

The Theology of the Old Testament  
A.B. Davidson  
*The Princeton Theological Review* 4:115-120. [1906]

It is with a double sense of loss and sadness that we come to the reading of this book. As the title and preface tell us, the author passed away before he could put the material of his lecture-manuscripts on Old Testament theology into the beautiful, well-ordered form which it would undoubtedly have received from his hand, had he been spared to complete this task. And since the date of publication, Principal Salmond, who undertook the task of editing the posthumous volume, has also gone to his reward, so that in the book before us we have the last contribution to Biblical science of two of the most eminent Scottish theologians of our day. Both have labored so long and so usefully, each in his own sphere, that we cannot refrain from paying on this occasion our tribute of admiration and thankfulness to their memory. Our gratitude would have been still greater, if the work under review did not so painfully disclose the extent to which the author in his later days gave countenance to the current critical views regarding the Old Testament. Not as if Dr. Davidson went the whole length in adopting the evolutionary, subjectivizing interpretation of the Old Testament history of religion or in advocating the literary conclusions of the modern school. In point of fact, he occupies an intermediate position, which, in our opinion, does justice to neither the old nor the modern view and is on account of its continual oscillation between the two, weaker than either of them. Biblical theology is defined as "the knowledge of God's great operation in introducing His kingdom among men." One might object to the use of the idea of the kingdom in such a general definition, on the ground that this idea did not become the central organizing idea in the Old Testament consciousness, or did even emerge until a comparatively late period. It would have been vastly better to substitute for this the idea of revelation, for the latter is actually coextensive with the whole course of sacred history, if only revelation be taken not in the abstract theological sense of a communication of truth, but in the practical sense of a self-manifestation of God for the purpose of establishing and cultivating the true religion. But, apart from this infelicity, the definition given has at least the merit that it safeguards the objective character of the theme of Biblical theology. The moderns simply say that Biblical theology deals with the religion of Israel in its phenomenological sense. Dr. Davidson is conscious of tracing an operation of God, not an evolution in man. And yet, strange to say, at subsequent points in the book this consciousness appears too weak and too little assured of itself to repudiate or even criticize the opposite, the subjectivizing point of view. The author simply proceeds as if the two were identical or the difference immaterial. On page 13 occurs the following characteristic sentence: "New thoughts of Jehovah or revelations regarding Him,—for the two things are the same, seeing that a revelation is no revelation until it takes the shape of human thought—etc." It will be noticed that Dr. Davidson does not say "until it is received," but "until it takes the shape of human thought"; evidently he means to place the revealing-process itself in the subjective emergence of thoughts in the human consciousness. The statement that a revelation is no revelation until received into human thought is a curious instance of pitting the strict etymological sense of the word against its common usage. The divine part of the transaction has always been called "revelation" quite apart from its effect or reproduction in the consciousness of man. But Dr. Davidson seems to deny the objectivity of this divine factor, at least in the sense in which it could properly be called a revelation in itself. "Revelation of truth," we learn on page 8, "was not, so to speak, communicated from without; but the organs of revelation rose within the people in the persons of its highest representatives, men in whom its life beat fullest and its aspirations were most perfectly embodied."

“The prophetic thoughts were . . . profoundly subjective to the prophets themselves, that is, rose up out of their own hearts with the greatest intensity and fire of conviction” (p. 14). And most explicitly on p. 36: “On man’s side this revelation was an operation of Jehovah in the mind. Revelation was the arising in the mind of man of thoughts or impulses accompanied by the conviction that the thoughts and impulses were from God. In such thoughts the mind of man and God coalesced and the man was conscious of meeting God.” The reader will not fail to notice, how here the meeting of man with God, in which the two subjects are distinguished, is identified with the coalescing of the divine and human mind, in which the distinction is entirely lost. Now we do not mean to assert that revelation through inspiration of the subjective mind of man is nowhere found in the Old Testament. To the Psalmists it was frequent, perhaps the ordinary experience. But we protest against the setting up of this partial method as the exclusive method of divine procedure in revelation, and protest especially against the indiscriminate extension of it to the sphere of prophecy. König may have gone too far in claiming for all prophetic revelation the external objectivity, which admits of being defined in terms of space, but certainly his main contention, that the prophets were conscious of having the truth addressed to their subjective personality *ab extra*, is fully borne out by the testimony of the prophets themselves. It has never been refuted and cannot be refuted, least of all by the quibble that revelation is not revelation, until it takes the shape of human thought. Dr. Davidson, and all who take the same view, must go back of the prophetic testimony and the prophetic consciousness, and construe on some other basis their theory of revelation. That in this other basis there is frequently a considerable element of anti-supernaturalism it would be difficult to deny.

