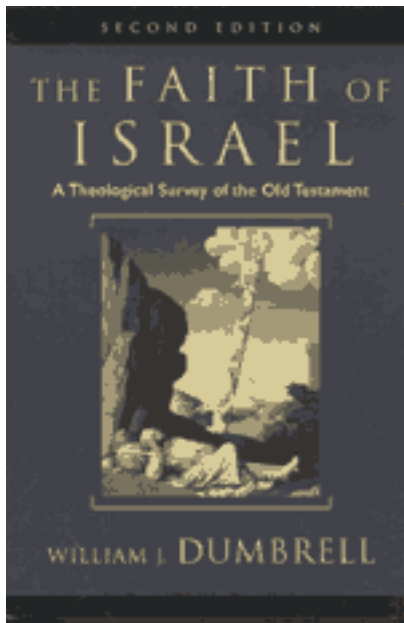


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**Dumbrell, William J.**

***The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament***

2d edition

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Dumbrell's *The Faith of Israel* offers its readers a brief introduction to the message of the individual books of the Old Testament. As such, its focus is on the final form of the Masoretic Text. Dumbrell does not deny that the biblical writers relied on various source materials in compiling the canonical books (10), but he finds the debate over such introductory questions to be grounded in subjectivity and marked by a lack of consensus. Thus, he adopts a text-centered approach that seeks to describe the theological movement found within each book.

Dumbrell has taught at institutions throughout the world: Moore Theological College in Sydney, Regent College in Vancouver, and Trinity Theological College in Singapore.

This is the second edition of Dumbrell's original work from 1988. The first edition was a well-respected resource, especially among evangelicals. The new edition is significantly longer than the first, contains updated bibliography, and includes new insights gained through Dumbrell's ongoing study of the biblical text.

*The Faith of Israel* begins with a brief introduction in which Dumbrell offers his understanding of the unifying center of the Old Testament: "God, who created the world

with a New Creation in ultimate view, to be achieved ideally by human cooperation, had given Israel a model in the Eden narrative of what the world was to be" (9). The principal human vocation is the proper exercise of dominion in the service of God's creation. The rest of the Old Testament functions in relationship to this initial vision. The spread of sin in Gen 3–11 shifts the focus from representative humans to the nation of Israel. The remainder of the Pentateuch highlights Israel's corporate vocation, institutions, and covenant regulations for life in the promised land. In the Pentateuch as well as in the remainder of the Old Testament, there is a balance between focus on God's creational intentions in Gen 1–2 and humanity's propensity for repeating its earlier failures of Gen 3–11. The Former Prophets focus on life in the land. This new reality for Israel ushers in the need for kingship and for prophets who will watch over Israel's covenant commitments. The Latter Prophets include the content of the prophetic message, which serves to call to account Israel's tendencies to fall short of the nation's vocational commitments before God. In light of Israel's collapse at the hands of the Babylonians, the prophetic word gives rise to an eschatological hope of a new beginning. For Dumbrell, the New Testament's various Christologies serve as further fulfillment of the Old Testament's prophetic vision. The Writings fit into Dumbrell's paradigm in a variety of ways. The wisdom books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes depend on creation theology and thus relate well with the divine order instituted in Gen 1–2. Psalms functions as the hymnbook of the Second Temple. Ruth, Song of Songs, Esther, and Lamentations are associated with Israel's sacral festivals. Daniel offers an apocalyptic message emphasizing God's control of history. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles close out the Hebrew canon. For Dumbrell, Chronicles is a fitting end to the canon because it anticipates the coming of God's kingdom and a second exodus.

*The Faith of Israel* presents the Old Testament according to the order of the Hebrew canon. Although much of the book is derived from Dumbrell's own exegetical work, he has not labored in isolation. He makes reference to standard scholarly treatments in each chapter. It is disappointing, however, that Dumbrell does not offer the reader specific suggestions for additional reading for each canonical book. Dumbrell's most common approach is to offer a brief programmatic summary of the biblical book, followed by an interpretive reading of its main sections. In most cases, a concluding paragraph or section provides a final assessment, often with an eye toward the book's abiding significance and its relationship to the remainder of the Old Testament. The organization, however, remains uneven. Some books, such as Deuteronomy and Job, rightly receive extended conclusions given their prominence. On the other hand, the content of an equally important book such as Psalms is barely treated, and its conclusion functions more as an introduction to the wisdom books that follow than as a conclusion to the Psalter.

