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# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY

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# The Future Role of the Bible in Seminary Education

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

“In the minds of most people, ranking close to the library as a conserving activity [of the seminary], is the teaching of the Bible,” declared the President of Illif School of Theology in Denver, Colorado in 1995.<sup>1</sup> He went on to say (somewhat matter-of-factly, for his purpose was to show how the Bible does not sanctify the *status quo*), “In every seminary, both mainstream and evangelical, biblical studies has a prominent position in the curriculum and requirements.”<sup>2</sup>

But it is precisely this assumption that must now be carefully examined. With all the talk of a major “paradigm shift” that is coming in the theological curriculum, it may well be the case that talk about the Bible maintaining a “prominent position in the curriculum” is purely propaganda for the purposes of assuring some of the more mature, but worried laity, that the seminary is continuing on track with the central task of teaching the Bible as it has in the past. It is at this point that the discussion must engage the modern nay-sayers head-on if the Bible is to continue to have the central role it exerted in the past and the role that most still assume it is going to have in the future.

## The Shape of the Curriculum in the Twenty-First Century

Most seminaries that have had an evangelical thrust in their curriculum and faculty in the past have experienced an enormous growth from the years of 1968 to about 1985. However, following the middle of the 1980s, the programs leading to the degree of Master of Divinity in seminaries accredited by the Association of Theological Schools began to suffer up to a fifty-percent loss in overall enrollments (bolstered in part only by the presence of large numbers of Korean and female students). This meant that fewer students were answering the call to take pastoral positions in the 1990s than in the previous decades. What makes this trend even more alarming is the estimate that “at least 40 percent of our ordained pastors in some mainline denominations [will be] retiring at the age of 65 by the year 2000 (and all indications are that this percentage will probably be [even] much higher).”<sup>3</sup>

Given this startling turn of events, it is all the more surprising that the new word on the lips of many boards and administrators is “downsizing.”<sup>4</sup> Adding to the fuel already in this fire is the recently conducted review by the J. J. Murdock Charitable Trust of Graduate Theological

Education in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>5</sup> Many have concluded that the most significant contribution of this study was in the area of curriculum and faculty. Based on the responses which they received from all segments of those quizzed, its conclusions are extremely pertinent to our study of the future role of the Bible in theological education. They conclude the following:

- (1.) The seminary curriculum is neither user-friendly to its users nor friendly to the church. Supposedly, there is too much academic work with too little concern for application and the needs of the church.
- (2.) The students tend to model the professionals of the academy rather than the professionals of the church. The present curriculum emphasizes too much of the "head" with too little of ministry skills.
- (3.) The curriculum has been driven by language and theological content skills, both of which graduates quickly lose or replace in favor of more pressing needs in the church.
- (4.) The curriculum must be expanded to become more friendly to the users, stressing things like management skills, finances, relational skills, counseling, preaching skills, leadership skills, planning and conflict management and personal spiritual development.

With such a long wish-list, is clear that something will have to give in the curriculum. Since in most seminaries the significant amount of time spent in learning Greek and Hebrew, along with courses in the Bible, consumes the largest portion of the overall curriculum, the hit must be taken in that area first of all. Is this a step however, in the right direction, and will it be an answer to our ills? This is the question that must be faced now.

### **The Value of the Old Testament**

One of the oldest questions in the history of the church is this: what is the value or worth of studying or using that portion of the Bible to which we refer as the Old Testament? Perhaps Christianity would stand to gain more from jettisoning her linages with the Old Testament than

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she would lose. Much time, after all, is consumed in most seminaries teaching Hebrew and the Old Testament corpus. If that same time could be spent on more practical subjects, the ministry of the church would be much further ahead, or at least such is the imagined result.

