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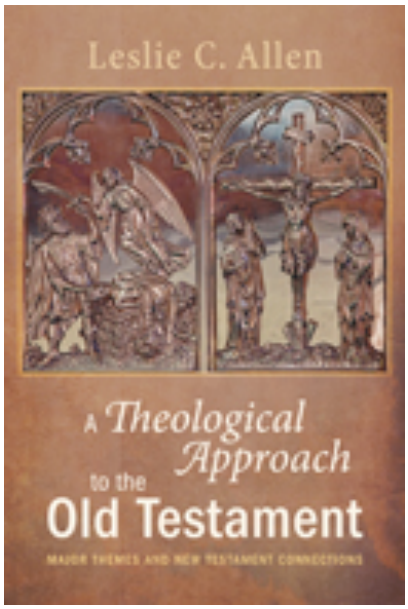

Leslie C. Allen

A Theological Approach to the Old Testament: Major Themes and New Testament Connections

Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014. Pp. xi + 206. Paper. $20.00. ISBN 9781625642493.

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According to its introduction, this book was developed from lectures given by Professor Allen as part of a Korean-language DMin course at Fuller Seminary in 2012. In its published form, the work retains an easy hortatory style of a lecture, even though it reads like a written work. This style makes it eminently suitable for use as a supplemental textbook in a course on Old Testament taught from a Christian perspective, particularly an MDiv or undergraduate course. Pastors and lay people will also find the book an easy, edifying read.

Allen observes that many Christian pastors are afraid to preach from the Old Testament. "In focusing on the OT aspect of biblical theology, it is hoped that this book will especially encourage pastors to preach more from the OT in their services and give it more prominence in the teaching programs of their churches" (2). He therefore sets out to exposit a biblical theology of the Old Testament. Rather than seeking to ascribe "Christian" meaning to the Old Testament, his approach is to let the Old Testament speak for itself. He thus hopes to restore the Old Testament to its proper "primary importance" for Christians—"primary" temporally and narratively, not in terms of priority. He considers the Old and New Testaments as organically related but as part of an unfolding story (5–7). Therefore, Allen sees his task as "teaching Christian students to be good

Jews," so that they may fully appreciate first the First Testament on its own terms, and then the ways in which the New Testament authors build their theology on their scriptures (6–8).

Allen's approach to Old Testament biblical theology is thematic rather than book-by-book (5–6). He suggests that "a thematic approach does justice to the diversity of OT theology by bringing to the fore complementary and contrasting aspects in a challenging and comprehensive way" (6). The two main themes to which he connects subthemes are creation (ch. 2) and covenant (ch. 4). Wisdom (ch. 3) is a subtheme of creation, and Israel's religion and the Davidic covenant (chs. 5 and 6) are subthemes of covenant. Internationalism (ch. 7) links brings the ideas of creation and covenant together as the nations relate to Israel and to Israel's God. An eighth chapter discusses the relationship between the themes of creation and covenant.

Because the book is more theological and not directed at a scholarly audience, Allen gives little attention in the body to critical concerns: "The final form of OT literature is the basis of discussion, with a postcritical perspective that accepts moderate historical criticism" (ix). The footnotes reveal a deep engagement with a wide spectrum of biblical scholarship that a reader would expect from a senior scholar in the field. Perhaps this is one of the features of the book that distinguishes it from comparable works on Old Testament biblical theology written for an evangelical nonscholarly audience: it may serve to introduce evangelicals to valuable nonevangelical perspectives in a sensitive, pastoral tone. Most pages contain at least one reference to the New Testament, demonstrating the Old Testament bases of key New Testament themes and concepts. Yet at each point the Old Testament voices are heard without being drowned out by the New Testament.[1]

Allen also sprinkles anecdotes, particularly from his experience as a hospital chaplain, that demonstrate pastoral uses of the Old Testament texts—quite appropriate, given the genesis and purpose of the book. The stories on 48 and 101 are particularly poignant, but I will not spoil them for the reader.

In chapter 2, "God as Creator of the World," Allen focuses his attention primarily on the Genesis accounts of the creation and the fall, but he also draws from the psalms and the prophets to show God's interest in and care for creation after the fall. Keeping with his theological approach to the final text, he acknowledges the differences between Gen 1:1–2:3 and 2:4–25 but points to the areas of agreement: a transcendent Creator of an orderly world, monotheism, humanity created nobly in God's image, the lavishness and care of

1. In this respect the book resonates with the goal of a recent publication by Allen's colleague at Fuller, John Goldingay (*Do We Need the New Testament? Letting the Old Testament Speak for Itself* [Downers Grove, IIL.: IVP Academic, 2015). Goldingay has written one of the jacket endorsements for Allen's book.

God's provision for creation, and human responsibilities toward God and the rest of creation. He acknowledges the validity of an "original sin" reading of Gen 3 (e.g., 2 Esdr 7:8; Rom 5:12–21), but suggests (following Goldingay and Fretheim) that sustained exegesis of Gen 3–11 also leads to the idea that the human evil inclination is "universal and inescapable" (25–26).

