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• Yahweh and the Gods in the Old Testament
• *Yahvé et les dieux*
• *Jahwe und die Götter*

J. Gordon McConville, Oxford.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article traite des exigences exclusives à l'égard de Yahvé dans le contexte d'un milieu culturel où l'on partage bien des façons de penser qui, jusqu'à un certain point, ont une dimension religieuse. L'auteur se demande jusqu'à quel point on a raison de considérer en termes purement contradictoires la relation entre le Yahvisme et d'autres religions. Il aborde cette question en étudiant les thèmes de la création, de la présence de Dieu en Sion, et des noms de Dieu.

Lorsque l'AT utilise le langage 'mythologique' pour parler de la création, cela signifie-t-il qu'il accepte, d'une certain manière, les idées mythologiques? La question a plusieurs aspects et peut être abordée du point de vue de l'histoire des religions, du langage, du canon et de la théologie. Dans quelle mesure les textes sont-ils 'detachés' du monde du mythe par leur intégration dans un nouveau contexte canonique? Y a-t-il une 'affirmation' quelconque dans les fragments mythologiques qui sont ainsi intégrés? En général, la dimension canonique est considérée comme décisive (contre Barr et en nuançant Westermann). L'auteur essaie de le montrer pour chacun des thèmes en question.

La conclusion principale est que l'AT rejette avec force les éléments qui sont au coeur de la religion cananéenne. Néanmoins, l'auteur suggère de distinguer entre l'affirmation théologique et la suggestion religieuse. Le langage de Canaan, tel qu'il est employé dans l'AT, conserve une partie de son pouvoir de suggestion dans le domaine religieux. Ceci a des implications pour la façon dont les chrétiens s'adressent à ceux qui ont d'autres croyances que les leurs.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das Ziel des Artikels ist es, die exklusiven Ansprüche, die für Jahwe erhoben werden, auf dem Hintergrund der gemeinsamen kulturellen und zum Teil der gemeinsamen religiösen Voraussetzungen zu betrachten. Es stellt sich die Frage, in wieweit das Verhältnis zwischen Jahwismus und anderen Religionen zurecht allein in gegensätzlichen Ausdrücken zu beschreiben ist. Dieser Frage wird nachgegangen durch Studien in folgenden Bereichen: Schöpfung, die Gegenwart Gottes in Zion, die Namen Gottes.

Wenn das Alte Testament 'mythologische' Sprache für die Schöpfung gebraucht, schließt das eine bestimmte Annahme von mythologischen Ideen ein? Diese Frage hat verschiedene Dimensionen, einschließlich von Fragen der Religionsgeschichte, der Sprache, des Kanons und der Theologie. Wie weit sind die Texte von ihrem mythologischen Bereich befreit worden, als sie in den neuen kanonischen Kontext eingefügt wurden? Allgemein wird die kanonische Dimension als die entscheidende angesehen (dies einschränkend gegen Barr und Westermann). Auf diese Weise wird dann in allen angesprochenen Bereichen argumentiert.

Folgende Hauptschlußfolgerung wird gezogen: Das Alte Testament verwirft streng die Elemente, die für die kanaanitische Religion zentral sind. Jedoch wird eine Unterscheidung zwischen einer theologisch bindenden Aussage und einer unverbind- lichen Gedanken / Idee vorgeschlagen. Die kanaanäische Sprache, wie sie im Alten Testament gebraucht wird, behält einiges von der Kraft ihrer religiösen Gedanken. Dies hat Folgen für die Art und Weise, wie Christen Angehörige anderer Religionen ansprechen.

T he aim of the present article is to consider how the Old Testament relates to the concepts found in other religions of its time when it speaks about God and his relationship to Israel and the world. That there was a relationship between the concepts of Israel, Canaan, and Babylon is not in doubt. Nor, indeed, can that relationship be described in wholly adversarial terms. Certainly, the Deuteronomic and prophetic critique of the religion of Baal must be given its due place, yet there are also elements in the relationship between Israel's thought and that of her neighbours which imply a certain sharing of beliefs.

At a certain level it is entirely uncontentious to say that Israel shared ideas with her neighbours. Culturally they ocupied the same world. Hebrew is a Semitic language closely akin to that of the Canaanites who lived alongside Israel. Israel was heir, along with those nations, to a wisdom tradition in both its theoretical and practical aspects. There were shared assumptions about the religious nature of the world, and in fundamental ways about its creation. In relation to political organization also, particularly in the configuration of king, temple and structure of cultic life, there was a basic similarity with the forms of the ancient world. This similarity extends to root religious ideas such as holiness, sin and salvation. Israel's rootedness in its world is inescapable, even as it proclaims the religion of Yahweh which, in important ways, sets it apart from its neighbours.

