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Jaco Gericke, A PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL, EXPERIMENTAL, COMPARATIVE AND ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

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In summary: Koperski aims to offer a new model of divine action, in the process providing discussions of determinism and laws of nature from a philosophy of science perspective. While I remain agnostic as to the adequacy of Koperski's model, I found its introduction interesting and generally scientifically and historically well-informed. I would have liked to hear more about neoclassical divine action in a world whose fundamental theory is something like an Everettian or Bohmian theory of quantum mechanics, and I thought there were some weaknesses in the discussion of the metaphysics of laws of nature. But it is clear to me that Koperski has advanced a novel and credible contender for a theory of divine action, and that is no small achievement.

A Philosophical Theology of the Old Testament: A Historical, Experimental, Comparative and Analytic Perspective, by Jaco Gericke. Routledge Publishing, 2020. Pp. viii + 163. \$155.00 (hardcover).

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Old Testament (OT) scholars and analytic philosophers each employ technical language in ways that make it difficult for practitioners of one discipline to fully grasp what practitioners of the other discipline are saying. The potential for miscommunication between two disciplines, however, is a common roadblock for interdisciplinary work in general. But when such obfuscating and technical language is combined with caricature and dismissive attitudes between two disciplines, the potential for fruitful interdisciplinary work moves from merely difficult to practically unimaginable. This is the sort of impasse, in Gericke's estimation, found at the intersection of OT scholarship and philosophical theology. In *A Philosophical Theology of the Old Testament*, then, Gericke is self-aware as he enters into this interdisciplinary project between OT scholarship and philosophy, and he painstakingly chisels away at the confusions and befuddlements facing OT scholars concerning the nature and possibility of philosophical theology. Importantly, Gericke is himself an OT scholar (i.e., with a D.Litt in Semitic languages and a Ph.D. in Theology), so he is critiquing a guild from the inside, as it were.

Gericke begins with a chapter in defense of the claim that, as a general rule, OT scholars only "rarely, briefly and mostly negatively" speak about philosophical theology (1). That is, OT scholars, in Gericke's experience, tend to write off philosophical theology as antithetical to the project of biblical theology. Illustrative of this is the following reference to R. P. Carroll:



[R]eified and personified, descriptions of YHWH in the world of the OT texts are not affected, as is philosophical theology by contradictions and contrarities. But if the Bible is roped in the service of (such) theology, its conflicting images become problematic (*Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as a Problem for Christianity* [SCM Press, 1991], 38). (3)

As one progresses through Gericke's seeming deluge of quotations from OT scholars in chapter 1, a few commonalities emerge behind the thoughts proffered. There is, first, repeated resistance to philosophical theology found in Gericke's survey. But it is also clear that there is no common and universal understanding of "philosophical theology" with which the scholars referenced are working. Why might this be? Well, many of them apparently equate philosophical theology with a minimalist (and no-longer-typical) *natural* theology that fails to denote much of what is written by today's academic philosophical theologians. In other words, the scholars cited neither have a common conception of philosophical theology nor are they familiar with contemporary work.

This unfortunate phenomenon provides significant evidence for the thesis of the next chapter, namely, that philosophical theology is an essentially contested concept (especially as understood by OT scholars). Important for the purposes of this review, however, is the fact that Gericke wrote the chapter under question (chapter 2) "specifically for OT scholars." And perhaps he did so for the clear reason that contemporary philosophers would find the conclusion—i.e., that a philosophical theology of the OT is not *necessarily* in conflict with the project of biblical theology—not especially objectionable (13). Thus, we can move on from this chapter without further comment.