“The problem,” however, of “the Old Testament . . . is not just one of many. It is the master problem of theology,” warned Emil G. Kraeling.<sup>6</sup>

Kraeling proceeded to show why such is the case:

Once one has awakened to the commanding importance of this question, one will be able to see that it runs through the whole of Christian history like a scarlet thread. Yea more: one can see that much of the difference in theology springs from the extent to which they build Old Testament ideas and impulses into primitive Christian patterns.<sup>7</sup>

The tragedy today is that more and more Christians are beginning to agree with the awful estimate which Adolf Harnack gave of the use of the Old Testament in Christian thinking, living, and study. Harnack disturbingly concluded as follows:

The early church was quite right to keep the Old Testament in the beginning, but she should have jettisoned it very soon. It was a disaster for the Lutheran reform to keep it in the sixteenth century. But for Protestantism to cling to it as a canonical document in the twentieth century is a sin of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the fact remains true to the present day that almost every aberration in Christian theology can be traced back to some incorrect estimate of the use or abandonment of the Old Testament.

Everyone, for example, knows by now that Marcion declared that the God of the Old Testament was a different God from the God of the New Testament. Marcion labeled the God of the Old Testament a “demiurge,” an inferior being who created and ruled over the world, but who was not good in the same sense that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ was. But the early church vigorously disagreed with Marcion’s analysis. The same God whom we worship is the one who had spoken many times and in many ways in the past to our fathers by the prophets, but who has spoken in these last days through His Son,

Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-2a). He is the same God!

There is more, however, to the unity of the Bible than the fact that both testaments refer to the same God. The central message of the promise of God forms one continuous thread throughout both testaments. The increasing loss, however, of even any desire to study the unity of the Bible has placed both the church and the seminary in an extremely vulnerable position. It has meant that the seminary has offered, and thus the church has received, a more fragmented approach to comprehending the wholeness of the Biblical message.

Already in 1979 Professor James Smart, the former Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Union Seminary in New York City, observed the following:

Scholars and churchmen must come awake to the fact that some of the most capable students have not been making the journey very successfully from school to church, from fact to faith, from historical record to sermon text, from cultural artifact to Christian revelation.<sup>9</sup>

Most locate the problem in the fact that the seminaries are placing too much emphasis on the teaching of the theoretical subjects rather than on the more needed practical subjects in the practice of ministry. But that analysis seems to be more reflective of the values and priorities of our society today than they are of the overwhelming data of Scripture.

The great failure of the moment, as judged from the perspective of Scripture, is that there is an enormous famine in progress in many churches for the word of God. It may well be that the warnings of Amos 8:11 have come true:

The days are coming, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.

Despite the push to replicate the methods and techniques of the marketplace in the church in order to stimulate the growth of the church, Deuteronomy 8:3 is still true: “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” There may be wisdom in supplementing the primary task of feeding God’s people

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through the dynamic word of God, but in no case must this central task be exchanged or discounted in favor of a thousand other good objectives. Instead of supporting the present mania in theological education for diversity, discontinuity, pluralism, and fragmentation, it is time for evangelical seminaries, who place different values on Scripture, to resist the present trend. In place of the bifurcation, fragmentation, isolationism, and compartmentalization that are so much a part of current fashion, we ought to stick to what is most important according to our commitments in the past and teach the Old Testament as part of the unity of Scripture—and as foundational and essential to an effective pastorate. To the degree that God's people are fed with the real bread of the word of God, we will be spared from the unnecessary compounding of the demands of the perceived needs of so many who are driving the church wild with their frivolous agendas.

No one is better qualified to pronounce on this matter than the psychiatrist and Christian writer John White. He decried the present trend to substitute counseling for the exposition of the word of God. He explained as follows:

Until about fifteen years ago psychology was seen by most Christians as hostile to the gospel. Let someone who professes the name of Jesus baptize secular psychology and present it as something compatible with Scripture truth, and most Christians are happy to swallow theological hemlock in the form of "psychological insights."

Over the past fifteen years there has been a tendency for churches to place increasing reliance on trained pastoral counselors . . . to me it seems to suggest weaknesses in or indifference to expository preaching within evangelical churches . . .

