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# THE OLD TESTAMENT TRADITION

by

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“ RECENT STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT  
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## THE OLD TESTAMENT TRADITION

If the use of the Old Testament in religious education—and the same is true of its use in the Church's worship—is to be realistic, it is essential that we should be aware of the trends of Old Testament scholarship and see their significance in the actual interpretation of the material. But when we look at the recent developments in Old Testament studies, we must not bypass the question of their significance in looking for their applicability. Their relevance still lies in the deepening of our understanding rather than in the provision of particular lessons. It is the purpose therefore of this survey to give a wider view and a deeper insight into what the Old Testament is about—as it is seen in the light of recent study.

It would be tempting—and indeed fascinating—to engage in a series of excursions into the exciting world of archaeology, in which discoveries of so many kinds have brought such rich illumination to our understanding of the background to the Old Testament. The importance of this field of study is to be seen in the stress—a stress which cannot be too greatly insisted upon—that we are dealing with a real world, with real people. But such excursions are apt to leave us still unaware of what it is we are really concerned to study. Nor shall we here engage in the important and often illuminating discussion of the problems of historicity—though again, at every point we must be alert to the questions which this whole matter raises for our understanding of our own faith and not merely that of the Old Testament. For we cannot escape the challenge of the question “Did this really happen?”—a question which every teacher of the Bible in schools must continually be faced with. No simple literalism of acceptance of the record as history—generally confirmed though it often is by our new knowledge of the background; no allegorising of the material, so often subtly disguised as the contention that “It does not really matter whether this happened or not, since it reveals a great moral or religious truth”; no escape from what has been called the “scandal of historicity” is open to us. For the reality of historical events within the biblical record is plain enough, and it loses its central point if we detach it from history and make of God's self-revelation to man a mere set of

religious tenets or statements unrelated to the realities of day-to-day human experience. The distinctive feature of what we call a "historical" religion—such as Judaism and Christianity—is that it is historical: it does not shrink from the affirmation that the world of time and space experience is the scene of divine action, and that God is known in his actions and not in a series of tenets. At some point we have to face this issue, and it has to be faced in such a way as not to dissipate the story into fairy-tale, while at the same time not to force faith into the strait-jacket of credulity.

The attempt is here made to give some account of the result of recent studies, both historical and theological, which makes it easier for us to grasp rather more clearly what the Old Testament as a whole is about, and to appreciate its unity in the richness of its diversity. To do this fully would involve a much longer discussion. But we may pick out three moments, which have a certain correspondence with historical stages but are not limited to them, what we might call outcrops of an underlying stratum, expressions in different ways of what we may most conveniently call the Old Testament *tradition*, that enduring, though changing current of life and thought which belongs to the Old Testament.

## THE NATURE OF TRADITION

This word "tradition" has come to occupy a very important place in the study of the Old Testament because it avoids some of the clear-cut divisions which stultify our understanding of the realities of Old Testament life and it positively emphasizes the continuity and vitality of Old Testament faith.

There is a sense—a quite proper sense—in which we use the word "tradition" to convey the idea of something not quite reliable, not a matter of historical fact, not an exact telling of what happened, but just a vague sort of story. We may be able on the basis of historical records to affirm that King Alfred ruled in the late ninth century, that he engaged in wars with the Danes and eventually concluded a treaty with them, that he reorganized the army, issued a code of laws, and was much concerned with education. We may add "Tradition tells that he was sheltering in a peasant's cottage when he allowed some cakes

to burn which he had been asked to watch". The historical statements do not include this. It is a story told about Alfred, and it is recorded in a little piece of Latin poetry which is known from about a century later than Alfred. There is no means of determining whether it represents fact or fiction, or whether, if it is fact, it really originally referred to Alfred or was a piece of popular story which belonged to someone else—or was just a piece of folktale which did not belong to anybody. Here the word "tradition" is quite properly used; this information is handed down—for that is what "tradition" simply means. But the tendency of its meaning is that it is something either untrue or unprovable or improbable—in this case distinguishable from history—and the shade of meaning you give to it will depend on whether, in the case of Alfred, you cherish an affection for the story of the burnt cakes which makes you think it really ought to be true, or whether you take it as a jolly little tale which has no historical importance and no particular value, or whether, going deeper, you recognize in it a reflection in non-historical terms of a reality of historical experience—a sidelight on the character of Alfred or on the nature of men's view of him.