Not merely, however, in the question of the form of revelation, in other respects also, the author does not always speak in such terms as to us would seem to be demanded by an unqualified endorsement of the supernaturalism of the Old Testament. In his capacity of a Biblical theologian, Dr. Davidson professes not to go to the Old Testament with any general conception that it is the Word of God spoken to us, but only to rise from it with this conception. This would seem to imply that the Biblicotheological treatment of the truth itself is not affected by its supernatural origin and character. The organic character of the progressive unfolding of truth is described as something that results from its dependence on the organic character of the historical development of Israel, which shares this peculiarity with all historic life. Must we infer from this that the organism of the Old Testament truth is not determined by its supernatural origin? Is there not a development here generically distinct from the natural evolution of the national life? On p. 12 the following statement is quoted, with apparent approval, from Wildeboer’s *Canon*: “From an evolutionistic point of view, men speak of the development of the religion of Israel. From a different point of view, the history of Israel’s religion is called a progressive revelation. We must remember that a progressive revelation from the divine side must exhibit itself among men as a persistent struggle to realize new truths. . . . This conflict appears to one man as a progressive development; to another, who by experience has learned to know the gulf between God and the human heart as a terrible reality, it appears as a progressive revelation. But, however it be regarded, all are agreed that from the Tora and Nebiim we can understand how the precious treasure of Israel’s religion came more and more fully to light, and maintained itself ever more firmly.” This is the kind of attenuated supernaturalism which scorns to be able to make itself believe that the interpretation of the historical phenomena can be the same from the supernatural standpoint as from the evolutionistic, and that yet the cause of supernaturalism can be fully safeguarded by merely positing behind the phenomena a divine causation which is denominated “supernatural.” But is it not reasonable to say that supernaturalism in order to be real at all must be

such as to make itself a potent factor in the shaping of the phenomena? Can we continue to believe in it, when it is assumed so to work, that its effects are capable of a naturalistic and supernaturalistic appreciation alike? Is our consciousness of “the gulf between God and the human heart as a terrible reality” the only or the main reason for putting a supernatural causation back of the process of history? Can anybody find comfort in being reduced to the position, where supernaturalism is an unverifiable possibility, or do we not rather feel that, in order to be at all, it must obtrude itself, in the field of history, a triumphant reality? How is this so-called supernatural activity of God, which lies back of the phenomena, to be distinguished from His mere providential immanence in the world? Is there anything to differentiate the one from the other, if the former does not affect the complexion of history? These and other like questions are inevitably suggested and not answered by Dr. Davidson’s statements.

The extent to which the author adopts and lays at the basis of his work the current critical views is not quite easy to determine. This is owing to the fact that he does not follow any chronological method in discussing the contents of the Old Testament religion, but, topically dividing it into the doctrine of God, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of redemption, treats within the compass of each of these the whole material that lies scattered in the Old Testament writings, and that frequently, though not always, without regard to distinction of periods. Even the New Testament is occasionally drawn upon to contribute elements of argument and illustration. In this method of topical treatment the book resembles Dillmann’s work, with this difference, that the latter gives a far lengthier discussion in a separate section to the course of historical development, whilst Dr. Davidson disposes of this matter in a few pages. The chronology of criticism, however, is constantly used. We are told that the Old Testament religion hardly begins till the exodus (p. 16). The adjective “prehistoric” occurs repeatedly. The origin of the idea of God lies beyond the horizon of history (p. 31). This would seem to imply that there is an evolutionary origin, but elsewhere the view seems to be retained that man has an innate conception of God in virtue of creation, and on p. 96 the matter is left in doubt. What we have of the patriarchal period is not a contemporaneous historical record, but the traditional or legendary view taken by the ninth or the eighth centuries (p. 28). Still the patriarchs are treated as historical persons (p. 97 and elsewhere). Even to the account of the exodus this applies. The Book of the Covenant is placed between the exodus and 800 B.C. Deuteronomy was “made public” in 621, apart from any theory of its origin or even its date of composition (p. 17). It at least did not influence Israel until Josiah’s time (p. 360). The denial of the early existence of the Levitical law, not merely in codified form, but even as oral priestly tradition, is implied (p. 308), where it is held that to sacrifice was the privilege of every Israelite. The ritual law for the first time was brought together and codified in the post-exilic period, and did not become until then an element in the national life (p. 19). Only the Decalogue is positively and consistently treated as Mosaic, and that particularly as regards the two great principles of practical monotheism and the prohibition of images. On the other hand, not only are the single critical conclusions as to the date of the several documents adopted, also the incisive critical principle that in the post-exilic period a new way of reading the past history of the nation arose, and that the scheme of Israel’s religious history, as it now lies before us in the Old Testament (in other words, the Old Testament itself), is the product of this rewriting, is espoused (p. 18). The newest critical hypothesis about the origin of the present prophetic writings receives assent. The collectors made insertions in order to render the prophecies applicable to the thoughts and religious needs of their own times. Still this is not meant in any extreme sense, for the genuineness of the promissory element in Hosea and Amos, of the great Messianic prophecies in Isa. 9 and 11, of the