Allen associates wisdom with creation in chapter 3: "God's role in Wisdom literature is that of creator and controller of the world—both the natural and the human world.… The wisdom tradition prizes theological ethics just as much as the covenant tradition does" (29). Wisdom is "skill in living" within the world and its rules as God has ordained them. Wisdom may therefore be found in sources outside Israel's revelation, including international wisdom traditions (31–32) and in human observation (34). Allen also introduces the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, in which he finds the "paradox," the "mystery," and the "self-criticism" of Old Testament wisdom (37–48). Yet Allen does not drive an unnecessary wedge between wisdom and "anti-wisdom":

> Proverbs found that life has a discernible meaning *much* of the time and reinforces its teaching of moral values with incentives and deterrents. The other two books presuppose and oppose a development among wisdom teachers in which the *whole* of life has a discernible meaning. (42, emphasis added)

In chapter 4, "God in Covenant Relationship," Allen focuses on two covenants: the patriarchal covenant, and the Sinai covenant. Throughout his discussion he observes the dualities within these covenant relationships: divine and human obligations (56–64); "grace and justice as rival role expectations for God" (64–65); the human obligations to love both God and neighbor (68–70); collective versus individual actualizations of the covenant (71–74); and covenant sanctions giving way to restoration because of God's covenant relationship to his people (76–79). He draws freely not just from the Pentateuch but from the Prophets and the Writings in exploring these tensions. Allen builds on these ideas to show both positive and negative portraits of the law covenant in the New Testament (the "NT connections" section of this chapter is longer than those of the other chapters in the book, save for the ninth chapter).

The fifth and sixth chapters provide a fairly standard overview of Israel's religious life and the Davidic covenant. Allen addresses the different understandings and manifestations of the divine presence, as well as the sacrifices of Israel's worship. He links the psalms to the covenantal aspect of Israel's religious life; the psalms affirm, appeal, and protest God's attributes and actions within the context of his covenant relationship with Israel (97–101). Allen stresses the conditionality of the Davidic covenant: the king was to provide order and true justice (104–6), while God agreed to give the king military victory and

dominion over the nations (106–7). The psalms and the prophets celebrate God as king over Israel and the world and also protest God's failure to grant the king success (e.g., Ps 89). In each of these chapters, Allen shows the points of similarity to New Testament ideas, while all the time letting the Old Testament speak with its own voices.

In chapter 7, Allen surveys the many different ways in which the Old Testament portrays the other nations of the world and their relationships to Israel and Israel's God. Ultimately he prefers Brueggemann's term *internationalism* over *universalism* (which carries systematic-theological baggage) to describe the Old Testament's interest in the nations. Some scriptures describe Yahweh as interacting independently of Israel with the nations (113–16). The nations may also be the enemies of Yahweh and Israel (116–25), allies of Yahweh *against* Israel (125–26), the imperial keepers of Israel for Yahweh (127–28), and eventually the political subjects of Israel and Yahweh (128–30). Individual foreigners are also participants in the worship of Yahweh (128–30), and the nations are variously said to be both spectators of and participants in Israel's salvation (130–40). Allen concludes:

> The OT offers a bewildering variety of perspectives about the nations other than Israel, and the NT shares much of its versatility. Even in the OT the dominant exclusiveness of the covenant relationship is matched with recurring evidence of inclusiveness that draws in other nations.… The scattered and long-range nature of the positive material in the OT flowers in the NT into pervasive and contemporary concerns. (140)

Having surveyed these subthemes under the basic headings of creation and covenant, Allen addresses the relationship between these concepts in the eighth chapter. It must be remembered that God's covenant relationship to Israel was crafted in order to benefit the whole world (144). Where there is apparent tension between God's obligation to the creation and his obligation to Israel, God errs on the side of mercy, and mercy toward the nations in particular (150–51): "The book of Jonah presents the tension between covenant and creation at its best. It challenges a concept of covenant that can be held at the expense of creation."

If there is a weakness in this book beyond the limitations inherent in the purposes articulated above, it is that the book has no concluding summary. The ninth chapter, simply titled, "New Testament Factors," is perhaps a form of conclusion, but it introduces important ideas that should not be relegated to a conclusion. The book ends somewhat abruptly, where a summary of even a few pages might have been helpful.

A formatting idiosyncrasy made the structure of the arguments somewhat difficult to follow within individual chapters: the font sizes and styles for the first-level and second-level headings are very similar. This sounds like a nitpick, and perhaps it is, but I found that I was constantly flipping back to other pages to determine whether a heading was intended to continue the previous subtopic or to introduce a new topic.

Allen states in the introduction that the course on which the book is based was intended as a companion to a course taught by another Fuller colleague, Seyoon Kim, entitled, "Biblical Theology of the New Testament for Pastors" (ix). It would be fascinating to see such a course adapted into a companion textbook.

Professor Allen has written a stimulating and accessible treatment of Old Testament biblical theology that provides teachers, pastors and lay readers with rich insights and a map of Old Testament thought that renders the Old Testament less intimidating—no small feat.