### TRADITION AND "IDEAS"

It is with this last point in mind that the word "tradition" is used here. It has a considerable advantage over the "ideas" of the Old Testament. If we speak of "ideas" we may very easily get too limited and too abstract a picture. It will be rather like the kind of examination question which asks: What were the main points in the teaching of the prophet Amos?—to which the answer inevitably runs along a certain well-defined path, well-trodden by the commentators and still more so by the candidates—teaching about God, God the righteous judge, the requirements of social morality, the divine judgement upon other nations and so forth. But if we pick out the ideas like that, we are left with something very much less than the prophet Amos; if he really has something significant to say about God—and in that case, it is relevant to us to hear it—then it will not be in so many set statements, but through the impact of a *total personality* in a *total situation*. It is Amos the prophet, the eighth century figure in a particular historical situation, who stood in a certain kind of

religious environment, who had inherited certain beliefs and outlooks, who directed his message to people who also had inherited certain beliefs and outlooks—this total personality and situation is what we need if we are to arrive at an adequate understanding of what he is.

## TRADITION AND “FACTS”

On the other hand, keeping closer to reality, why should we not talk about “facts”? But as soon as we do this, we again beg certain questions. The verifying of historical facts is in any case a major problem when we are dealing with the ancient world. It is difficult enough to find out the true facts about the most recent periods of history; how much more difficult for the remote world of the Old Testament. But far more important than this is the recognition that it is not simply a matter of discovering what happened; it is the why of the facts, the understanding of the facts, the impact of the facts which are the things that matter. It is a known fact of history that William the Conqueror invaded this country and defeated Harold in 1066. But to know the date 1066 tells us next to nothing that we want to know. Why did he invade, what led up to the events, what was the impact of this invasion on this country, how was our whole history affected?—these are the questions to which we should want answers. Such answers depend not merely upon verifying historical information; they depend upon our ability to weigh the information, to give a judgement upon its significance, to see it and handle it imaginatively.

The word “tradition” enables us to have the best of both of these, and more. The tradition includes the historical facts and also a great deal more which is also historical fact though of another kind. What is important in trying to understand the mind of an ancient people is not simply what happened to them, but also what they thought had happened to them. The events are always seen through the eyes of real people, men and women who were involved in them, or who lived under the impact of them as they were subsequently remembered. So the whole tradition is meaningful.

## THE "EVENT" AND ITS MEANING

We should try, wherever possible, to distinguish between what actually happened and what is built up around the events. Even though we can never hope so exactly to reconstruct events as to be able to describe them in all their detail, we need to search for historical fact because only an adequate assessment of what really happened can enable us to understand what men thought had happened. We may ask the question: Did this happen? and sometimes it is possible to give a definite answer: Yes or No. But whichever the answer, or as more usually, with a qualified answer, we are still faced with another kind of historical fact, namely the fact that people described events or supposed events in a certain way, and that this description is itself an historical fact to be looked at and discussed and evaluated. Different people will give different answers to the questions: Was Abraham an historical character? Did David kill Goliath? Was Amos a prophet? Was Daniel put in a den of lions? A full reading of the relevant evidence for each of these questions will result in a picture to which some people will give one meaning and some another. Indeed to some questions of this kind the Old Testament itself—sometimes embarrassingly rich in information—gives more than one answer, telling us one thing in one place and another thing in another (David and Goliath—I Sam. 17, Elhanan and Goliath—II Sam. 21. 19). The important thing is to try to look at the tradition as a whole, to see it as a totality which is made up of a great many different factors, no one of which is without its significance in the final assessment of meaning.

This has already perhaps shown how "tradition" also covers ideas. For it is part of an historical event that men think about it. The crossing of the Jordan by the Israelites dry-shod could have been made possible by a landslide which blocked the river further north and stopped the flow of water for a time. Such things have happened in more recent times, indeed in 1927. Whether such was the cause or not, we have no means of deciding. But whatever the cause, it is quite clear that the Israelites' own story of crossing the Jordan only makes sense if we see that they believed that this event had been made possible by God—and they were evidently not concerned to discuss by what means it

had been achieved. When the Jordan was blocked in 1927, it is not recorded that anyone regarded the event as a divine intervention, and while some of those who presumably crossed the river then may well have called to mind that they were doing what the Israelites had done, they did not say, as one of the psalmists said:

The sea looked and fled  
the Jordan turned back  
The mountains skipped like rams  
the hills like lambs  
What came over you, O sea, that you should flee?  
O Jordan, that you should turn back?  
O mountains, that you skipped like rams?  
O hills, like lambs?  
Before the Lord, tremble O earth  
Before the God of Jacob.

(Ps. 114. 3-7).

They did not say something like this because they were not—we may assume—in a situation which imposed on them questions about the meaning of the happening. So the full understanding of the Old Testament event is a matter of considering what happened, what men believed had happened, what they believed about the happening, and further still the way in which the event and belief about it continued to be alive and significant to later generations, indeed to be of the very substance of their life. The “tradition” is not merely of an historical event—though it claims that as one of its elements. It is a statement about an historical event, made not in the context of a history book, but in the context of a living community which herewith handed on and kept alive the faith by which it lived.

