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# Introduction to the Old Testament: a liberation perspective

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A subsequent edition might address the following typos: “capitol” (238), “antineighborly”(242), “antihuman” (353), “the distinctions ... is” (275) and the all too familiar, tautologous phrase “common consensus” (1, 3x). In the Index on Names (431-434): the page location for citation of poet “Yeats” should be page 283; Scott, James M.” should follow “Scott, J(ames) C.” and the names cited corrected to Moberly, R.W.L.,” “Soulen, R. Kendall” (433) and “Wybrow, Cameron” (434). Page 244 should be added to the page citations given for both Luther and Calvin (432). Also “Hill, John, 179” and “Herodotus, 179” should be added to page 432, as well as “Rosenberg, David, xii” to p.433.

In short, the book is a bold attempt to decipher the theological, ideological code underlying the instruction, prophecy, wisdom, narrative, poetry, and apocalyptic of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. One wonders to what degree this particular publication, a milestone in a lifetime of biblical study, if methodologically insightful and correct, does not ultimately undermine, if not negate, the validity of most, if not all, of Brueggemann’s previous historical-critical published work.

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## **Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective**

Anthony R. Ceresko

Revised and updated edition. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001

384 pages, \$25.00 Softcover

The first *Introduction* (1992) grew out of the author’s experience of teaching an Old Testament survey course at St. Michael’s College in Toronto. The goal was to make available to a larger audience the results of Norman K. Gottwald’s work on the origins and religion of ancient Israel. This updated edition follows upon almost nine more years of teaching OT at St. Peter’s Pontifical Institute, Bangalore, India. A.R. Ceresko, O.S.F.S, now teaches at the Divine Word Seminary in Tagaytay City, Philippines.

The book is straightforward, engaging, very readable, and well-structured. There are 26 chapters arranged under seven major units: Introduction, the Pentateuch, the Rise of Israel in Canaan, the Period of the Monarchy, Prophecy in the Pre-exilic Period, the Exile and the Restoration, and the Writings. Individual chapters are subdivided with paragraph headings and closing review questions. There is also a general index, scripture index, and chapter-specific bibliographies.

As would be expected from an Orbis publication the OT is expounded from a liberation point of view. The initial chapters underscore the importance of the historical-critical method and the use of sociological methods to reconstruct Israel's origins and life. Two key liberation principles are set forth and explained: (1) the hermeneutical privilege of the poor; and (2) the hermeneutic of suspicion. The hermeneutical privilege of the poor counsels us to read the Bible and its history through the eyes of the poor and powerless. The hermeneutic of suspicion urges us to recognize the bias implicit in a given point of view and the relative importance given to certain individuals and events in contrast to other individuals, persons, and events. Such a method and insight for reading and understanding the OT suggests that those in the so-called First World (developed, capitalist, industrialized nations) are in a position to learn something from their brothers and sisters in Latin America and in other places in the Third World.

The book is remarkable for its clear and succinct presentation of data. The publication would serve well for a user-friendly introduction to the basics of OT content and liberation theology as applied to the OT, at the college or beginning seminary level. If the book has a major fault it is the degree to which its content and claims are out of date, even such debatable geopolitical terms as First and Third worlds. For a North American context one might more fittingly ask people to learn something similar from their even closer brothers and sisters in the "Fourth World," a term first used in 1974 by Shuswap Chief George Manuel to characterize the more widely unknown cultural "nations" of indigenous peoples living both within and across national and international boundaries.

First of all, the book's commitment to the historical-critical method, indeed part and parcel of the liberation perspective itself, is simply not where so much of contemporary OT study is. Current scholarship lives much more under a hermeneutic of historical

suspicion and has grave doubts as to the historicity of almost all chronicled events prior to the exile. Did Abraham, Moses, David, or Solomon even exist as recounted? Did the exodus, conquest, or monarchy happen exactly as recorded? Today's approach is more literary, ideological, and post-modern than historical, confessional, and modernist! Thus chapters 5 and 6 on the "documentary hypothesis" and the details about four narrative sources are in need of serious rewriting to reflect increased recognition of exilic and post-exilic Priestly and Deuteronomic redactional activity. Likewise, the so-called models for Israel's origins or "conquest" of Canaan have increased in number beyond the familiar three (actual conquest; gradual immigration; and Mendenhall/Gottwald's "social revolt") to four (the gradual emergence model). It is widely recognized today that the revolt theory is an anachronism. Old world cultures, even today, simply have much more respect for inherited authority and related institutions than today's modern predilections. While the revolt model may appear compatible with some of the epigraphical archaeological evidence, it has no support whatsoever in the biblical text. It is clearly the product of contemporary socialist and neo-Marxist idealism and wishful thinking than ancient world historical reality.