Our particular question goes beyond observations of this sort, though as we shall see, it is inseparable from them. It is concerned with the fact that in certain key topics of faith Israel uses expressions and ideas that are very close to those of its neighbours. The question is raised, consequently, whether there is any sense in which the Old Testament writers demonstrate a positive openness to the tenets of other religions, or indeed may be said to have 'learned' from them. If there is evidence for such a phenomenon, the nature of the Old Testament's 'exclusiveness', in Deuteronomic and prophetic terms, will need to be defined carefully in relation to it.

The topics which are most interesting for our study, I believe, are those of creation, the presence of God and the nature of God himself. In each case the question must be asked, whether and how far 'foreign' ideas have been introduced into Old Testament religion. The question has several dimensions, including the history of religion, language, canon and theology.

1. Creation

As is well known, the Old Testament's creation and flood-narratives have close counterparts in the ancient world. The Atrahasis epic and the Sumerian flood-story offer parallels for many of the elements of the stories of creation and flood in Genesis, and the Gilgamesh epic has particular echoes of the Genesis flood account. Echoes of the literature of the ancient world also occur in the Psalms and certain prophetic texts. These observations bring literary- and source-critical ramifications with them. In particular, what are the origins and date of Genesis 1–11, or its parts? It has long been recognized that Israelites could have been aware of the Babylonian traditions from an early time.[1] The current tendency is to recognize that the Bible inherited the creation/flood tradition as a whole at an early preiod, since its motifs, and even its basic structure, pre-date the Old Testament.[2] The interesting question, however, is not about chronological priority, but about what the Old Testament has done with the ideas which it takes over.

Broadly speaking, the Old Testament can be said to have reinterpreted the motifs of the literature which it echoes, and the beliefs of the foreign peoples that underlay it. Scholars such as G. von Rad, C. Westermann and B. S. Childs, for example, used the idea of demythologization in arguing for a biblical reinterpretation of the creation stories.[3] Our question, however, is how rigorous such a reinterpretation is. Does the Old Testament consciously turn its face against 'mythological' elements in the stories of origins, or does it leave a residue of such elements?

Westermann apparently believes that it does. He stresses that in its belief in creation as such, Israel is no different from its neighbours, or indeed many other races and

religions.[4] Indeed, Israel does not need to express its faith in God as creator, so much is this a presupposition of its thought.[5] There is, of course, a crucial difference between Israel's understanding of creation and that of other nations, namely in that there is in Israel no creation of 'gods'.[6] Nevertheless, the 'myths of origin' (i.e. where the memories of 'beginning' are not yet related to a personal creator) still 'leave their stamp on Gen. 1'.[7] And Ps. 139:15 preserves a memory of the origin of human beings from the womb of mother-earth.[8]

Westermann's belief that the Old Testament rests on certain presuppositions which it has in common with other religions is developed into a hermeneutical theory. On the one hand, he is in no doubt that the biblical narrative, with its prefixing of the primeval history to the story of Abraham, represents a transformed understanding of the relationship between the primeval period and the present: that is, in the Bible the medium is history, not 'cultic actualization'. On the other, however, he insists: 'In the interpretation of the primeval story, one must be well aware that these two points of view cannot be fully harmonized'. And again: 'It would not be in the mind of the (Israelite) narrators to give voice merely to the specifically Israelite adaptation and meaning of the primeval stories; they wanted more; they wanted their audience to hear something that belonged to the prehistory of Israel'.[9]

Westermann's position has been criticized by H-J. Kraus. Kraus stresses the recasting of Israelite thought about creation in the light of its understanding of God as saviour. The sovereignty of Yahweh, demonstrated in the history of Israel's salvation, is reflected in the Old Testament's presentation of creation, where Yahweh also conquers his foes. There is a consistent picture, furthermore, freed from mythological theogonic conceptions, of a world created entirely within history. Kraus expressly rejects Westermann's view that creation is merely presupposed in the Old Testament, rather than subsumed under a comprehensive understanding of God's relationship with his people.[10]

The difference between Kraus and Westermann is largely a matter of emphasis.

Concrete differences between them are elusive. Kraus can say of Ps. 90:2, by way of a concession: '. . . there are echoes of rudiments of the mythological view of the procreative power of "mother earth" (cf. Job 38:4ff.)'. The difference between Kraus and Westermann, therefore, seems to concern whether these 'echoes' actually affirm something, or whether they really are mere relics, evacuated of their original meaning by the new context which they have received in the Old Testament's thought.

