Old Testament theology, since its recognition as a specific discipline, has been anything but a stable field. One may liken it in many respects to the floating islands of C.S. Lewis’ *Perelandra*. The waves of new scholarship go up and down and back and forth, and the ground shifts in response, making it difficult to stand in place, let alone make any progress. Nevertheless, there has been progress in this shifting discipline, and it is the intention of Ben Ollenburger in this work to trace the foundations of this discipline, its changes up to the present, and explore where it may go in the future. Ollenburger, himself a contributor to the book with section introductions and an introductory chapter on the discipline up to 1933, is Professor of Biblical Theology at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.

**Summary**

Ollenburger notes in his introduction that since the first edition in 1990, the discipline of Old Testament theology, contrary to many expectations, has exploded with new literature, both articles and monographs (xi). In light of the rapid change since that time, he and the editors of the series not only recognized the need for a revised edition, but realized that such a revision would require significant changes. Consequently, Ollenburger has added nine new selections to this edition, while abridging or removing essays from the first edition on account of space limitations (xi-xii).

Ollenburger structures this work into five sections that roughly follow an historical order. Part One focuses on the background of the discipline. After a survey of the discipline up to 1933, Ollenburger includes works from Otto Eissfeldt (12-20) and Walther Eichrodt (21-32). These
two essays mark what Ollenburger sees as the foundation of Old Testament theology as its own discipline, though he traces the beginnings of this movement back to Johann Gabler’s address in 1787.

In Part Two, Ollenburger traces the discipline from Eichrodt to Gerhard von Rad. Inserted between essays from both of these scholars are Theodorus Vriezen and G.E. Wright. Eichrodt’s essay, drawn from a larger discussion on the topic in his *Old Testament Theology*, focuses on covenant as the central theme in the Old Testament. He finds covenant such a dominant theme because it helps explain his “double-aspect,” the two sides of Old Testament theology that focus on the one hand on a comparative study of religions and on the other hand on the Old Testament’s forward trajectory into the New Testament. Vriezen’s essay builds upon this idea of a central theme in Old Testament theology, but unlike Eichrodt, Vriezen sees the knowledge of God, understood as “the immediate communion between the Holy God and weak, sinful man,” as the “underlying idea of the whole of the Biblical testimony” (64). Like Eichrodt, however, he comes to this conclusion because he believes this basic idea is found in the New Testament (64). Wright advances the discussion with his proposal of theology as recital and his assertion that the basic substance of biblical theology is that “God in Christ has completed the history of Israel” (79). The excerpts from von Rad’s *Old Testament Theology* deal with some of his methodological presuppositions, primarily his distinction between the history and kerygma.

In Part Three, Ollenburger provides selections from the state of the discipline between von Rad and Brevard Childs. Ollenburger’s introduction to this section speaks of a “methodological impasse” that followed von Rad (117). He suggests that there were numerous different approaches that scholars used to avoid and move beyond this impasse. Ollenburger thus attempts to provide selections from many of these different perspectives. For each selection,
Ollenburger has chosen a piece that focuses on that scholar’s primary contribution to Old Testament theology, namely their identification of the central theme of the Old Testament. For Zimmerli, the central focus is that Yahweh was “not the God of Israel from the beginning of the world” (123), but once Yahweh covenants with Israel one can focus upon the faith of Israel in Yahweh who has made himself known. John McKenzie focuses his attention regarding the faith of Israel on the cult (140-155). Ronald Clements speaks of law and promise (156-173), whereby law is “the comprehensive list of instructions and stipulations by which Israel’s covenant with God is controlled” (165) and promise is the prophetic hope that “recognises the tensions that have arisen within this covenant relationship and the fact that Israel stands poised between the election of God, with all the promises that this entails of land, national life, and the tasks of bringing blessing to the nations, and its fulfillment” (173). Walter Kaiser likewise speaks of promise as the center of Old Testament theology (174-190). Samuel Terrien focuses on presence in absence. Terrien asserts that it was God hiding His face from Israel “which disclosed to them not only the meaning of their existence but also the intrinsic quality of divinity” (202). In Claus Westermann’s essay, he argues that “God’s acts in saving and judging his people belong closely together” (212). Finally, Elmer Martens proposes that Yahweh’s gift of the land to Israel demanded a specific lifestyle (234-241).