#### TRADITION WITHIN A LIVING COMMUNITY

“Tradition”—and for those who like it so, there is the added advantage that it is a biblical word (mediated to us via the Greek *paradosis*)—stresses the two sides of the matter together. On the one hand it emphasizes that something has been handed down from the past—historical fact and interpretation welded

together into an indissoluble whole; on the other hand it emphasizes the active participation of those who transmit: I delivered unto you that which also I received (I Cor. 15. 3) is Paul's classic statement of this. We have a received body of material, fact and interpretation; and we have a living community in which that received material is perpetuated, not by mere handing on but by living participation. The formalism which kills a religion comes when the stress is upon the mere handing on, the mere maintaining of a succession. The reality of a living faith is expressed in the life of a community to whom the tradition is here and now the stuff of which life is made.

### THE UNITY AND DIVERSITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT TRADITION

To attempt to give a brief description of the Old Testament tradition as a whole is clearly impossible. It is also dangerous if it suggests that an oversimplified picture will do, so that the impression is given that the Old Testament is all at one level. In recent years not a little has been said about the unity of the Old Testament. In some studies of Old Testament theology a principle of unity has been sought. The same kind of consideration has affected New Testament study, and it is in many respects a healthy alternative to the impression that the evangelists and Paul and others were talking different languages and discussing widely diverging expressions of the faith. The apparently widely divergent traditions in the Old Testament have needed some kind of unified study to draw them together. But whenever this drawing together has been made too simple and has understated the richness of the diversity of biblical thought, there has been loss rather than gain. It is an immensely enriching fact of the New Testament that we have not one gospel but four, and that we have not one systematized presentation of the Christian message but many. In the Old Testament, the even greater diversity enables us to glimpse behind the letter of the text the teeming life of the ancient world, of the people to whom these things happened, by whom they were thought out and set out. We can see something of the texture of their life—and one of the greatest contributions which archaeology has made in our generation has been the gradual illumination of the detail of that life so

that fragments of pottery, remains of buildings, scraps of written and decorative material, help us to have a clearer picture. No longer are they remote figures, moving in a stained-glass window aura; they are real men and women, full of vitality and urgency, living through shattering experiences, reacting in a myriad ways to the great variety of the events of their history.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT TRADITION IN THREE ASPECTS

The three points which follow represent aspects of the Old Testament tradition which have been specially stressed in recent years. They are (1) the Exodus in the tradition, (2) the prophets and their relation to the tradition, (3) the ordering of life in accordance with the tradition. They stand in one sense in a chronological sequence—the foundation events, the prophetic period, the post-exilic consolidation—and the strength of the Old Testament tradition's linkage to history is such that the observing of chronological order is proper. But although this is true, it will I hope become plain that mere chronology is not the most important factor. All three represent reactions of men in a particular community to events and their interpretation, to life and the problems of its right ordering. They are all aspects of one more complex whole.

### I THE EXODUS IN THE TRADITION

The discovery in the New Testament of a number of statements of the basic content of the early preaching of the gospel—the so-called *kerygma*—has proved a very valuable point in the investigation of New Testament thought and the development of New Testament material. More recently it has come to be recognized that it must not be given too great prominence, and that it does not stand alone. Its value is nevertheless clear. It is hardly surprising that a parallel movement has given a great stimulus in thinking about the Old Testament. It has been observed that there are, here and there, statements of what may be called the basic facts of the faith, which are rehearsed on special occasions. Thus in Deuteronomy 26, the worshipper who brings his first fruits to the shrine is to make a confession of faith:

My father was a wandering Aramaean, he went into Egypt and thrived, he was subjected to slavery and cried to God for deliverance, God delivered the people with great marvels from Egypt and brought us into this land. Similarly in Joshua 24 a statement of faith in very similar terms is made and this is seen as the basis of a renewed act of allegiance to God, a re-inauguration of the covenant relationship between Israel and God.

### THE PATTERN IN THE TRADITION

It is possible, with this in mind, to recognize in the whole structure of the opening four books of the Old Testament (Deuteronomy which now stands with them in the Law has particular problems of its own) a development and elaboration of the main themes which are set out in the confessional statements. These are to be seen as statements of the saving acts which God has performed towards his people and at the same time as an acknowledgement by the people of the true nature of their historical experience. They do not directly include any statement of the obligations which follow from this, though in both the contexts which I have mentioned—in Deuteronomy and in Joshua—they are in fact closely linked with the obedient response in worship and in allegiance which is appropriate to the confessional utterance.

