

VanGemenen, Willem A., et. Al. “A Guide to the Old Testament Theology and Exegesis.” In *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Ed. by Willem A. VanGemenen, 1:5-218. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997 (214 pp.).

Compiling a useable theological dictionary of any sort is no small feat but to compile one of the caliber of the *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* is worthy of highest praise. The sheer scope and size of the project, not to mention the thoroughness that marks each contribution, puts this work in a category that few other works achieve. One reviewer noted VanGemenen and his team of editors along with almost 200 competent scholars compiled over 1200 pages of material presented in over 3000 lexical entries – a feat that makes it difficult for any reviewer to approach with any criticism. (Eng, *JETS*, 42:305) *NIDOTTE* is a valuable resource for any serious study of the Old Testament and should occupy a prominent place on the shelf of every pastor desiring to give serious attention to preaching from the Old Testament.

Purpose and Intent

Of particular value are several additional features beyond the actual dictionary entries contained in the work. One such feature is the introductory section that serves as a guide for doing evangelical theology and exegesis from the Old Testament responsibly. Consisting of an introduction explaining the layout and function of the entire dictionary followed by ten articles addressing major issues associated with Old Testament theology and exegesis, the *Guide* sets out to provide a working methodology for using the dictionary in the context of theologically sound exegesis.

One’s approach to the OT largely determines what he or she gets out of it. The “method” of interpretation is the central issue of hermeneutics and of interpretational strategies. The issue of method presents a real challenge in that there is little unanimity on how to do exegesis, let alone biblical theology. In the first section of the dictionary, one will discover ten methodological essays that

bring together insights from areas that appear at first to be far afield, but which have a direct bearing on the exegetical and theological exercise: hermeneutics, textual criticism, biblical history, the OT as literature, linguistics, and biblical theology. (1:5)

Although attempting an ambitious goal, in general the articles (with a few exceptions) go along way down the road to accomplishing VanGemeren's stated objective. However, the obvious should be stated – in order to benefit properly from these articles and the rest of the volumes in the dictionary, the user must have more than a passing familiarity of Biblical Hebrew as well as standard hermeneutical and exegetical principles and practices.

Structure and Organization of the Set

The set consists of five volumes arranged in four major sections. The opening section contains a series of ten articles comprising a working methodology for doing theological exegesis and instructing the reader how to maximize the offerings provided in the dictionary itself. The second section consists of the lexical entries themselves arranged alphabetically and according to semantic domain. The third section comprises the fourth volume of the set and contains articles on specific topics related to Old Testament theology and exegesis. Samples of the kinds of topics addressed include articles on proper names, geographic locations, and theological concepts or topics. Especially valuable to the exegete are the book theologies that are included for every Old Testament book. The fourth section in the set is actually the fifth volume of the dictionary and contains the indices to the set. One index references each time a biblical reference occurs in any of the entries throughout the entire set. Another index is set up according to semantic field so that the user can readily access entries of words occurring

in related semantic domains. There are several other smaller indices that will provide much aid in different aspects of Old Testament research and exegetical study.

Organization and Analysis of the Guide (1:5-218)

The *Guide* addresses methodological issues related to exegetical and theological praxis. VanGemeren states the basic approach toward Old Testament theology and exegesis follows the historical-grammatical method as opposed to some of the new methodologies currently in vogue. However, he does clarify the articles do “include refinements in its nuanced concern for linguistics, literary analysis, and a historical-theological synthesis of the text.” (1:5) The *Guide* opens with an introductory article on hermeneutics followed by articles addressing five specific areas: 1) The Reliability of the Old Testament Text; 2) History, Theology, and Hermeneutics; 3) Literature, Interpretation, and Theology; 4) Semantics, Interpretation, and Theology; 5) Canon, Literature, Interpretation, and Biblical Theology.

In the first article, “Language, Literature, Hermeneutics, and Biblical Theology: What’s Theological About a Theological Dictionary?,” Kevin Vanhoozer examines the relationship between language and theology and attempts to address how language and communication affect the location of meaning. For Vanhoozer, meaning properly resides at the discourse level in the logical flow of thought. Since sentences are comprised of terms (words), the proper understanding of the meaning and theological implication of words is important. This is in part the value of a good theological dictionary. After a very interesting narration of the history of linguistic development from pre-modern up through post-modern linguists, Vanhoozer moves to the first of his major contentions, that language presupposes an extralinguistic reality. (1:27) He asserts the primary task

of interpretation is discovering and describing what a text meant for its original hearers.

(1:31) Vanhoozer next discusses the meaning of “meaning,” and demonstrates that the meaning of a text does not reside merely in the terms or words employed by the writer but rather in the thoughts expressed by those words in the context of discourse. (1:33)

He develops the implications for this for biblical exegesis in the following statement.