It is already clear that a decision between these points of view involves going further than observations of a religious-historical sort, to issues of language, canon and theology, as noted above. For Kraus, the linguistic issue is clear: where the Old Testament uses language known from the myths, it is because it has borrowed foreign elements in connection with the theme of creation; this borrowing, however, is in the interests of the worship of Yahweh as creator. Linguistic affinities, therefore, may not be read as the simple assimilation of concepts.[11]

The issue of language requires some special notice in this connection. The difference between Westermann and Kraus goes to the heart of the central question raised by modern discussions of language, namely how does language relate to meaning? Older notions of a 'referential' relationship between words and meaning have given way to the belief that meaning emerges essentially within discourse, and beyond that, within a social and cultural matrix.[12] This insight has direct application to our subject. We have seen that both Kraus and Westermann think of the adaptation of certain topics within the broadest religious-cultural horizon to a specifically Israelite understanding of God and the world. Here then is precisely a claim that the language of the Old Testament should be understood within the terms of its cultural matrix. This would appear to mean that the use of certain words, phraseology and even extended stretches of discourse cannot be assumed to imply the borrowing of ideas from a different cultural milieu.

There is indeed a methodological difficulty in the attempt to discover whether such a borrowing could have occurred. That difficulty consists in the need to understand the

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There is indeed a methodological difficulty in the attempt to discover whether such a borrowing could have occurred. That difficulty consists in the need to understand the

'world' of Israel in order rightly to interpret its discourse, while we are almost completely dependent on its discourse for our understanding of its world. The sort of information which we would need in order to break into this circle is not available bcause it would involve quizzing the authors about their meaning. The difficulty is scarcely diminished by the closeness of the culture of the biblical writers to that from which, in certain crucial respects, they differ. It may be supposed that they *understand* that culture.[13] Indeed, their self-conscious engagement with it may be presumed to give rise to the specific way in which they treat it. This, indeed, is a postulate of much of the Old Testament itself, in its presentation of Israel as a people which, in a profound sense, has 'come out' of its environment, whether in the form of the Mesopotamian cultural-religious world (Joshua 24:2) or of Egypt, and which continues to be called out of the Canaanite religious culture by the prophets, who see Israel as thoroughly conformed to it.

Considerations of this sort should put us on our guard against over-simple interpretations of cases where the Old Testament seems to echo motifs from the myths of its neighbours. The point may be illustrated from Ps. 74:12ff., which seems to suggest a rather self-conscious and rigorous adaptation of such motifs in favour of the Old Testament's understanding of God and the world. Here there is a distinct evocation of the myth of the slaying of the chaos monster (v. 13), yet it is carefully interwoven with the motif of the dividing of the Reed Sea in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Creation effectively becomes an act of salvation, demonstrating the sovereignty of the God of Israel. A similar pattern is visible in Isaiah 43:15ff., 51:9–10.

In passages of this sort we have examples, I think, of the creative power of language, another important insight of the modern discussion.[14] The full implication of the point is that the biblical writers do not simply re-align well-known motifs into a pre-existing, free-standing frame, but rather that their use of the motifs actually is part of the structuring of that frame. In Funk's words (speaking generally of metaphorical language): 'The metaphor is a means of modifying the tradition'.[15]

This insight seems particularly apposite in the case of the Old Testament in view of the fact that Israel does indeed stand within a tradition along with its neighbours. Its writers may be seen as redirecting or reconstructing a tradition of thinking about God and the world. This is slightly different from the category of polemic, which better characterizes the prophets' outright attacks on Canaanite religious beliefs and practices. The sort of language of creation which we have considered is better described as re-creative or redemptive. The beliefs of Israel are being articulated and re-articulated within a cultural and religious tradition. The use of motifs from the myths is neither a borrowing of ideas nor a simple rejection of them; it is rather theology in the making.

These considerations make it hard to think in terms of a residue of Canaanite ideas, such as Westermann had in mind when he said: 'It would not be in the mind of the (Israelite) narrators to give voice merely to the specifically Israelite adaptation and meaning of the primeval stories' (see above n. 9), or such as even Kraus acknowledged in Ps. 90:2; Job 38:4ff. Equally it is hard to allow that such passages may be regarded as 'merely' poetic.[16] And certainly metaphor may not be appealed to as a way of suggesting some dilution of meaning, as Funk has warned.[17] Language, perhaps especially poetic language, with its habitual recourse to metaphor, is never 'innocent'.

The view we have thus taken of the Old Testament's language about creation implies that it produces a rather radical reinterpretation. However, I have suggested that this language is not best described as polemical. It restructures rather than rejects outright. Our interpretation, then, permits the question whether the moifs which we recognize as Canaanite have any positive life left in them when they appear in the Old Testament. At the level of religious apprehension, I think that they do. When, for example, the Old Testament uses birth-imagery, as in Ps. 90:2, it should not be supposed that its readers would have thought: Ah, but it doesn't really *mean* that. The language is evocative of a beginning, a 'coming to be' on a massive scale, and may be heard for what it is.