latter part of the Book of Micah is recognized (p. 369-372), although in the same connection there is again a hint at the post-exilic expansion of ancient prophecy. And on the whole, while those critical opinions are introduced at certain points, they do not shape or even appreciably affect the treatment of the material. The conclusions are not drawn from them which are usually considered their correlates. Dr. Davidson continues to believe that the conceptions of God in the patriarchal age did not differ greatly from those which we now have (p. 48). The unity, if not the spirituality of God was known to Abraham (p. 98). The Hebrew idea of God is ethical, not physical, he affirms without qualification (p. 36). Prophetism was a development of Mosaism on one side (p. 20). On the other hand, it must be confessed that the author has done next to nothing to show how, with his critical premises, the history of revelation can be made intelligible. The old view with its continuity of revelation from the beginning, whatever in the opinion of our modern critics may be its historical difficulties or impossibilities in the concrete, yields at least a reasonable philosophy of the process of revelation. The new view, with its great prehistoric blank at the beginning, leaves us to a large extent face to face with the blind, unilluminated facts. What brings the light into it is the subjectivizing, evolutionary, naturalistic interpretation of the facts. Where the critical theories and any solid form of supernaturalism are combined, as is the case in Dr. Davidson's book, they eventually obscure and confuse each other. We are confident in affirming that, notwithstanding the unusual lucidity and orderliness with which Dr. Davidson's mind naturally operated in his material, no student will get from this book a clear and distinct idea as to what the course of the development of Israel's religion actually was, not to speak of the reasons why it was shaped thus and not otherwise. To mention only one instance: the juxtaposition of the ethical and ritual elements in the Old Testament is affirmed on p. 14 and elsewhere after a purely mechanical fashion. The critical hypothesis has its answer ready to the question, why these two elements exist thus mechanically together or even lie in conflict in the religion of Israel. From Dr. Davidson, at least in this book, we look for an answer to this and similar questions in vain. Perhaps this unfortunate circumstance is in part due to the peculiar origin of the volume. One gains the impression that Dr. Davidson's views in regard to the content of truth of the Old Testament were substantially worked out in a period previous to his aligning himself with the modern hypothesis. Afterward the critical conclusions were superimposed, but they did not have time materially to reshape the body of doctrinal convictions.

As a so-called Biblical Dogmatic the book has great merit, and still more, if considered as a series of essays on the important topics of Old Testament teaching. A wealth of sound generalizing is to be found here, which in most cases admirably reproduces the large content and bearing of the Scriptural facts. On the other hand, a close scrutiny of the data in detail and a delicate attention to the finer nuances of teaching are lacking, not because the writer was incapable of giving this, but evidently because the primary intent of the work for classroom teaching did not permit of this. The same circumstance will explain the not infrequent repetition not only of isolated statements, but of whole trains of reasoning on important conceptions. We are not sure but the editor could have excluded some of these to advantage. Evidently, however, Dr. Davidson was a thorough believer in the pedagogic efficacy of repetition, and in so far even this feature of the book helps to increase its individual character. It is difficult, where so much is excellent, to single out sections for special praise. An exception may be made for the extended section on eschatology, and its lucid discussion of the development of the Old Testament doctrine of immortality. Here the author lays bare to our view more than elsewhere the basis of his induction and gives most admirable *resumés* of the important passages bearing on the problem. It must have been an especially congenial and delightful

task to Principal Salmond to edit this portion of the book.

At the close, besides an Index of Scripture Passages, extended Notes of Literature, topically arranged, are given. The latter, however, need supplementing. E.g., under the topic "Lord of Hosts" the important article of Borchert in *Studien und Kritiken* is overlooked. Under the head of "Typology, Prophecy and the Prophets" we miss Giesebrecht's *Berufsbegabung der Alttestamentlichen Propheten*; under the head of "Angels," Everling's *Paulinische Angelologie und Dämonologie*, which is evidently not excluded on account of its dealing with a New Testament subject, because an article of Hackspill on *Jewish Angelology* in the New Testament period is mentioned.