

PURITAN REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

MEETING DR. WALTHER EICHRODT

MEETING AN OT THEOLOGIAN PAPER SUBMITTED TO DR. D. C. TIMMER
FOR ISSUES IN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY CLASS

BY
MICHAEL M. DEWALT

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN
DECEMBER 12, 2009

Walther Eichrodt's Historical Context

Walther Eichrodt, the German Old Testament Biblical Theologian, was born in the black-forest of Gernsbach on August 1st of 1890. Under the supervision of Dr. G. Beer, Dr. Eichrodt finished his dissertation entitled *Die Priesterschaft in der Genesis* in 1914 at Heidelberg. In 1917 Dr. Eichrodt became a professor of Biblical Theology at the University of Erlangen. By 1922 he had moved on to the University of Basel in Switzerland where he became the Associate Professor of Old Testament and History of Religion, and then worked full-time in 1934. It was during this time that Walther Eichrodt wrote commentaries to books in the Old Testament (Ezekiel) and exegetical articles dealing with both themes and the history of Israel. It was also at this time that Higher-Criticism played a role in theology, and after World War I biblical theology in Europe became an intense debate between many scholars, which led to much of Eichrodt's writing. During this time in Dr. Eichrodt's life his work in theology finally came to appear main stream alongside that which was being done throughout much of Europe. This was where Dr. Eichrodt became well known for his massive three volume work, which he completed between the years of 1933-1936, entitled *Theologie des Alten Testaments*. This work was largely influenced¹ by Otto Procksch, who had inspired Walther Eichrodt by much of his teaching.² By 1959 Eichrodt's work had been revised in its sixth edition and was translated by J. A. Baker and edited by five others into the English language.

¹ Walther Eichrodt's 3-volumes were broken down into 3 divisions in which he arranged his material. 1. God and People, 2. God and the World, and 3. God and man. This pattern comes from Otto Proksch and is used by Eichrodt. Dr. Eichrodt used this format to go against much of the traditional way in which others' theology of the Old Testament was broken down.

² ed. Ollenburger, *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*. "Covenant" SBTS 1. 1st ed. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), pp. 58.

Dr. Eichrodt served as a full-time professor at Basel until his retirement in 1961, but continued lecturing and writing on Old Testament theological issues until his death on May 20th, 1978, in Basel.

Dr. Eichrodt was known best for his work in Old Testament scholarship, namely in dealing with faith in the Old Testament and its fulfillment in the New Testament. D.G. Spriggs argues that Dr. Eichrodt's Old Testament Theology writings "*are the most important contemporary works of their kind*,"³ thus why Dr. Eichrodt's work stood out among other scholars during his time. His dealing with "Covenant" in and throughout Israel during the time of the Old Testament was his "claim to fame." On this topic, his essay entitled *Covenant* – published in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology* – and volume one of his well-known title (in English), *Theology of the Old Testament* are his masterpieces. Although Dr. Eichrodt was a scholar during his time, his work for the layman through what he preached and taught, his work teaching in many church settings, his work in the civil realm⁴, and his concept upon "Covenant," centered upon all of his theology. For Dr. Eichrodt the theme of Covenant was the very center of the Old Testament, and he developed this thought throughout much of his life.⁵ This thought (the Covenant being the very center of the Old Testament) was debated during his time (and history), and there were several other theories that were quite opposed to Dr.

³ D.G. Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies: A Comparative Evaluation of the Contributions of Eichrodt and von Rad to our Understanding of the Nature of Old Testament Theology*. (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1974), pp. 1.

⁴ I am referring to Dr. Eichrodt's assessment in the Basler Mission and international missionary agency.

⁵ I am referring to Dr. Eichrodt's theology of Covenant at the center of the Old Testament, vs. Gerhard von Rad's theory of having no center in which the Old Testament focused upon. Cf. D.G. Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies: A Comparative Evaluation of the Contributions of Eichrodt and von Rad to our Understanding of the Nature of Old Testament Theology*. (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1974).

Eichrodt's central thoughts of the Covenant holding together the Old Testament.

However, Eichrodt never once fought with others about it.

Walther Eichrodt's Presuppositions about the Old Testament

The idea and passion that Dr. Eichrodt had for seeing the Covenant and its importance in the Old Testament was not only a thought and theme in his writings, but even more so, became a part of his presuppositions in thinking. When he came to the Old Testament texts, Covenant was the very center. Having a lens in which to see and interpret the Old Testament was of much importance for Dr. Eichrodt's work in the Old Testament. Dr. Eichrodt saw a number of presuppositions, of which I only have time to give a few, which can be seen in and through his work in biblical theology.

