



## **Old Testament Theology for Ministry: The Works of Claus Westermann in English Translation**

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In October of 1979, an article appeared in *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung*, the daily newspaper of Heidelberg, Germany, celebrating the 70th birthday of Claus Westermann, Professor of Old Testament. Included is the following comment:

He is among the theological professors who came to the university out of parish ministry, and this background in the church has given Westermann's work its special characteristics to this day. For him, the scholarly interpretation of the Old Testament always has something to do with the contemporary practice of church and society, and therefore he has worked tirelessly to bring scholarly interpretation and practical life into close relationship with each other. With great willingness he has accepted invitations from congregations, study groups, and institutions of learning for countless lectures, discussions, Bible studies, and sermons. And many of his scholarly works arose directly out of such practical work in the congregation.<sup>1</sup>

The subtitle for this journal is "Theology for Christian Ministry." That phrase catches the intent of Westermann's writings precisely. In this issue devoted to Scripture, it seems appropriate to comment upon some of Westermann's publications now available in English, and to make suggestions for their use in the work of the preacher and teacher.

For Westermann, experience and exegesis are always closely related to one another. Thus it is important to begin with a brief sketch of his own life, indicating how he came to devote his attention to the Old Testament.

Westermann was born October 7, 1909, in Berlin. His father had been a missionary in Africa, and later became a professor of African languages and ethnology in Berlin. He finished his studies in philosophy and theology in 1933, and decided to become a pastor. In the German educational system a year of study in a practical seminary follows the university training. During that practical year Westermann was among a group of some thirteen young men who left the seminary because of Nazi pressure, and who then re-assembled as a seminary of the Confessing Church, led by Pastor Martin Niemöller in Berlin. Discussing his encounter with the Old Testament there, he says:

<sup>1</sup>Rainer Albertz in the *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung*, October 8, 1979, translated by John Rossing.

We began with the Bible, with the Old Testament. I began to read the Old Testament. It became an existential question for me....No one had taught us anything about it in our university studies. We discussed the psalms and said, "Is this the way we should pray? If so, we'll read the Old Testament!"<sup>2</sup>

For five years during World War II, Westermann served in the German army. During a part of that time he was a translator on the Russian front. Commenting on his wartime experiences he says:

There were times when you could not understand God anymore. You had to speak against God. Then I saw that this was what really happens in the Psalms and in Job. Out of this I learned the difference between petition and lament....In Russian prison camp one time we stood in a circle to have a worship service. One of us was asked to pray. He read Psalm 103. We were standing with our heads bowed, stooped over. But afterward I thought, "That's not the way to praise God! Such a psalm has to be spoken with joy, your head raised, your body erect!" In that experience I learned the difference between real praise and our notion of prayer. Then I began my dissertation, writing on a little board, sometimes trading bread for paper. It was then that I discovered that the psalms of the Old Testament really come out of human experience.<sup>3</sup>

After the war Westermann served as a pastor in Berlin. Then Professor Walther Zimmerli offered him a chance to study with him in Zurich in 1948 and 1949. Westermann wrote his dissertation there, entitled "The Praise of God in the Psalms." In 1949, in addition to his pastoral duties, he became a teacher at the *Kirchliche Hochschule* in Berlin; out of this period came his *Handbook to the Old Testament* and *Handbook to the New Testament* (published as one volume in German). In 1958 Westermann was called to join the Old Testament faculty at Heidelberg and remained there until his retirement in 1978. He currently lives with his wife, Anna, in St. Leon, near Heidelberg, where he continues his work of writing.

## II

The "selected" bibliographies of Westermann's publications through 1979 list ten pages of articles, books, and helps for preaching.<sup>4</sup> A glance at the list of works translated into English, given at the end of this discussion, indicates something of the vast range of Westermann's interest in the Old Testament.

In 1978 his *Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzügen* (Theology of the Old Testament in Outline) appeared in Germany.<sup>5</sup> This volume provides a concise synthesis of a lifetime of study. Though not as thick as the theologies of Walther Eichrodt or Gerhard von Rad, it takes its place alongside those classics as one of

<sup>2</sup>Comments by Westermann at the Sprunt Lectures, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1 February 1977.

<sup>3</sup>Comments at the Sprunt Lectures.

<sup>4</sup>These bibliographies, listing works in German and in translation, may be found in *Forschung am Alten*

*Testament: Gesammelte Studien II (Festschrift for Westermann's 65th birthday; ed. Rainer Albertz and Eberhard Ruprecht; München: Chr. Kaiser, 1974)* and in *Werden und Wirken des Alten Testaments (Festschrift for his 70th birthday; ed. Rainer Albertz and others; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980)*.