The development of the pattern in the books from Genesis to Numbers shows an elaboration of each stage in the statements. The picture of the wandering Aramaean is given body in the complex cycles of material concerning the patriarchs, welded into a unity by the close interlinkages which are now given in the book of Genesis to the great variety of stories which it contains. The stress here is upon promise, the promise of the land which is the ultimate goal of the saving events, and which, when the stories or the statements are used later, is a reality of experience—as it was during the period of the united monarchy—or a vivid memory and a consciousness of divine promise frustrated—as it was in the periods of alien occupation and domination and especially as it was in the nadir of the exile. The experience of Egypt, prosperity, bondage and deliverance has been developed with the enriching of the story—by the use of all manner of

motifs from folktale, reminiscence, travellers' tales and the like—into a picture of the supreme victory of God over the powers of evil, typified in Egypt and its Pharaoh, Rahab (as Isaiah described it) the ancient dragon overcome in the battles of creation. A new beginning, a new order, is thus established, linked back through the patriarchal stories to the primeval creation material, and this is brought to its fulfilment in the eventual entry into the promised land, for which much of the intervening material with its emphasis on human failure and disobedience, and on divine providence and renewal, prepares. At the end of the book of Numbers, Israel stands on the threshold of the land, prepared and organized for the entry.

As the material now stands, Deuteronomy (and the history which follows in Judges to Kings) takes us back again. In reality we have a new work which utilizes ancient material, presenting the pattern of deliverance afresh, stressing the divine action and the obligation of human response. The perspective is changed, because we know that the final form of this belongs to a time when, during the exile, men could look back not only on the great divine acts of the past but upon the sorry record of human failure, and so the pattern is extended to stress the continuing of the same underlying activity of God, seen in the changed circumstances of the period from conquest to collapse.

When we turn from the more obviously historical material—in which the events themselves are described and interpreted—to the prophets and psalmists, we find abundant evidence of the strength of this element in the religious tradition. The glorifying of the redemptive acts of God is a frequent subject of the psalmists' offering of praise, it is a basis for appeal to God for help in distress, a ground for recalling Israel to obedience and faithfulness, a standard of judgement. We shall note subsequently the richness of the same tradition in the prophets.

## THE PATTERN IN THE INTERPRETATION OF EXPERIENCE

There are two particular consequences of this emphasis. First, the repeated acknowledgement of what God did in the past provides the pattern for the interpretation of the new experiences of subsequent history. What we may call the Exodus-conquest

pattern—seen as an expression in historical events of divine action—provides a basis upon which the later experiences can be understood and described. In the Exodus events the victory of God is proclaimed, and it is repeatedly made clear that although Pharaoh imagines that he has control of the events and can choose whether he will grant or refuse permission to Moses to take his people out of Egypt, in actual fact it is God who decides and at any moment he can bring about the victory he intends. So when Israel is defeated by the Philistines and the Ark of God falls into their hands, it looks like failure; but in fact it is God achieving victory over his enemies, here typified in the Philistine deity Dagon. A later psalmist—like the historians who have set this event in a context of human failure—interpreted the event as a judgement upon Israel for apostasy; but his main emphasis is on the divine action:

Then the Lord awoke like a sleeper  
like a strong man sobering up from wine  
He smote his adversaries backwards  
he put them to eternal shame

(Ps. 78. 65-66).

The same is true of the overthrow of the Assyrian king Sennacherib who thought himself to be the controller of world destinies, but did not realize that it was God himself who had ordained that the Assyrian should be the instrument of his own judgement and that he stands himself under the divine control.

Had you not heard  
that I did it long ago  
that from days of old I shaped it  
now I bring it in. . .

(Isa. 37. 26).

Supremely the hope of restoration from the exile in Babylon is expressed in terms of a new Exodus, and a new entry into the promised land. Much of the teaching of the unknown prophet of Isaiah 40-55 (the Second Isaiah), and not a little of what is to be found in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Deuteronomic writers and the Priestly Writers point to this kind of understanding of events, and the anticipation of a new act of deliverance which will achieve

completely what the first Exodus did not. The echoes of this are very evident in much of the interpretation of what Christ has done as the New Testament writers attempt to set it out in terms intelligible to their contemporaries.

### THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

Second, and related to this, is the recognition that this concern with the Exodus is not a matter of remembering past history as an object-lesson for the present. Mere remembering is not what Israel did with the Exodus. The two passages (Deut. 26, Josh. 24) which we took for showing the main elements in the historical recall are both from a setting of worship—the one more obviously individual, the other more obviously corporate. Israel recalled what God had done not as an object-lesson but as a present reality. In fact it has been properly observed that in spite of the apparently enormous concern of Israel with history, she lacked an historical sense as we understand it. The statements of her historians are full of anachronisms, full of judgement of men by standards which are inappropriate because in advance of what was known at the time. But the reason for this is not that Israel read back into the past the experience of the present. Or at least not that so much, as that Israel knew past and present as one, that the experiences of the past were not just over and done with but were part of present reality. The fact that the rehearsing of the events took place within the context of her worship makes this intelligible, for it is in worship that we do in fact draw together past present and future; eternity becomes a reality within the confines of time. So the Deuteronomist could say that

Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant,  
but with us, who are all of us here alive this day.

(Deut. 5. 3).

This is not a projecting back; it is an expression in historical terms of an experience of worship. When we break the bread and bless the cup we are not remembering in the narrowest sense of that word, we are aware of the actuality of present experience; the Lord is here, and it is he who breaks the bread and blesses the cup, and the knowledge that one of us will betray is not just a remembering of what he said but a realization of present truth.

## THE RELEVANCE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The realization of the immediacy of history in the present experience of worship—this appropriation of the past, seen as the action of God, in a context which is both present and timeless—is of very great significance for our interpretation of the Old Testament. It is characteristic of our generation to ask somewhat impatiently—as was done by some of the correspondents in the discussion in *The Times* in August, 1962—why we should have to trouble ourselves with the wars and other rather undesirable activities of the ancient Hebrew people. A reading of the Moabite stone with its description of the way in which Chemosh god of Moab guided king and people to victory over Israel might have been suggested as a suitable alternative. Are not the theological motives here exactly comparable? At first sight this seems to be so. But a return to our word “tradition” may help to show that the position is not so simple as that. We do not read the Old Testament narratives simply because those who experienced the events thought that God had himself given the victory over Agag and the Amalekites and ordered their complete extermination (I Sam. 15). The significance of the narrative lies rather in its reappropriation, the way in which, within the continuum of the religious tradition, it has ceased to be merely a matter of historical record and has become a statement of faith in historical terms. (This is, of course, the whole excuse for allegorization. But where allegorization undercuts the historical foundations, an understanding of the continuity of the religious tradition enables us to see that our reading of the narrative is our own appropriation of the saving acts of God.) We are not looking for a moral—though sometimes, of course, such a moral may lie ready to hand, as it does in the Agag atrocity story. We are appropriating an understanding of the reality of the action of God, in terms of salvation and judgement. We can never hope to fathom the depths of the Old Testament religious tradition if we stop at the level of saying: This is sub-Christian. This is immoral. The working out of a system of ethics is by no means a simple matter of saying: The Bible says. It involves what the New Testament calls “knowing the mind of Christ”, and it is therefore never finalized in a set of rules and regulations which can be applied by rule of thumb. We are no more to say: Jacob by deceit stole his brother’s blessing,

therefore we are justified in deceiving our neighbour, than we are to say: Jesus said, Sell all your property and give to the poor, therefore any possessions are to be judged unchristian. (It is, we may note, odd how easily people pick up the impropriety of the former, while preferring to turn a blind eye to the latter.) The Old Testament must be seen in terms of affirmations about the reality of God's saving action. We need to be aware of this constantly, if we are not to allow our reading and teaching of it to be dissipated into unprofitable antiquarianism.

## 2 THE PROPHETS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE TRADITION

One of the most significant developments in Old Testament study in recent years has been in the stress laid upon the place the great prophets occupied within the religious tradition. It is difficult to avoid giving the impression that they were isolated characters, standing out completely against a hostile environment, giving a message quite unacceptable and always unpopular. Their sudden, unexplained appearances—cf. Elijah in I Kings 17—make this impression easy. But to put the matter this way makes it very difficult to understand what their relation was to those who preceded them; and it also makes it difficult to understand how it has come about that they have so greatly influenced the course of Israel's later thought.

### THE INHERITED FAITH

The realization of the importance of the Exodus in the developing religious thought of the Old Testament not unnaturally led to the question as to what it was that the prophets inherited from the earlier stages. It immediately became clear that their emphasis was in the first place upon something which was recognized by them as belonging to a known religious tradition. They spoke to their contemporaries not about something new but about old-established and familiar things. The appeal was made not to some newly revealed truth, but to what Israel ought to have known (cf. Isa. 1. 2).

