

Goldingay's Evangelical Approach To The Old Testament: A Description and Critical Assessment of his Methodology

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Summary

To offer an account of Goldingay's methodology is a complex task. This is mainly because he did not refer to his method of interpretation in his Old Testament Theology as expected. Though this is the case, as a theologian with approximately 30 years of experience in the domain of Old Testament (OT) studies, he fortunately has several other books and articles on methodology. Hence, the paper's central focus is to analyze Goldingay's theological approach to the OT. In order to accomplish this, the author will make use of Goldingay's relevant books and articles with reference to methodology. In its first part, the paper attempts to describe Goldingay's Evangelical Approach to the OT with the central focus on his way of understanding the place of history in the Evangelical approach to the OT. We shall see that this could be assumed to be the determinative factor that shaped Goldingay's entire theology of the OT. This is what the present article attempts to prove. In order to do so, it needs a second part that consists of a critique of Goldingay's approach.

Key words: method and OT Theology, Evangelical OT Theology, OT history, history and faith, OT genres, OT gospel

Old Testament Theology Through Goldingay's Eyes: A Description

This part attempts to give a reliable account of Goldingay's methodology. The amount of books and articles published by him in over 30 years of work recommend him without hesitation. Though this is the case, after a serious reading of

his *Old Testament Theology*, one cannot resist the question that sticks to his/her mind: Why did Goldingay write this particular OT theology? In other words, what is behind this nice product of his theological thinking? Why did he write in the way he wrote? Why did he approach the text in the way he did? These kinds of questions will hopefully get part of their proper answers in this first part of the paper.

An Evangelical Old Testament Theology

Goldingay states that Scripture “points more to God’s actions and his grace than to our obligations” (Goldingay, 1995, 56). He again states later in the same book that “the Bible’s main concern is the gospel,” i.e., to be a witness to this gospel (91-93). This is the reason that he pleads for an understanding of the OT in the light of the gospel. It is important for the reader of his volumes to understand Goldingay’s evangelical presupposition¹ in approaching the theological study of the OT. But what, exactly, does Goldingay mean by “gospel”?

So what is the gospel? The gospel is the fact that God had such love for the world as to give up the only son God had, and that God did this so that people could live real life. The gospel is the fact that God has thus set about turning the world into what it was always meant to be, a world that reflects who God is. The gospel is the fact that God wanted to be in relationship with us, and took the action that was needed so that nothing would stand in the way of this relationship. We study the Old Testament in the light of that (Goldingay, 2001, 99).

For Goldingay, first of all, the gospel meant that God created the world out of love. The same God that we encounter in Jesus is the God who sent Abraham out of love, who elected his people out of love and guided them into the promise land. “The structure of Old Testament faith is itself that structure of the gospel - or rather, the structure of the gospel is the structure of Old Testament faith,” writes Goldingay (100).

Quoting the NT text that all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory, he makes space both for human failure and for God’s grace. Regarding this, he states,

Evangelical study of the Old Testament does not have to rewrite it in order to turn its heroes into saints; we can let them be the sinners we also are. We

1 By “Evangelical presupposition”, I mean the Evangelical lenses through which Goldingay looks at the OT. It has three dimensions: (1) OT seen as gospel; (2) a peculiar understanding of history; (3) a focus on the final form of the text. This will have both positive and negative implications, as we shall see later.

read the Old Testament as the story of God's grace not of human achievement (101).

This particular way of looking to the OT offers a considerable basis for the possibility of a strong connection with the NT.² Goldingay notices this when he states that "the gospel story is a continuation of Old Testament story" (Goldingay, 2001, 101-102).³ He sees the New Testament in the light of the OT, and says that the former "follows the pattern of the Old Testament and again kick-starts its story" (Goldingay, 2003, p. 31).⁴ He immediately safeguards his affirmation by explaining that this "does not mean that we read Jesus into the Old Testament" (Goldingay, 2001, 102). He resists any Christological reading of the OT and any typology or artificial techniques which point to Christ.⁵ For example, speaking about OT predictions, he says that "the New Testament does not attempt to persuade people that Jesus is the Christ on the basis of his having fulfilled predictions" (Goldingay, 2001, 102). In his understanding, what the NT actually brings is not a new revelation radically different from that of the OT, but rather a new event which "incarnates the truth of the old revelation," opening thus the possibility for the old ideal to be achieved (Goldingay, 1975, 43).