Why do we have to turn to the human sciences at all? Why? Because for years we have failed to expound the whole of the Scripture. Because from our weakened exposition and our superficial topical talks we have produced a generation of Christian sheep who have no shepherd. And now we are damning ourselves more deeply than ever by our recourse to the wisdom of the world.

What I do as a psychiatrist and what my psychologist colleagues do in their research or their counseling is of infinitely less value to distressed Christians than what God says in His word. But pastoral shepherds, like the sheep they guide, are following. . . a new Pied Piper of Hamelin who is leading them into the dark caves of humanistic hedonism.<sup>10</sup>

There just are no substitutes for declaring the whole counsel of God to the whole body of believers. All additives prove in the end to be more carcinogenic and detrimental to our spiritual health than we had ever imagined.

Some, however, will still ask, "Where, then, shall we find any practical usefulness of that portion of the canon called the Old Testament? Surely we are finished with that section of the Bible now that Christ has come." The Apostle Paul, to be sure, instructed Timothy that the Old Testament was "profitable" and "useful" in 2 Timothy 3:16-17,<sup>11</sup> but how is that usefulness to be recognized in our day and age? There are, in fact, at least four areas where the value of the Old Testament comes through quite clearly: in doctrine, in ethics, in practical living, and in preaching. Without the input of the Old Testament in these areas, the church will continue to be as bankrupt in all four areas as many are at the present time.

First of all, then, there are a number of doctrines that come to their fullest expression in the text of the Old Testament. Some that come to mind immediately are the doctrines of creation (Genesis 1-2), the fall (Genesis 3), the law of God (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5), the incomparable greatness of God (Isaiah 40), the substitutionary atonement (Isaiah 52: 13-53:12), the new heavens and the new earth (Isaiah 65-66), and the second advent of our Lord (Zechariah 14). This list could go on, but these points are enough to demonstrate how bereft of a balanced theology the church would be if her seminaries suddenly decided to make room for the newer practical studies by jettisoning a significant portion of her biblical studies of the Old Testament.

To be, however, even more blunt about the situation, if we avoid the Old Testament and depend solely for the entire structure of systematic theology on the New Testament, we shall be providing the seedbed for the heresies of tomorrow or, at least (in the merciful providence of



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God), room for yet another para-church ministry that seems to flourish on picking up areas where the church has defaulted in its performance. It is impossible to say that we are declaring the “whole counsel of God,” as the Apostle Paul was able to announce in Ephesus in Acts 20:27, if we neglect or devalue 77.2 percent of what God had to say in His word.

It is also very clear by now that our generation has left an ethical and moral conundrum of enormous proportions which is due, in part, to a tendency to avoid instructing God’s people in the law of God in the Old Testament. Little or no instruction was given about the value of pre-born life prior to 1973, but now we find that we are reaping what we have sown as we are now approaching thirty million babies lost to abortion since 1973 in the United States alone—a figure that represents the total population of Canada at present and a figure that represents almost five times the six million Jews of whom Hitler authorized extermination! And at this very moment another threat sits on our doorstep with little or no instruction from the biblical text—euthanasia, or assisted death by doctors. In a recent poll over sixty-six percent of the American population saw nothing wrong with suicide assisted by doctors! Do not these results indicate that more and more moral black holes are turning up in our day because the teachings on ethical matters from the Old Testament have been abandoned or ignored?

Some, of course, will reply by saying that our ethical values are to come only from what the New Testament repeats from the Old Testament or what the New Testament initiates. If such, however, be the case, would not those Christians who say the New Testament teaches nothing about abortion be approved as choosing the proper course of action? And what shall we say to those who now wish to marry close relatives, practice bestiality, experiment in the areas of bio-medical oddities similar to Hitler’s scientists, who did such bizarre experiments on twins and the like? None of these topics, and more, are addressed in the New Testament.