At the end of the twentieth century, we are on the verge of a similar recovery, not of the languages but of the literature of the Bible. An appreciation of the biblical texts as forms of extended discourse make two important contributions to biblical interpretation. It encourages us to treat biblical texts as certain kinds of literary wholes (viz., genres). It also requires us to treat the literary form more seriously, as the only access to the text’s content. To claim that the proper object of interpretation is neither individual words or atomic proof texts but rather discourse is to imply that biblical exegetes and theologians should attend to the whole text as a unified though extended piece of discourse. (1:35)

VanGemeren concludes by stressing that normative truth is not fully contained in the mere words of a text but rather in the overall context of the form and genre in which a particular statement, discourse, or story is presented by the biblical author.

Consequently, the exegete must understand how to interpret the different biblical genres.

The biblical text is the primary location of truth for Christians; the sacred page is the sacred teaching. But what doctrines there are in Scripture do not always take propositional form – in some case, the story is the doctrine, and the task of the theologian is to render conceptually explicit the understanding that is implicit in the narrative form. (1:43)

The ultimate goal in all of this is that the interpreter be instructed and not merely informed by the study of terms, statements, and discourse within a biblical genre. In Vanhoozer’s view, “the ultimate function of a good theological dictionary is not only to provide mere *information*, but also to aid in the *formation* of faithful and competent disciples.” (1:44) A lofty and worthy goal but one, in the opinion of at least one

competent reviewer, that goes beyond the legitimate role of a theological dictionary.
(Barrick, *MSJ*, 9:1 p. 121)

In the next article Bruce Waltke addresses the relationship of Old Testament textual criticism to exegesis and theology in “Textual Criticism of the Old Testament and Its Relation to Exegesis and Theology.” For the reader unfamiliar with the textual history of the Old Testament, Waltke’s article provides a helpful introduction and basic overview. One serious concern is Waltke’s deference to the linguist over the informed textual critic and/or exegete in resolving apparent difficulties and discrepancies in parallel Old Testament accounts. (1:54) While this may be the currently accepted route given the contemporary emphasis on genre, in the opinion of this reviewer Waltke has given the place traditionally reserved for hermeneutics and biblical/textual exegesis to linguistics and the results are not likely to be positive for a conservative traditional higher view of inspiration and inerrancy.

Eugene Merrill and V. Phillips Long contribute two articles that make up the second main division of the *Guide* — “Part II: History, Theology, and Hermeneutics.” Merrill’s article, “Old Testament History: A Theological Perspective,” is one of the best articles in the *Guide*. His major premise is that the Old Testament is more than just an accurate narrative of historical events and people. Rather, it is a theological history told by means of actual historical events arranged in specific literary contexts. Merrill clearly holds to the historicity and accuracy of the biblical events but his point is that those events in and of themselves are not the main point to the Old Testament, rather, they are arranged by the biblical author to communicate a theological message presented both

through direct propositional statement as well as by means of literary presentation as demonstrated in his example below.

The best-known critique is that of the so-called deut. historian, who, after looking back at Israel's history from the vantage point of her collapse in 722 BC, draws theological conclusions as to its causes and effects (2 Kgs 17). He states rather forth-rightly that "the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria" (v. 6) and then makes the dogmatic assertion that "all this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God" (v. 7). There follows then a lengthy litany of specifics, which, interestingly, traces the entire history of the nation in the span of seventeen verses (vv. 7-23). These verses are more than a mere recapitulation of that 700-year period – they are a sermon reflecting on it and attempting to draw lessons from it. They form part of that inescapable thread of interpretation that is woven into the fabric of the historical story of the OT. (1:74-75)

Perhaps most helpful to the reader is Merrill's analysis and identification of the historical and theological significance of each section of the Old Testament beginning with the individual books of the Pentateuch and progressing through the different eras of Old Testament history represented in the historical, prophetic, and wisdom books. The biblical exegete will find this section to contain many exegetical details valuable for teaching and preaching.

Long's article, "Old Testament History: A Hermeneutical Perspective," provides a nice follow-up to Merrill's. Among other things, Long helps the reader come to grips with specific hermeneutical principles necessary for responsibly navigating the relationship between the history of Israel and Old Testament history. (1:86) At the heart of this issue is "whether the OT can be viewed as a worthy source, even if not an exhaustive or exclusive one, for the reconstruction of the history of ancient Israel." (1:87) Long answers with a resounding affirmation of the historical reliability of the Old Testament. Of particular value to the reader are his clear illustrations by which he

presents both the tension followed by his proposed resolution. One example out of several will have to suffice.

The biblical conviction that God is the Lord of history not only runs counter to aspects of the historical-critical method (as commonly understood) but also conflicts with the belief system, or worldview, of some modern scholars For instance . . . when King Mesha (in the so-called Moabite Stone inscription) attributes his subjugation to and eventual deliverance from King Omri of Israel to the divine actions of the god Chemosh, few modern scholars are likely to accept Mesha's claim at face value, for the existence of a true god Chemosh, capable of affecting the course of human history, has no place in how they see the world. Thus, in their historical reconstructions they tend to ignore Mesha's claims and seek other, usually naturalistic, explanations for Mesha's experience of subjugation and deliverance. It is worth noting, however, that most do not proceed to write off the entire inscription as historically worthless because of Mesha's metaphysical claims. The OT is filled with similar claims about the divine actions of Israel's God, Yahweh. The question we must face, then, is this: Should these claims be dismissed in historical reconstructions in the same way that claims about Chemosh were? (1:91-92)