The second characteristic of the gospel articulated by Goldingay is the idea of relationship. You cannot speak about true love without relationship. And you cannot speak about a genuine relationship without communication. Goldingay puts this aspect at the core of his *Old Testament Theology*. The way he structures his volumes, and the accent he puts on the relationship between God and his creation sets this theme as one of the main themes of his theology. The Old Testament issued from "acts of communication between God and people," and

- 2 Following Barr, Goldingay moves toward a pan-biblical theology. He says that "it is the boundaries of the total canon that mark the area within which God has revealed his truth in Scripture, and our grasp of that truth will be at least incomplete, if not distorted, if we fence off one area and try to generalize about the rest in isolation" (Goldingay, 1975, 42).
- 3 Goldingay sustains the same when he states, "In a sense there can be no Old Testament theology; or rather it is a discipline without a *raison d'être*; and there can be no New Testament theology that omits all the New Testament's unspoken Old Testament presuppositions. There can in fact only be a biblical theology which cross-sections the whole canon" (Goldingay, 1975, 45).
- 4 He also mentions the OT's explicit forward look in his book *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (1990, 115).
- 5 He refers to this in his first volume, *Israel's Gospel*, where he states that his intention is "to write on the Old Testament without looking at it through Christian lenses or even New Testament lenses." He continues by saying that he is open "to say that the Old Testament's insights must be seen in light of those of the New, but only as long as we immediately add that it is just as essential to see the New Testament's insights in light of those of the Old" (Goldingay, 2003, 20-21).

from this springs the ethics of the church; the Old Testament was given “to form our worldview, to form our understanding of how God relates to us and how God relates to the world, and thus to shape our lives” (Goldingay, 2001, 103). By making use of the theme of communication, Goldingay partially succeeds in bridging the gap between the contemporary reader of the Scriptures and the original audience. He does this by referring to God’s concern for communicating both to the original audience and to us today. But since this element cannot do justice to the relationship between history and the contemporary church on its own, Goldingay is compelled to offer his understanding of it. This step, as will be shown, is crucial for the outcome of his OT theology.

History and Faith

At this point, it is important to see the way Goldingay understands history and its function within the Evangelical study of the OT. This step is crucial because it will help the reader to better grasp the presuppositions that stand behind his use of the OT text. How important is history in the study of the OT according to Goldingay? What is the proper place of history in biblical studies? Goldingay mostly faces these types of questions in his other writings, more than in his *Old Testament Theology*. This section aims to summarize his thoughts on history and its role in OT theology.

For Goldingay, the OT is not a history book (Goldingay, 2001, 109). He believes that it is a wrong assumption to think that the OT is about the history of Israel. Speaking about the exodus story, Goldingay writes,

It is passionately vital that this story refers to something that actually happened, but it appeals to the imagination, to the heart, to the instinct to worship, to the needs and aspirations and experience of the people who told this story over generations. It is not pure history (110).

It is important for the Evangelical study of the OT to know that the OT does refer to some historical events, but it is also important to understand that, as the historical approach to the OT already shows, there will never be consensus on the history that lies behind the OT text (111, 114). Discussing the relationship between story and history, Goldingay rightly observes that “the truth of the biblical story is more than its historical facticity” (Goldingay, 1995, 16). He rightly envisions the danger of reducing the theological study of the OT to a simple account of Israel’s history. Moreover, he recognizes the importance of the historical background in studying the prophetic books or the Epistles in the NT. Still, by overly stressing the dangers of a purely historical approach, he fails to keep a ba-

lance in his understanding of history.⁶ In his discussion about history in *Israel's Gospel*, Goldingay stresses the different character of the OT's history. He shows how the OT historical accounts depart from modern or postmodern ways by focusing, for instance, not merely on political issues or government action, but mostly emphasizing the law (Goldingay, 2003, 861). He furthers this by saying that "a civilization has the right to decide how to give itself an account of its past, and specifically whether to include God in its account."⁷ Though this is the case, it is extremely important that some historical events are behind the narrative because without them "the Old Testament narrative could not be the true word of God" (Goldingay, 2001, 111). Goldingay's peculiar view of history is even more strongly affirmed when he appeals to the dimension of faith. For him, the Evangelicals know that there is "some history" behind the OT books. He states that "the word of God has enough history behind it to be valid as the word of God" (114). This conviction is grasped through faith.⁸ It is faith that the OT is the word of God and that God did not give us something historically unreliable though we have no access to that history apart from the OT text.

"Letting the Voice of the Old Testament Be Heard"

Because of this particular view of history, Goldingay argues for the centrality of the text in the theological study of the OT. The object of study is the OT in the narrow sense (Goldingay, 2003, 16). In his understanding, the only valid way of knowing about this special kind of history is by paying close attention to the OT text. Goldingay has a strong passion for letting the voice of the OT be heard. The OT has "a capacity to speak with illumination and power to the lives of communities and individuals" (18).

