

Garrett, Duane. *The Problem of the Old Testament: Hermeneutical, Schematic, and Theological Approaches*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2020. 355 pp. + 40 pp. (back matter).

The Problem of the Old Testament is Duane Garrett's prolegomenon (354) to his forthcoming multi-volume series addressing biblical theology and hermeneutics in the OT. Garrett, an OT professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, seeks to solve the Church's challenge of reading, defining, and reconciling the OT with the NT. He desires to remedy the problems by identifying a unifying theme in the OT and introducing a hermeneutic that bridges the gap between the NT Christian and the OT text.

Chapter 1 defines the three problems that are advanced throughout the volume. First, how are readers to understand Messianic prophecy? Specifically, what was the hermeneutic of NT authors in their use of OT prophecies? Second, how does the Mosaic law relate to NT believers? Third, what is the relationship between ethnic Israel and the NT Church? Acknowledging that these questions are not new, chapter 2 surveys the unsuccessful answers of Justin Martyr and Tertullian.

Chapters 3–6 evaluate three spheres of inadequate solutions: hermeneutical, schematic, and conceptual. In chapters 3–4 the *hermeneutical* solutions of the Alexandrian and Antiochian traditions are contrasted. Garrett exposes the dangers of historic allegory, noting that “an allegorized text loses all authority” (74). He further applies his warning to advocates of the current theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) movement. His appraisal of the Antiochian school is more positive. He commends their attempts at a literal hermeneutic but expresses disappointment that the result was often a displacement of the OT within the life of a believer (100).

Chapter 5 quickly dismisses covenant theology and dispensationalism as *schematic* solutions to problems in the OT. Regarding the former, Garrett finds no biblical justification for a covenant of works or grace (115). He also dismantles dispensationalism for creating such separation between the Church and Israel that the OT is rendered as “someone else's mail” (127) with no New Covenant implications for NT believers (126).

Chapter 6 addresses *conceptual* solutions that seek to find a unified theme within the OT via biblical theology. Three factors are considered: “the nature of the canon,” “the meaning and focus of biblical theology,” and “the models for organizing an Old Testament theology” (129). A survey of various methods of biblical theology results in the conclusion that no model is adequate, and a “hybrid approach” is necessary.

Chapter 7 introduces Garrett's new approach. He defines the unifying theme of the OT as the “election of Israel” (169). He divides the OT into Election Literature, which “tells Israel's history” (165), and Wisdom Literature, which is universally applicable since God “made the world according to wisdom” and thus “its teachings are timeless and not governed by the progress of salvation history” (166). Within this framework NT believers find meaning in the OT as being grafted into Israel (Rom 11:17–19) and thus fellow family members who can experience and apply the OT by “family identification” (173).

Chapter 8 argues against a progressive view of OT covenants, suggesting that the theme of covenant is secondary in biblical theology and proposing that each covenant is individualized to its

context (175). Chapter 9 maintains the OT law as a unified whole and posits four functions of the law (234). First, the law is a covenant document (234). Second, the law is a demonstration of the need for New Covenant (235). Third, the law is an ideal of righteousness and basis for judgment (237). Fourth, the law is a teacher, leading those who meditate upon it into righteousness (238). He notes only the fourth function as “abiding” and the previous three as “in some sense obsolete” (238). The final application of Garrett’s new approach focuses on reading OT narrative (chapter 10). Garrett warns against reading each OT story exclusively through the lens of the biblical metanarrative lest it lose its authorial and contextual intent. He develops a grid for interpretative intertextuality defined as “allusive patterns” (272), which allows for connective hope as one reads the “dark” literature of the OT. The final chapters (11–13) and appendix represent Garrett’s application of his principles through case studies in Hosea, Joel, and Isaiah 7:14.

This work is self-defined as prolegomenon, but Garrett does more than introduce topics for his upcoming series. He attempts in a single volume to deconstruct long-standing theological perspectives and reconstruct his own model for reading the OT. In deconstruction the book is expansive in its breadth, but it fails to accomplish its purpose. In less academic terms, Garrett attempts big-game hunting using buckshot from long-range. The result is minor injury, but no substantial harm. As he communicates his own model, valuable insights are shared, but they lack enough development to form a cohesive hermeneutic or biblical theology.