<sup>5</sup>Published in Göttingen by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978.

the significant syntheses of the Old Testament material for our time. An English translation is scheduled to appear soon.<sup>6</sup> A condensed version of Westermann's approach to Old Testament theology is available in the book, *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?*, based on the Sprunt Lectures given at Union Seminary in Virginia in 1977.<sup>7</sup> An abbreviated discussion of each of the six topics listed below may be found in that book.

Since a major issue in writing a theology of the Old Testament is the arrangement of the material,<sup>8</sup> we offer on pages 177-178 a translation of the table of contents of the *Theologie* to indicate how Westermann envisions the task. In the discussion which follows, we shall comment on each part of that work, indicating how earlier publications available in English fit into the structure of the whole.

PART I—*What Does the Old Testament Say about God?* This, says the author, is the question to which a theology of the Old Testament must be addressed. The answer must be based on a consideration of the Old Testament as a whole. No one concept, such as covenant, election, or salvation, can be taken as the “center.” Since “the Old Testament tells a story” (Gerhard von Rad), “the structure of an Old Testament theology must be based on events rather than concepts.”<sup>9</sup> The threefold structure of the canon—Torah, Prophets, and Writings—gives the clue to organization. Here we find narrative or story, the word of God entering into that story, and the people's response to God's words and actions. In summary,

The theology of the Old Testament thus remains determined in every aspect by the outline of a story, which has been entrusted to us, and to which belong the occurrence of God speaking and the response of those who experience these events.<sup>10</sup>

PART II—*The Delivering God and History*. At this point Westermann introduces a distinction which is of crucial importance for his interpretation of the whole Bible, namely, that between deliverance (*Rettung*) and blessing (*Segen*):

From the beginning to the end of the biblical story, God's two ways of dealing with mankind—deliverance and blessing—are found together. They cannot be reduced to a single concept because, for one reason, they are experienced differently. Deliverance is experienced in events that represent God's intervention. Blessing is a continuing activity of God that is either present or not present. It cannot be experienced in an event any more than can growth or motivation or a decline of strength.<sup>11</sup>

Here Westermann offers an exposition of the exodus event, the central demonstration of God's “delivering” activity in the Old Testament.

PART III—*The Blessing God and Creation*. In the discussion of the themes of creation and blessing we find some of the author's most creative and distinctive

<sup>6</sup>Translated by Douglas Stodt. Atlanta: John Knox Press, scheduled for publication in 1981.

<sup>7</sup>Bibliographical data on all of Westermann's works available in English are given at the end of this article.

<sup>8</sup>See Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975).

<sup>9</sup>*What Does the Old Testament Say About God?*, p. 12. Cf. *Theologie*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup>*What Does the Old Testament Say About God?*, p. 14. Cf. *Theologie*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup>*Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, pp. 3-4.

insights. His many works dealing with creation all indicate a desire to revitalize that theme for the Church:

When the theology and the preaching of the Church are concerned only with salvation, when God's dealing with man is limited to the forgiveness of sins or to justification, the necessary consequence is that it is only in this context that man has to deal with God and God with man. This means that God is not concerned with a worm being trodden to the earth or with the appearance of a new star in the Milky Way.<sup>12</sup>

Other works dealing with creation include *The Genesis Accounts of Creation, Beginning and End in the Bible*, sections of *A Thousand Years and a Day, Handbook to the Old Testament, Our Controversial Bible, What Does the Old Testament Say About God?*, and the articles on Genesis and on creation listed in the bibliography. It should also be noted that Westermann's commentary on Genesis 1-11 is scheduled for publication in English soon.<sup>13</sup>

The book, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, treats that theme at length. The rediscovery of the blessing activity of God is a necessary supplement to a one-sided emphasis on the mighty acts of God. Blessing, says Westermann,

is a quiet, continuous, flowing and unnoticed working of God which cannot be captured in moments or dates. Blessing is realized in a gradual process, as in the process of growing, maturing, and fading. It is not as if the Old Testament is reporting only a series of events which consists of the great acts of God; the intervals are also part of it; in them God gives growth and prosperity unnoticed in a quiet working, in which he lets children be born and grow up, in which he gives success in work.<sup>14</sup>

PART IV—*God's Judgment and God's Mercy*. In the sentence quoted above, Westermann indicated that "the occurrence of God speaking" belongs to the story of God and people. In this way prophecy is linked to the "story" theme. His analysis of prophecy of judgment is available in *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*. Salvation prophecy is dealt with in the article, "The Way of Promise through the Old Testament" as well as in the commentary on Isaiah 40-66. *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?* offers a discussion of these topics, and *A Thousand Years and a Day* provides an excellent introduction to the whole subject of the

prophets and prophecy.

