in 1975 and died in Switzerland on December 4, 1983.³

His publications included a number of important articles in the field of OT interpretation, including “Ich bin Yahweh” (“I am Yahweh”),⁴ “Erwägungen zur Gestalt

² Zimmerli, “Promise and Fulfillment,” in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics (EOTH)*, ed. Claus Westermann, (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1971), p. 98.

³ Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel, eds., *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology, 1930-1990* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), pp. 188-89.

⁴ In *Geschichte und Altes Testaments. Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 16. FS Albrecht Alt* (Tübingen: Verlag J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1953), pp. 179-209. Reprinted in *Gottes Offenbarung: Gesammelte Aufsätze I*, Theologische Bücherei 19 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1969), pp. 11-40. ET in *I Am Yahweh*, trans. Douglas W. Stott, ed. W. Brueggemann (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) pp. 1-28.

einer alttestamentlichen Theologie” (“Thoughts on the Shape of an Old Testament Theology”),⁵ and “Zum Problem der ‘Mitte des Alten Testaments’” (“On the Problem of the ‘Center of the Old Testament’”).⁶ He was particularly interested in the eschatological hope as presented in the prophetic books, writing a massive two-volume technical commentary on Ezechiel for the *Biblischer Kommentar* series, considered by many to be his *magnum opus*.⁷ He also undertook a more general examination of “the principle of hope” in *Der Mensch und seine Hoffnung im Alten Testament (Man and His Hope in the Old Testament)*.⁸ As part of his life-long dialogue with von Rad’s theology,⁹ he contributed “Alttestamentliche Traditionsgeschichte und Theologie” (“Old Testament Tradition-History and Theology”) to the von Rad Festschrift in 1971.¹⁰ The capstone of his career was the publication of *Grundriss der Alttestamentlichen Theologie* in 1972, which went through five editions. The second edition was translated into English by David E. Green and published in 1978 as *Old Testament Theology in Outline*.¹¹

As an exegete Zimmerli both embraced and employed the historical critical method. In his commentary on Ezechiel, for example, he employs the full range of critical

⁵ *TLZ* 98 (1973) 81-98.

⁶ *EvT* 35 (1975) 97-118.

⁷ Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969. ET by R. E. Clements and James D. Martin (Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979-83).

⁸ Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968. ET by G. W. Bowden, *Studies in Biblical Theology*, 2nd Series 20 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson Inc., 1968/ London: SCM, 1971).

⁹ He states in his preface to *Old Testament Theology in Outline* that his work “is the outgrowth of constant dialogue, in both agreement and disagreement, with Gerhard von Rad’s *Old Testament Theology*” (p. 11).

¹⁰ *Probleme biblischer Theologie*, ed. Hans Walter Wolff (Munich: Kaiser, 1971), pp. 632-47.

¹¹ *Grundriss der Alttestamentlichen Theologie*, *Theologie Wissenschaft* 3 (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1972, 1975, 1982, 1985). ET: *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978/ Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994).

exegetical methods, especially form-criticism. His writings display a broad grasp of the best OT scholarship of his day, constantly interacting with such heavyweights as Gunkel, Mowinckel, Noth, Alt, and von Rad. However, Zimmerli never allowed his historical investigations to hinder the overriding concern for a theological approach. His exegetical work is never an end in itself but pushes him to make penetrating insights that go beyond a purely historical investigation. Indeed, Zimmerli often enters the realm of theology with a view to hearing the divine address of Yahweh himself. And he does so with an impressive sense of confidence that he is not engaging in mere subjective speculation but unpacking an objective theological message residing in the text itself. Zimmerli consistently maintained a concern not to allow the valid results of the scientific and historical investigation of the Bible to overshadow or undermine the church's preaching task.¹²

Zimmerli's contribution, then, to the field of OT theology must be seen in terms of his exegetical labors. In his *Old Testament Theology in Outline* he was largely engaged in a focused examination of the OT material with a strong emphasis on careful exegesis. Yet in spite of his specialization, Zimmerli also attempted at several points in his career to address more pointedly the issue of the correlation of the testaments in one overarching biblical theology. The first attempt at biblical theology is found in his masterful 1952 essay, "Verheissung und Erfüllung" ("Promise and Fulfillment"), which was printed in English in the journal *Interpretation*, as well as in *Essays on Old Testament*

¹² Zimmerli, "Die historisch-kritische Bibelwissenschaft und die Verkündigungsaufgabe der Kirche," *EvT* 23 (1963) 17-31.

