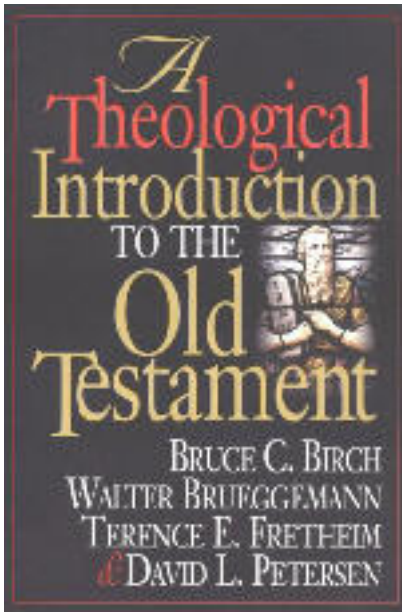


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**Birch, Bruce C., Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen**

*A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*

Nashville: Abingdon, 1999. Pp. 475. Paper. \$40.00.  
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Tim Bulkeley  
University of Auckland/Carey Baptist College  
Auckland, New Zealand

Unavoidably one's first impressions of a book are shaped by its physical presentation and title. This volume is a large paperback, the paper and binding of which give the feel of a book designed to endure years of use, surviving on the shelves and dipped into with pleasure for many years after it was bought as a textbook. Indeed, its stimulating, thought-provoking ideas and style suggest that this is how many readers will use it. One can imagine this work still suggesting ideas for sermons years after its first reading.

The authors preface their work by speaking of the experience of "teaching introductory Old Testament courses in the context of a theological school" (11) and (by implication) contrast their theological approach with the tradition of historico-critical studies (17). They expressly seek to enable the biblical text to be a witness not only of ancient Israel's faith but also to the church's life today. Their intended readership is "introductory seminary students" (11), although they express the hope that the book might be useful in college and university classes also (12).

The body of the *Theological Introduction* comprises twelve chapters. The first is different from the others and presents an overview of what the authors mean by describing the Old

Testament as “theological witness.” This concise but clear presentation is organized according to a series of tensions, between

- ▶ the nature of the text as ancient but also present (Scripture);
- ▶ Scripture, understood critically in historical, literary, canonical, and public modalities; and
- ▶ a diversity of message as well as expression in the text, while also a continuity both within the canon and with later communities based upon these Scriptures (both Jewish and Christian).

After an introductory chapter on “The Old Testament as Theological Witness” the work is historically organized. The authors move through the “story” of the Old Testament and focus in turn on different collections of “key texts” and deal with “key topics” from that period’s story. In this way an outline of the history of Israel, and the main sections of the biblical text, are covered. The titles of these sections, with their associated themes, and the texts chosen for each chapter, reveal much about the positions taken by the authors.

Chapter 11 does not fit the chronological framework, yet it begins with a strong statement of the centrality of history to the way “Israel held together the *realities of public life and public power and the reality of God in its midst*” (373). This paradoxical presentation introduces “another mode of faith” that used “quite different interpretative categories” (374), which is recorded in the wisdom texts. Looking at the subtitles of this chapter is suggestive of the mix of literary, social, and historical introduction with theological reading that this volume offers.

- ▶ “The Horizon of Wisdom Teaching” introduces wisdom literature as theological teaching.
- ▶ “Common Sense Permeated by God’s Holy Will” presents the proverbs of Proverbs as community wisdom.
- ▶ “The Royal, Scribal Function” discusses the collection of wisdom (through Proverbs and selected wisdom psalms) as an international movement and function of the royal court.
- ▶ “Protest against Conventional Settlements” introduces the book of Job.
- ▶ “The Enduring Question of Theodicy” briefly relates Job to contemporary concerns.

- ▶ “Hiddenness at the Brink of Futility” discusses Ecclesiastes as a text on the margin.
- ▶ “Lived Experience as the Data of Faith” summarizes, presenting the wisdom writers as practical, not “churchy” (414), theologians.

So, although the team situate themselves as interpreters who have moved “beyond historical criticism” (21) the overall organizing principle of *Theological Introduction* is historical, and narrative and prophetic texts receive stronger treatment than poetry or wisdom (treated outside the historical framework in chapter 11). Thus, the authors’ engagement with the conclusions of historical criticism leads to Ruth not being covered at its place in the story (reflected in the Greek and Western Christian canons) but in chapter 12 along with Esther and Daniel. This presumably concords with the (supposed) time frame of its composition, though *Theological Introduction* does not discuss this. The dates of composition of some texts are addressed, so for example Isa 56–66 is “regularly attributed to the period soon after the second temple was completed” (435). However, both arguments and evidence to support these datings, and discussion of possible alternative views, are sadly absent.

