

Title: Old Testament Contributions to Ecclesiology: Engaging and Extending the Insights of John Howard Yoder

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ABSTRACT

Conspicuously absent from ecclesiological literature is a volume dedicated exclusively to assessing the Old Testament's relevance to ecclesiology. With only a few exceptions, scant use is made of the Old Testament in ecclesiological primers and that use tends to be highly selective and often decontextualized. This dissertation argues that in-depth engagement of the Old Testament furnishes a helpful context for ecclesiological reflection and that John Howard Yoder's canonical-directional approach to Scripture exemplifies such engagement. Though Yoder did not dedicate a treatise exclusively to the Old Testament's ecclesiological relevance, his numerous scattered essays on this topic evince a rich and coherent Old Testament narration that scholars have not sufficiently engaged and which pays significant ecclesial dividends.

For Yoder, God did not begin shaping the life of the Church only in the New Testament; rather, the formation of Abraham's descendants as God's chosen people constitutes the fundamental starting point of the Church. This does not, however, mean that every social form that Israel takes in the Old Testament is normative for the Church. Yoder argues that in Christ God reveals and confirms the direction he was going in the Old Testament and provides the requisite criteria for evaluating Israel's social legacy. Importantly for Yoder, God did not wait until Jesus to correct Israel's missteps, but began doing so with the sixth-century diaspora and the transformation of Israel into a transterritorial nation. Consequently, important features of the Church's social shape and structure were largely in place before Jesus was born.

If Yoder is right, the Old Testament must no longer be ignored in ecclesiological reflection. His narration is not, however, without flaws. Though Yoder's canonical-directional approach to Scripture makes valuable contributions to ecclesiology, his reading of key events in Israel's history needs to be modified and gaps need to be filled. This dissertation brings together Yoder's full Old Testament narration, engages its weaknesses, and strengthens it by filling gaps and furnishing needed correctives. It closes by demonstrating that the concept of a priestly kingdom serves as a fitting ecclesial metaphor that marshals the contributions of the full canonical witness for ecclesiology.