Similarly in Ps. 93 the lordship of Yahweh over the created order is expressed with a thrice-repeated allusion to the swelling *n^eharôt* (literally 'rivers'), and the waves of *yam* (literally 'sea'). Behind the allusions to the natural phenomena of rivers and sea, however, will have been heard the names of the Canaanite gods Nahar and Yam (intimately associated, of course, with just those phenomena in the myths). This point is reinforced by the suggestion of personification in the manner of the allusions. Now in one sense the Psalm may be said to 'demythologise'—these forces are not in fact personal, but the inanimate creatures of the one Lord, Yahweh. In another sense, however, the traditional motifs have been adopted precisely for their evocative power. In their fear of the natural elements Israelites had a point of contact with their neighbours. The poetry is used for its effect on the mind, even though at the same time it is made to serve the worship of Yahweh.

The view thus taken affords, I believe, a satisfactory rationale for the adoption of Canaanite motifs in the language of the Old Testament. Westermann tried to account for what he saw as residual elements in the Old Testament with the tentative suggestion that the biblical writers wanted their readers to hear echoes of the old creation ideas. This is scarcely satisfying as an explanation of the writers' purpose. Our notion of a development of a tradition held in common by Israel and her neighbours turns this rather negatively conceived intention into something rather more positive.

Our discussion must move next, however, to canon and theology. This stage of the argument is already anticipated by our observations so far. This is because the idea of canon has a point of contact with linguistic theory as applied to the Old Testament. We have mentioned the fact that meaning has to be considered in the context of stretches of discourse. The canon of the Old Testament might well be taken as the natural limits of the discourse in question. Indeed we have already implied this by talking about the ideas, meaning etc. of the 'Old Testament'. Of course, two rather different principles are in view here. For the purposes of the study of language, the limits of the discourse might

well be differently defined (either smaller or larger than the Old Testament canon). With the canon, however, we have introduced a strictly theological criterion, which invites discussion on its own terms.

Nevertheless, canonical assumptions are present in Westermann's thought when he argues that the primeval history is freed from the realm of myth by its juxtaposition with the Abraham narrative. That argument proceeds from the final form or redaction of the text. Westermann continues to refer to the documents J and P in his treatment of Genesis 1–11, but the differences between them are at best incidental to his argument. He tends to think rather of the 'biblical authors' together, albeit as representing a developing tradition which features an internal dialogue. Here a matter of basic principle is raised. In comparing the thought of the Bible with that of other ancient literature and religions, where do we identify the former? The question touches a contentious issue in contemporary Old Testament interpretation. The debate about so-called 'canonical criticism', conducted chiefly between its leading advocat B. S. Childs and his arch-critic James Barr, is well known. At its heart is a question of biblical authority. Does the authority, the meaning of the Bible 'for us', lie in final forms (whole books, and ultimately the whole Bible) because these are the forms that have been received by successions of believing communities? Or conversely, does it lie in the Bible's religious ideas, conceived as a more disparate collection, among which we must make our own theologically informed value-judgments? In the former case, the quest for 'biblical thought' is relatively straightforward (though Childs has a place for the critical reconstruction of the pre-history of texts[18]); in the latter it is complicated, because the question is raised acutely of the status of putative prior stages of the text, which may be thought to contain ideas quite different from those of the text in its final form. It will be seen immediately how considerations of this sort are interwoven with the preceding discussion about the 'biblical' reinterpretation of Canaanite ideas.

The point may be seen clearly in relation to Genesis 1–11. Barr can say, for example, that

on the relationship between the man and the woman in Genesis 1–3 'P' corrects 'J'; that is, Gensis 1 (the later text) affirms the equality of the two, where Genesis 2 had seen the woman as an afterthought to the creation of the man.[19] On immortality he goes further, discerning Canaanite motifs behind the text of Genesis 2–3 and, partly on that basis, denying that those chapters teach a 'Fall' in the sense of the traditional Christian understanding. In a review of the work in question in the present issue, I have argued that such an approach cannot properly claim to have ascertained 'biblical' thought on the matter, for it has given an unwarranted authority to a reconstructed pre-history of the text (the fact that this is hypothetical hardly affects the principle at stake), and passed over the assimilation of the material, which is surely the point at which distinctively 'biblical' thought may be found. The point applies to Genesis 1–11 in its entirety, where, as we have noted, motifs and elements from the ancient myths have been recast in a narrative which has its own logic.[20] In my view, Westermann and Childs are right to emphasise the precedence of this dimension of interpretation over previous stages of the text's history, as well as over allegedly imported ideas. It is this level of interpretation too which ultimately provides the right context for the interpretation of linguistic usages held in common with mythological texts.