PART V—*The Response*. Also belonging to the Old Testament story is “the response of those who experience these events.” Section A summarizes the author’s research on the psalms. Here is another area where Westermann’s work has been particularly significant. His approach to the psalms is discussed in the article “Psalms, Book of,” in *A Thousand Years and a Day, Handbook to the Old Testament, What Does the Old Testament Say About God?* and in the book, *The Psalms*.<sup>15</sup>

Scheduled for publication soon is *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, which will re-

<sup>12</sup>*Creation*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>13</sup>*Genesis 1-11*, translated by John J. Scullion, scheduled for publication by Augsburg in early 1982. This is a translation of the first section of his work in the *Biblischer Kommentar* series. The commentary is available in German through Genesis 36; Professor Westermann is currently at work on the last section, dealing with chapters 37-50.

<sup>14</sup>*What Does the Old Testament Say About God?* p. 44.

<sup>15</sup>Note that the second printing of this book includes a number of revisions and corrections.

print the earlier *The Praise of God in the Psalms* and supplement it with a number of articles on the laments.<sup>16</sup>

Of special importance is Westermann’s work with the psalms of lament. In prison he had discovered that at times “you had to speak against God.” He writes,

...in Western Christendom the lament has been totally excluded from man’s relationship with God, with the result that it has completely disappeared above all from prayer and worship. We must ask whether this exclusion is actually based on the message of the New Testament or whether it is in part attributable to the influence of Greek thought, since it is so thoroughly consistent with the ethic of Stoicism.<sup>17</sup>

PART VI—*The Old Testament and Jesus Christ*. Westermann deals with this topic in a book with that title as well as in *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?* Consistent with his concern to deal with the Old Testament as a whole, each part of the canon is discussed in its relationship to Christ. Note again the significance of the “deliverance” or “rescue” theme: “The beginning of the Old Testament tells the story of a rescue in the book of Exodus. The beginning of the New Testament tells the story of a rescue in the Gospels.”<sup>18</sup>

### III

How can these works by Professor Westermann be used in the work of the pastor and teacher?

1) The small book, *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?* can point the direction toward an integration of the Old Testament materials. The clue is provided by Westermann’s statement, “The Old Testament thus remains determined in every aspect by the outline of a story.” One can relate narrative, prophetic, and psalms materials to this theme in a way which is simple enough to be utilized in teaching at all levels and, of course, to inform one’s own

preaching. The book works well as the basis for a study group of pastors or highly motivated lay persons. If used in this way, interest can be heightened by listening to portions of the lectures on tapes. Introductions by Patrick D. Miller, Jr., John Bright, Mathias Rissi and others as well as comments by Westermann put these lectures into a living context.<sup>19</sup>

2) The works on creation are of special help for anyone who has to deal with that topic, at all levels of instruction and in preaching. The most convenient summary is found in the book, *Creation*. The interested reader can go as far as desired with this topic, beginning with the short presentation in *A Thousand Years and a Day* and continuing through other works to the detailed exposition in the forthcoming Genesis commentary.

<sup>16</sup>Translated by Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen. Atlanta: John Knox, scheduled for publication in 1981.

<sup>17</sup>“The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament,” p. 25.

<sup>18</sup>*What Does the Old Testament Say About God?* p. 81. Cf. *Theologie*, p. 192.

<sup>19</sup>Available as the James Sprunt Lectures for 1977, from the Library, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 3401 Brook Road, Richmond, VA 23227.

3) Westermann’s rediscovery of the blessing theme is of immediate relevance to ministry. The section in *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?* provides an introduction, and the theme is dealt with at length in the book devoted to the topic. In the last part of that book, “Blessing in Worship and in the Rituals of the Church,” Westermann makes a comment about worship, picking up on the distinction between deliverance (or salvation) and blessing:

Worship is often interpreted in terms of God’s saving actions in Christ in the same one-dimensional way that salvation is interpreted in theological thought. In this view the only decisive occurrence in worship is the proclamation of the message of God’s saving work in Christ, and the congregation’s response to that message. To be sure, this is the center of Protestant worship, but it is not the whole of worship. Worship mediates not only God’s saving activity but his blessing as well.<sup>20</sup>