First and foremost was Eichrodt's view on a Covenant. Dr. Eichrodt, when defining "Covenant," states that it is "*the typical description of a living process.*"⁶ As Meredith Kline said about Eichrodt's view of the Covenant, it "*calls attention to the multiformity of arrangement that was known as "covenant."*"⁷ Although Eichrodt was holding to High-Criticism and his modern view on biblical revelation rather than that of the traditional-Reformed view, one can still see the importance of his view of Covenant throughout the Old Testament. This view that Eichrodt saw is best described through the words of Kline, who said that the Covenant in Eichrodt's theology was the "*Sinaitic transactions as evidence of bilateral relationship in the covenant-union between Yahweh and Israel.*"⁸ Eichrodt did not see it as fitting to view the Old Testament merely

⁶ Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 18.

⁷ Meredith Kline, "Law and Covenant", *Westminster Theological Journal*, 27:1, Nov. 1964, pp. 2.

⁸ Meredith Kline, "Law and Covenant", *Westminster Theological Journal*, 27:1, Nov. 1964, pp. 2.

in a historical way, as that undermined its value. Instead, finding the overarching theme and then reading it through that lens was Eichrodt's theology of the Old Testament.

Secondly, another view of the Covenant, which James L. Mays points out in his review⁹ of Dr. Eichrodt's *Theology of the Old Testament*, is that Dr. Eichrodt saw that the Old Testament Israel was to set forth the coming of the kingdom of God for the New Testament believers. Dr. Eichrodt says, "*Old Testament history as a whole is to be seen as an act of God for the bringing in of his kingdom.*"¹⁰ Although Eichrodt does not want to have a systematic approach in doing theology throughout the Old Testament,¹¹ nor does he see it fit to be shedding all of redemptive history through one lens, or constantly going back to the same theme. While much of the Old Testament has one "major" theme, or many common features that run throughout it, you cannot continue to run all of the history of Israel through one lens without looking at the whole picture at individual times. This is broken down in the way the theologian views Israel in the Old Testament. Is Israel's faith in history used to bring forth the changes through Christ in the New Testament? Or is Israel disclosed in their way that they believe so that they, in distinctive character, are different from that of the Old Testament? This is how one can relate Covenant to the coming kingdom of God in the New Testament. Seeing the nation of Israel as a "typical description of a living process" is such a view, that the whole of the Old Testament was to set forth the coming kingdom in the New Testament.¹²

⁹ James L. Mays, "Book Reviews", *Union Theological Seminary Journal*. Vol. 19, No. 3. 1962.

¹⁰ Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 502.

¹¹ Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 517.

¹² Cf. For Eichrodt's presuppositions, D.G. Spriggs, "Introduction to Eichrodt" pp. 3-6.

How Walther Eichrodt Related Biblical Texts to History

Another presupposition that Eichrodt had not only dealt with the way in which he saw the Old Testament, but also dealt with how he related all of Scripture to history. He believed that he could discern the core historical development of the nation of Israel throughout all of the Old Testament, and the theme of Covenant could be, and was, used as the lens to relate the Scripture to its time.¹³ Eichrodt's theme of Covenant can create quite a prospect as it takes things farther than just a nation and simple narrative stories of their history and faith, to include the prophets, wisdom literature, and the Psalms.

Walther Eichrodt's continuity between the Old Testament and New Testament

Dr. Eichrodt's cross-section method¹⁴ creates a number of issues, namely in how to relate the Old Testament to the New Testament and how theology is not based upon diachronic approaches. To use Eichrodt's own words about how to come to the New Testament:

“Hence to our general aim of obtaining a comprehensive picture of the realm of Old Testament belief we must add a second and closely related purpose - to see that this comprehensive picture does justice to the essential relationship with the New Testament and does not ignore it.”¹⁵

¹³ This seems to be an ongoing mistake of biblical theology, professors, and theologians, who will take what he believes is central to the Bible, Old & New Testament, Markan or Pauline Theology then apply their own rule to all of the Scriptures. I simply do not understand this and find it hard to understand why many do so.

¹⁴ Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*. (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1991), pp. 59-60.

¹⁵ Ollenburger, *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, pp. 62.

Another way Eichrodt looks at the continuity between the Old Testament and New Testament is that the Old Testament paints the lens in which we are to look at the New Testament. However, Eichrodt sees only biblical theology as able to do this justice; any random systematic scheme will not do it justice. Eichrodt states,

“One thing, however, must be guarded against and that is any arrangement of the whole body of material which derives not from the laws of its own nature but from some dogmatic scheme. It is impossible to use a system which has been developed on a basis quite different from that of the realm of Old Testament thought to arrive at the Old Testament belief about God.”¹⁶

How can one who is an orthodox Christian agree with such a statement? Why is it necessary to even have a systematic department in academics, or a seminary? Eichrodt goes on in his article to say that *“it has been often observed that the Old Testament contains very little actual doctrine.”*¹⁷ He goes further, dealing with how one is to treat the Old Testament and New Testament together in theology, saying,

“On our procedure for the treatment of the realm of Old Testament thought, we must avoid all schemes which derive from Christian dogmatics - such, for example, as Theology - Anthropology - Soteriology, ‘ordo salutis’ and so on. Instead we must ploy our course as best we can along the lines of the Old Testament’s own dialectic.”