The point about canon enables an important distinction to be made between religious experience and theological affirmation. If we have been able to find a point of contact between Israelites and Canaanites in their understanding of the world this can be expressed in terms of religious experience. The idea of the canon, however, is a presupposition of the attempt to articulate the beliefs of Israel as they are enshrined in the Old Testament, and therefore in the use and understanding of the Old Testament as the Word of God. (The point thus bears, obviously, on the relationship between linguistic theory and biblical authority, or theological truth, for a discussion of which I refer the reader elsewhere.[21])

2. The Presence of God

The argument set out above in relation to the topic of creation may be briefly retraced in relation to that of the presence of God, specifically in the context of so-called Zion-theology. There are clear and well known similarities between the Old Testament's idea of Yahweh dwelling on Mt. Zion and that of Canaanite Baal dwelling on Mt. Zaphon. The Canaanite idea is that the mountain of Baal represents the divine mountain, the dwelling of the gods (the Canaanite counterpart of Greek Olympus), located at a primeval confluence of the great rivers in the mythological 'north'. Echoes of the idea may be found in the biblical Garden of Eden, which is apparently equated with the 'mountain of God' in Ezekiel 28:13–16, and out of which, in Genesis 2:10, flow the four primeval rivers.[22] The more specific connections with biblical thought relate to the temple on Mt. Zion, however. In Canaanite thinking Baal's dwelling in his temple on Zaphon (usually located south of the Orontes[23]) procured life and security for the whole people who worshipped him. A number of so-called Zion-Psalms echo this idea, now of Yahweh and Israel. Yahweh, dwelling in his temple, laughs at his foes (Ps. 2:4ff.) and establishes his authority over all nations (Ps. 46:5–10); from there he makes himself manifest to his worshipping people (Ps. 50:2). Most remarkably, Mount Zion is said to be 'in the far north' (Ps. 48:3), in a clear echo of the northern location of the mythological mountain (since the description cannot be geographically realistic).

The Old Testament affords some insight into the religious-historical background to these affinities. It is clear that what we may call the Zion-tradition was not always, or universally, accepted in Israel (2 Sam. 7:5–7). Part of the story of its origin there is told, no doubt, by King David's bringing of the ancient ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and by the building of Solomon's temple. Yet there may be lines of continuity too from the Jebusite cult, echoes of which may be found in the story of Melchizedek and Abraham (Genesis 14).[24] This might provide the religious-historical explanation for the ready acceptance of mythological language in the worship of Zion.

Those linguistic affinities call for an explanation, as the language of creation did, in terms of the relationship between expression

and thought. In Canaan, the cult of Baal involved the use of images of the god, repugnant in Israel, and in character was a fertilty-cult in which sacrifice and ritual were thought to exert a quasi-magical influence on the disposition of the god. The rituals, involving cult-prostitution, invited the strong opprobrium of the prophets (e.g. Hosea 2). The prophets also evidently considered the Canaanite cult to be non-ethical in character, and therefore in sharp contrast to the covenantal basis of the cult of Yahweh (e.g. Hosea 4:1–3).[25] In the Book of Isaiah, moreover, where the language of the Zion-theology is heavily used, the Canaanite ideas are evidently overwhelmed by the strong covenantal, salvation-historical theology. Whether a prophet is (superficially at least) 'pro-Zion', like Isaiah, or overtly critical, like Jeremiah (Jer. 7:1–15), they agree that Israel must be dissuaded from the opinion that cultic worship has inherent efficacy. This larger theological view is in the nature of the case harder to apply to the Psalms, because they consist of smaller, discrete units. Yet the Book of Psalms too shows signs of the need to come to terms with a 'failed' cult.[26] Observations like this echo our argument above that words take their meaning within large contexts, both linguistic and cultural.

As with the creation topic, it is important to avoid two extremes of interpretation, namely the idea that the language is merely a poetic relic, evacuated of content, or on the other hand that it is actually a vehicle for Canaanite ideas. The former is impossible because the language of Zion had as its context the apparatus of worship in the Jerusalem temple—nothing 'merely' poetic here.[27] The opposite belief, that Canaanite ideas really were implied in the Zion-imagery, has more weight, if only because of those hesitations, mentioned a moment ago, which the Old Testament has preserved. It is clear, however, that the language of Zion has entered the mainstream of Israel's worship of Yahweh. Once again, it is best to conclude that the hymnists of Israel drew readily on the language about God found in the wider religious-cultural environment. To the religious imagination, shared in some sense by Israelites and Canaanites, the idea

of a remote north or a mysterious river apparently expressed something of the majesty and mystery of God. Once again, however, a distinction must be maintained between religious experience, where there is common ground between Israel and her neighbours, and theological affirmation, where the prophetic criticism of Canaan's idolatry is decisive.