Closely related to the theme of morality is the theme of practical lifestyle. Few sections of the Bible offer more down-to-earth guidance for living life than can be found in the wisdom-books. The extremely popular demand for para-church seminars that focus on basic conflicts in the family proves that there is a deep hunger among God’s people to

know how we are to live.

Likewise, a theology of culture, values, and possessions is offered in Ecclesiastes—a most positive statement on matters like the possession and power of enjoyment of things like leisure-time, spouses, food, drink, paychecks, knowledge, and goods. All these are gifts from God, but the gift of a thing has been kept separate from the power to enjoy the gift (Ecclesiastes 6:2) so that we might realize that no good thing, in and of itself, can satisfy people until each comes to know God and place all these things in their proper perspective. Indeed, the allegory of marital fidelity in Proverbs 5 (15-23) provides an entry into the figures and symbols of the Song of Songs, since they were both written by the same author. The powerful conclusion to this book of Solomon is to be found in Song of Songs 8 (6-7)—marital love cannot be bought, exchanged, or arbitrarily traded for other things; it is as a ‘flame from the Lord’ (verse 7).

All of these points call for a preaching mission in the church that gives high visibility to the part of the Bible that represents over three-fourths of what God had to say to us. A strong exposition of the word of God is needed—one that dares to announce the whole counsel of God’s will. It must be a message that has a strong prophetic element of *foretelling* the word over against the current national, international, economic, societal, familial, and personal morasses of our day. Yet how can we expect the pastors of the church to produce such expositions of the Bible when the trend is to downplay and downsize the biblical requirements in the seminary in favor of many of the newly perceived needs of the modern congregation.

### The Biblical Language

It must also be asked if it is necessary to continue to study the Bible in its original languages. Ever since the revival of the study of Hebrew among Christians in the fifteenth century, prior to the Protestant Reformation, the study of Hebrew was taken for granted as an essential basis for biblical exegesis. Since 1549, for example, Hebrew has been required to receive the degree of Master of Arts from the University of Cambridge. Thus the founders of Harvard College, being graduates of Cambridge, followed in the steps of their *alma mater* in stressing the importance of Hebrew in the preparation of ministers of the gospel.

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The motivating forces that led the founders of Harvard to such action were clearly stated:

After God had carried us safe to New England, and we had builded our houses, provided for our livelihood, rear'd convenient places for God's worship, and settled the civil government: One of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our *present ministers shall lie in the dust*.<sup>12</sup>

The reading of the Bible in the original tongues of Greek and Hebrew was seen as a prerequisite for the Protestant ministry in the life of this nation during its earliest days.<sup>13</sup> Evangelicalism can be no less dedicated to the same principle of studying the original languages. The reason for this undertaking has little, if anything, to do with tradition or an outmoded scholasticism. It is, rather, that no translation is inerrant; the appeal to inerrancy can only be to the original texts as represented by the best Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. As the Jewish poet Haim Nacham Bialik put it, "Reading the bible in translation is like kissing your bride through a veil." Nor is this point a matter of minor importance; for, in an area where the souls of mortals hang on the exact form of the divine word disclosed from heaven, mere approximations are even less acceptable than are generalized approximations in the area of science that affects our bodily health for some three score and ten years.

Greek and Hebrew study involves more than a mere ability to parse verbs and look up words in a lexicon or concordance or in one of several analytical tools in ways that can be taught in a matter of two to four hours of instruction. It involves, instead, the patient tracing of the "threads" of meaning through the syntax of the original language. Translations are unable to expose the "joints" or "seams" of the units of thought to the degree that a working knowledge of the original languages is able to give. It is the tracing of these connecting points in the syntax of a passage that is so vital in constructing sermons that reflect the original authority of the word of God.