This is what brings to reason why Eichrodt makes the categories he does for his work on theology.

Walther Eichrodt’s Categories used to organize Old Testament Theology

Eichrodt goes on to state:

“This speaks of a revelation of the God of the People, who in his rule proves himself to be also the God of the World and the God of the Individual. We therefore presented with three principle categories, within which to study the special nature of the Israelite faith in God: God and the People, God and the World, and God and Man.”

¹⁶ Ollenburger, *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, pp. 67-8.

¹⁷ Ollenburger, *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, pp. 68.

Here lies the three ways in which Eichrodt breaks his theology volumes down. These three categories came much from the mentorship of his professor during his earlier years under Otto Procksch. Eichrodt says,

“I owe this pregnant formulation of the three major categories to the outline by O. Procksch, which formed the basis of his university lectures on Old Testament Theology and which has provided me with many stimulating ideas.”

Eichrodt's work on Old Testament theology was much in debt to his mentor, but it was Eichrodt that put his way of thinking into writing. The difference here is that Eichrodt's thoughts placed his presumptions – namely “Covenant” – throughout his categories of the Old Testament. Eichrodt used his presupposition theme of “Covenant” in the Old and New Testament, weaving it throughout his mentor's three categories. This then led to Eichrodt dealing with the Covenant relationship, the Covenant statutes, the name of the Covenant, the nature of the Covenant, instruments of the Covenant, Covenant breaking, and how the fulfillment of the Covenant take place – all seen in *God and People*. This work is what would later place Eichrodt on the map of biblical theology. His focus upon understanding “Covenant” without a systematic approach was a first of its kind. Also, applying it through the history of Israel and relating its theology in how it relates to the New Testament is something which had not been seen before. For this, many are much in debt to Eichrodt's work; but the question that should be asked is – Is his work even necessary?

My Evaluation of Walther Eichrodt's Old Testament Theology

The answer to the above question is in every way, yes. It is true that Eichrodt's theology believed in higher-criticism; Eichrodt did not believe in biblical revelation;

Eichrodt believed that the cross-method of interpretation was significant for biblical theology; Eichrodt was very Barthian... but there does seem to be two things we can learn from Eichrodt's theology. Number one: the importance of the Covenant. It was the Covenant that was the very center of Israel's faith; they as a people and a nation were in Covenant with God, looking for the fulfillment of that in Christ so He may establish His kingdom. Number two: although many critics from the traditional side highly criticize Eichrodt, there were still many individuals that were far more liberal than him – for instance, Von Rad. When Von Rad's theology came to print, he stated that the Old Testament had no center (as Eichrodt had been saying), but rather placed importance upon the heterogeneity of the Old Testament witness. Even though the Covenant is seen, Von Rad believed there was no center in which Old Testament theology could place itself. Thus, in Von Rad's mind, truth of the text already had lost its purpose and reason. Though "non-traditional," Eichrodt did see certainty of the Old Testament texts and saw the theme of Covenant in and throughout it, much like that of many Reformed systematic approaches today.¹⁸

¹⁸ Cf. Spriggs' work on showing the differences between Von Rad and Eichrodt's Understanding of the Nature of Old Testament Theology. D. G. Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies: A Comparative Evaluation of the Contributions of Eichrodt and Von Rad to our Understanding of the Nature of Old Testament Theology*. (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1974).

Bibliography

Eichrodt, Walther. *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, trans. Cosslett Quinn, Old Testament Library Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970.

_____. *Man in the Old Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology 4, trans. K. and R. Gregor Smith. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1951.

_____. *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*. "Covenant" SBTS 1. 1st ed. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992, pp. 58-78.

_____. *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*. "Does Old Testament Theology Still Have Independent Significance within Old Testament Scholarship?" SBTS 1. 1st ed. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992 pp. 30-42.

_____. *Theology of the Old Testament*, 5th rev. ed., 2 vols., trans. J. A. Baker Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961-7; *trans. of Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 3 vols. Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1933-1939.

Spriggs, D. G. *Two Old Testament Theologies: A Comparative Evaluation of the Contributions of Eichrodt and von Rad to our Understanding of the Nature of Old Testament Theology*. Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1974. (pp. 3-5; 11-59).

Note: I used Ollenburger's OTTFF 1st edition because of the amount of people using and in need of the 2nd edition. The articles I needed (by Eichrodt) were in both the 1st and 2nd editions.