3. Names of God

One of the most complicated topics which the Old Testament faces us with in the present connection is that of the names of God. It is well known that the Old Testament uses a number of divine names which are also used in Canaan, principally 'El', which occurs especially in Genesis in various combinations (e.g. El Shaddai, El 'Elyôn). The religious-historical reason for this has been hotly debated. The view of F. M. Cross now largely prevails over that of A. Alt, namely that El in the Old Testament is, predominantly at least, a proper name. His conclusion is reached partly on linguistic grounds and partly by analogy with what is known about the Canaanite high god El. El in the Old Testament, he concludes, should be understood in terms of that god.[28]

Cross has shown that there are impressive similarities between the biblical expressions and certain Canaanite ones.[29] However, the next stage of the argument is the crucial one. Does the use of Canaanite language for God imply anything about how Israelites thought about God himself? There have been those who have advocated such a view. O. Eissfeldt, leaning heavily on the LXX of Deuteronomy 32:8–9, concluded that Yahweh was at one time understood as one of a pantheon of gods subordinate to El Elyôn.[30]

A related question is how we should understand references to the 'gods' in places such as Ps. 92. In its portrayal of a 'divine Council', where Yahweh presides over other heavenly beings (cf. Job 1; 1 Kings 22), it has echoes of a high god in a pantheon. According to certain modern treatments passages of this sort afford evidence of a surviving polytheism in Israel.[31]

In all these cases, however, as with the topics already discussed, the relationship

between language and theological content requires careful handling. The view, well exemplified by Barker, that pre-exilic Israelite religion was predominantly poly-theistic and that this is reflected in biblical texts of the sort just mentioned, finds it hard to avoid circularity. The postulate is based on readings of certain texts which are then read in the light of the postulate. In fact, a key text like Deuteronomy 32:8-9 is capable of quite a different reading from that of Eissfeldt and Barker, namely that Yahweh is cast in the role of the 'Most High', who disposes over the nations of the earth. The text in MT strongly suggests a 'mono-Yahwistic' meaning, with its 'sons of Israel' instead of LXX's 'sons of God'. Whether MT has deliberately altered the LXX text because it read the latter as polytheistic is debatable. The interpretation of Dt. 32:8-9 LXX belongs to the wider question of in-terpretation under discussion.

As with the other topics we have con-sidered, the idea of canon operates in the discussion. It is significant that the context of the passage in question is Deuteronomy, the supreme 'mono-Yahwistic' treatise in the Old Testament. The same point applies to Deuteronomy 4:19-20, where Yahweh is said to have 'allotted the sun, moon and stars to all the peoples under heaven'. It is unjustified to think that this phrase means a deliberate permission or dispensation, and highly implausible in the context of the strong repudiation of idolatrous worship in Deuteronomy 4.

These considerations show, I think, that there is no simple correlation between 'god'-language and beliefs about God. It may be granted that Canaanite language provides the best analogies for that of the Old Testa-ment, but that is merely the beginning of the question how the biblical writers, by comparison with Canaanites, thought of God. The divine Council idea, indeed, bears the hallmarks of demythologization, where Yahweh reigs supreme, and other beings are of a different order. This is clear in 1 Kings 22, where the 'host of heaven' are 'spirits', available to do Yahweh's bidding (vv. 19, 21). In other cases the idea of 'sons of God' may be little more than a literary device (as in Job 1), or even outright polemic against

the idea of a pantheon (as, arguably, in Ps. 92).[32] The strange narrative in Genesis 6:1-4, furthermore, is subordinate to the concept of the ordering of the parts of creation by the one God (Genesis 1),[33] and has even been understood as a polemic against fertility cults.[34] These points too have a canonical dimension to them, alongside an exegetical one.

With the interpretation of the name El we come to a more strictly linguistic question. Cross believed that the close analogies of usage which he identified implied that the Old Testament identified the God of the fathers as the Canaanite God El.[35] This, however, does not follow, nor does its corollary, that the Old Testament narrative in Genesis and Exodus, culminating in Exodus 6:1-3, similarly identifies Yahweh with El. The issue here concerns the nature of language about God itself. The term El is used in the Old Testament both as a name in the strict sense, and as a general word for 'god' (a generic, or appellative term) in passages like Exodus 15:2, 11; 20:5.[36] There would seem, then, to be a similar potential range of meaning in the biblical word El as in the English 'god' (or German Gott, or French dieu). It is a word denoting deity.