In chapter 3, Gericke returns to the style of surveying OT scholars, but this time he focuses on moments when otherwise anti-philosophical practitioners of biblical theology end up engaging in philosophical theology without realizing it. For instance, Gericke provides examples of work in OT theology employing everything from concepts of a divine essence, abstract vs. concrete objects, fundamental attributes of the divine nature, hypostases, negative and positive predications of God, etc. With such a plenitude of examples of OT scholars—excellent and important ones at that—already engaging in philosophical theology, Gericke concludes that not only is there no good objection to providing a philosophical theology of the OT, but such a project has been ongoing under the surface throughout the twentieth century as well. It is high time then, thinks Gericke, for the project of a philosophical theology of the OT to be recognized for what it is and practiced with more sustained attention and reflection than it has previously received. This, I would think, is something most readers could get behind without much reservation.

The close of chapter 3 marks the end of the part of the book aimed primarily at OT scholars. Gericke next turns to his own proposal and framework for constructing a philosophical theology of the OT.

To this point we have learned very little about the difference between philosophical theology in general and a philosophical theology of the OT in particular. So, what makes something a *philosophical theology*, on the one hand, and *of the OT*, on the other? Chapter 4 gives us Gericke's answer, that is, one inspired by Richard Rorty ("Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," *New Literary History* 10 (1978): 141–160). Something counts as philosophical theology if it is second-order discourse on the object of theological study where that object is thought, in Gericke's depiction, to be the text itself:

All our second-order discourse of what YHWH in the world of the text is like never really reaches the first-order religious language or the world of the text. "YHWH," "first-order religious language," "world of the text" and all that jazz is already second-order, as is even the concept of an "OT." (93)

This claim that our second-order discourse never reaches the objects represented by religious language, however, is likely a point with which many readers will take issue. Theology has traditionally been thought of as *scientia*, and as such, the object of theology properly speaking is God (i.e., as opposed to second-order religious language about first-order language about God). Why does Gericke assume here that theology must be about mental constructions the meanings of which are not determined via a connection to an external reality? A bit of semantic externalism concerning the meanings of theological terms would certainly put this assumption into doubt.

Gericke's characterization of a philosophical theology of the OT above is, moreover, related to another comment that might provoke a raised eyebrow or two. He claims, "The bad news is that there can be no pure or perfect philosophical-theological method that is not just another perspective" (94). But what is the point Gericke is trying to make here precisely? Is it the trivial truth that all methods that are employed in doing philosophical theology are employed by agents with a perspective? One would think that his characterization of this as *bad news* undermines an interpretation of his remark as merely trivial. But if so, then what point is being made? It is not at all clear in the text.

Whatever one thinks of the rather bald claim above, Gericke next outlines several distinctions that help us categorize various methods which might undergird a philosophical theology of the OT. This, in particular, is where we find an explanation for the bewildering quadripartite qualification of Gericke's method found in the subtitle of his book (i.e., *A Historical, Experimental, Comparative and Analytic Perspective*). Allow me to explain each *seriatim*.

By "historical," Gericke means that his approach "discusses its perspectives on the associated metaphysical problems [found in the OT] for their own sake" (100), whereas the contrasted contemporary approach focuses on questions and topics of interest to today's philosophical theologians (i.e., including those with no interest in seeing what the OT has to say independently).

By "experimental," Gericke just means that his model of a philosophical theology of the OT is not being built for extensive investigation. Rather, it

is built simply to see whether such a model can successfully or unsuccessfully get at the first-order language of the text, and in so doing either benefit or be benefitted by that interplay. In particular, Gericke does not intend for his model to be some sort of *prototype* for all subsequent discussions of philosophical theology of the OT to focus on or advance.

By “comparative,” Gericke intends to highlight that his method is inclusive of a wide range of philosophical theological approaches, such that other practitioners in his new field of philosophical theology of the OT should feel free to experiment with their own perspectives (e.g., phenomenological, continental, scholastic, or whatever) without feeling threatened by his preference for an analytic one.

And finally, by “analytic” Gericke simply identifies the philosophical tradition employed in the next chapter (chapter 5) as a test case to see whether it is possible to construct “a new descriptive second- or third-order metalanguage, a new kind of writing about old ideas OT scholars still have about YHWH in the world of the text” (105). In other words, Gericke has a very minimal aim in that concluding chapter. He merely wishes to establish that there is at least one perspective, an analytic one, in philosophical theology that can serve as a dialogue partner with the OT, and he accomplishes this by charting “what OT texts can and cannot” say about and alongside the “main topics” of contemporary analytic philosophical theology (106). Let us turn to his analytic experiment.

