Preface

This book celebrates the contribution to OT theology by Prof. Elmer A. Martens, OT Professor Emeritus and President Emeritus of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California. It includes three essays written by Elmer himself, as well as fifteen others written by his former students, his colleagues, his friends, and even one of his professors! The essays are clustered around three topics—Christian use of the OT, aligning God’s people with God’s call for justice, and addressing the issue of land in the life of God’s people—each of which is one of Elmer’s particular interests. A biographical sketch and a list of the honoree’s varied publications are included.

Elmer has had a productive career as teacher, author, and preacher—a career spanning almost six decades and five continents! Yet all talk of Elmer’s numerous achievements must include the contribution of his wife, Phyllis. Phyll, as he likes to call her, has been a valued collaborator in all of his projects—as proofreader, dialogue partner, and soul mate.

After forty years of seminary teaching, Elmer is known to many as professor. He taught his signature class, OT theology, from 1968 to 2004 at MB Biblical Seminary, shaping an entire generation of preachers and Bible teachers. His OT theology textbook, God’s Design, now in its third edition, continues to be used at the seminary as well as in translation in numerous other schools around the world.

Elmer’s persona as mentor, advocate, and unwavering cheerleader is well attested. He consistently challenges practioners of biblical theology to attend to the “form and function” of the biblical text in the meaning-making enterprise of interpretation. His critique of the exegetical work of others is constructive—sometimes very direct, but always fair. He exudes enthusiastic support for former students in church and denominational ministries in both North America and elsewhere—regularly lecturing in places far from California, places where former students now serve.

Those of us who had him as our teacher remember how excited he could become over one of our ideas: often seeing the potential long before we did, ready with suggestions for turning a paper into a publication. Elmer began his professional life as a public school teacher and, even as a graduate school professor, retains his keen commitment to good pedagogy, good formation, and good mentoring.
For many, negotiating the gap between academy and church proves to be a challenge. Not so for Elmer. He models a happy relationship between scholarship and pulpit ministry. While producing publications for the academy, he also writes popular pieces for church periodicals. An avid columnist with prose that sparkles with clarity, elegance, and well-chosen words, he presents a bibliography that is impressive in scope. Known as an exceptional preacher (someone who preaches without notes), he is deeply appreciated for his service to the church, both locally and globally. Elmer is comfortable in the pulpit and in the classroom, and his love for the church and God’s mission anchors all his endeavors.

As a scholar, Elmer exhibits all the characteristics of the professional academician: careful attention to detail, mastery of the field, unwavering focus, uncanny insight, great productivity, and rhetorically persuasive speech. In addition to these scholarly attributes, Elmer’s energetic personality gives him a competitive edge. Whether it is to argue a theological point, to secure a better financial arrangement, or to make a game-winning move, Elmer loves the “cut and thrust” of debate. This sort of sparring is the “stuff of life” for Elmer, and life would be “oh-so-boring” without it. All of us who have come to cherish him (and still to disagree with him at points!) have found his rigor to be both stimulating and exemplary.

And so, Elmer, we offer this book to you as our attempt to recognize your love for the church, your impact on our lives, and your significant contribution to OT theology. Thank you. We salute you as scholar, mentor, and churchman.

—Jon Isaak, Festschrift editor
Associate Professor of New Testament
Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary
Fresno, California