This point should not be misunderstood, however. If Israel uses the same word for 'god' as the Canaanites it does not mean that they know or worship the 'same' god. Even the idea of God takes shape within frame-works of thought.[37] This means that it may be used with all kinds of different under-standings of who or what 'God' is. And this point holds, I think, whether the word is being used as a 'proper name' or an appella-tive. In principle, therefore, the fact that Israel shares a habit of speech about 'God' with Canaan does not entail that it shares Canaanite ways of thinking about him, or at least not in all respects. The broad religious and cultural affinities between Israel and her neighbours, which we have referred to frequently in the present essay, are sufficient to explain the similarities of usage in the language about God. A similar point about God-language, incidentally, has been well made by N. T. Wright, concerning the use of the term *theos* in the New Testament.[38]

It is pertinent at this point to consider one

of the best-known difficulties of inter-
pretation in this area, namely the question
why the term El was accepted in the Old
Testament, but not the term Baal.[39] The
foregoing has shown that this alleged problem
rests on a misapprehension, namely the idea
that the Old Testament not merely 'accepted'
the name El, but with it the high god of the
Canaanites. The idea in itself that Israel
'accepted' the term is suspect. Rather, the
term El, both in Israel and in Canaan, is
simply the primary word for 'god'—both as
a generic and also as a way of speaking of
the supreme (or in Israel's case, only) God—
the precise meaning, in each case, being
determined by a wide context of religious
ideas. The word Ba'al did not have this broad
range, and was therefore more resistant to
assimilation.

Conclusions

A number of conclusions follow from our
discussion. The first is the Old Testament's
rigorous repudiation of the elements that
are central to Canaanite religion. This
repudiation is most evident in Deuteronomy
and the prophets. Its characteristics are an
insistence on the covenantal-ethical nature
of Yahwism, and on the prohibition of
image-worship. At its most vociferous, this
can imply that the gods of the nations are no
gods at all (Jeremiah 2:11; Isaiah 44:9–20).
At its most rational, it seeks to articulate
the essential nature of Yahwism in contrast
to the religion of Canaan. Thus Deuteronomy
4 offers a sustained treatise on the way in
which Yahweh may be thought to dwell at
once in heaven and on earth. The thought of
this text rejects the Canaanite solution,
involving images, with their implied con-
tainment of the god in the material world.
Rather, God's being in heaven and earth is
bound up with his self-giving to Israel in
history, in a way which guards his own
freedom.

The question whether Israel has 'borrowed'
from Canaan is not entirely answered thus,
however. We saw that the use of certain
religious language implied some degree of
commonality with Canaan at the level of
religious experience. The polemic against
the Canaanite gods hardly denies the reality

of Canaanite religious experience, or their
apprehension of 'god'; even the harshest
critique of idolatry moves in a world in
which the reality of the divine is taken for
granted. Israel shared with Canaan certain
kinds of language which could provoke a
religious response.

Finally, we may draw inferences for the
relationship between Christianity and other
religions today. Christian theology is bound
as much by its allegiance to Christ as the
Old Testament writers ever were by their
conviction of the uniqueness of Yahweh.
Dialogue between Christianity and other
faiths is therefore laid under this constraint,
and any quest for 'common ground' is there-
fore hazardous. Nevertheless it is in this
area that our observations so far have real
contemporary significance. Kenneth Cragg,
writing from long missiological experience
on the ways in which the different faiths
may 'hear' each other, draws on the
Canaanite echoes in the Zion-Psalms to
suggest ways in which adherents of one faith
may hear 'truth' in another:

> Such readings (i.e. the finding of such echoes)
> by modern scholars may dismay Hebrew
> orthodox. If we can allow them, they may give
> the severely Semitic imagery of Jerusalem
> some distant translation into Asian faiths
> which prefer to cities the imagery of rivers
> rising in the far vaster majesty of the
> Himalayas.[40]

Cragg carries this point further by saying
that the range of metaphors available
for use in language about God is bounded by
the earth that is shared by all. The same
metaphorical language is used by all faiths
to interpret the same world. 'They will
not cease to debate and differ, but only
within devices of language and meaning
common to them all.'[41] This is not far from
our contention that there are points of
contact, *mutatis mutandix*, between Israelite
and Canaanite worshippers at the level of
religious suggestion.

A recognition of this feature of religious
language involves, in my view, no derogation
from the first conclusion of our study, namely
that the Old Testament insists uncompro-
misingly on the unique rights of Yahweh to
rule and receive worship in the world. It
may, however, allow on the one hand

a tempering of zeal with sensitivity in Christian relations with members of other faiths, and on the other a 'bridge' in a dialogue which nevertheless remains committed to the truth of the Gospel.

1 See S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, London, Methuen, 1904, 27–31, especially 31.

2 See G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Waco, Texas, Word Books, 1987, for an account of the relationship between Genesis 1–11 and ancient Near Eastern creation and flood traditions. The claim that the basic structure of a creation-flood epic existed prior to Genesis rests largely on the evidence of Atrahasis and the Sumerian flood-narrative. See further W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atrahasis*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969; T. Jacobsen, 'The Eridu Genesis', *JBL* 100 (1981), 513–529.