Hermeneutics, edited by Claus Westermann.¹³ Next, Zimmerli expanded on these themes in his 1963 James Sprunt Lectures delivered at Union Theological Seminary (Richmond, Virginia), published in a small volume entitled *Das Gesetz und die Propheten (The Law and the Prophets)*.¹⁴ Finally a year before his death he wrote an essay entitled “Biblical Theology” for *Horizons in Biblical Theology*.¹⁵ The consistency of Zimmerli’s thinking in the area of biblical theology over the span of his career is striking. Not only do these three statements hang together and provide a coherent picture of the theological relationship of the testaments, it is noteworthy how well they harmonize with and illumine his *Old Testament Theology in Outline*.

James Barr criticizes Zimmerli for paying only limited attention to the NT in *Outline*.¹⁶ But *Outline* must be evaluated in light of Zimmerli’s pan-biblical theological reflections in “Promise and Fulfillment,” *The Law and the Prophets*, and “Biblical Theology.” We must evaluate the central theme of the self-revelation of Yahweh as presented in *Outline* in the context of Zimmerli’s other works which attempt more explicitly to develop an approach to the theology of the OT that provides a natural bridge to the claim of the NT that Jesus the Christ is the fulfillment of the OT. In the process we

¹³ “Verheissung und Erfüllung,” *EvT* 12 (1952-53) 34-59. ET: “Promise and Fulfillment,” *Interpretation* 15 (1961) 310-38. Reprinted in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics (EOTH)*, ed. Claus Westermann, (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1971), pp. 89-122. Page numbers in this paper will be those of the *EOTH* reprint.

¹⁴ *Das Gesetz und die Propheten: Zum Verständnis des Alten Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1963). ET: *The Law and the Prophets: A Study of the Meaning of the Old Testament*, trans. R. E. Clements (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965).

¹⁵ *HBT* 4 (1982) 95-130.

¹⁶ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 315.

will gain a more positive and balanced evaluation of Zimmerli's contribution to *biblical* theology.

The Name in Salvation Historical Context

In *Outline* Zimmerli identifies the *mitte* of the OT as the divine self-manifestation in the Name Yahweh.¹⁷ It is not merely the concept of divine revelation that Zimmerli is focusing on here. He also wants us to consider what God reveals about his nature when he reveals his Name. He does so by drawing our attention to the explication of the meaning of the Name in the theophany at the burning bush: “I am who I am” (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה) (Exod. 3:14). Zimmerli interprets this enigmatic phrase by comparison with the syntactically parallel statement: “to whom I am gracious I am gracious, and to whom I show mercy I show mercy” (וְחַנּוּתִי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֶחַן וְרַחֲמֵי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אַרְחָם) (Exod. 33:19). In these statements Yahweh asserts his sovereign freedom. Thus in one sense God is refusing to answer Moses' request to know God's Name, refusing to turn himself into an object to be comprehended by his creatures. God's Name is no talisman which can be superstitiously manipulated for man's own ends. On the other hand, Yahweh's mysterious answer to Moses in itself constitutes a genuine revelation of God's nature, yielding real insight into his character as the sovereign Lord who is free to disclose himself to man whenever and however he pleases, and who indeed wishes to do so in his grace so long as that grace is not presumed upon as a given but received for what it is – grace.

¹⁷ *Outline*, pp. 17-21.

However, it is important that we not oversimplify Zimmerli's insight here as if he were attempting to extract a mere theological idea or timeless principle from the self-revelation of God in history. Zimmerli recognizes that using the phrase "center of the Old Testament" is open to misunderstanding. In fact it can be discarded "if one is able to find a better [phrase] for the undeniable fact that the Old Testament's language of God is determined by Yahweh's self-revelation in word and deed in which the diachronic aspect plays" a decided role.¹⁸ The sovereign freedom of God in his self-revelation is indeed the center of Zimmerli's theology, but not in a simplistic or reductionistic fashion. Included in his programmatic claim is a much broader analysis of the basic plot-line of promise, law, exile, and prophetic hope.

All along this plot-line it is Yahweh who is acting and revealing himself in the freedom of his grace. At each stage the freedom of God is evident as he progressively reveals himself to be the faithful Lord who keeps his promises but who even at the moment he reveals himself as faithful, refuses to put himself at the disposal of man or to allow man confine him within the cage of a definition.¹⁹ Yahweh can be known – but never comprehended – only to the degree that he freely reveals himself. The nature of Yahweh can only be discerned by paying close attention to his sovereign self-disclosures at each stage of salvation history as he makes known to us both his promises and his commandments, his law and his grace, his terrifying word of judgment and his unexpected word of an eschatological fulfillment of the promises beyond judgment. Thus

¹⁸ "Biblical Theology," p. 123. Barr recognizes the diachronic aspect of the Name in Zimmerli's thought: "The name is thus not a static concept ... but connects us directly with the God whose Name resonates throughout the entire Hebrew Bible." *Concept*, p. 314.

throughout the history of salvation we see the dialectic of God's freedom and God's faithfulness.²⁰ The promises cannot fail; but the threat posed by the sinfulness of the human covenant partner is so great, only a free decision of divine grace can bring those promises to their fulfillment.