Against the main eddies of our time that opt for subjectivistic meanings of the text of Scripture and argue that there are no absolutes

left (such as the authorial truth-intentions of the writers of Scripture who first stood in the council of God) stands the evangelical seminary that refuses to teach less than the original text of Scripture. It will help the seminarian very little to delete these types of study, for the approach has already been tried in liberal seminaries and has invariably led to a diminution of both the quality and the motivation for the study of Scripture.

The frequently heard objection that some pastors claim they have forgotten all the Greek and Hebrew which they ever learned must also be faced here. The criticism is that most students will not become Greek or Hebrew scholars and there is, therefore no reason why they should go to all the trouble of acquiring this knowledge. And since most of this learning will be lost by most pastors, should not the requirement be dropped altogether? If, however, this logic is correct, then on the same basis one could argue that all learning ought to be dropped—since much of it is forgotten as well!

A.T. Robertson, in his introduction to his massive Greek grammar, relates the following story:

At the age of sixteen John Brown, of Haddington, startled a bookseller by asking for a copy of the Greek Testament. He was barefooted and clad in ragged homespun clothes. He was a shepherd boy from the hills of Scotland. "What would *you* do with that book?" a professor scornfully asked? "I'll try to read it," the lad replied and proceeded to read off a passage in the Gospel of John. He went off in triumph with the coveted prize, but the story spread that he was a wizard and had learned Greek by the black art. He was actually arraigned for witchcraft, but in 1746 the elders and deacons at Abernathy gave him only a vote of acquittal, though the minister would not sign it . . . Surely young John Brown of Haddington should forever put to shame those theological students and busy pastors who neglect the Greek Testament, though teacher, grammar, lexicon are at their disposal.<sup>14</sup>

Such students and pastors should, indeed, be put to shame.

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### The Future of the Study of Bible in the Seminary

The lesson from the history of theological seminaries is that biblical orthodoxy depends on students being firmly grounded in the exegetical skills of interpreting the Bible. Pastors must, to be sure, excel in the practical areas of theology. They cannot do so if the foundation of their ministry is not an excellent understanding of Scripture and skills in the use of the original languages to provide the exegesis of that text.

The student rebellion, for example, in February of 1909 at Princeton Theological Seminary recently reorganized at that time,<sup>15</sup> should be adequate warning to all who long for similar paradigmatic shifts that would diminish the emphasis on the biblical languages and the mastery of Scripture itself.<sup>16</sup> At Princeton the students formulated and signed a petition that was presented to the Board of Directors asking that there be a decrease of hours in exegesis, both Hebrew and Greek, and that more practical courses be offered in its place, just as was being done Union Theological Seminary in New York City. The students suggested that more studies could be offered in sociology in place of the deleted courses in the Bible and the biblical languages.<sup>17</sup>

J. Gresham Machen, one of the leading professors of the New Testament of that day, steadfastly resisted this revision of the curriculum. In a letter to his parents on February 21, 1909, he wrote,

The students are exhibiting a spirit of dissatisfaction with the instruction that is offered to them. [They had particularly singled out the courses of President Francis Lindey Patton, William Park Armstrong (New Testament), and John D. Davis (Old Testament)]. . . Other seminaries have yielded to the incessant clamor for the "practical," and we are being assailed both from within and from without. I only hope the authorities will have the courage to keep our standard high, not bother about losses of students, and wait for better times. It is the only course of action that can be successful in the long run.<sup>18</sup>

Machen, of course, was proven to be right, for those who revised the curriculum to de-emphasize the biblical languages in favor of more practical courses exhibited a more latitudinarian theological perspective. Much to Machen's dismay, Princeton Seminary finally capitulated to the

students after President Patton retired in 1913. On the surface the issue appeared to be rather superficial, but in the end it was bound up with the very nature and purpose of a seminary. While the exegetical and practical aspects of pastoral ministry are inseparable, the exegetical is foundational to the practical and not vice versa. Therein lies the whole case for a strong emphasis on the Bible along with the biblical languages.