Goldingay accentuates the importance of the final form of the text. In doing this, he sustains a unique approach to OT genres. In the first part of his book *Models for Interpreting Scripture*, he speaks about the so-called "overlapping of the biblical genres." By this, he is referring to the four main genres that appear in the

6 "The historical approach is capable of casting doubts on the truth of the text it studies, by questioning its historical value, but it is not capable of vindicating the truth of the text. [...] the historical approach inevitably thus fails to realize the text's own aim" (Goldingay, 1995, 20).

7 Because of this, Goldingay believes that fictional material is included in the OT. The example of Jericho as a "created story that comprises a concrete, vivid representation of the fact that YHWH gave Israel the land" shows Goldingay's use of the "present evidence that is a logical approach to take to the story." Genesis 1 is another good example of this kind (Goldingay, 2003, 861-63).

8 In another article, he states, "faith is more than cold facts" (Goldingay, 1990, 19).

OT: (1) narrative (descriptive), (2) instructive (proscriptive), (3) prophetic (commissions), and (4) experiential and revelatory material (expressive) [Goldingay, 1995, 4]. As already mentioned, he gives a great deal of emphasis to the relationship between God and people, a fact that offers him the possibility of interpreting the OT genres in that very shape: God - people, people - God, people - people.

Because the basis of this is the theme of relationship, particularly the act of communication between those involved, Goldingay categorizes people's responses in conjuncture with the genre that is at stake. Hence, (1) storytelling and worship are appropriate responses to the witnessing tradition, (2) delight and submission are responses to the authoritative canon, (3) repentance and hope are responses to the inspired word, and (4) awe and theology are responses to the experienced revelation (Goldingay, 1995, 5). Going further, particular focuses are driven out from these responses, a fact that helps Goldingay categorize the OT material in his volumes. So, (1) the revelatory material focuses more on the world, the entire universe, and objective truth, (2) the prophetic and instructive material focuses on the needs of the audience, (3) the experiential material focuses on the personal feelings and experiences of the author, and (4) the narrative material focuses on the inner dynamic of the work itself. What Goldingay wants to emphasize is the fact that "the method is not a matter of taste" (1995, 6). It is not the task of the OT biblical scholar to choose a method and to impose it on the OT canon, but to construct one by the means offered by the OT itself. This is the sense in which Goldingay argues for "a critical pluralism" regarding the proper method that one should use in the theological study of the OT (1995, 6).

Though he pleads for a critical pluralism, one can see that Goldingay's approach in his three volumes mainly divides the genres into two parts: (1) the narrative (particularly – *Israel's Gospel*) and (2) direct affirmations, i.e., Torah, Prophets, Writings and Psalms (general – *Israel's Faith* and *Israel's Life*). Regarding the connection between these two, Goldingay states, "The direct affirmations are subordinate to the narrative, and require the narrative to give them their meaning" (Goldingay, 2003, 37). Moreover, he says, the shape of the Hebrew Bible proves that "the particular is posterior to the general as well as prior to it" (37). The same twofold division of his volumes can be seen in his description of the twofold pattern existing in theology where both (1) narrative and (2) metaphysics (timeless truths) are required (Goldingay, 2006, 15). Moreover, in his volume called *Israel's Life*, he categorizes the OT genres in (1) discursive genres and (2) narrative. He says, "The discursive genres are complemented by narrative; narrative is complemented by the discursive genres" (Goldingay, 2009, 46).

Goldingay's focus on the dynamics of the final form of the text instead of on one particular category (i.e., history) as a framework of his theology directs him to organize the OT material by themes. He says this when he states,

In order to understand a narrative, we may not need to know whether it is history or fiction. That may not affect its meaning. Readers may disagree about whether Jonah is history or parable, but they can agree about its themes, agree that it is about how not to be a prophet, and about God's attitude to other nations, and about the possibility of repentance on humanity's part and on God's part. Those are the story's themes, whether it is history or parable (Goldingay, 2001, 115).

Though he tries to shape this statement by stressing the importance of letting the message of a story "be affected by our view on when it was written and for whom" (2001, 115), he concludes with the same low opinion of history: "We lack the historical information that enables us to see how to read the narrative;" and "we do not in fact know who they [the original audience] were". As mentioned earlier, this low opinion of history, on the one hand, drives him to appeal to the dimension of faith, i.e., that the OT is the word of God and that there should be some history behind it. On the other hand, it can now be seen that this low view of history's role in OT theology, in one part, and the overlapping of the genres described earlier, in the other, cause him to organize the OT material by themes. This is because the themes do justice to the diversity of the genres and their overlap. They offer space for approaching the final form of the text, and for looking at it closely. They give Goldingay freedom both in organizing his volumes and in discussing the church's present beliefs. Moreover, the organization of the OT material by themes offers him the possibility of a dialogue with various systematic theologians such as Barth, Pannenberg or Moltmann (especially in *Israel's Faith*).