The overarching contribution of *The Faith of Israel* is its unified, canonical approach to the Old Testament. The reader is constantly reminded of the wider literary context of the Old Testament as well as links with the New Testament writings. Dumbrell has amassed a lifetime of learning into a relatively slim volume. For this, readers are in his debt.

Despite Dumbrell's textual focus, historical-critical questions remain unavoidable. Dumbrell's conclusions tend to be conservative, such as a pre-Israelite settlement date for Deuteronomy and an early monarchic date for Ruth, but these are not offered from a polemical or defensive posture.

Dumbrell's promise-fulfillment model may be problematic for some readers. Dumbrell reads the Old Testament not only as a witness to the faith of ancient Israel but also as the precursor to a greater fulfillment beyond itself. For Dumbrell, this is the coming of Jesus Christ as witnessed in the New Testament. Dumbrell, however, is subtle in his presentation. He does not read an explicit Christian message into the Old Testament. Instead, a strength of his presentation is his focus on demonstrating that much of the Old Testament's witness is in fact open-ended and anticipates future salvific acts by the God to whom it testifies.

A chief weakness of Dumbrell's book is his failure to address many of the obvious questions that careful readers of the biblical literature will ask. For example, Dumbrell does provide a discussion of Job and the problem of evil, but he covers the book of Exodus without a word about the cause of Pharaoh's hardness of heart. Likewise, in his discussion of Joshua, there are no remarks on the ethics of holy war. Obviously, a book of this size cannot offer exhaustive answers on such matters, but an introductory survey should at least touch on them.

Issues of selection and detail are also problematic for *The Faith of Israel*. Given Dumbrell's emphasis on creation and its aftermath, it is unsurprising that a full fourteen pages (13–27) are devoted to explaining Gen 1–11. The creation narratives of Gen 1–2 are read in comparison with *Enuma Elish*, and Dumbrell makes frequent recourse to other ancient Near Eastern materials to explain the creation pattern in Genesis as well as key elements such as the *imago Dei*. The problem, however, is that for most of the remaining sections of the Old Testament Dumbrell moves away from the detailed analysis with which his book begins. Furthermore, as part of his discussion of Gen 1–11 he argues that creation represents God's initial covenant in the Bible. Thus, the Noahic covenant in 6:18 and 9:8–17 is merely a continuation of the one found implicitly in Gen 1–2. While Dumbrell's argument is plausible, his framework does not do justice to the dominance of the Sinai covenant in the Pentateuch (Exod 19:1–Num 10:10), nor does it take into account the chiasmic arrangement of the explicit pentateuchal covenants that have been

noted by many scholars: A Noahic (Gen 6:18; 9:8–17), B Abrahamic (Gen 17:1–14; cf. 15:1–21), C Sinai (Exod 19:1–Num 10:10, especially Exod 19:1–34:28), B' Covenant with Phinehas (Num 25:11–13), and A' Covenant in Moab (Deuteronomy). Given the dominance of Sinai, it is striking that Dumbrell devotes only seventeen pages to the Sinai pericope (37–53). Besides the early portions of Genesis, Dumbrell provides the most comprehensive coverage to the Latter Prophets. The forward-looking nature of the prophets fits well with Dumbrell's emphasis on a movement toward a new creation.

*The Faith of Israel* concludes with a modest bibliography and subject index. The bibliography includes representative scholarly works that have been cited within the body of the text. Given the scope of *The Faith of Israel*, the bibliography's usefulness would have been enhanced if its entries were arranged according to the biblical book(s) to which each relates.

Overall, *The Faith of Israel* is a good introduction to the essential content and narrative flow of the Old Testament with an emphasis on the interconnectedness of its constituent parts and its anticipation of further developments. This book certainly is not the final word on the meaning of the Old Testament, nor does it offer answers for every question that a beginning student of the Bible will ask. It, however, can serve as a springboard for more in-depth study of individual texts. *The Faith of Israel* is written from a conservative Christian viewpoint, so it will find its best audience in Bible survey classes in evangelical institutions or as a resource for interested nonspecialists.