Of course this is to over emphasize one aspect of the truth. Every true reformer sees himself not as a mere innovator but as one who is endeavouring to recover the true values which have

been lost to sight. At the same time, he is not in reality one whose view is entirely towards the past; and while claiming to speak of what is known, he is at the same time revealing through himself a new understanding of the meaning of the older tradition. In just the same way we must describe the activity of Jesus in terms of recalling men to what was known and recognized, while at the same time recognizing that the nature of his own person fundamentally affected what he presented as that tradition. In the case of the prophets (as in the case of Jesus) the determining factor in the originality of what they said was in their personality and religious apprehension. This is why it is so important that in many passages we are told about the nature of the prophet's authority, about the experience which led to his being sent to his people with a particular message. The authenticating of the message lies in the direct confrontation between God and man in which the prophets—like many other Old Testament characters—stress that they have been commanded to act as they are doing and that to go against that command is the ultimate betrayal for them.

#### ALLEGIANCE AND OBEDIENCE

When Elijah makes his challenge to the prophets of Baal it is with the appeal to Israel that she will no longer "go limping about on unequal legs"—trying to combine the allegiance to her God with allegiance to some other deity. Fundamental to the ancestral faith is the absolute claim of God. He is the God who brought them out of Egypt, whose first demand, as set out in the decalogue, is that Israel shall acknowledge no other gods at all. Part of the acceptance of the covenant relationship, in the context of the confession of faith in what God had done for Israel, is the setting aside of other gods. So in Joshua 24 the other gods are repudiated—the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt. When Elijah made his challenge to Ahab in the vineyard of Naboth it was on the basis of a standard of justice in dealings between men which is also enshrined in the ancient tradition. For the acceptance of allegiance to God—again as we can see it in the Joshua 24 passage—involves a willingness to be obedient to his law, and the making of the covenant includes a writing of statutes and ordinances which are accepted and to which a stone set up at Shechem bears witness. So too the decalogue, having claimed

Israel's absolute allegiance to God lays down the standards, the basic requirements of morality without which Israel may not stand before God. "Thou shalt not commit murder, adultery, theft, false witnessing, coveting."

## THE FITNESS OF THE COVENANT PEOPLE

This double element constitutes the basic demand of the covenant relationship. It is this which Israel ought to have known, and it is in relation to this that the prophets—and not only the prophets—set out the requirements and judged the achievements of their people. When Amos passes judgement upon his contemporaries, it is a judgement upon a people which does not conform; instead of protecting those members of the community who are in need of protection, justice is corrupted and the rich oppress. This in spite of the fact that

I destroyed the Amorite before them. . .

I brought you up out of the land of Egypt  
and led you forty years in the wilderness  
to possess the land of the Amorite  
And I raised up some of your sons for prophets  
and some of your men for Nazirites.  
Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel

(2. 9-11).

The very closeness of the bond—that unique intimacy between God and Israel—You only have I known of all the families of the earth (3. 2)—makes the disaster the more inevitable. And alongside this failure, we find that Amos and even more Hosea and others of the prophets are aware of the lack of that complete allegiance to the one God of their historic experience and faith.

This is not a prophetic emphasis alone. It belongs to the psalmists and the priests whose task is also to direct—whether by indicating what are the requirements of an acceptable people or by setting out the controls necessary for a right approach to God.

Who shall sojourn in thy tent?  
Who shall dwell on thy holy hill?

(Ps. 15. 1.)

The question of the psalmist is not a rhetorical one—it is echoed in other psalms, in the prophets and in the law; it is the basic question of who is fit to be there. The answer is primarily in terms of purity and wholeness of life, but also in terms of a right appreciation of divine action. In another psalm the answer combines the two elements:

Clean of hands and pure of mind

Who has not lifted himself to a vain thing (idol)

nor sworn to deceit (by false invocation of God)

(Ps. 24. 4).

We shall see how these concerns are echoed in the law.

Basically the problem with which the prophets were concerned was the problem of the fitness of the people. The premise of their thinking was that God had acted to save and in so acting had established, of his own will, a bond with his people, like the treaties established by great kings with their subordinates over whom they exercised suzerainty and control while offering protection and guarantees of security. Granted that premise, the concern of the people and of its religious leaders must be the maintenance of that condition of life which would ensure the continuance of the bond. Failure—so history and prophecy alike emphasized—must inevitably break the bond—though a deepened understanding of it gave the belief that God could and would act again, not because somehow Israel had deserved it, but because of what God himself is. So Ezekiel puts his whole confidence in the willingness of God to restore, and finds the sole basis of hope not in the belief that the bond cannot be lost but in the reality of the divine nature, the divine name which cannot be profaned. When Israel reaches the lowest point of her fortunes and comes to the full acceptance of the rightness of judgement, then it is possible for her in utter dependence upon God to find a salvation which is not for her sake but because of what God is.

