

**Kim, Brittany, and Charlie Trimm. *Understanding Old Testament Theology: Mapping the Terrain of Recent Approaches*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020. 162pp. + 15pp. (back matter)**

The intense specialization of biblical scholarship makes it difficult to keep up with research and trends even in one's own field. This was already the case when I did doctoral work in OT theology in the 1990s. At that time I received significant help from the analysis of the discipline in Gerhard Hasel's *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). While Hasel's work continues to serve as a foundational resource, it has not been updated to reflect the scholarship of the last three decades. To fill this void, Brittany Kim (Northeastern Seminary and North Park Theological Seminary) and Charlie Trimm (Talbot School of Theology, Biola University) have collaborated to write *Understanding Old Testament Theology: Mapping the Terrain of Recent Approaches*.

In their introduction Kim and Trimm discuss "the promise and problems" in current study of the theology of the OT (1–4). They identify six "flash points" that reflect the diversity of the discipline:

1. The degree of unity in the OT, including the question of a central theme that ties together the OT books
2. The connection between the OT and the NT
3. The significance of the individual interpreter's context
4. Whether OT theology should be descriptive or prescriptive
5. Questions concerning the relationship between historical study and theological study as well as other methodological concerns
6. How an OT theology should be structured

The authors acknowledge the confusion that can result from scholarly disagreement over such weighty questions, but they take up the challenge. "We seek to address this problem by offering a guide through the maze of publications in the field and giving you a taste of the rich banquet that Old Testament theology spreads for those who accept its invitation" (4).

Kim and Trimm foreground a different image, however: mapping terrain. OT theology is like a mountainous wilderness, and the mountain peaks represent various approaches to the discipline. Specifically, current scholarship reflects three broad approaches or orientations: history, theme, and context. These three approaches form the three parts of the book. Further, each approach divides into subcategories—the paths leading to a peak—and each subcategory is the subject of one chapter.

Part 1 discusses the historical approach: a focus on the development of Israel's faith over time. Chapter 1 deals with "Old Testament Theology Grounded in Biblical (Hi)story," where "(hi)story" conveys the dual idea of the history itself and the narrative recounting the history. Here scholars concentrate on how the OT itself describes the progression of Israel's theology. This differs from the subject of chapter 2: "Historical-Critical Old Testament Theology." Writers in this vein question or reject the biblical presentation and reconstruct Israel's theological development following various theories of composition.

Part 2 focuses on the thematic approach. “Multiplex Thematic Old Testament Theology” (chapter 3) describes theologies oriented to a variety of themes such as worship or the character of God or divine blessing. By contrast, “Old Testament Theology Focused around [on?] a Central Theme” (chapter 4) seeks the famous *Mitte* that unifies the OT and ultimately the whole Bible. Candidates include covenant (e.g., William J. Dumbrell), the kingdom of God (e.g., Stephen G. Dempster), the divine presence (e.g., J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays), and the mission of God (e.g., Christopher J. H. Wright).

Part 3 is the most diverse, explaining approaches that highlight one kind of context or another for OT theology. In “Canonical Old Testament Theology” (chapter 5), the entire Christian canon provides the context. By contrast, “Jewish Biblical Theology” (chapter 6) analyzes the teaching of the Hebrew Bible from streams within contemporary Judaism, including those shaped theologically by the experience of the Holocaust. The final contextual approach is “Postmodern Old Testament Theology” (chapter 7). This rubric naturally encompasses a wide-ranging assortment of subjectively and socially oriented methodologies and conclusions.

Kim and Trimm’s conclusion summarizes the various approaches to OT theology. Then follows an overview of OT theology sources not dealt with under the main headings of the book, which points the reader to an online annotated bibliography for additional material. The authors continue by sharing some reflections on the future of OT theology. They close the book by encouraging the reader to keep exploring the field, providing a list of questions to guide study. An appendix provides a chart that synthesizes the key points of the approaches to OT theology.

The back cover is not exaggerating when it claims that “*Understanding Old Testament Theology* provides the only summary introduction of its kind to the field of Old Testament theology.” Kim and Trimm have expertly condensed an immense amount of scholarship into this thin volume. Though they acknowledge that their categorization is not airtight (10), their classification provides sound analysis that helps make sense of the bewildering array of OT theologies available today.

Clear and consistent organization characterizes *Understanding Old Testament Theology*. Each chapter follows the same structure. At the beginning Kim and Trimm provide a concise definition of the kind of OT theology to be discussed. This definition identifies common features as well as points of tension, and these elements echo relevant “flash points” from the book’s introduction. For example,

Canonical Old Testament theologies focus on the final canonical form of the biblical text, interpret texts in light of their broader Old Testament context, read the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, and see Old Testament theology as prescriptive. Points of tension among proponents of this approach include which canon is followed, the significance of the history of interpretation, and the role of historical-critical methods. (92)

Following the definition, the authors give a bibliography of a half-dozen or so texts that will be covered as key representatives of the theology at hand. For the chapter on canonical OT theology, the bibliography includes authors such as Brevard S. Childs, Paul R. House, and Charles H. H. Scobie (92). The bulk of the chapter then explains and illustrates the common features and points of tension

introduced in the definition. Each chapter ends by considering the Book of Exodus as a brief case study of how scholars of the selected persuasion actually do OT theology. The repeated combination of explanation and illustration keeps the discussion from being unhelpfully vague.

Insofar as Kim and Trimm aim at description not prescription, I find little to quarrel with. I wonder, however, about the small amount of evaluation they do provide. Their main complaint about the contemporary discipline of OT theology? The field is dominated by white males (154–56). While this concern is not entirely unworthy, I can think of more urgent problems in OT theology.

In particular, many of the theologians Kim and Trimm discuss have an unorthodox bibliology. Whether following a historical-critical, postmodern, or other direction, these scholars reject the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and consequently diminish its authority. Given that *Understanding Old Testament Theology* is published by an evangelical publisher (Zondervan) and that Kim and Trimm earned their PhDs at an evangelical institution (Wheaton College), one may be able to assume that the authors hold a high view of Scripture. This is not an explicit emphasis in the book, however. Instead, the following represents the flavor of Kim and Trimm’s approach:

Since every attempt to capture the theology of the Old Testament is partial and constrained by the perspective of the interpreter, we look forward to seeing further contributions to the field by a wide variety of scholars—female and male, Western and majority world—using each of the approaches we have outlined and possibly some new ones. While we as readers will not always agree with the assumptions and conclusions of scholars working in the field, each Old Testament theology has something to teach us if we are open to listening.

This does not strike me as a model of careful discernment.

Nonetheless, *Understanding Old Testament Theology* provides a wealth of information useful in an academic setting. The question is determining the level of instruction for which the book is most appropriate. In an introductory OT theology course, my own approach is to provide a brief survey of the discipline but focus on getting the students to interact with the text of the OT itself. *Understanding Old Testament Theology* would be distracting and even overwhelming in a setting like this. But for an intermediate or advanced level, the book would serve as a convenient and comprehensive guide to late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century scholarship in the field.

**Ken Casillas**

Professor, Old Testament Interpretation | BJU Seminary