The pattern of each chapter is different, reflecting the different literature and themes that are being presented. However, the overarching historical framework allows a theologically stimulating conjunction of material that has usually been kept separate by the canonical ordering scheme traditional in the introduction genre. For example, the final chapter deals with 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Isa 56–66, Joel, Malachi, Jonah, Song of Songs, Daniel, Ruth, Esther, and selected psalms. This allows an evocative and provocative stream of theological thought about each of these works. Such theology is often hidden by traditional introductions and perhaps bypassed by traditional theologies of the Old Testament, with their more doctrinal approach. Here the approach is social and pastoral, presenting what these texts might have meant for ancient Israelites in their context. This approach encourages readers to make connections to their own situations.

The co-authors are renowned as teachers and preachers, and their goal is to suggest or provoke theological reflection. So, in the introduction to wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes is understood as expressing a “modest faith,” preaching the need to “keep on keeping on . . . as an act of faithful resistance to a faith-denying culture” (412). Indeed, the work is peppered with fine phrases and provocative ideas:

Because of loud and strident believers who prefer to cite only carefully selected references, one might conclude that biblical faith is always militant, upbeat,

successful, and triumphant. But of course this is not so. Here is a modest faith that is close to depression. (412)

Having presented the work, and suggested some of its strengths, one must also assess its claims and its success in fulfilling them. The title of the work, using the phrase *Introduction to the Old Testament*, suggests a well-known genre of introductory textbook. However, qualifying this title with the word “theological” immediately alters the reader’s perception. Rolf Rendtorff is quoted (on the back cover) as saying, “as the title suggests, this book combines two usually separated matters. It expounds the topics of the classical Introduction to the Old Testament, at the same time explaining the biblical texts as a witness to the church and synagogue through the generations.” These two tendencies meld sometimes uneasily in the one work.

On the one hand, an introductory textbook cannot assume that its readers already possess significant knowledge of the subject. In accordance with this, in places even the most basic concepts are explained, such as “the tabernacle [was] a portable sanctuary” (133). However, already chapter 1 assumes that the reader understands that wisdom is an international movement. Similarly, by page 39 the reader is expected to comprehend a reference to Gen 2:4 as a genealogy. Hebrew speakers could recognize in *toledot* such a meaning. How are other beginning students to understand this verse in this way without some explanation?

Such unevenness is perhaps inevitable in a work seeking to create a new genre of scholarly writing, or at least to reinvigorate an old one. It does, however, raise questions about the book’s intended role as introductory textbook. Perhaps the publishers recognize this when they say on the back cover: “The intention is that this book be used alongside other resources in an introductory course. The authors do not aim for comprehensive coverage of all matters appropriate to introduction of the Old Testament.”

An example of this is the policy (noted above) of bypassing many of the most contentious issues. Neither conservative nor skeptical readers will be happy to be given only statements of positions that “some scholars” hold, with little or no indication of the positions taken by others or of the arguments and evidence used to support these positions. So, for example, it is frustrating simply to be told that:

While a majority of scholars hold that some of Israel’s ancestors lived in Egypt along with other Semitic foreigners during the second millennium and that a general dating of the exodus from Egypt must be placed in the early thirteenth century BCE, these and other historical details are uncertain and debated. (103)

In many ways such caution is accurate and commendable, but the beginning student needs more. This leaves a potential purchaser, or a reviewer, to face the issue of how this book might be used. As has been suggested above it cannot be *the* textbook for an introductory course. But might it, as the publisher suggests (see above), be used as *a* textbook for such a course? The crucial question for the teacher is: Can I imagine using this book, alongside another more traditional introduction to provide the core contents of my course? I can.

The work will also be of use to frustrated students, in both seminary and university classes, who have come to theological study with the desire to study theology (rather than religious studies or ancient history). Such students are often ill-served by our current offerings: dry history, postmodern ambiguity, academic caution, or religious bigotry leave many unsatisfied. If such students, laboring through their introductory Old Testament class, come across this book, they will be well rewarded. It is a work to nourish the intellect and the faith. It is written by Christian teachers for students for whom the Bible is Scripture but who desire to approach this text using the results of two centuries of critical enquiry and who also desire in the end to discover theological meaning in the text.

This is an interesting, stimulating, and useful book. The authors claimed to be filling a perceived gap in current offerings, and indeed there is only one other work on my shelves that achieves such “theological introduction” while remaining within the tradition of critical academic biblical scholarship, John Drane’s *Introducing the Old Testament* (rev. ed.; Oxford: Lion, 2000), and that is an academically much lighter work, aimed at college rather than seminary classes.