Zimmerli breaks the essential plot line of the OT into three major divisions, each marked by significant moments of divine address: (1) the giving of the promise to Abraham, including its initial fulfillment in the exodus; (2) the revelation of God's commandments in the law at Sinai; and (3) the ministry of the prophets who spoke both a divine word of judgment on account of Israel's failure under the law, and a divine word of hope for a new eschatological work of grace in fulfillment of the prior promises.

(1) The Giving of the Abrahamic Promise

Soon after discussing the revelation of the Name, Zimmerli turns his attention to "Yahweh, God of the Fathers: The promise."²¹ The content of the promise given to Abraham, and through him to Israel, is not something inward or spiritual but deals with two very material realities: an innumerable number of descendants, and the gift of the land (Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:18-21; 17:1-8). Land and seed are interconnected

¹⁹ *Outline*, pp. 20-21.

²⁰ In a recent dissertation Jochen Motte aptly speaks of a dialectic between God's freedom and faithfulness in Zimmerli's thought. *Biblische Theologie nach Walther Zimmerli*, Europäische Hochschulschriften XXIII/521, XV (Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1995), pp. 98-109.

²¹ *Outline*, pp. 27-32.

because it is in this way that God's elect people will become "a great nation" (גוי גדול) (Gen. 12:2).²²

But in spite of its material form, Yahweh's covenant promise, directed to the future formation of the nation Israel, is interpreted by Zimmerli as a revelation of divine grace. God freely made this promise to Israel's descendants in terms of a hypothetical self-maledictory oath (Gen. 15), thus making it a promise of guaranteed blessing. It therefore differs from the conditional covenant of Deuteronomy and so represents an earlier tradition.²³ Despite the circumcision requirement added later, and the threat to the uncircumcised of excision from the covenant community (Gen. 17:14), the Abrahamic Covenant is fundamentally unconditional. Excision from this covenant is threatened only against the disobedient individual; there is no possibility that the covenant as a whole could be canceled since it is absolutely guaranteed by the divine oath.²⁴

Thus the promise places Israel on a forward movement, anchoring its existence in a divinely interpreted history moving toward a fulfillment. It means "that the history in which Israel is guided by the 'shepherd of Israel' is preceded by a pledge ... that Yahweh is faithful, that he does not forget his promise but does what he promises."²⁵ This contrasts sharply with the mythological accounts of national origins of the nations surrounding Israel. The various civilizations of the Near East conceived of their origins in connection with their mythological creation stories. Israel too has its primal history (Gen. 1-11), but there is no mention of Israel. The ancestor of Israel is not presented as a

²² *Outline*, pp. 28-29.

²³ *Outline*, p. 52.

²⁴ *Outline*, p. 56.

heavenly demigod from the hoary mythical past but as an ordinary man called out of Ur of the Chaldeans, from an actual nation in real history.²⁶ As the promise that sets Israel on its pilgrimage is anchored in history, so the fulfillment must be a real historical fulfillment.

The promise finds its initial historical fulfillment in the exodus. The exodus out of Egypt is an act of sovereign grace and mercy on the part of the God who had committed himself in the patriarchal promises. Because of the prior promise, the events of Israel's redemption from the house of bondage and the subsequent conquest of the land are not mere historical accidents. The saving acts of God are thus pre-interpreted by the word of divine promise, and so become in themselves further media of divine revelation, "words addressed personally to Israel."²⁷

But the exodus event is not only a fulfillment of the promise; it is also a new promise. "Every Old Testament event receives increasingly the character of a fulfillment which in turn presses the question of deeper fulfillment ... in the fulfillment it receives a

²⁵ *Outline*, p. 30.

²⁶ Zimmerli states, "This is not the place to test the historicity of the individual elements that are significant for the prehistory of Israel in the patriarchs. That is the job of a 'history of Israel.'" *Outline*, p. 28.

