

## About Gerhard von Rad and His Commentary on Genesis

By Eugene H. Peterson

I met Gerhard von Rad only once, and that briefly. I was a guest at "The Symposium," a book club in Princeton that conducted a monthly dinner meeting at the old Princeton Inn. That evening, von Rad, on a visit from Germany, was also a guest, invited by his longtime friend, Professor Otto Piper. Piper introduced von Rad and asked him to say a few words. The room was dimly lit, and I was about thirty feet away. He stood and spoke. I remember him as tall and craggy, an alpine figure. He talked for probably no more than two or three minutes, but the impression on me was powerful. There was no small talk, none of the pleasantries one comes to expect on such occasions. Without preamble, he started talking about Abraham. I don't recall the content of his remarks but remember the repetition of "mystery," "darkness," "faith," and "prayer." As von Rad spoke from a shadowed part of that room, for a few moments Abraham was present for me in his person, a real presence out of the centuries, out of the shadows, the vibrations of faith, and the energies of prayer. Years earlier in seminary, my Hebrew professor had told me that German was the most important Semitic language, so I set out to learn it. Von Rad's *Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel* was the first book that I read all the way through in German. In the process, Hebrew and German became fused for me in the person of von Rad. Now, looking at him and listening to him, all the complexities and difficulties of the two languages distilled into something distinctly spiritual, something Abrahamic, something mystic. When I arrived home after the Princeton meeting, the first thing I did was purchase von Rad's commentary on Genesis. On page after page I found confirmation of my first impressions of the commentator: strong, spare, ascetic, mystic. In and behind the sinewy scholarship, I was conscious of urgency and faith. Lives were at stake here. Every sentence counted. Theology was wedded to philology. I learned later that the commentary had gotten its start many years earlier in 1944 when he expounded the book of Genesis daily to his fellow inmates at a prisoner of war camp in Bad Kreuznach. This was a book authenticated in adversity and pastoral care.

Source: Eugene H. Peterson, *Take and Read. Spiritual Reading. An Annotated List*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996.