#### BY FAITH ALONE

The *sola fide* emphasis of this provides us with a clear point of relationship to the New Testament. It is significant that the emphasis is in such a manner as to avoid any of those dangerous elaborations of the thought which so easily make of faith simply

a mechanism by which man gains a claim upon God. The stress which is laid upon the absolute holiness of God, the place of the Name of God, the sole action of God, within the period of the Exile, when Israel experienced the utmost disaster, not only makes clear the importance of that period for our understanding of the Old Testament and particularly for our understanding of the prophets whose message circles around the prospect or the reality of disaster, but also brings us some way towards understanding the way in which the New Testament dares to speak of the revelation of God in the cross, and also speaks of the sharing in that cross which belongs to the experience of Christian people. The moment of dereliction is the moment of faith.

### THE TIMELESSNESS OF THE PROPHETIC PROTEST

Thus we can see that the prophetic protest is not simply a matter of history. That the prophetic movement stretches across some centuries—with no clear definition of where it begins and where it ends—is a fact which can be described and discussed. But the essence of the prophetic message points to the problem which faces men in the presence of God. Granted the reality of divine action, where do men stand? Where do we stand? The moment our recognition of the reality of divine action, divine saving power, gives us any idea of having a standing with God, a position of privilege, we have forfeited the right to be there. Only with a sharing of disaster, an appropriation of this element in the tradition, can we discover the highly ambiguous position in which we must always be—secure in the reality of God, insecure in the human situation in which we are involved.

### 3 THE ORDERING OF LIFE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE TRADITION

The Exodus faith is a statement of what God has done and implicitly an appeal for response and obedience to it. The prophetic protest—a convenient term to cover more than the prophetic movement—is an indictment of what Israel has been in the face of that divine action and at one and the same time a pronouncing of the verdict and an expression of hope of a new response. If the

matter is left here, the impression may very easily remain of an over-confident optimism in human nature. Indeed, not infrequently the prophets give the impression that Israel not only ought to have known but that she ought to have responded. And in the setting out of the reality of divine action to save, the assumption that Israel can respond is perhaps at times too readily made. But alongside this there is a third element, already present in the earlier period, but reaching its richest expression as a result of that disastrous collapse of Israel's political life which came with the exile in Babylon. The whole history appeared to be one of failure. Yet the elements of a successful bond between God and his people were there clearly enough. It was not that God had failed his people; it was the people who had failed their God.

And if the subsequent years should show that God really would act again to save, how could Israel ensure that there would not be a renewed failure? The concern came to be more and more with that need for continuing response, for the maintenance of the relationship, for the repeated restoration and purification of it.

#### THE FUNCTION OF OLD TESTAMENT LAW

The reading of Old Testament law is not often very exciting. No one would choose Leviticus as his favourite book of the Old Testament. Inevitably this is so because much of the detail is so evidently tied to a system which is now outmoded. Yet the intention and meaning of that system must be understood. Where sometimes the historians and the prophets were optimistic—though by no means always—the later presentations of the law were fundamentally pessimistic, pessimistic that is to say in regard to human endeavour. The one hope for Israel lay in the reality of God's action, and this was seen to be expressed in two ways. On the one hand there was the saving action which had brought Israel into being and restored her after the disasters of the exile. On the other hand there was the maintaining and continual renewing of the relationship brought about through the medium of the Temple worship. The sacrificial ordinances, the festivals, the elaborate priestly rituals, the details and complexities of practice and of costume—all this was the divinely ordained means by which God showed his willingness to restore and maintain the relationship.

The underlying assumption is that Israel will fail, but that God provides the means by which the bond is continually being restored. Through what he has ordained the people's life is renewed.

Gathered together in the law codes of Israel is material which comes from many different periods. It reflects the various stages of the people's life, and the different codes do not always exactly agree as to what is prescribed. But this is proper, for law is a living thing and any law-code inevitably becomes outmoded as time passes. The attempt to provide a complete code of laws for all time—both in the ancient and in the more modern world—cannot sufficiently take account of the changing needs of the society to which it is directed. Israel not only had a rich heritage of laws; she also set those laws in the context of the divine saving action. She gave them a unity of purpose which is to maintain and continually to renew the reality of the people's life as the people of God. On the one side are all those laws which are concerned with social behaviour. On the other side are all those which lay down the mechanisms by which life and purity are to be maintained. For Israel is the people called to live in the presence of God. To fail is to be excluded from the presence. So to live is impossible without the renewing grace of God.

