

Craig G. Bartholomew. *The Old Testament and God. Old Testament Origins and the Question of God. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2022. 527pp. + 30pp. (front matter) + 50pp. (back matter).*

Bartholomew proposes to do in this book, and in the volumes that follow in the series, what N. T. Wright did in his *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series. Specifically, Bartholomew wants to move OT beyond the paradigms of historical criticism and postmodernism. He observes, “Especially after the postmodern turn, it is fine in mainstream OT studies to be a naturalist, a Marxist, a new historicist, a Foucauldian, a Derridean, an exponent of queer and transgender theory, a postcolonialist and so on, but heaven forbid one should be a theist, let alone a full-blown Christian theist” (xviii). And yet, Bartholomew does not think it possible to move back to a pre-critical approach to OT studies. For instance, he is ambivalent about when and how the exodus and conquest took place (5n8) or when Genesis 10 is to be dated (6, n. 12).

The book divides into four parts, which Bartholomew helpfully summarizes in the Introduction (xxvii):

- Part 1 seeks to answer the question: “What should we do with the Old Testament?”
- Part 2 develops a range of tools for answering this question from a critical realist perspective.
- Part 3 examines the major world views of the Ancient Near East against which background we read the Old Testament.
- Part 4 brings all this to bear on the central character of the OT, YHWH, the God of Israel.

Bartholomew seeks to begin each part inductively—his work is a species of biblical theology—and then move into debated areas of OT studies, epistemology, ancient Near East (ANE) worldviews, and theology. For instance, Bartholomew begins the book with an examination of the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 from which he concludes that the OT must be studied along *historical*, *literary*, and *theological* lines. Holding these three dimensions together positions him against historical criticism, which divides books into redactional layers rather than engaging in literary readings, and against postmodernism, which dispenses with history and reads “against the grain” of the Bible’s own theology (79).

If part 1 introduces the reader to the literary, historical, and theological dimensions of the OT, part 2 investigates each dimension more deeply, giving a chapter to each. Before these investigations take place, however, Bartholomew devotes a chapter to epistemology. Like Wright, he proposes that Christians adopt a *critical realist* framework. The *critical* points back to Kant and his recognition “that the knower influences the results of the knowing process,” and the *realism* indicates that, unlike in Kant’s thought, “we can know [the world] as it is” (93). An important concept that Bartholomew introduces at this point is *stratification*, which means that there can be “multiple accounts of the same things or events” that are all true (95). He gives an example of the analyses that a physicist, historian, builder, detective, ecologist, poet, and resident would give of a house that has burned down. Each one could give different, but entirely true, accounts of what happened. In contrast to postmodernism, however, critical realism recognizes that some accounts may be false and contradictory.

In part 3, Bartholomew examines the worldview of ANE people groups. As a preliminary to this survey, he must address the issue of mythology. Bartholomew thinks that ANE myths are not just

metaphors: ANE peoples believed in the gods that their myths spoke of. And yet myth is not to be defined so broadly that it includes all worldviews. Thus, the OT is not a mythological book but a book that stands opposed to myths.

After surveying the worldviews of the Sumerians, Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Arameans, Phoenicians, Canaanites, and Persians, Bartholomew picks up the phrase “the Mosaic distinction” to highlight the great difference between Israel and the surrounding nations in the matter of God and the gods. Among themselves, the various polytheistic cultures could “translate” between their different systems. Different cultures may have had different sun gods, for instance; but both had sun gods. With Israel, however, there was the true God, and all other gods were idols. This “Mosaic distinction” is fundamental, being rooted in Israel’s central narrative, the exodus. However, Spinoza, the founder of historical critical approaches to the Bible, equated God and nature. He rejected “the Mosaic distinction.” Historical criticism is therefore not “simply . . . the triumph of neutral, objective science” but part of a worldview that is alien to the worldview of the OT and more of a piece with the polytheistic ANE worldviews that surrounded Israel (372).