²⁷ *Outline*, p. 30. Although Zimmerli accepts the idea of revelation *in* history, he warns against the idea of revelation *as* history. History "as a phenomenon in its own right ... as an independent quantity in God's revelation, is alien to the Old Testament" (*ibid.*, p. 25). Zimmerli and Rendtorff had an exchange on this topic in 1961-62. Cf. Rendtorff, "Die Offenbarungsvorstellungen im Alten Israel," in *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, ed. Wolfart Pannenberg (Göttingen, 1961), pp. 21-41. Zimmerli responded in "'Offenbarung' im Alten Testament. Ein Gespräch mit R. Rendtorff," *EvT* 22 (1962) 15-31. Rendtorff replied with "Geschichte und Wort im AT," *EvT* 22 (1962) 621-49. For a general review of the debate see James Robinson, "Revelation as Word and as History," in *Theology as History*, ed. Robinson and Cobb (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 42-62. Cf. also Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 4th edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 115-38.

new character as promise.”²⁸ The exodus-redemption is the initial fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise, but it is not the endpoint, for the exodus merely sets Israel on a pilgrimage with God, who never abandons his people but continues to be with them in all their vicissitudes. God is the “Shepherd of Israel” who guides his people throughout their history, whether in the times of blessing (conquest) or judgment (exile). “This knowledge makes it possible for Israel not to lose its God in all its subsequent ‘departures,’ when it is snatched out of the ‘rest’ to which God brings it in the land.” Israel never ceases to be a people of hope. The initial giving of the promise leads to the expectation of fulfillment, which, though begun at the exodus and the conquest and renewed through the prophets who spoke of a return after the exile, is never completed in the OT itself.²⁹

The giving of the Abrahamic promise thus introduces us to another major aspect of Zimmerli’s biblical theology. Divine self-manifestation in the divine Name is not a sufficiently broad umbrella concept under which to explicate the depth of Zimmerli’s thought. Just as significant is the promise-fulfillment scheme, which structures the entire history of God’s dealings with his people, including the climactic finale in the Christ-event.

(2) The Revelation of Law in the Mosaic Covenant

The promise-fulfillment schema is clearly central to Zimmerli’s construction of the overall shape of biblical theology. But Zimmerli recognizes that the biblical materials are too complex to be reduced to a simple formula. Alongside the gracious promises we

²⁸ “Promise and Fulfillment,” p. 112.

²⁹ *Outline*, p. 24.

also hear another word, the word of divine commandment with its conditions and threats, leading ultimately to the seeming failure of the promises in the exile.

It is to this additional complexity created by the law that Zimmerli devotes his exegetical attention in his 1963 James Sprunt Lectures, *The Law and the Prophets*. Zimmerli takes the NT phrase “the Law and the prophets”³⁰ as his point of departure. His goal is to undertake “as penetratingly as possible, a full theological examination of what the New Testament understands by the key-word ‘law’,” recognizing that this “was a fundamental issue both for the New Testament and for the Reformation.”³¹

The word law (*Gesetz*) immediately evokes certain connotations, especially for those in the Protestant tradition who are trained to think in terms of the Pauline contrast between law and gospel.³² Momentarily setting to one side such assumptions, Zimmerli argues that the Hebrew term תּוֹרָה simply means “teaching, instruction.” The key thought here is that the Pentateuch contains “the normative divine will” for God’s people.³³ Thus the category law need not necessarily be heard as a condemning demand. “It is better, therefore, to put this association aside for the time being.” However, Zimmerli immediately adds an interesting comment which adumbrates his larger concerns: “Any truth it contains will become apparent in the course of our investigation.”³⁴

³⁰ Matt. 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16, 29, 31; 24:27; John 1:45; Acts 24:14; 26:22; 28:23 Rom. 3:21.

³¹ *The Law and the Prophets*, p. 50.

³² Of course Zimmerli wrote this prior to the “new perspective” on Paul advanced by E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and others, who argue that Paul’s view of the law was fundamentally misinterpreted by the Reformation.

³³ *The Law and the Prophets*, p. 12.

³⁴ *The Law and the Prophets*, p. 11.

Appealing to mid-century studies of the Hittite suzerain-vassal treaties, Zimmerli argues that there are two types of covenants in Scripture. There is the covenant of pure gift, as exemplified in the Abrahamic Covenant; and there is the covenant of contract which involves certain conditions, as exemplified in many of the Hittite treaties.³⁵ Zimmerli believes that the Decalogue and Deuteronomy cannot be easily classified in one or the other covenant form. The preamble of the Decalogue, for instance, expressly appeals to the grace of God in bringing his people out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of servitude, as the ground for the stipulations that follow.