3 G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology 1*, Edinburgh/London, Oliver and Boyd, 1962, 139. B. S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, London, SCM, 1960; C. Westermann, *Genesis (Kapitel 1–11)*, Neukirchener Verlag, 1976²; ET (cited here) London, SPCK, 1984. Von Rad saw the crucial difference between the biblical understanding of creation and the mythological view in the setting of the former within time. Westermann, 64f., thought the prefixing of the primeval history to the Abraham narrative freed the former from the realm of myth. Both these views now look like overstatements. Caution is needed in seeing the category of time as crucial in distinguishing the Old Testament from the myths (see B. Albrektson, *History and the Gods*, Lund, Gleerup, 1967; J. G. McConville, *Grace in the End: a Study in Deuteronomic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1993, 128ff.).

4 Westermann, op. cit., 25.

5 Ibid., 43.

6 Ibid., 25f.

7 Ibid., 20f., cf. 20ff.

8 Ibid., 26.

9 Ibid., 65.

10 H.-J. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, (ET of *Theologie der Psalmen*, Neukirchener Verlag, 1979), 63.

11 Ibid., 64.

12 See A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, Exeter, Paternoster, 1980. The work in its entirety relates to modern theories of language and meaning, but note especially 115–139 (on hermeneutics and language), 149–168 (on Heidegger), 357–385 (on Wittgestein).

13 On the possibility in principle of understanding foreign cultures, see B. van den Toren, 'A New Direction In Christian Apologetics', *EJT* 2 (1993), 49–64.

14 R. Funk puts it thus: 'Metaphor shatters the conventions of predication in the interests of a new vision . . . a fresh experience of reality', *Language, Hermeneutic and Word of God; the Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology*, New York, Harper and Row, 1966, 138f. Thiselton also notes Heidegger's contribution to this insight; *Two Horizons*, 43.

15 Funk, ibid.

16 Cf. J. C. L. Gibson: '. . . most of (Job) is in poetry, which is not doctrine (there is, for instance, considerable use of pagan imagery) . . .'; *Job*, Edinburgh, St. Andrew's Press, 1985, 3.

17 Above, n. 15. See also G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, London, Duckworth, 1980, 153f.

18 See his commentary on Exodus, London SCM, 1974, which classically demonstrates the 'canonical critical' method.

19 J. Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality*, London, SCM, 1992, 72.

20 In addition to Westermann's treatment, note also D. J. A. Clines,, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, Sheffield, JSOT, 1978, 61–79.

21 See Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 432–438.

22 Cf. also Ezekiel 47:1–12, Joel 4:18, Zechariah 14:8, Isaiah 33:20–22.

23 So F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 38; and see his treatment of the theme generally, 36–39.

24 See G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology 1*, Edinburgh/London, Oliver and Boyd, 1962, 46–48.

25 For a comparison of Canaanite and Israelite ideas of worship see R. E. Clements, *God and Temple*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1965; cf. H.-J. Kraus, *Gottesdienst in Israel*, Munich, Kaiser, 1962², 210–220.

26 For example in the questions raised about the apparent failure of the Davidic covenant in Ps. 89. See further the author's 'Jerusalem in the Old Testament', in P. W. L. Walker ed., *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*, Cambridge, Tyndale House, 1992, 21–51, especially 30–33.

27 For Zion as heir to the world of ideas of the pre-Israelite cult, see H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, 462f.; R. Davidson, *The Courage to*

Doubt: Exploring an Old Testament Theme, London, SCM, 1983, 140–144.

28 F. M. Cross, op. cit., 46ff., note 49. Contrast A. Alt, *Der Gott der Väter,* (BWANT III/12), Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1929 = 'The God of the Fathers', in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion,* Sheffield, JSOT, 1989, 1–77.

29 See ibid., 19, 50ff.

30 O. Eissfeldt, 'El and Yahweh', *JSS* 1 (1956), 25–37; cf. M. Barker, *The Great Angel: a Study of Israel's Second God,* London, SPCK, 1992, 5f.

31 Barker, ibid., 6f.

32 So M. Weinfeld on Ps. 82: *Deuteronomy 1–11,* New York, Doubleday, 1991, 206.

33 Cf. B. S. Childs, *Myth in the Old Testament,* London, SCM, 1960, 54–57; G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15,* Waco, Texas, Word Books, 1987, 141.

34 So E. Drewermann, *Strukturen des Bösen 1; die Jahwistische Urgeschichte in exegetischer Sicht,* Paderborn, Schöningh, 1982, 181–183.

35 Cross, op., cit., 49.

36 Cross recognizes this for Exodus 15:11; ibid., 46.

37 Cf. P. van Buren: 'To examine the word ('God') in isolation from its context in the life of religious people is to pursue an abstraction'; *The Edges of Language,* London, SCM, 1972, 71.

38 See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* London, SPCK, 1992, xivf.

39 See Cross, op. cit., 190f.

40 Kenneth Cragg, *To Meet and to Greet,* London, Epworth Press, 1992, 82.

41 Ibid., 83.