The liberation perspective championed by the book is very helpful. Such a perspective implies that theology does not exist for its own sake but for its liberating praxis; it is preoccupied with the practical issues of justice and poverty, as distinct from the more theoretical questions of belief or truth. The author rightly attempts to read between the lines to uncover potential social and political dimensions pro and con. This perspective assists us even today to address our contemporary human rationalizations and self-justifications for continued inaction for what they are, helping us today to unmask our secret, subtle, hidden sins as a society, moving us, as Christians, hopefully beyond a theology of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Article of the Creed toward a totalizing theology and eschatology involving all three Articles.

Conversely, the liberation perspective as a whole has shortcomings. It is observed that liberation theology tends to obscure any real distinction between theology and witness, as its perspective is not so much theology as a method of ideology critique. This perspective is predisposed to rationalize the position of the poor with no sensitivity whatsoever for the situation or contribution of the rich

and influential. To claim, as the book does, that YHWH has taken sides, is to ignore the abundant biblical counterclaims of God's impartiality (Deut 10:17; 2 Chr 19:7; Job 34:19; Jonah 4:1-11; Jer 9:25-26; Matt 5:45,48; Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11; 10:12; Gal 2:6; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; 1 Pet 1:17). The adoption of an OT-like Marxist class-struggle hypothesis remains in actuality somewhat vulnerable and suspect in that social and political experience repeatedly demonstrates that so-called upper and lower classes, however defined, almost never act as unified bodies, with divisive issues regularly cutting across class lines to embrace individuals who, judging from the rhetoric alone, frequently act at variance with their own material self-interest. The liberation perspective is, equally, narrowly selective and provincial in its understanding of the total human situation, as it does not get at the more subversive forms of human bondage or self-interest within *all* groups and individuals. What is more, the liberation perspective does not affirm the ultimate importance of the divine/human relationship or the final dimension of religious faith as *trust* and *confidence* in God.

No relationship ever exists without some dimension of power being present. The key question is how shall such attendant power be implemented. Our world faces, at the very least, two basic conceptions of power: unilateral and relational power. Unilateral power is a concept of power where all around are utilized, subjugated, controlled, and exploited for self-gain and self-promotion. Its motto: "I have come to be served." Its model: Everyone strives to become first over all. By contrast, relational power is a concept of power where the most powerful engender relationships of enhancement and beneficial sharing with all living around, over, and under. Its motto: "I have come to serve." Its model: The first becomes last. To the degree that the liberation perspective espoused in this book fosters a new version of unilateral power, seeking simply to replace one unilateral head with another, it is short-sighted and reprehensible. To the degree that the same liberation perspective proclaims and actualizes a new and viable vision of relational power, it remains life-affirming and worthy of continued publication and proclamation, even as an Introduction to the OT.

This *Introduction* still needs further updating and revision, reworking that reflects the latest findings in biblical research and some refinement in its methodology. All theology is political, even if

one does not speak explicitly in political terms. The vital question is, Whose politics and ideology gets advanced – ours or God’s? A new third edition might also render the transcription of Hebrew words into their English equivalents more precisely. Kudos to the editor: I noted only two typos: “Genesis 12-60” (p. 54) and “Ancient Near East” (pp. 21ff.).

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## **Introducing the Old Testament**

Richard J. Coggins

The Oxford Bible Series, edited by P.R. Ackroyd and G.N. Stanton.  
 New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990; second revised  
 edition, May 2001

165/176 pages, \$35.00 Softcover

Reverend Richard Coggins is now retired and was formerly Senior Lecturer in Old Testament Studies at King’s College London. In all, there are nine volumes published so far in the Oxford Bible Series. Two of the volumes provide general orientation, one is devoted to the cultural and historical context of the Old Testament, the second deals with the New Testament, treating the origins of Christianity. Four other volumes deal with the main literatures of the Old Testament: narrative, prophecy, poetry/psalmody, and wisdom/law. Two New Testament volumes discuss Paul and Pauline Christianity and the variety and unity of New Testament thought. The nature of biblical interpretation is given over to the ninth and last volume in the series.

This present work is the first one cited above, an introduction to the environment of the Old Testament. Like the other volumes in the series this short book is designed to stand on its own, providing a helpful background for subsequent study. The format of chapters is a series of questions. What is the Old Testament? What Does It Mean? Did It All Happen? What Does Archeology Contribute? What Kind of Society Was Israel? What Is Man? The Old Testament as Liberation? (The 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. of 176 pages divides the 1990 chapter into two