A Critique of Goldingay's Methodology

Before starting to evaluate Goldingay's works, it is important for the reader to correctly understand his main goal. As a practicing Evangelical, and as one who believes that theology should be done in service of the church, Goldingay addresses his volumes on OT theology primarily to the Evangelical Church. Martens noticed this when he said that Goldingay's approach is more on the side of praxis, deriving ethical claims for contemporary Christians, though not as clearly as might be expected for a theology that pretends to write in service of the church (Martens, 2007, 682). Indeed, Goldingay proves to be deeply concerned with the contemporary implications of the biblical text: "Thus the Christian's use of the Old Testament consists most importantly not in inferring the theology that underlies it but in extrapolating from its varied concrete messages to what may be God's message to our situation" (Goldingay, 1975, 46). The reader should keep

this in mind throughout his/her entire evaluation of Goldingay's approach.

Though this is the case, one should not hesitate to critically engage with the methodology used in his *Old Testament Theology*. This is because any theology that proposes itself as one made in service of the church, and which aspires to give a careful account of "the world of the text", as Goldingay's does, should not be spared from any criticism. On the contrary, such a high goal, i.e., to write for the church – which implies the correction of its fallacies – requires even more attention, both to the details, and to the system as a whole. As expected, this part of the paper will emphasize the critique of Goldingay's system as a whole.

As it was shown earlier, Goldingay's understanding of history played a crucial role in his entire methodology.⁹ This peculiar understanding of history shaped his volumes in their entirety. Throughout his volumes, one could get the impression that Goldingay misuses history, especially in *Israel's Faith* and *Israel's Life*, by using it only to prove his system and to attain his goal. Most probably this is in part because of his low view of history, and especially because of the lack of a linear sense of history throughout his 2nd and 3rd volumes. Understanding history in the way presented above gave Goldingay two main options: either (1) he could try to solve the tension encountered in a historical approach to the OT, tension which comes from the lack of reliable historical data, or (2) he could focus his attention and, thus, his entire theology on the world of the text. Obviously, he chose the latter.

Consequently, there are several things which need to be said regarding his choice. The lack of sufficient historical data is a fact. One could wonder how much historical data Goldingay would need in order to give the history what it deserves. But does this reality rule out history in the way Goldingay does? Does the fact that scholars did not yet come to an agreement mean that history's role should be diminished in the making of OT theology? One should be aware that such a view of history does not do justice to the OT itself nor to the Christian church. Wenham sees history as basic for the study of the OT (Wenham, 1976, 14). Goldingay, unintentionally or not, leaves some space for us to put him on this track in his approach to history. Referring back to the lack of historical data and the debates on history between scholars, one could say that both call for persistent work in this regard and, thus, give it even more importance. Olford strongly maintains that theologians must take what historians say very seriously, and must have no fear regarding this because the Christian faith is historical which means that it asserts something about humans, i.e., their existence is historical in character. Olford would definitely agree: "Faith takes doubt into itself," he wrote (Olford, 1957, 27-28). Clements also

9 This is sustained by Tim Meadowcroft in his review article: "Goldingay's understanding of history *vis-à-vis* Old Testament interpretation is crucially determinative of his organizing approach to the task of Old Testament theology" (Meadowcroft, 2006, 52).

calls for “a deeper involvement in the work of biblical criticism than simply to learn its main results and conclusions” (Clements, 1978, 19). Unfortunately, Goldingay is guilty of a simplistic or innocent use of history. He chose to use it where it helped his system, but he neglected it when it was of no help to him. In his approach to the story, in *Israel's Gospel*, and throughout his books that explain his methodology, one can get the impression that Goldingay does not really give much importance to history because what really matters is the way story functions, and not so much the issue of historicity. He is right when he maintains that the interpreter of the biblical story should pay close attention to the way in which the Bible tells the story, but, as Martens rightly suggests, “resorting to story does not necessarily skirt issues of history” (Martens, 2007, 678).