The author continues with some suggestions for invigorating our theological understanding of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial. Westermann writes, “These rites constitute today a particular opportunity for the church, since the blessing imparted in them involves the well-being and peace of family life.”<sup>21</sup>

4) Congregations which use the *Lutheran Book of Worship* are now giving the psalms a wider hearing, since the reading of a psalm is part of each Sunday’s worship. This provides an opportunity for using the psalms in both teaching and preaching. It is in dealing with this part of the Bible that Westermann’s writings are perhaps of the most help for the work of pastor and teacher. The book, *The Psalms*, is an excellent resource for preparing a series of adult classes. One could extend the classes for six sessions, dealing with the psalms discussed in each of the first six chapters. Or a series of sermons for Lent could be oriented around the psalms with the help of this book. Westermann’s insights on the laments are of value for preaching and teaching, and for counseling as well.<sup>22</sup>

5) Finally, *A Thousand Years and a Day* is a book which has gone through eight printings in Germany and which has been translated into five languages. This rather remarkable popularity is indicative of the usefulness of the book as a very simple and readable introduction to the Old Testament.

#### IV

There are signs that we are on the verge of a rediscovery of the Old Testament in our churches. In the Lutheran congregation where I grew up we heard only the Epistle and Gospel texts read, Sunday by Sunday. But now an Old Testament lesson and a psalm are a part of each week's worship. Important questions from outside the churches are also focusing our attention on the Old Testament. Explora-

<sup>20</sup>*Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, pp. 108-109.

<sup>21</sup>*Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, p. 120.

<sup>22</sup>In addition to Westermann's materials on the laments, see the perceptive discussion by my colleague Daniel J. Simundson in chapter 2 of his book, *Faith Under Fire* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980). Another colleague, Wendell W. Frerichs, has prepared for publication a series of Prayer-Lament Services, designed for the use of both individuals and groups in times of distress.

tion of outer space compels us to reconsider the creation texts. Exploitation of the powerless calls us to listen once more to the prophets. Anxiety about the future of the "late great planet earth," evidenced in books and movies, leads us to investigate the apocalyptic materials in the Bible again. The popularity of the "story" form, ranging all the way from a nation's fascination with "Dallas" on television to an individual's search to discover the story of his or her own family, invites us to rediscover the Old Testament as story, and to hear as adults some of the old stories we first heard as children.

In each of these areas the writings of Claus Westermann can provide us with fresh insights and reliable guidelines, as we go about our task of relating text to context, word to world.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>I wish to acknowledge the assistance of our Reference Librarian, Ray A. Olson, and my assistant, Donald E. Johnson, in the gathering of materials for this article.

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page 176

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page 177

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### *Theology of the Old Testament in Outline*

#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

##### PART I—*What Does the Old Testament Say about God?*

1. The story (*Die Geschichte*)
2. The Word of God in the Old Testament
3. The human answer
4. The oneness of God as that which makes the story possible

##### PART II—*The Delivering God and History*

1. The meaning of the delivering activity of God in the Old Testament
2. The event of deliverance and history
3. Elements in the event of deliverance

##### PART III—*The Blessing God and Creation*

###### A. The creator and the creation

1. The primeval events, Genesis 1-11
2. The making of the world, the world as God’s creation
3. The making of man, man as creature

###### B. Blessing

1. The continuous and the individual acts of God, blessing and deliverance
2. The history of blessing in the Old Testament

C. Creation and blessing in the history of religions and in the Old Testament

PART IV—*God's Judgment and God's Mercy*

A. Sin and punishment, prophecy of judgment

1. Sin and judgment
2. Prophecy of judgment

B. God's mercy

1. God's mercy with the individual
2. God's mercy with his people, prophecy of salvation

C. God's judgment and God's mercy at the end: apocalyptic

1. Apocalyptic and prophecy
2. The theological meaning of apocalyptic

---

page 178

PART V—*The Response*

A. The response in speech

1. Calling on God in the Old Testament
2. Praise
3. Lament

B. The response in action

1. Commandment and law in the Old Testament
2. Worship

C. The response in thinking or reflection

1. Devotion and theological reflection
2. Theological interpretation of history, the great historical works of the Old Testament (Yahwist, Deuteronomistic history, Priestly writing)

PART VI—*The Old Testament and Jesus Christ*

1. The historical books and Christ
2. The prophetic proclamation and Christ
3. Christ and the response of the people of God
4. Conclusion: On the question of a biblical theology