

# Some Observations on Current Old Testament Studies

Dennis F. Kinlaw\*

One advantage that biblical scholars enjoy today, not available to their predecessors, is a large knowledge of the ancient world of which Israel was part. The work of the archaeologists and technicians skilled in the interpretation of the data that comes to us from that world is bringing to us information at a rate that makes it exceedingly difficult even for the specialist to keep up. This is affecting in dramatic ways our knowledge of all of the pre-Christian era, but especially of the second millennium B.C. Such names as Alalakh, Boghazkoi, Kultepe, Mari, Nuzu, Tell El-Amarna, and Ugarit remind us of the incredible mass of information now accessible. This extra-biblical material gives us a means of examining the biblical texts in the light of the world of which they claim to be a part and to evaluate them accordingly.

The light produced by these finds has ignited hope in many scholars. For some it has brought a full anticipation that Hebrew religion can be seen to be one with its religious environment. For others it has sparked a hope of being able now to produce conclusive evidence of the uniqueness of biblical faith. Absolute conclusions can hardly be drawn in a field that is in such a state of flux. Some facts, however, are emerging with increasing clarity. A glance at a few of these should be profitable.

One of the results of the work of recent decades is a growing respect in most quarters for the reliability of the ancient biblical records. The Book of Genesis was as available to scholars of a generation ago as it is today. But its value as evidence about the world it purported to describe was limited. Critical scholars looked upon the stories of Genesis as either late inventions or retrojections of events and conditions from the period of the Monarchy. That view has now, for the most part, been abandoned.

---

\* Associate Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature at Asbury Theological Seminary, and doctoral candidate of Brandeis University.

The texts unearthed have permitted careful study of such things as social customs, political and religious customs, legal procedures and concepts, the formation and character of personal names, and ethnic movements in the period of the patriarchs.<sup>1</sup> The result is that a scholar like W. F. Albright can now say that "there is scarcely a single biblical historian who has not been impressed by the rapid accumulation of data supporting the substantial historicity of patriarchal tradition."<sup>2</sup>

This research has made us increasingly aware of what a wealth of material is available to us in the Old Testament about the origins of Israel. One will search in vain in Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Greece, Phoenicia, or Rome for a comparably rich tradition of national origin.<sup>3</sup> Current willingness to come with some measure of respect to the biblical records, linked with a determination to compare them with relevant texts from the ancient world, encourages us to expect in the coming days more realistic and more fruitful results from critical scholarship.

Increasing knowledge of the literature of the ancient Near East now enables us to come to a clearer understanding of the relationship of the world of thought in Israel and among her neighbors. Instead of finding that Israel is ideologically continuous with her environment, contemporary scholarship is finding some significant differences. One of the most important of these is in the matter of mythology. While New Testament scholars are fighting the battle of demythologizing the New Testament, Old Testament scholars are seeing that there is hardly any point at which Israel diverges more completely from the peoples about her. One thing that any student of primitive societies knows is that man is by nature a myth-maker. Yet scholars are beginning to question the very ability of Israel to produce a myth.<sup>4</sup> Some have been fearful that this might indicate a lack of creative genius.<sup>5</sup> Others, including Artur Weiser, suggest that perhaps the problem is a theological one, that the ground in which myth arises is natural religion with its inability to transcend

- 
1. See articles like C. H. Gordon's "Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets," in *The Biblical Archeologist*, III (1940), 1-12, or the discussion of the patriarchal period in John Bright's *A History of Israel*.
  2. W. F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 1.
  3. *Ibid.*
  4. Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 35.
  5. G. Henton Davies, "An Approach to the Problem of OT Myth," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, LXXXVIII (1956), 83-91.

the recurrent processes of nature, that the cradle of myth is polytheism with its tension between the gods and the other forces that determine their destiny, and that both of these were lacking in Old Testament religion.<sup>6</sup> Also typical of those using this approach is Otto Eissfeldt, who feels that traces of myths can be found in the Old Testament but that these were undoubtedly borrowed, that none originated in Israel. Weiser simply says that the very presuppositions for forming myths were "lacking in the soil of OT religion."<sup>8</sup>