The final section of the book is a single, lengthy chapter that positively presents the God of the OT. Bartholomew begins with the OT’s presentation of God as the *living God*, noting that this presentation of God distinguishes him from dying and rising gods like Baal as well as from idols. It also identifies God as one who acts. Bartholomew recognizes that the OT’s descriptions of God’s actions, and even its description of him as living, are anthropomorphic. He cautions, however, against the classical theism of Maimonides and Aquinas, which views such language as unworthy of God. He argues that since humans are made in God’s image and since God reveals himself through his actions, we come to truly know God through anthropomorphic language rather than through “philosophical speculation” (402).

Drawing on Colin Gunton and Karl Barth, Bartholomew critiques even post-Reformation classical theology for not recognizing sufficiently that their abstract language about God is metaphorical. The danger is that abstract language actually distances interpreters from God’s own self-description. Bartholomew argues that “to think of God mainly in terms of intellect,” as Thomas does, “results in a conception of God at odds with the biblical rendition of God according to which God is mainly known *through his particular acts in history*” (404). He further argues, “Classical theism tends to restrict its focus to cosmology rather than attending to the divine economy. . . . According to Gunton, such an approach is in danger of collapsing into Spinoza’s pantheism or Kant’s idealism. If the negative way is pushed, one ends up with the unknowable God of Kant” (405). Bartholomew observes that Spinoza and Kant (both of whom were foundational figures for the historical critics) rejected the historical narratives of Scripture because they were incompatible with their vision of god. Part of the problem, Bartholomew avers, is that Aristotle promoted the view that “metaphorical language can always be replaced with literal language” (407). Thus, the goal of some theologians is to purge their theological talk of metaphor—which puts them at odds with the Bible’s speech about God. He notes that more recent linguistic studies have argued that metaphors are inescapable in all language and not something that hinders clear understanding.

This groundwork laid, Bartholomew looks at metaphors used to identify YHWH, the name YHWH itself, and the importance of divine action in the OT. He concludes the book by arguing for the reality of divine revelation and the failure of historical criticism.

Bartholomew's volume makes many significant contributions, not least his survey of how historical, literary, and theological readings of the OT are to be pursued. His defense of the term *Old Testament* and its interpretational relationship with the new are helpful, as is his definition and defense of worldview. Likewise, his treatment of ANE worldviews rightly maintains the "Mosaic distinction" that is blurred in many comparative studies, even from evangelicals. Most worthwhile of all was the sustained critique of historical criticism. Bartholomew rightly recognizes that historical criticism is not a neutral method but part of a worldview at odds with the worldview of the Bible itself. Bartholomew does not always reject the conclusions of historical criticism, however (note his comments above about not returning to pre-critical interpretation of Scripture), and his conversation partners are not conservative evangelical scholars. This means that some of his strong rhetoric against historical criticism loses some of its punch in practice.

A similar dynamic is at work in Bartholomew's discussion of God. He rightly worries that certain versions of classical theism make God inert and unknowable, and he rightly asserts that the Bible presents God as one who speaks and acts. He is correct to resist the impulse to strip all metaphorical language from theological talk about God, since God has chosen to reveal himself in such language. He seems to think that Colin Gunton provides the way forward, however, and he fails to interact with the systematic theologians involved in the current renaissance of classical theism. These theologians rightly warn against Gunton's social trinitarianism, and the best of them seek to root their classical theism in Scripture. Yet some within this movement need the cautions that Bartholomew raises. Bartholomew has a remarkably wide skill set, being well-versed in OT biblical studies, hermeneutics, philosophy, and Christian worldview in the Kuyperian and Dooyeweerdian tradition. If, however, he has had the same deep engagement with post-Reformation scholastic theology and its heirs, it is not evident in this volume at the key point where engaging that theology was most important.

In sum, Bartholomew's inaugural volume in the *Old Testament Origins and the Question of God* series does an excellent job of surveying and critiquing the current state of OT scholarship. Many of his proposals are also valuable. Bartholomew is not always a sure guide, however, and his work would have been strengthened by more interaction with post-Reformation orthodox theology and with conservative scholars.

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