In chapter 5, Gericke suggests that what distinguishes his new discipline—i.e., philosophical theology of the OT—from OT scholarship and philosophical theology is that its proponents take the project of understanding the metaphysical assumptions of OT texts as a valuable aim in itself rather than valuable only instrumentally. Not only this, but his new discipline also takes it as valuable in itself to understand the metaphysical assumptions of OT scholarship in its attempts to get at the world of the OT text. Thus, *qua* philosophical theologian of the OT, one can direct one’s conceptual tools to either the OT texts themselves or the reflections by OT scholars upon those biblical texts, so long as one does so in part because one takes the use of conceptual analysis in this way to be intrinsically valuable (i.e., regardless of whether, for instance, the results of one’s conceptual analysis might play into an argument for a particular way of characterizing God outside of the world of the text).

This way of distinguishing a philosophical theology of the OT from plain and simple philosophical theology or OT studies is a bit odd. First, this way of approaching the distinction between disciplines presupposes that philosophical theology and a philosophical theology of the OT should be defined in a constructivist manner. Yet if the classical definition of theology as the study of God and all things in relation to God is correct, then the *theology* part of those disciplines will not be defined constructively. Not only this, but the idea of a *theology* that takes the OT as its primary object, rather than God, looks like a misnomer on this way of thinking, whether it is philosophical in nature or not. Second, given that this book is largely

intended as an apologetic for establishing a new discipline, there needs to be more time spent defending the value claim above, namely, that philosophical theologians of the OT must treat figuring out the philosophical concepts and assumptions operative in the world of the OT as an intrinsically valuable end. While I am inclined to accept the idea that uncovering such concepts and assumptions is intrinsically valuable (i.e., where such concepts and assumptions are to be found), I am less inclined to think it is *very* intrinsically valuable. Intrinsic value does not entail great value, and unless Gericke can establish that his project has *great* value, there is little reason to think it justifies the creation of a new disciplinary space. A third worry, which is related to the second, is that not only does Gericke need to demonstrate that his new discipline aims at something of great value, but he needs to offer further reason to think that creating a discipline is a reasonably good way of achieving his aims in the first place. The problem here, however, is that philosophical theology already has a number of practitioners who take the philosophical assumptions and concepts in the world of the text with utter seriousness (e.g., William Abraham, Eleonore Stump, Michael Rea, and the late Marilyn McCord Adams to name a few). Such theologians also find uncovering the assumptions and concepts in scriptural texts to be a valuable aim in itself, and one wonders why we should not simply encourage more future collaboration between OT scholars and contemporary philosophical theologians rather than attempt to establish a separate discipline.

Before closing it would be remiss of me to not mention that the ideas contained in the book are difficult to keep track of, and constant grammatical missteps often make it even more difficult to determine what the author is getting at. Given the book's price, it is unfortunate that there appears to have been so little copy editing done. One should factor this in when considering whether to purchase a copy.

Now, even if (as I suggested above) Gericke's reflections are not yet sufficient to merit the creation of a new discipline within OT scholarship, there are several worthwhile aspects of this text. It is a great resource if one wishes to find fertile textual ground for new engagement between philosophical theologians and OT scholars. Indeed, I doubt there are any other books that so much as approach the amount of gathered OT scholarship quotations engaging with conceptual analysis, or their own version of philosophical theology, as found here. It is also rare to find a text by an OT scholar with such an unambiguous commitment to the importance of philosophical analysis as practiced today for dealing with the OT on its own terms. In this respect, Gericke's book is certainly to be commended. Thus, even with the reservations I have registered, there are many things to like about this book. Hopefully, it can indeed contribute to a future of increased collaboration and mutual understanding between contemporary philosophical theologians and today's scriptural scholars as its author envisions.