Hand in hand with the non-mythological nature of Israel's religion is its historical character. It was once common to read that Herodotus was "the father of history." R. G. Collingwood in 1945 dismissed the Hebrew contribution with one page and said that "the quasi-historical elements in the Old Testament do not differ greatly from the corresponding elements in Mesopotamian and Egyptian literature."<sup>9</sup> A more realistic view was that of Robert Pfeiffer, who insisted that historical writing as the "recital of past events dominated by a great idea" was the creation of the ancient Hebrew, who gave us a classical example of historical writing (II Sam. 9-20 and I Kings 1-2) a half century before Herodotus.<sup>10</sup> Julius Wellhausen had caught some of the historical character of Israel's ultimate faith but had seen it as a development of the seventh century and later.<sup>11</sup> Gerhard von Rad, however, is now insisting that the earliest expression of Israel's faith was a historical recital (Deut. 26:5 ff).<sup>12</sup> This historical recital was the base that was ultimately, according to von Rad, expanded into the Hexateuch. Numerous Old Testament theologians are now insisting that this sense of history acquired a place of unique value in Israel's faith. Walther Eichrodt says:

. . . it never occurred to them (neighbors in the ancient East) to identify the nerve of the historical process as the purposeful activity of God or to integrate the whole

- 
6. See Artur Weiser, *The Old Testament: Its Formation and Development* (New York: Association Press, 1961), pp. 57-59, and Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 22 ff.
  7. Eissfeldt, *loc. cit.*
  8. Weiser, *loc. cit.*
  9. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 17.
  10. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), p. 357.
  11. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), p. 92 ff.
  12. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 43.

by subordinating it to a single great religious conception. Their view of the divine activity was too firmly imprisoned in the thought-forms of their Nature mythology. In Israel, on the other hand, the knowledge of the covenant God and his act of redemption aroused the capacity to understand and to present the historical process . . . as the effect of a divine will . . . .<sup>13</sup>

Thus, elements of cult and ritual that are firmly rooted in nature among Israel's neighbors are found in historicized form among the Hebrews.

A third element in the biblical literature that indicates how unique Israel was in its world is its attitude toward magic. Magic, "black" or "white," is practically a universal phenomenon. The texts known to us from Israel's neighbors like Egypt, Babylonia or the Hittite world reveal an enormous literature on the subject of magic. It was utilized at every turn in life. Its all-pervading presence is demonstrated most clearly in the fact that even the gods felt the need for magical knowledge to utilize or to escape that autonomous force of the metadivine that transcended even their world.<sup>14</sup> Yet what is such a normal part of the life of Israel's neighbors is anathema in the Old Testament. A ban is placed upon it (Ex. 22:17, Deut. 18:10) that appears to be without equal in the ancient world. It was this non-magical view that enabled Old Testament believers to break into a spirituality not found outside Israel. Sacrifice could thus be viewed as neither a necessary feeding of the gods nor a mystical and magical "participation in the maintenance of the cosmic order."<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, the most significant difference between Israel and her neighbors lay in her view of God, her monotheism. The knowledge that "the ground of all is a single Divine will, transcendent—above fate and magic, outside the continuum of creation—Who ordained the world order and revealed His will to men"<sup>16</sup> was more singular than most critical scholars had dreamed. Where else in the ancient world can one find a god without family connections, whether consort, son, or daughter, transcending human sexuality, utterly distinct from the world and subject to no external force? The fact that such a God's worship is aniconic simply underscores the uniqueness of Israel's faith.

13. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), I, 41-42.

14. Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 40 ff.

15. Moshe Greenberg, "Kaufmann on the Bible," *Judaism*, XIII (1964), 79.

16. *Ibid.*

It should be obvious that the foregoing discussion is of necessity given in briefest form. Any one of the factors cited could be profitably developed *in extenso* if time and space permitted. Nor is the list exhaustive. Numerous other items could be cited that would simply fill out the larger picture suggested by these. Even so, this limited treatment should make it evident that Israel's faith can not be explained as simply a variation on the religious patterns of the ancient world. Something new and different qualitatively was present. What was its origin and how did it occur?