Yet it is evident that the law is not a word of grace which upholds the people at any price, but is also a holy fire which threatened the unfaithful human partner.³⁶ The Law is “a commandment which has the power to expel men, or even the whole nation of Israel from the covenant. We may state it in accordance with the New Testament by saying that ‘law’ is related to the curse (Gr. *katara*) (Gal. iii.13).”³⁷ The two elements of grace and curse exist “side by side in a state of tension.”³⁸ Here, for the first time, Zimmerli uses the term “tension” to describe the law-promise dialectic in the OT. This term will be used with increasing frequency, not only in *The Law and the Prophets*, but most especially in *Old Testament Theology in Outline* to which we now turn.

³⁵ Cp. the similar distinction of Meredith G. Kline between “law covenants” and “promise covenants,” distinguished by the identity of the one who swears the covenant oath. Law covenants are conditional, since the oath is taken by the human covenant partner (e.g., Exod. 24). Promise covenants are unilaterally sworn by God alone and involve an absolute guarantee of blessing (e.g., Gen. 15). *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 13-21.

³⁶ *The Law and the Prophets*, pp. 54-55.

³⁷ *The Law and the Prophets*, p. 51.

³⁸ *The Law and the Prophets*, p. 60.

In his analysis of the Decalogue, Zimmerli observes a tension between the proclamation of grace in the preamble (“I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of servitude,” Exod. 20:2) and the threat of judgment in the second word (Exod. 20:5-6). Even within the second word itself this tension is apparent. On the one hand, God’s benevolence far exceeds his wrath, since he “shows lovingkindness to thousands [of generations], to those who love me and keep my commandments.” The “thousands [of generations]” that enjoy God’s lovingkindness (חַסְדֵּי) far exceed the visitation of divine judgment upon “the third and fourth generation” of those who hate him. But on the other hand, in this wrath of Yahweh “there glimmers the sinister possibility that Yahweh’s commandments can have their deadly side.”³⁹

The “deadly side” of the law is brought to the fore with even greater clarity in the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy, which are explicitly conditional upon obedience or disobedience.⁴⁰ This is not to say that everything in the Deuteronomic covenant is conditional, that there is no promise. “The law with its good and wise ordinances is part of the great blessing intended by Yahweh for his people.”⁴¹ Deuteronomy 4:7-8 makes this evident: “What great nation has a god close at hand as Yahweh our God is close to us whenever we call to him? What great nation is there whose statutes and laws are just, as is all this law which I am setting before you today?” At the same time, however, Deuteronomy places before Israel a choice: “I offer you the choice of life or death, blessing or curse: choose life” (Deut. 30:19). It is exegetically impossible to avoid the

³⁹ *Outline*, pp. 110-11.

⁴⁰ *Outline*, pp. 68-69.

⁴¹ *Outline*, p. 112.

conclusion that, according to Deuteronomy, Israel's disobedience to the law could lead to its being dispossessed from the land. And in actual fact, we know that Israel "foundered on the law"⁴² and was carried off into exile as a result. Zimmerli therefore concludes that the law's two aspects of gift and threat, indicative and imperative, are in tension with one another.⁴³

It would not be proper, however, to view these two aspects of the law as merely counterbalancing one another equally. "According to J (Gen. 12:2-3), the history of Israel stands *first* under the sign of an unconditional blessing, which promises to Abraham that he will increase to become a nation and become an agent of blessing for all the families of the earth, and *second* under conditionally stated promises of the immediate blessings of nature."⁴⁴ The unconditional promises to Abraham are prior to the conditional blessings of the law. The faith of Abraham is, according to Paul, prior to the giving of the law and "stands in the sphere of evangelical promise."⁴⁵

On the other hand, it is "equally wrong to present the covenant people of the Old Testament as a people whose faith led them to believe that they were secure in the covenant from any radical threat to life, and who regarded the law solely as a call to show allegiance to Yahweh."⁴⁶ Zimmerli identifies Noth and von Rad as proponents of a gracious construction of the law as nothing more than the call for a response of allegiance

⁴² *Outline*, p. 57.

⁴³ *Outline*, pp. 112-13, 142. Cp. *The Law and the Prophets*, pp. 59-60.

⁴⁴ *Outline*, p. 69.

⁴⁵ "Promise and Fulfillment," p. 118.

⁴⁶ *The Law and the Prophets*, p. 60.

to Yahweh as Redeemer.⁴⁷ But Zimmerli finds their analysis inadequate because it leads to a flattening of the movement of *heilsgeschichte*. It is precisely the presence of a very real threat within the Mosaic Covenant that leads inexorably to the great crisis of the exile. But it is the presence of the even more fundamental promise of grace that impels a forward movement beyond the exile to the hope of an eschatological outpouring of grace that creates Israel anew under a new covenant. And this eschatological hope was revealed in the utter freedom of Yahweh speaking through his servants the prophets.

