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# The Old Testament: a brief introduction

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depicting King Jehu of Israel bowing before the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (742 B.C.E), is curiously never mentioned in the text of the book, although this oversight most probably is the fault of the cover and book designer, not the author. A second edition might add such detail on pages 269-270 or p. 29.

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### **The Old Testament: A Brief Introduction**

Christoph Levin

Translated by Margaret Kohl. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001

191 pages, \$22.95 Hardcover

The author, Christoph Levin, is currently Professor of Old Testament in the Faculty of Protestant Theology at Ludwig-Maximilians University at Munich and is a minister in the Moravian Church. As the title implies, this crisp introduction, originally published in German in 2001, runs only 176 pages of expository text in English translation.

The reader is quickly brought up to speed on today's critical approach to Old Testament. "At present, Old Testament scholarship is in the process of striking out in a new direction.... It is becoming increasingly clear that ancient Hebrew literature has to be read as part of Ancient (*sic*) Near Eastern culture and religion.... The literary genres and themes we find in the Old Testament, its social background – even ancient Israel's concept of God – are no longer without analogy.... On the other hand, analytical exegesis, especially as it is treated in German-language research, is penetrating ever more deeply into the Old Testament text, and shows that its emergence is for the most part the outcome of a long process of literary self-interpretation, the presuppositions for which can no longer be looked for in the monarchies of Israel and Judah, but actually belong to the postexilic Judaism of the Second Temple period" (1-2). Thus primal events such as the patriarchal stories, the exodus, the conquest, and

theological conflict in Canaan are much less assured in the light of present internal literary analysis, local archaeological findings, and comparable ancient Near Eastern resources.

After its opening question, “Why Read the Old Testament?”, its mini-20 chapters unfold along specific developmental lines. As a prolegomenon, chs. 1-3 discuss the Old Testament as text, canon, and scripture passed down by post-exilic Judaism. Ch. 4 details the range of the scriptural remnants from ancient Israel: wisdom books, annals and historiography, law books, cultic lyrics, and priestly and prophetic materials. The crucial steps then begin.

Ch. 5 deals with the two great redactions of the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E, the Yahwist (the J redactor supposedly was in the circle around King Jehoiachin!) and the Deuteronomistic histories. The Yahwistic history, the oldest of Judaism’s origins, according to this author, narrates an epic story of and for people living in exile. Ch. 9 unfolds the structure and patterns of the Priestly Source (P), while ch.10 heralds the fixation of the Torah in a redaction that forged a single Pentateuchal salvation history out of the two earlier accounts (J & P). For the author, as the Priestly Source presupposes the Ezekiel tradition, it cannot have originated before the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. The text which came into being through the amalgamation of the Yahwist’s history and the Priestly source was still far from being identical with the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy as possessed today. By estimation Levin judges the portion of the text added afterward secondarily to be probably greater than the two former sources put together. The legal material likewise is viewed to be more recent vintage, although it remains nearly impossible, in Levin’s eyes, to know whether or not such additions had already been part of the earlier independent P source tradition. The most extensive text, however, claimed to be added later is Deuteronomy.

Ch. 7 sees in the prophet Jeremiah the real beginnings of Old Testament theology. The “earliest” Book of Jeremiah constitutes the basic text for a wider developing tradition in which fresh attempts were repeatedly made to come to terms with Israel’s harsh exilic fate. The promise of a new covenant, which did not harbor seed for its own ingrained failure, had to be a divine unilateral act of forgiving love, which had every hope of success, as it was founded on God’s side alone. The Book of Jeremiah thus was reworked in such a way that

previous prophecies of salvation were made to concern not the people of Jerusalem, but the people in exile or recent returnees. According to Levin, however, it is the Book of Ezekiel (ch. 8) that is the most programmatic text favoring Babylonian Jews and their right to return home from exile as opposed to those Judeans who remained behind in Palestine.

Chs.11 and 12 are devoted to the growth and expansion of primary and original Isaianic material into three Isaiahs (1-39, 40-55, 56-66). Herein there is a clear movement from disaster (to Israel) to disaster (for the nations) to Israel's final salvation. Winding things down, chs. 14-18 treat the Chronicler's history, Psalms, the wisdom literature, the Megilloth, and the Book of Daniel. The penultimate, next chapter informs the reader about the fixing of the text and the closing of the canon.