Part Four begins with the work of Brevard Childs and moves into “new pluralism.” Childs’s emphasis is on canon and demonstrates a significant shift in Old Testament studies in general and Old Testament theology in particular. Though Ollenburger notes how Old Testament theology became increasingly diverse during this period, the selections that follow demonstrate at least one common, underlying impulse: concern for the text of Scripture. Despite the common concern for the text of Scripture as the primary object of study in Old Testament theology, little
else is similar. Rolf Knierim discusses cosmos and history and concludes that the underlying message of the Old Testament is the universal reign of Yahweh in justice and righteousness (268-285). Horst Dietrich Preuss agrees with many of the other scholars that there is a center to Old Testament theology, but he identifies and critiques numerous other proposals before presenting his own. Preuss proposes that the center of Old Testament theology is the election of Israel and the centrality of the Exodus event in that election (295-303). Walter Brueggemann suggests that the obvious primary subject of the Old Testament is God, but it is rather through Israel’s testimony that one comes to know this God, so it is their testimony that provides the starting point for Old Testament theology (304-322). Paul House gives some basic principles for examining Old Testament theology (324-329) before applying them to the book of Ruth (330-338). Bernhard Anderson, spending much of his time discussing the Psalms, identifies the royal covenant as particularly significant because the New Testament picks up on “the theological overtones of this language of God’s dominion, specifically God’s coming to the temple of Zion with saving power” (357). In the final essay of Part Four, Erhard Gerstenberger notes how there are tensions and differences in theologies, even though each recognizes the same God (365-373).

In Part Five, Ollenburger suggests that “Old Testament theology has become too diverse in its aims, its conceptions of the material with which it works, its methods and contexts, assumptions and convictions, participants and publics to permit confident predictions about the shape of its future” (380). He then provides selections from Hartmut Gese, Phyllis Tribble, Jon Levenson, John Sailhamer, Gunther Wittenberg, James Barr, R.W.L. Moberly, and Mark Brett that demonstrate this diversity.

Ollenburger concludes the work with Gabler’s oration from 1787, the point from which Ollenburger traces his history of the discipline in Part One.
Critical Evaluation

Ollenburger’s work is a valuable research tool and can boast of numerous strengths. Perhaps the most obvious strength is the scope of the work. The volume of material published in recent years, in addition to the definitive works of Eichrodt and von Rad, makes it exceedingly difficult to find manageable selections that convey the various schools and branches of the discipline in the present. Nevertheless, Ollenburger has done an exceptional job of providing the reader with these various strands. For example, in Parts Three and Four, Ollenburger includes numerous selections from various scholars who argue for the center of Old Testament theology. Rather than drawing from a single tradition, however, Ollenburger includes the likes of Kaiser, Westermann, and Brueggemann. While each of these scholars is a prolific contributor to Old Testament studies, they come from radically different methodologies and presuppositions. These methodologies and presuppositions are not lost to the reader either, since Ollenburger includes two parts for most of the selections in the book. The first part of each selection tends to focus on methodological and/or hermeneutical concerns, while the second part is the application to Old Testament theology. In giving the reader this background, he or she is aware not only of how the author may have come to his or her conclusions, but also how these radically different methodologies leading to different conclusions have all made a significant contribution to the field. Without these clear methodological issues or a diverse selection of authors, the reader would fail to understand much of the background that led to these different strands at the present.