(3) The Preaching of the Prophets

Zimmerli clearly has a special love for the prophets, for it is here that he sees the “divine address” reaching its most profound point in the whole OT history of revelation. In his preface to *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, Zimmerli states that in his view it is in Old Testament prophecy that the confrontation between Yahweh and his people Israel achieves its “radical depths.”⁴⁸

If the law represents the normative divine will, the prophets stand for the authentic word of God as heard through God’s servants. It was simply a matter of Israel’s historical experience that after they had received the divine instruction in the *torah*, they then began to hear the divine voice speaking with equal authority through the prophets, and with such force that it could not be ignored.

Zimmerli inquires concerning the inner relationship of the law and the prophets, these two supreme manifestations of God’s revelation. Several possibilities exist: (1) the

⁴⁷ *The Law and the Prophets*, pp. 43-50.

⁴⁸ *Outline*, p. 10.

message of law and that of the prophets were identical; (2) the prophets were merely interpreters of the law for a later generation, so that the prophetic word is subordinate to the law; or (3) the prophets brought something new, in effect shattering the existing understanding of the law. It is the third option which most closely reflects Zimmerli's own analysis.

The first thing the prophets do is uphold the claims of the law to demonstrate Israel's complete inability to obey God's will. For example, when Elijah confronted king Ahab with his violation of the Decalogue in the episode with Naboth and his vineyard the prophet functioned as the authorized messenger of God who announces a sentence of death on Ahab: "Thus says the LORD, 'Have you murdered and also taken possession?' And you shall speak to him, saying, 'Thus says the LORD, "In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth the dogs will lick up your blood, even yours'" (1 Kings 21:19). Zimmerli identifies Elijah's role here as "the guardian of the divine law," whose preaching results in the pronouncement of a death-dealing curse arising out of the transgression of the law.⁴⁹

In the time of the great literary prophets, when Israel's legitimacy before God is questioned as the people face the prospect of exile, "the tension implicit in the initially peaceful juxtaposition of gift and commandment is here actualized in the sharpest terms."⁵⁰ In Hosea, for example, we see the same basic message of judgment, "the fearful consequence that the covenant itself will be shattered by this curse." Thus, Hosea is to name his second child **לֹא רַחֲמָהּ** (not pitied), and his third, **לֹא עַמִּי** (not my people)

⁴⁹ *The Law and the Prophets*, pp. 93, 64.

(Hosea 1:6, 9). The formula which defined the covenant relationship in the words “You shall be my people, and I will be your God” is here reversed, signifying the end of the covenant. God now “regards his covenant as canceled, and drives the people away from his presence.”⁵¹

But judgment is not the only message of the prophets. Alongside judgment there is also a surprising, unexpected revelation of Yahweh’s grace in his desire to fulfill his ancient promises. The sovereign election of Israel in the promises and in the exodus is irrevocable and will not fail. God will see his grand redemptive intentions through to their final goal, regardless of the inability of the human covenant partner. Zimmerli began his *Outline* with a study of the self-manifestation of the divine Name as revealing the freedom of God’s grace. Zimmerli now returns full circle. As he concludes his *Outline* with a study of the prophets, he returns to the theme of the freedom of Yahweh. The outstanding characteristic of the exilic prophets is that they represented the spontaneity of Yahweh’s divine address in which he sovereignly reveals himself to be the God of grace who ever remains faithful to his promises, in the very midst of the execution of the covenant curse upon a disobedient and unfaithful people. Thus the message of the prophets confronts us once again with the mystery of the one whose name is “I am who I am.”⁵²

In the prophets we see both the announcement of disaster on a disobedient people, and the reminder that Yahweh remains faithful to his promises. Both aspects of God’s

⁵⁰ *Outline*, p. 183.

⁵¹ *The Law and the Prophets*, p. 72.

⁵² *Outline*, pp. 104, 107.

word are combined without dissolving the tension. If anything the tension escalates as the prediction of disaster becomes an inescapable word that no amount of repentance can prevent. But in the midst of this preaching of judgment, the promise of a new beginning that transcends the original promises is also proclaimed with even greater forcefulness. Thus, the promise made to the patriarchs is not limited to the early history of Israel “but reappears unexpectedly even when Israel has temporarily come to a halt, setting the nation once more on its pilgrimage and upholding it as it travels.”⁵³

Ezekiel, for example, declares that God’s love finally overcomes his holy wrath when he speaks of the recreation of Israel in his impressive vision of the awakening of the dead bones (Ezek. 37:1-14). The people of God were dead, slain by the law. But the same Yahweh who had elected Israel in his sovereign grace and had promised his unchanging love to them, would bring the dry bones to life through a new act of creation. And he would do so solely for the sake of his own faithfulness to his promise, on the basis of his sovereign freedom. Ezekiel makes quite clear that this resurrection of the people of God is not made possible by any latent goodness within Israel. “They are dead on account of their sin, and only God’s faithfulness to himself and his zeal for the honour of his name can effect this new life” (Ezek. 36:16-23).⁵⁴ None of these eschatological promises of renewal flow necessarily from those which go before, but are the free product of Yahweh’s gracious intentions as one who has committed himself to his promises.