Machen's position (as ours today ought to be) was squarely where the editorial in *The Presbyterian* placed it on May 12, 1909. It declared that the difference of opinion arose "out of the deeper difference as to the purpose of a theological seminary":

If its primary purpose is to give young men a clear and systematic understanding of the truth of God revealed in His Word and the history and life of His church, one course of study will be readily outlined. If the purpose is, in some haste, to prepare young men to study the varying thought and attempt the regulation of the social order of the present time, a very different method of instruction will be necessary.<sup>19</sup>

For the sake of the future of theological education, the watchword for the coming days ought to be "Back to the Biblical Text" a good pastor "keeps his finger on the text while he ministers in the house of God and while he preaches the sermon." Thus, on matters of principle, we ought to stand unflinchingly, no matter how strong the pressure is to change the paradigm and to avoid some of the losses that may be experienced in enrollment, in approval and funding by the makers of current opinion and in the accolades of those who value innovation more than faithfulness to the word of God. For people will not live by practical ministries alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

### The Endnotes

1.      Donald E. Messer *Calling Church and Seminary into the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 76.
2.      Ibid.
3.      Ibid., 30.

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4. Timothy C. Morgan, "Re-Engineering the Seminary: Crisis of Credibility Forces Change," *Christianity Today* (October 24, 1994).
  5. This study costing \$100,000 was financed by the Murdock Trust. John Woodyard was the program officer who reported on the findings.
  6. Emil G. Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1955), 8.
  7. *Ibid.*, 7.
  8. Adolf Harnack *Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott*, second edition (Leipzig: 1924), 217. This translation appears in Salvador Muñoz Iglesias, "Old Testament Values Superseded by the New," in *How Does the Christian Confront the Old Testament?* Concilium, volume 30 (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), 99-100. The earlier statement of Harnack's edition of 1921 appears in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 14, note 5.
  9. James Smart *The Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 974-95.
  10. John White, *Flirting with the Word* (Wheaton, Illinois: Shaw, 1982), 114-117. One may also see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Crisis in Expository Preaching Today," *Preaching* 11.2 (1995), 4-12.
  11. One may see the discussion of the four verbs in this passage in *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament*, 26-32.
  12. *New England's First Fruits* (London, 1643).
  13. One may see the article by Robert H. Pfeiffer, "The Teaching of Hebrew in Colonial America," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 45 (1954-1955), 363-373.
  14. A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), xix. Ian Murray repeated the same story in his "Biographical Introduction" to John Brown's *Hebrews* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961, reprinting the edition of 1862), iii. Murray tells the story in this way: "Early one morning in the year 1738 a shepherd boy with homespun clothes and bare feet stood at the counter of Alexander McCulloch's bookshop in the university city of St. Andrews. The

startled shopkeeper was yet more surprised when he heard the youth's request; it was for a Greek New Testament. "Boy," exclaimed the Professor of Greek who happened to be in the shop at that moment, "if you can read that book, you shall have it for nothing." Soon a rather thick leather volume was in the lad's hands and to the astonishment of all present he read a passage and won his prize. By the afternoon sixteen-year-old John Brown was back amongst his flock on the hills of Abernathy, having walked some forty-eight miles since the previous evening to obtain his treasure."

15. Whereas the college had been established in 1746 to educate Presbyterian ministers and was known for many years as "The Theological Seminary," in 1902 a reorganization was effected by the division of the seminary from the college. The college was known as the College of New Jersey and the seminary came to be known as Princeton Theological Seminary.
16. For an account of the "Rebellion of 1909," one may see Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1977), 149-153.
17. This information comes from an article in the *Baltimore News*, as reported in Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 149. The case is also described by Wayne G. Strickland, "Seminary Education: A Philosophical Paradigm Shift in Process," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 32:2 (June 1989), 227-235, especially 233-235.
18. Stonehouse, 150-151.
19. *Ibid.*, 152-153.

Walter C. Kaiser is Colman M. Mockler Distinguished Professor of Old Testament in Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.