

The Theology of the Tanakh

By Carl Kinbar

One of the simplest definitions of theology is “discourse about God and God’s relation to the world.”¹ According to this definition, the Bible is a theological work, since it has something to say about God and his relation to the world in virtually every passage.

Within the Bible there are two dominant ways of describing God, two dominant theological witnesses. The first is most explicit in the Tanakh, which describes God predominantly in terms of his relationship with Israel. The second is most explicit in the Apostolic Writings, which describe God in terms of his self-disclosure in the person, words, and works of Messiah Yeshua. These two witnesses speak about the same God, but in different ways. Each is meant to be understood on its own terms and in relation to each other in a way that does not homogenize the two but leads to deeper and richer perceptions of God that neither supplies on its own.

I use the word “dominant” very intentionally, since the Tanakh also speaks about God as Creator and about God’s intentions for the Nations. However, the Bible speaks about the cosmos *as if* human beings, flora, and fauna are the only physical life forms that dwell there. Of course, we do not know if this is the case, only that the Bible seems to present things as if it is. Biblically, the cosmos is significant in large part because animate life, especially human beings, dwells there. Otherwise, the cosmos is simply a massive aggregate of the inanimate.

¹ This is adapted from a definition found at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theology>

While all human beings are significant, having been made in the image and likeness of God, the Bible speaks about the Nations in the context of his own relationship with Israel.

Thus, the Bible's witness to God in terms of his relationship with Israel and in the person, words, and works of Messiah Yeshua contextualize its witness to God as Creator and to God's intentions for the Nations.

For nearly two thousand years, Christians have emphasized the Bible's witness to God in Messiah and the Apostolic Writings so strongly that the Tanakh's witness has been muted if not lost entirely. This approach to the Bible has influenced Messianic Jews more than we would like to think. My goal is to draw attention to the Tanakh's theological witness for the sake of Messianic Jews and our communities, but it should also be of interest to Christians and their communities. For when the Tanakh's witness is lost or obscured, it affects the way we think, talk about, pray to, and worship God and the way we relate to one another before God. And nothing is more important than these.

I want Messianic Jews to hear and internalize the Tanakh's theological witness and to fashion a way of life that depends on it in harmony with the witness of the Apostolic Writings and the Jewish interpretive tradition.

Our definition of theology has two parts: "discourse about God" and "discourse about God's relation to the world." The Tanakh further simplifies this definition by collapsing the two into one. For one of the most startling things about the Tanakh is how little it says about God *apart from* his relation to the world. It follows that the theology of the Tanakh is its "discourse about God *in terms of* his relation to the world" – that is, his relation to everything that exists: the seen and the unseen, the non-sentient and every form of life.

Yet even this revised definition does not get to the heart of the matter, for the Tanakh begins with Creation, but quickly narrows its focus to the lives of our Fathers and Mothers. From this point on, the scope of the Tanakh widens to the relationship between God and a people, Israel. The Tanakh describes the relationship between God and Israel in diverse literary genres, styles, and kinds of content (think, for example, of Genesis, Leviticus, , Psalms, and Isaiah). All this makes it difficult to write a comprehensive theology of the Tanakh that accounts for its essential ideas while also accounting for its diverse concerns and perspectives.² I do not attempt such a theology: I stick to the simpler task of describing what the Tanakh says when called to the witness stand to describe God and what our people have heard it say over the centuries.

God cares for Israel, rebukes us through the Prophets, and judges us when we sin, but also comforts and restores us. He gives us the Torah to produce a holy society in which we love God and one another. The singer-songwriters of Israel pour out their heart to God and make him known in the fervor of their worship. Writings such as Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes make him known as the giver of wisdom that guides Israel through the thicket of this world. The Song of Songs makes God known in an epic song, or series of songs, about his relationship with Israel.

Howard Wettstein³ comments on the Bible's literary theology. "The Bible, in its talk of God and theological matters, generally treats these as a poet

² For a brief account of these efforts see Benjamin D. Sommer, "Dialogical Biblical Theology: A Jewish Approach to Reading Scripture Theologically" in Leo G. Purdue, Robert Morgan, and Benjamin D. Sommer, eds. *Biblical Theology: Introducing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009) 1-14.

³ "Against Theology" in *Philosophers and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Charles Manekin and Robert Eisen (College Park: University Press of Maryland, 2008), 219-45.

might, or a writer of literary prose. . . .Theological matters are addressed of course, but in the manner of poetry or literary prose.” (Wettstein 222, 224). So the Tanakh’s “portrayal of God, His thoughts, feelings, plans, His role in history” is a form of theology quite different from the common conception of theology (Wettstein, 225).

One of the features of the Tanakh’s literary theology is the great variety names and metaphors assigned to God. He is *my banner, my shepherd, and my rock*. He is *the LORD our righteousness, God of Forgiveness, Eternal God, the Living God, and God of gods*. He is Israel’s salvation, strength, and song. He is *Adonai* (Lord), *Father*, and *Vine-keeper*.

These are not God’s abstract qualities: they describe him in terms of his multi-faceted relationship with Israel.

The Tanakh also reveals the emotions God feels toward Israel. God loves Israel (Deut 7:7-8), is compassionate toward us (Ps 103:13), and rejoices over us (Jer 32:41). He is angry at us when we sin (Exod 22:24), yet he also grieves for us when we do (Ps 78:40). The attributes of mercy in Exod 34:6-7 are various aspects of his relationship with Israel.

The Tanakh’s names and metaphors for God all express or imply God’s relationship with Israel. Another feature of the Tanakh is the way God associates himself with Israel in common terms such as *the LORD your God* (395 times), *the LORD our God* (88 times), *the LORD their God* (35 times), and *the God of Israel* (199 times), for a total of more than 700 times in the Tanakh.⁴ These terms make it as clear as can be that God’s very identity—the way God is known in the world—is bound together

⁴ These are the results of digital searches that may have a very small degree of inaccuracy.

with Israel. If we remove Israel from the equation, we cannot have a fully-orbed conception of God's identity.

Nothing is as commonly attested in the Tanakh as the relationship between God and Israel. We learn about God in terms of his relationship with Israel; and we learn about Israel in terms of their relationship with God.

It is vital for believers to internalize the Tanakh's theological witness along with and in harmony with the witness of the Apostolic Writings. These are the Bible's two dominant ways to describe God. We were given both of them so we can know God as fully as is humanly possible.