⁵³ *Outline*, p. 31.

⁵⁴ *The Law and the Prophets*, pp. 82-83.

At this point Zimmerli appeals to the concept of “prophetic excess.”⁵⁵ These promises of a new beginning after the exile far surpass the reality of their fulfillment after the exile. The post-exilic period saw the restoration and rebirth of Israel, albeit in a politically insignificant form. As a result, the strain of the glorious promises and their apparent lack of fulfillment becomes so great that it calls Israel to hope for a greater fulfillment yet to come. There is a great unrealized “excess” that demands an eschatologically transcendent fulfillment in the future. Israel becomes a people waiting for the fullness of their life in an as-yet future coming of God to bring his promises to their climactic expression. It is only when we turn to the pages of the New Testament that we find the complete resolution to these tensions and expectations: on the cross the Messiah of Israel submitted to the curse of the law. By thus taking the curse of the law upon himself Jesus brought about the ultimate fulfillment of the promises, and by his resurrection the prophetic hope of a new creation was set in motion.⁵⁶

Thus, the whole history of Israel is a forward movement that points beyond itself to a final fulfillment in Christ. “When we survey the entire Old Testament, we find ourselves involved in a great history of movement from promise toward fulfillment. It flows like a large brook – here rushing swiftly, there apparently coming to rest in a quiet backwater, and yet moving forward as a whole toward a distant goal which lies beyond itself.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Outline*, pp. 238-40.

⁵⁶ *The Law and the Prophets*, pp. 93-94.

⁵⁷ “Promise and Fulfillment,” pp. 111-12.

Conclusion

Zimmerli's identification of the vertical I-thou encounter in the self-revelation of Yahweh as the *mitte* of the OT is seriously misunderstood if it is divorced from the horizontal diachronic activity of Yahweh from promise to fulfillment. The divine address as found in the OT does not come to man with a morality or a theology, but an event, or rather a series of events of both blessing and judgment, grace and demand, indicative and imperative. The covenant is not static but creates a forward movement leading to a crisis and a new revelation of grace. The tension is ultimately resolved only in the ultimate, eschatological fulfillment of the promises in the cross and resurrection of the Messiah.

In order to capture the forward movement of redemptive history, however, it is essential that we pay close attention to what Zimmerli has to say about the complexity and tension introduced by the conditional nature of the law, the escalation of that conditionality in the prophetic threat of judgment, and the actualization of that threat in the exile. Only when the tension this creates with the prior promise of grace is felt in full force will we be able to appreciate the prophetic renewal of the promise pointing to a final fulfillment in Christ in whom alone the law-promise tension is ultimately resolved.

The current trend in OT theology is to interpret the giving of the law as merely another development in the revelation of God's gracious promise, defining the obedient response that the Redeemer demands of the redeemed. But this gracious construction does not do justice to the reality of the threat posed by the law. The genuine nature of the threat is demonstrated by the historical reality of the exile. It is impossible to provide a satisfying theological interpretation of the exile solely in terms of the gracious

commitment of God to his covenant people. Zimmerli's analysis, on the other hand, explains the exile, and the prophetic ministry that accompanied and interpreted the exile, in a way that allows the conditional nature of the Mosaic Covenant to have its full force, while at the same time safeguarding the fundamentally gracious nature of Yahweh's covenant self-revelation to Israel.

But the advantages of Zimmerli's interpretation of the law-promise tension pale in comparison with the payoff for the development of a biblical theology encompassing both testaments. Ironically, his recognition of the genuine threat posed by the law, and his refusal to simplify the OT material concerning the law in a misguided Christian concern to safeguard the graciousness of the Old Covenant, are the very things that made possible Zimmerli's employment of the promise-fulfillment schema to build a natural bridge to the NT that fits internally with the OT itself. Only by means of such careful analysis of the theological significance of the law on its own terms, can a seamless connection be established with the NT that arises from an unconstrained, internal analysis of the OT material. It goes against the grain of our Christian presuppositions to interpret any element of the OT revelation in a way that creates tension with the principles of grace and promise. But it is only when we go against that grain and see the elements of threat, conditionality, and curse for what they are in the OT, that we are in a position to maintain that the theology of the OT coheres perfectly with the gospel of Christ.