The weaknesses of the volume can be categorized by both style and content. In style, Garrett develops his argument unevenly, makes overstatements, and misrepresents those he deems incorrect. First, the space given to significant topics is underweighted. Little time is spent on covenant theology, dispensationalism, the use of types and anti-types, biblical theology, or the use of fulfillment language in the NT. Second, overstatements are laced throughout the book. For instance, Garrett says, “The apostles give few guidelines about how we are to handle the Law” (33), without noting Acts 15, Romans 7, or the Book of Galatians. Third, Garrett’s explanations of dispensationalism and covenant theology are misrepresentative. For example, he suggests that two of the essential distinctives of dispensationalism are a pre-tribulation Rapture and the absence of the NT Church from any aspect of the New Covenant (125–26). Yet a reading of dispensational literature would evidence that these two issues are not considered distinctives. Garrett’s attempt to quickly dismiss dispensationalism without valid warrant creates within the reader a spirit of distrust. His equally dismissive handling of covenant theology would no doubt meet with similar cries of “unfair” from proponents of that system.

The weaknesses in content center on Garrett’s development of his own methodology. His most important decision is to make the election of Israel the dominant and unifying theme of the OT. Garrett presents this conclusion in three paragraphs of explanation with no corresponding exegesis (165–66). His choice is based on the chronology of Genesis 12 and 15. Yet Garrett’s claim of priority by chronological order only suggests that election preceded covenant. He does not consider other unifying options. He simply states, “In short, Israel is the elect people of God. All the laws, history, prophecy, and psalmody of the Old Testament build upon this foundational idea, that God chose Israel for a specific purpose” (166).

A second weakness in content is Garrett's understanding of the Church's relationship with Israel. He declares that the Church "partake(s) of the collective experience of Israel. We recognize ourselves not just by analogy but by family identification—we have been adopted into this people" (174). By this "family identification," Garrett surmises that OT texts now have new significance within the NT community. The Church can "recover a lost memory, recapitulating the experience of sin, punishment, and repentance of the elder members of our family" (174). To understand the OT fully, Garrett sees a need for NT Christians to identify with OT Israel in a visceral, family manner. Such a conclusion seems hermeneutically unnecessary. Christians can identify with all OT characters as fellow fallen creatures. There is no need for family relationship outside of common humanity. Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 10 that OT stories were written for our "example" not for our experience.

The strengths of the volume are numerous. Historically, Garrett traces the challenges of reading the OT from the early Church era, through the Reformation, and into the contemporary Church setting. In doing so, he connects the fallacy of allegorizing with the current reoccurrence of those failures in TIS. He also challenges extremes within the dominant theological systems of dispensationalism, covenant theology, and progressive covenantalism. Garrett's dismissal of each is too hurried and uneven, but his explanatory work through the OT covenants, Mosaic law, and OT narratives remains helpful. His delineation of the three types of covenants, the development of the Hebrew structure, and the evidence for the mutual independence of each covenant is worthy of consideration. Garrett's perspective of the Mosaic law grounds it in its historic context and theological distinctiveness. He critiques the threefold division of law into moral, ceremonial, and civil, and he properly reminds readers that the law is a unified whole and a singular covenant with Israel. His development of the four-fold role of the law is effective. He emphasizes that the law declares the fullness of God's character and encourages meditation on it without adherence to it.

Garrett's understanding of the role of OT narrative is cognizant of the current conversation on metanarrative. While embracing the metanarrative of Scripture, he emphasizes the place of an OT story in its historic and canonical context. This preserves the author's original intent prior to envisioning the broader redemptive framework. Also of value, though not equally so, is the attempt to address the current movement toward intertextuality. He rejects the language of type and intertextuality for his own term, "allusive pattern" (272). He also provides ten principles that govern the use of the tool (285–88). This safeguards from other forms of intertextuality that provide no means of evaluating a biblical warrant for textual connections.

Garrett's volume is both satisfying and unsatisfying. The "buckshot" nature of the writing stirred unanswered questions, unresolved conundrums, and underdeveloped arguments. What is appreciated is the awareness of the current trends in OT hermeneutics and commitment to an accurate handling of the Word. The attempt to make the OT attainable to the Church prompts valuable reflection even if there are disagreements.

Brian Trainer

Associate Professor, School of Religion | Bob Jones University