Until a few decades ago it was common to explain Israel's faith in terms of historical evolution. The influence of Wellhausen and his contemporaries led to the use of the "growth metaphor" to account for Israel's faith, seeing it as the result of an evolutionary process that had moved from pagan polytheism to monotheism.<sup>17</sup> This direction of thought is being called in question now. The fact that basic resemblances between the religions of Israel's neighbors make them one, while essential differences make Israel's faith unique, forces men to seek more satisfactory answers. Yehezkel Kaufmann speaks of an "original intuition," the result not of intellectual speculation or of mystical meditation, but of insight.<sup>18</sup> G. E. Wright writes about a distinctive Israelite *mutation*. He raises the possibility of "something in early Israel which predisposed and predetermined the course of Biblical history."<sup>19</sup> He suggests with Eichrodt that scholars must take seriously the story of God's revelation and covenant at Mt. Sinai. The extent to which he feels that something unique happened in Israel is indicated in his willingness to speak of "a radical revolution" rather than an evolution, a revolution that can not be explained entirely by the empirical data.<sup>20</sup>

The appearance of works like that of Wright a decade and a half ago encouraged many to hope that a new orthodoxy would emerge in Old Testament studies. Such a hope was largely baseless even though there has been a return by many men to positions more consonant with that of the Old Testament text. However, it should be understood that this conservatism is not necessarily a religious expression. It may not represent a confidence in a God who has revealed himself in sacred Scripture, but rather a confidence in archaeology and historical research. Trust in the reliability of "traditions" that have been handed down by a religious community,

- 
17. G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (London: SCM Press, 1950), p. 9 ff.
  18. Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
  19. Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.
  20. *Ibid.*, p. 15, n. 11.

whether orally or in written form, indicates nothing about one's commitment to a revealing God.

The scarcity of such faith may be demonstrated by the strange hesitancy of contemporary scholarship to deal with the question of the "why" of Israel's difference. Whence came this distinctive Israelite "mutation"? The fact of that difference has caught scholarly imagination and received helpful treatment. Yet can anyone suggest a more tantalizing or more exciting subject than the question of why this happened in Israel and not elsewhere? Helpful studies on the common Canaanite background that Israel shared with her neighbors have enabled the Israelite "mutation" to be seen the more dramatically. Usually, though, the transition is covered by such words as "adaptation," "adjustment," and "transformation."<sup>21</sup> Who can be satisfied by being told that in the transmission of the traditions there were adaptation, adjustment, transformation? Does that tell us anything that we did not already know?

Could this reluctance be due to the fact that contemporary Old Testament scholarship has no concept of revelation? This writer is unwilling to draw that conclusion. Nevertheless, suspicion has deepened that the concept of revelation behind many such treatments is one that has little or nothing in common with the historic position of the Church on such matters. There seems to be in contemporary study the implication, if not the affirmation, that the Spirit of God worked *immanently*, evolutionistically through the religious community, adjusting, adapting, transforming primitive pagan faith from within into distinctively Israelite faith. The emphasis is not upon a transcendent Word that comes from without, as the Old Testament indicates. Nor is the emphasis upon a radical break like that pictured in the Pentateuch in which during the life span of one man, Moses, the normative pattern for much of Israel's faith was *given*. (Thus Noth and his school would not be disturbed if it could be demonstrated that Moses never lived.<sup>22</sup>) Could it be that one reason for the silence here is that much of Old Testament scholarship has really not rejected Wellhausen's evolutionism at all but has simply reset the time table?

Such questions are not merely academic. Did the Word of God come by prophetic pronouncement to a reluctant and often rebellious

- 
21. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Worship in Israel* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962), pp. 169, 170, 174, 186, *et al.*
22. See the treatment by John Bright of the Alt-Noth School in Bright's *Early Israel in Recent History Writing* (London: SCM Press, 1956), p. 79 ff.

people, or did a spiritually intuiting community discern the mind of the Spirit and give the Word to the world? There can be little question as to which answer is maintained in the Old Testament. It is possible that there is a word to be found here relevant to the developing dialogue with Rome. At least this writer would be very happy if some scholars would take their courage in their hands and explore this question.