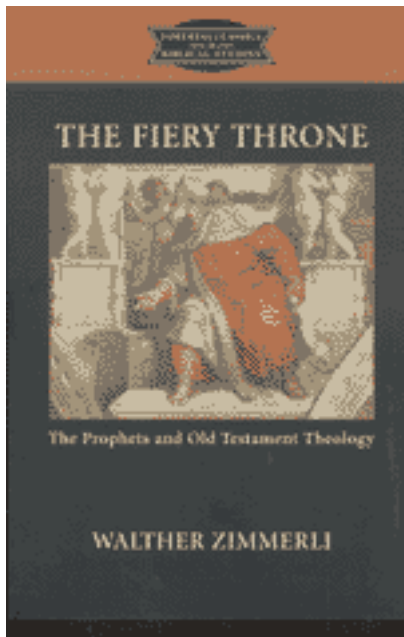


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**Zimmerli, Walther**

***The Fiery Throne: The Prophets and Old Testament Theology***

Fortress Classics in Biblical Studies

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Why read old scholarship? This is a question raised not just by this particular collection of the work of Walther Zimmerli but by the series in which it appears. This sixth volume in the Fortress Classics in Biblical Studies series is a collection of eight essays on theological aspects of the prophetic literature by the renowned interpreter and theologian Walther Zimmerli. All eight of the articles have appeared in print before, most of them in both German and English. Their dates of initial publication range from 1951 to 1985, so they cover a large expanse of Zimmerli's academic career. The enormous influence of Zimmerli's work on the study of the prophetic literature may be accepted as a given, so the evaluation of this volume may proceed on the basis of three criteria: (1) Does the volume effectively and conveniently bring together works by the author that might be difficult to obtain for many readers? (2) What do the essays look like when viewed through the lens of the two to five decades of scholarship since they were written? and (3) Does this old scholarship shed light on the current status of its subject matter?

The first essay, "Prophetic Proclamation and Reinterpretation," appeared in English in 1977, and a German version appeared in print one year later. This overview of tradition criticism of the prophetic literature provides a great introduction not only to the subject but to the work and thought of Zimmerli himself. His primary concern is the way in

which each of the prophetic books make use of the religious traditions of the Pentateuch. To be sure, some of the historical questions addressed in this essay are of far less interest than they were a quarter of a century ago, but a shift in concern toward the more contemporary, related subject of intertextuality is visible in Zimmerli's work.

It is readily apparent from its title that the second essay, "From Prophetic Word to Prophetic Book," addresses issues still of interest to contemporary students of the Hebrew Scriptures. The English version of this article did not appear until 1995, but the German original was published in 1979. Thus, it stands at the turning point between the eras dominated successively by historical-critical and literary-critical methods. The focus is on the final redaction of the prophetic books and provides ample demonstration that this approach to the text provided much of the impetus toward contemporary attention to the final form of the biblical text. This is clearly a direction in which Zimmerli's own thoughts were moving as the end of his career approached. He described, for example, the general movement of the book of Ezekiel from "words of doom" to "words of salvation" (36). On a negative note, contemporary readers might find Zimmerli's discussion of the "theological validity" (42) of the redaction process somewhat odd and his unquestioning assumption of the priority of the Masoretic Text of Jeremiah outdated.

A 1985 essay called "The 'Land' in the Prophets" is in the third position. This was a subject that interested many biblical scholars at this particular time, of course. This English publication took place two years after Zimmerli's death, and no German version was ever published, so it is difficult to determine exactly when it may have been written. The essay examines Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel one at a time for their treatment of the subject of land. Given the direction of the previous essay, it is a little surprising and disappointing that the primary interest here is the tradition-historical trajectory of prophetic ideas about land, with little concern for the role land plays in the final forms of these six prophetic books. Relatively speaking, this is the weakest of the essays in the collection.

"Visionary Experience in Jeremiah" appeared in English only in 1982, near the time of Zimmerli's death. The direct and indirect comparisons to the role of visionary experience in Ezekiel make it likely that this was an ancillary concern that took form in Zimmerli's mind as he prepared his monumental commentary on Ezekiel. The form-critical and tradition-critical analysis in this essay identify the Jeremiah tradition as the location of the emergence of visionary experience as a major aspect of prophetic identity. The observations here are still valid for those concerned with how reports of such experience continue to function in prophetic books long after the initial context is gone. Zimmerli at least moves toward this question, without asking it directly.

The fifth essay, “The Message of the Prophet Ezekiel,” appeared in English in 1969 and, subsequently, in German in 1974. This essay looks very much like a working introduction to Zimmerli’s commentary, and it has the feel of a work in progress. The tone of the essay is very theological. It is less concerned with literary issues and the design of the book of Ezekiel itself than some of the other essays that address Ezekiel.

“The Word of God in the Book of Ezekiel” is a tradition-critical treatment of some of the central passages in Ezekiel, particularly those that make use of highly provocative images, such as Ezek 15; 16; 20; 23; and 37. This essay was published in German in 1951 and in English in 1967. Zimmerli appropriately struggles with the implications of the statement from God in 20:25, “Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live” (101). At the same time, there is only the vaguest sense of discomfort with the violent sexual images of Ezek 16 and 23. His primary concern is with the theological content of such passages, while the troubling nature of the vehicle that carries those messages is largely ignored.

The best of the three essays addressing just Ezekiel is the seventh entry, “Form and Tradition in the Book.” Published in English in 1965 after being presented at a conference in the previous year, this essay must also have come out of the preparation of the commentary. Here Zimmerli produces keen observations about the forms of the components of the book of Ezekiel. They are a reminder that our attempts to talk about the composition of whole prophetic books are dependent upon careful attention to small details. Zimmerli’s discussion of “sign acts” in Ezekiel extends beyond tradition-critical concerns with obvious implications for subjects such as speech-act theory and the rhetorical function of symbolic actions and their accompanying speech.

In the final position is a long essay called simply “Biblical Theology,” which was published in English in 1982 and in German in 1984. Zimmerli’s concern here is with the whole Christian canon, specifically the relation between the Testaments. “At this point Old and New Testament language must coalesce into a ‘biblical language’, into the formation of biblical theology” (137). The tremendous difficulties of this task and the problem posed by the Christian claim on the Jewish scriptures, which Nietzsche had characterized as a theft and a “philological farce,” are set forth here in the form of a proposal. This essay develops the questions that Zimmerli believed a biblical theology must answer. These questions likely arose out of the writing of Zimmerli’s last book, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, and perhaps pointed to what would have been his next.

Returning to the question with which this review began, a first-rate theological library would likely provide access to all eight of these essays, though they would have to be chased down in eight very different places. The library at my university would give me

access to only three of them. Therefore, this collection provides an important and useful resource. Too often new trends in scholarship are characterized as a repudiation of the past. Biblical scholarship that emphasizes the final form of the text at times suffers from supersessionist tendencies. Zimmerli's work, which concluded during the time of a significant shift in biblical studies, demonstrates how the results of one era of scholarship feed the questions and concerns of the next, even when transitions are not seamless. No contemporary student of the prophetic literature can ignore the work of this great scholar, and this is a fine primer on the subject.