Ollenburger’s introductions to each chapter are also a strength of the book. On account of his decision to include such different selections, each part would seem a random pile of pages without his direction in the introductions. Each of the introductions sets the framework for the section to follow. For example, in the introduction to Part Five (377-380), Ollenburger suggests
that “the range of approaches and proposals, including mutually incompatible ones, was never
greater than the present” (377). He then provides three key reasons for this diversity. First, the
number of options available for studying Old Testament theology has increased greatly. Second,
the resources outside of biblical studies now available to the Old Testament theologian have not
only increased, but the use of them has become more accepted. Finally, he suggests that the
wider range of participants in the discussion has accelerated the diversity of the discipline (377-
378). At the end of the introduction, he states that this diversity has become too great “to permit
certain predictions about the shape of its future” (380). These comments help set the
framework for the selections that follow in several ways. First, one is prepared to find quite
different positions, even mutually incompatible ones, in the pages to follow. This will alert the
reader to the need to read with care and a critical mind in order to discern the presuppositions,
methodologies, and conclusions of each selection. Second, the reader does not expect to find any
one method that will redefine the way the discipline goes in the future. Third, one expects that
each of the essays will make a unique contribution to the field to warrant their inclusion. In such
a diverse and prolific field, any work selected for this brief section would likely have found
significant support from the scholarly community to stand out among the other options. In this
way, the reader is prepared for the transition one must make from Trible to Sailhamer to Barr.

Though the scope of the work and the introductions to each section are strengths of the
book, its organization is a weakness. Ollenburger states in the foreword that the work will follow
a chronological sequence. As the intention of the book is to trace the history of the discipline up
to the present, this would seem a good decision. However, Ollenburger is unsuccessful in the
execution of this text. One reason for this struggle is Ollenburger’s opening chapter that is meant
to trace the discipline up to 1933. Ollenburger chooses to begin with Gabler’s address in 1787.
While this may be the date when biblical theology was “born,” there is nothing to suggest what led Gabler to make such a distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology. Additionally, while providing an adequate discussion on the philosophical influences, the salvation historical approaches, and the history-of-religions school, Ollenburger does not adequately show the causal connection between the movements. While his discussion of each issue individually is well done, the lack of connection leaves the reader confused as to how these things would come about at all. This lack of causal connection is evident elsewhere in the book as well. For example, Parts Three and Four are largely driven by selections of various scholars on what they believe to be the center of Old Testament theology. However, as Gerhard Hasel has demonstrated in his work, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, there are many who reject the notion of a “center” in Old Testament theology. Ollenburger’s focus on chronology is perhaps to blame, but his omission of competing viewpoints in this respect is problematic. He does little to show how the history-of-religions school led to these concerns for the center of Old Testament theology. He describes the impasse after von Rad and the diverse positions that arose to move past this impasse (117-119), but he never defends why each of the selections to follow seems to accept the methodological assumption of a center in Old Testament theology. Once again, there is a lack of causal connection; though he explains each period well, there is still some confusion as to what led to these changes.

Another weakness of Ollenburger’s work is the lack of a consistent evaluative voice. That is, Ollenburger provides little commentary on the good and bad changes in the discipline over time. The only time he explicitly enters the discussion as an evaluator of the discipline is when he says that one can have no confidence in the shape of its future, but this inability to control it “may be the best guarantee of its future” (380). However, Ollenburger never goes on to explain
what he means by this, a silence all too common in this work. This silence is all the more audible when the work ends with Brett’s essay (481-494) and an appendix including Gabler’s address (498-506), both of which are more than one hundred pages after Ollenburger’s final statement in the book. The reader thus has no word from the editor in the last quarter of the book. The failure to provide a consistent message of the editor in this volume stands in stark contrast to another volume in the series, *Israel’s Past in Present Research* by V. Philips Long, which begins and ends with the editor’s comments and hopes for the future. It must be noted that the first edition of Ollenburger’s work appeared nearly a decade before Long’s work. However, the revised edition appeared five years after Long’s work, so it is disappointing that Ollenburger did not see fit to follow Long’s model. Consequently, while the material in the book is helpful, it lacks a consistent message throughout.

**Conclusion**

Though these weaknesses limit some of the value of the work, it still remains an excellent volume for surveying the past and present of Old Testament theology. A more consistent message from the editor and a better analysis of the causes that led to new movements would help unify the work, but the excellent choice of selections, including both methodology and theology, make the individual selections extremely valuable for the reader who is seeking a good introduction to the writings of others. If one is seeking a work that traces the history of the discipline and the basic issues involved, however, then one would be better off reading Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*. 