With the rise of historical awareness since the Enlightenment, the historical and linguistic gulf that separates the two testaments has become more pronounced, so that we have become largely unaccustomed to theological discourse which is nurtured by the

word of both testaments. But Zimmerli believed that such discourse is absolutely necessary if the church is to faithfully bear witness to Jesus as the Messiah whose death and resurrection constitute the fulfillment of the Old Covenant. Zimmerli has laid down some helpful road marks to guide us in this unaccustomed path by drawing attention to the fundamental structure of biblical theology in terms of the promise-fulfillment schema. He would be the first to acknowledge that his work was only a beginning, but he has nevertheless cleared some passable roads along which the exploration of a biblical theology will have to move.

Bibliography

- Baker, David L. *Two Testaments, One Bible: A Study of the Theological Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*. Revised Edition. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991.
- Barr, James. *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.
- Bultmann, C. Review of *Biblische Theologie nach Walther Zimmerli* by Jochen Motte. *ZAW* 109 (1997) 310-11.
- Goldingay, John. *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.
- Hasel, Gerhard. *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*. Fourth Edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Kline, Meredith G. *By Oath Consigned*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968.
- Martens, Elmer A. *Old Testament Theology*. IBR Bibliographies 13. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997.
- Motte, Jochen. *Biblische Theologie nach Walther Zimmerli. Darstellung und Würdigung der alttestamentlichen Theologie Walther Zimmerli und der sich aus ihr ergebenden Perspektive zum Neuen Testament in systematisch-theologischer Sicht*. Europäische Hochschulschriften XXIII/521, XV. Dissertation. Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1995.
- Ollenburger, Ben C., Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel, eds. *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology, 1930-1990*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992.
- Zimmerli, Walther. "Alttestamentliche Traditionsgeschichte und Theologie." Pp. 632-47 in *Probleme biblischer Theologie (FS von Rad)*. Ed. Hans Walter Wolff. Munich: Kaiser, 1971.
- _____. "Biblical Theology." *HBT* 4 (1982) 95-130.
- _____. *Das Gesetz und die Propheten: Zum Verständnis des Alten Testaments*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1963. ET: *The Law and the Prophets: A Study of the Meaning of the Old Testament*. Trans. R. E. Clements. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965.

- _____. *Der Mensch und seine Hoffnung im Alten Testament*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968. ET: *Man and His Hope in the Old Testament*. Trans. G. W. Bowden. Studies in Biblical Theology, 2nd Series 20. Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson Inc., 1968/ London: SCM, 1971.
- _____. "Die historisch-kritische Bibelwissenschaft und die Verkündigungsaufgabe der Kirche." *EvT* 23 (1963) 17-31.
- _____. "Erwägungen zur Gestalt einer alttestamentlichen Theologie." *TLZ* 98 (1973) 81-98.
- _____. *Ezechiel*. 2 vols. Biblischer Kommentar: AT 13. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969. ET: *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*. 2 vols. Trans. R. E. Clements and James D. Martin. Ed. Frank M. Cross, Klaus Baltzer, Leonard J. Greenspoon, and Paul D. Hanson. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979-83.
- _____. *Grundriss der Alttestamentlichen Theologie*. Theologie Wissenschaft 3. Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1972, 1975, 1982, 1985. ET: *Old Testament Theology in Outline*. Trans. David E. Green. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978/ Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994.
- _____. *I Am Yahweh*. Trans. Douglas W. Stott. Ed. W. Brueggemann. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.
- _____. "Ich bin Yahwe." Pp. 179-209 in *Geschichte und Altes Testaments. Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 16 (FS Albrecht Alt)*. Tübingen: Verlag J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1953. Reprinted in *Gottes Offenbarung: Gesammelte Aufsätze I*, pp. 11-40. Theologische Bücherei 19. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1969. ET in *I Am Yahweh* (see above).
- _____. "Ort und Grenze der Weisheit im Rahmen der alttestamentlichen Theologie." Pp. 121-37 in *Les sagesses du Proche-Orient ancien: Colloque de Strasbourg 17-19 mai 1962*. Centre d'Études supérieures spécialisé d'Histoire des Religions de Strasbourg. Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1963. ET: "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology." *SJT* 17 (1964) 146-58.
- _____. "Verheissung und Erfüllung." *EvT* 12 (1952-53) 34-59. ET: "Promise and Fulfillment." *Interpretation* 15 (1961) 310-38. Reprinted in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, pp. 89-122. Ed. Claus Westermann. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1971.