Speaking also about this relationship between story and history in Goldingay's approach, Meadowcroft states, “Goldingay applies assured historical critical results in his writing and he does not eschew historical critical appreciation, but he resists the imposition of modernist historical enquiry as a metanarrative consisting of categories that the text simply does not understand” (Meadowcroft, 2006, 51). He is right that Goldingay affirms both the importance of history and of story. The problem is not what Goldingay affirms, but what he does, especially in his last two volumes, *Israel's Faith* and *Israel's Life*. He leaves aside both the category of story and of history as linear. In *Israel's Gospel*, he avoided this issue, not because of his system, but because of the genre (narrative) that forced him to speak in story form. The big problem here is that by setting the first volume, which focuses on narrative, as a basis for the second and third volumes, a notion implied by Goldingay when he suggests an integrative view of them, the category of story becomes static both for *Israel's Faith* and *Israel's Life*. Stroup rightly observes the intrinsic dynamic characteristic of story. He writes,

The narrative is never quite the same, appearances aside. Each new situation and each new movement in the community's history require a subtle but significant shift in the identity narrative. The dynamic that prompts this constant change in the community's narrative is its incessant need for interpretation (Stroup, 1981, 166).

Goldingay's approach lost, unfortunately, exactly this dynamic of the story in his second and third volumes. He rather chose to enter into a dialogue with systematic theology by addressing themes such as election, ecclesiology, Yahweh's kingdom, or sin in his second volume,¹⁰ and themes such as worship, prayer, thanksgiving, giving to Yahweh, or living in community in his third volume. In

10 For election, see pp. 176-200; for ecclesiology, see pp. 201-205; for Yahweh's kingdom, see pp. 209-221; for sin, see pp. 255-258. Referring to the problem of sin, Goldingay says that the book of Genesis supports the idea that sin can only be understood in the light of grace (255).

doing so, he proposes what Stroup calls “a smooth encounter between the reader’s identity (‘my story’) and Scripture (‘the story’)” (Stroup, 1981, 143). He thus does injustice to the text of the OT, to its complexity and, moreover, to the complicated relationship between the text and the reader. This is the point where Stroup suggests that a proper use of the historical-critical tool would “warn the reader that the text may not conform easily to the reader’s world and expectations” (144). Thus, what is needed is finesse in understanding the real value of the literature that is being approached. In other words, what is needed is what Clements calls “a serious reading and exposition of the Old Testament” (Clements, 1978, 199). But because he did not choose to do so, the result is a static system of timeless statements which are more or less relevant through contemporaneity. This bears in itself a certain dose of subjectivity. There is a kind of innocence to his approach to the OT that springs out especially from his second and third volumes. This is, again, mainly because he left the category of story aside and emphasized the discursive genres, thus diminishing the role that the narrative could have played in his approach.

Conclusion

In my understanding, the best of Goldingay’s three volumes is the first one, *Israel’s Gospel*. This is because, in it, Goldingay manages to do justice both to the genre and to the category of story used to develop the story of God. Though a negative view of history has its influence here as well, Goldingay’s approach throughout *Israel’s Gospel* is much more objective and engaging than in the other two volumes. I was a bit disappointed to read his second and third volumes, and to see him escape in timeless statements. Though his intentions were good, (1) to address the beliefs of the church and its way of life and (2) to open a dialogue with systematic theology, it seems to me that he did not really accomplish them. His theological account would have been much more reliable if the linear logical narrative would have connected his themes. Nevertheless, Goldingay’s approach to OT theology opens new possibilities for further study. His way of presenting the OT constitutes, without a doubt, a big step forward in OT theology in service of the Christian church.

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Goldingayev evandeoski pristup Starome zavjetu Opis i kritička prosudba njegove metodologije

Sažetak

Prikazivanje Goldingayeve metodologije složeni je zadatak. To je uglavnom zbog toga što u svom djelu *Old Testament Theology* (Teologija Staroga zavjeta) ne spominje svoju metodu tumačenja. Iako je to činjenica, teolog s otprilike trideset godina iskustva proučavanja na području Staroga zavjeta, na sreću ima nekoliko drugih knjiga i članaka o metodologiji. Ovaj članak je usredotočen na analizu Goldingayeva teološkog pristupa Starome zavjetu. Da bi to postigao autor je iskoristio Goldingayeve relevantne knjige i članke koji se odnose na metodologiju.

U prvome dijelu, ovaj rad raspravlja o Goldingayevu pristupu Starome zavjetu s fokusom na ulozi povijesti u evanđeoskom pristupu Starome zavjetu. To se može smatrati odlučujućim čimbenikom koji je oblikovao Goldingayevu cjelokupnu teologiju Staroga zavjeta. Autor to u članku naznačuje i pokušava dokazati. Drugi dio članka, stoga, sadrži kritiku Goldingayeva pristupa Starome zavjetu.