## THE WAY OF THE WISE

It is no accident that another aspect of Israel's ancient inheritance also came very much into its own in the later period. This is the wisdom literature—expressed particularly in the book of Proverbs—which though ancient in origin appears to have reached its final form and its greatest popularity in the years after the exile. Basically this too is concerned with the problem of how to live. Often in what seem to us trivial matters it lays down the principles of life. It is fundamentally conservative in the best sense, demanding adherence to ancient and well-tried forms. It is not afraid to ask questions—as in Job and Ecclesiastes—about the meaning of life, and finds the answer to them in the recognition that only in God, as he chooses to reveal himself, is there meaning to be found.

## THE PROBLEM OF INSECURITY

If it is true that in the later years—as we get near to the New Testament period—there was a strongly legalistic movement of thought which began so to exalt the exact following out of the law as to obscure the basic reason for the law, there were particular reasons for this. But it was not universal. In part the development was simply one more expression of that legalistic attitude which seems to be an inbred part of human nature. Justice is always easier to accept than mercy, perhaps because it is easier to define. The prophetic protest against formalism, echoed by the diatribes of Jesus against the Pharisees, are other warnings of the danger of this kind of thinking. In part too the development into legalism was the result of uncertainty. How can a man know that he is saved? How can Israel be sure that she will inherit the kingdom? The insecurity which is a part of man's inevitable position *vis-à-vis* God can easily become an obsession. The danger that, in the vital moment, man's failure will so frustrate the purposes of God as to bring ultimate disaster can easily lead to an ever greater insistence upon obedience. Complete obedience to the law—to what God demands of men—can alone ensure that men are fit for the appearing of God. How right, and yet how easily wrong if it is forgotten that obedience is itself the response to God's action and not the precondition of it; if it is forgotten that Israel's law stands in the context of God's salvation. As Deuteronomy puts it: When the LORD your God brings you into the land. . . then you are to do. . . (cf. Deut. 7. 1 ff. etc.). The desire for legal standing, the sense of insecurity, were strong in Judaism in the New Testament period; they were met by the reality of God's action in Christ. But that action in Christ was not simply the answer to men's wrong thinking; it was also the fulfilment of all those hopes which occupied the minds of many in the Old Testament and Intertestamental periods who looked to the future, in uncertainty but also in faith, knowing that God alone could save, believing that he would save, but conscious also that "even if not" (cf. Dan. 3) they must maintain their allegiance to him.

The sketching of these three points has been an attempt to indicate some of the content of the Old Testament tradition. They illustrate points at which recent studies have shed new light on the

Old Testament—on the significance of the Exodus and its place in Old Testament religious thinking, on the relationship of the prophets to the religious community to which they belonged and their contribution within it, on the significance of cult and law and wisdom in the understanding of the ordering of community life as Israel, in her later life a small dependent subject people, endeavoured to be what her whole history told her she ought to be, the people of God. Roughly they have been linked to periods, but only roughly because each of them represents an aspect of Old Testament life rather than a precise period. They can most conveniently be illustrated in particular movements, but are not thus limited.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT TRADITION AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Together they give some sense of completeness, and perhaps enable us to grasp a little more fully the richness of the Old Testament tradition. Nor is their usefulness limited to that. For a little reflection will show that the thought of the New Testament follows a pattern which is similar. To the Exodus event and its proclamation corresponds the whole impact of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which is both historic fact and acknowledged divine action. To the prophetic handling of the tradition we might compare the presentation of that central fact in the gospels and epistles with their essentially evangelical emphasis on the appeal to men to hear and to make their response. To the law and wisdom of the Old Testament corresponds that concern with right life, right response, right worship which belongs also within gospels and epistles wherever they are concerned with the working out of the principles in concrete terms, conscious both that the response must be expressed in life and that the failure of men to respond demands a continual consciousness of the renewing grace of God. If it is proper to lay stress on one point more than another, it may be well to consider this last one. The failure to understand the meaning of Old Testament law has not infrequently led to a failure to understand New Testament ethics and also to understand Christian worship; for obedience and the maintaining of relationship with God go

hand in hand, and the evangelical emphasis on the appeal of God's action towards men needs to be continued and enriched in the catholic recognition of the response in obedience and worship which we are to make.

### THE APPLICATION IN TEACHING AND STUDY

In the teaching of the Old Testament everything that can be acquired of modern technique is essential. The teaching of the Bible must not lag behind in its use of the most recent developments of teaching method, adapted to the needs of our own particular situation, and we may be glad that there are those whose speciality it is to explore the application of these techniques. Facts are also a necessity—and there will be no lack of them; if anything we are likely to be embarrassed by the wealth of literature available. But neither of these will be enough if we do not have something more—and it is this that this survey is designed to convey; a belief in the Old Testament, an appropriation of it which is only possible with an appreciation of its theological significance. It speaks of God, and our response must be one of faith to faith.



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