The style of the book and its movement of thought is rather sketchy and short-circuited. One would wish the author supplied more detail on the reasons for the positions taken. On the whole, the book is thus rife with numerous debatable assumptions. One such item occurs in ch. 7 in the discussion of the theological significance of the Law. The author posits two ways in which God's will was codified: (1) new divine law was drawn up on the basis of a prophetic proclamation; and (2) already existing law was annotated from the standpoint of the relationship to God. The author suggests both of these ways were followed, at about the same time. An example of the outcome of the first would be the Decalogue; an example of the second way would be the Book of Deuteronomy, a collection worked over from the perspective of covenant theology. The initial claim is debatable, as one might argue that the prophet Hosea or Amos did not create the command of God but only recognized its prior standing and validity. Which came first, the commandment or the prophet? Furthermore, the relationship of the Decalogue in Exodus 20 to Deuteronomy 5 deserves further scrutiny. Is the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5 "a late doublet of Exodus 20," or the other way around? Scholars have observed for some time that Exodus 20:1-17 is easily removed without any loss to its present context, suggesting that Deuteronomy 5 has been forwarded for inclusion at Sinai in an effort to regain and sustain its former prominence once Deuteronomy was attached later to the Tetrateuch. The Book of Exodus seems subtextually perfectly happy to live with its own "Decalogue," the

primal apodictic commands regarding YHWH in Exodus 20:23-26 + 23:10-19 and repeated in Exodus 34:17-26, in connection with the Golden Calf incident. To be sure, in agreement with the author, the Book of Deuteronomy does now give every indication of being a homiletical exposition and expansion of the apodictic and casuistic texts of Exodus 20:18-23:19 and Exodus 34. One need but compare Deut 14:21b; 15:1-16:17 with Ex 23 and 34.

Another dubious claim is the author's undermining of the customary and credible historical setting of Second Isaiah. This is what happens in his postulation that the two passages, Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1, where the datable 6<sup>th</sup> century Persian king Cyrus is explicitly mentioned by name, are supposedly not originally part of the Second Isaiah text. The closeness to the language and thought of the Psalms suggests to Levin that the book originated in the vicinity of the Jerusalem Temple. Accordingly, it is no longer the people in exile who are addressed here, but the post-exilic community dispersed worldwide.

A final bone of contention is the author's claim that behind the expanded and redacted present Book of Hosea there lies not an 8<sup>th</sup> century Ephramitic background with Samaria in the time of Jeroboam II (Hosea 1:1), but a 5<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century conflict with proto-Samaritanism. Thus the Book of Hosea as we have it now is supposedly attacking not the idolatry of the Northern Kingdom but the sanctuary on Mount Garizim (sic) near Shechem, the center of the Samaritan community, which refused to pay allegiance to the post-exilic Jerusalem Temple recently rebuilt.

This introduction is best not read by everyone. As the author admits, "this introduction offers no more than one possible outline of the history of the literature and religion of ancient Israel" (3), yet its problematic and provocative assertions require careful and judicious academic re-examination or at the least more detailed scholarly justification.

The final chapter concludes with this notable quotation on the Old Testament (175-176): "Right down to the present day, the Bible has been misused for the purposes of self-defense, and to underpin religious and even political claims, as if it came down from heaven. But the Bible is not an absolute book; it is a historical one. If it reveals the absolute, the absolute is veiled in the relative. Consequently the Bible resists any one-sided claim, but is open for

many, even rival interpretations. The dispute about the Old Testament cannot come to an end, and must never be allowed to do so.... All this being so, what we hold in our hands is not merely one of the most impressive documents in the whole of religion. It is the testimony of a faith which has been able to inspire men and women right through the centuries, down to the present day: *Tolle lege* – ‘Pick it up and read it!’”

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## **Imagining Redemption**

David Kelsey

Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005

106 pages. \$13.30 Softcover

David Kelsey’s latest book, *Imagining Redemption*, is an important theological work for all of us who struggle to relate the difficulties of life and ministry to our theological traditions. The presenting problem of the book on one level emerges when the author’s friend teaches an adult class at a church and poses the question: “Will someone please tell me what the word redemption means?” His question is met with silence. Kelsey recognizes that it is important to reclaim (perhaps redeem?) the word but refuses to do so from the standpoint of conceptualization or interpretation. For Kelsey the key to understanding redemption lies in the particularity of its language – particularly drawn from Biblical texts which describe (as in the postliberalism of Hans Frei) what Jesus said, did, and underwent – and in the particularity of situations in which the term gains meaning. In the end, it is these commitments which shape Kelsey’s work and invite his readers to join with him not in “interpreting redemption,” but in *imagining* redemption.

Chapter 1 then tries to make sense of what redemption could mean. Kelsey identifies three areas in language which, supplemented by “Christianly” views of the same, help make sense of the term. Redemption can “make up for a bad performance” (the batter