This illustration is actually a good example of the reality of this tension, and Long stresses the importance of possessing some measure of theological comprehension of the biblical sources even if one does not fully share the theological convictions articulated in those sources. (1:92) In a very insightful paragraph, he exposes the incongruity of the methodological practices of many OT biblical scholars who on the one hand are committed to excluding "from their historical reconstructions even the possibility of divine activity" and yet are not willing to bear the stigma of non-theism or even a-theism in their personal lives. (1:92) He concludes with a very helpful four step process for practicing historical interpretation from the Old Testament: 1) amass the evidence; 2) assess the evidence; 3) attempt a reconstruction; and 4) advocate the reconstruction. (1:96)

The third part of the *Guide* deals with the relationships between literature, interpretation, and theology. In an article entitled "Literary Approaches and

Interpretation” Tremper Longman III addresses the relationship between a word and a text. (1:103) He takes the reader on a brief survey of modern literary study starting in 1968 with James Muilenburg’s rhetorical analysis of specific Old Testament books up through Robert Alter’s influential work, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. He warns the reader to beware of common pitfalls in doing literary analysis of the Old Testament; chiefly, the intentional disconnection of the biblical author from his text and its meaning. (1:112) His material on genre and interpreting biblical prose and narrative is helpful but very basic compared to the fuller treatments readily available in many contemporary works on hermeneutics or biblical interpretation. However, his material on interpreting biblical poetry is extremely helpful and makes a significant contribution to the existing related literature. His explanation of the developments in thought related to parallelism in Hebrew Poetry are extremely thought provoking to one trained in the old approach. Philip Satterthwaite’s article, “Narrative Criticism: The Theological Implications of Narrative Techniques” is informative but too brief to do much more than give a cursory overview of the basic elements of narrative criticism and even there, he focuses primarily on four common elements: patterns, repetition, selection, and arrangement. Most standard texts on hermeneutics have much fuller and more helpful sections dealing with this topic. This article was among the weakest of the ten in the *Guide*.

The fourth section consists of two articles dealing with semantics, interpretation, and theology. Peter Cotterell leads the reader through the complexities and modern developments related to hermeneutics. His article, “Linguistics, Meaning, Semantics, and Discourse Analysis” is a bold attempt to present a readable presentation of a topic that is both vast and complex. Although his presentation does provide much help for the

reader, it must be read with caution. Several pitfalls present themselves in the course of his presentation starting with his observation that language has its origins in the human mind. (1:134) Scriptural evidence depicts God as the originator and inventor of language, at least in its spoken form. While this may seem petty, where one assigns the origin of language plays a significant role in the ultimate theory of interpretation and meaning. Additionally, Cotterell has clearly been influenced by the new hermeneutic in his contention that our pre-reading of the text hinders to some degree a truly objective understanding of the ancient meaning of that text intended by the author. (1:37) This affects his understanding of authorial intent and leads him to accept the notion of a hermeneutical circle. He argues that if we “locate meaning in the intention of the author . . . we are confronted with a different set of problems. Perhaps the most obvious of these . . . is the fact that the authors are long since dead, and their intentions are not usually available to us.” (1:41). However, the absence of a past author does not change the meaning/intention of the written text. Utilizing the normal laws of traditional hermeneutics, a modern reader can arrive at authorial meaning/intention with reasonable assurance of objectivity. In other words, the absence of a past author does not give a present reader the right to import new or subjective meaning to the text. John Walton’s article, “Principles for Productive Word Study,” wraps up this section and provides excellent help for doing individual word studies and for avoiding common fallacies that plague much preaching from the Old Testament.

The fifth section of the *Guide* contains two final articles addressing issues of canon, literature, interpretation, and Biblical theology. The first of these, “The Flowering and Floundering of Old Testament Theology,” traces the history of Old Testament

theology over the course of the last 200 years and concludes that serious evaluation must be given to the dangers as well as the benefits of the current focus on sociology and literature as key sources for developing a methodology for doing Old Testament theology. The final article by Richard Sculz attempts to provide a summary of sorts by calling for the integration of Old Testament theology and exegesis. In order to do this responsibly, the exegete must demonstrate sensitivity to the words, literary features, historical framework, and inter-textual relationship of the text under consideration. (1:85)

Evaluation and Conclusions

One of the primary concerns related to the *Guide* has to do with the selection and positive review of certain articles that seem at odds, at least on the surface, with VanGemeren's stated goal of presenting a methodology that would be in line with the historical-grammatical method. Specifically, the concerns addressed in the earlier discussion of Peter Cotterell's "Linguistics, Meaning, Semantics, and Discourse Analysis" seem to warrant more of a caution than the glowing introduction accorded them by the editor in the introductory paragraph to this section of the *Guide*. (1:34)

However, this concern aside, VanGemeren and his team of editors have compiled an extremely valuable tool for the exegete who desire to preach and teach the Old Testament accurately and theologically. This is definitely a set that belongs on the shelves of every pastor. And, in taking time to read the *Guide*, the reader will find a great deal of help and insight for using the dictionary effectively.