

Folklore and the Old Testament

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Writing in 1950, the leading Semitic folklorist Theodor H. Gaster commented that ‘unfortunately, the vast majority of Biblical scholars have been slow to appreciate the implications of a folkloristic approach’ for their particular studies and his words have been echoed by others both before and since. The exact import of Gaster’s statement needs to be carefully noted. As far as Old Testament scholars are concerned, they have long recognized the presence of a considerable amount of folklore material in the Biblical writings, and have frequently called attention to it. But, with some notable exceptions, it would seem fair to say that they have generally regarded such material as somewhat peripheral to their proper exegetical concerns. At best, they have concerned themselves with the way in which folktales, for example, have been assimilated and adapted to what they see as the distinctive faith of ancient Israel—it is the assimilation and adaptation which is the real focus of interest. At worst, folklore elements in the Old Testament are viewed as alien nuggets which, in von Rad’s comment on the story of wrestling Jacob, have ‘remained unchanged and uncorrected’ and are of little value for modern readers of the Bible. So, while everyone would admit that there is folklore in the Old Testament, the real issue is about the *implications* of it for our understanding of the actual Old Testament writings.

At this point, however, it is perhaps necessary to ask just what is meant by folklore or rather, in Gaster’s phrase, what is meant by ‘a folkloristic approach’, for one may suspect that part of the problem is that Old Testament specialists are in the main unsure about what they should understand by folklore and unaware of just what the modern folklorist is concerned with and what he is trying to do. J.J. Rogerson’s chapter on Folklore in his recent book *Anthropology and the Old Testament*, itself in many respects a pioneering work, provides ample evidence—or should one say ample *lack* of evidence?—for the truth of such a statement. His list of scholars who have made significant contributions directly related to Old Testament folklore is a very short one: Ewald in the middle of the last century and Gunkel and Frazer in the first quarter of this century, although here the name of Gressmann ought to be added from the same period, for his work is on the same level as theirs. There remains at the present day T.H. Gaster, but he is very much the exception that proves the rule, as witness his own rather sad words in the Preface to his recent *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament*: ‘I have had no help from colleagues in preparing this book, and have indeed been constrained, over these long years, to plow a lonely furrow.’ What has tended to happen is that Old Testament scholars, who generally have only a limited knowledge of folklore studies, rely largely on the work of their predecessors who have shown an interest in this area and since, as we have seen, most of these were active some fifty years ago, the result has been that more recent Old Testament study has operated with assumptions and concepts about the nature of folklore which are generally considerably out of date. Folklore studies have not stood still since the first quarter of this century. In particular, folklorists have been much concerned with establishing their subject as a discipline in its own right, with its own proper theoretical concepts and methodology which distinguish it from other subjects, such as the study of history, literature, anthropology or sociology, with all of which, not to mention others, it has been so closely intertwined, not to sad confused, in the past. Only such a development can really justify one in speaking of ‘a

folkloristic approach' at all or in suggesting to other disciplines that they should be aware of its, value for their own particular interests.

Having said this, however, it must be admitted that it is still by no means as easy to define the character and purpose of folklore study as it is in the case of longer established subjects. Funk and Wagnall's *Standard Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Legend* published in 1949, gives no less than twenty-one different definitions of folklore by various contemporary authorities and, although there is a considerable overlap, there still remains enough difference between them to make it difficult to arrive at any very precise description. But perhaps too great precision in this matter is not altogether desirable and here reference may be made to the discussion about what folklore aspires to do in a recent article by one of the leading modern folklorists, R.M. Dorson, with the significant title 'Is Folklore a Discipline?' He begins by pointing out that folklorists today 'frequently find difficulty in expressing their teleology' because no 'such all-governing hypothesis' directs their energies as was the case in the past when, for example, all folklore was seen as primitive survivals, from which the thought-world of prehistoric man could be reconstructed or viewed as fragments of original myths. In the light of this, Dorson goes on to attempt his own definition. 'I would say', he writes, 'that folklorists today are concerned with the study of traditional culture, or the unofficial culture, or the folk culture, as opposed to the elite culture, not for the sake of proving a thesis but to learn about the mass of mankind overlooked by the conventional disciplines.'

Now this statement makes a number of points which are of particular interest in connection with the Old Testament. It emphasizes the importance of a knowledge of folklore at first hand, the importance of field-work as part of the professional folklore scholar's methodology. Lying behind it also is the increasing concern, within the discipline, with contemporary folklore and the awareness that folklore is continually being produced and re-produced as a reflection of the ethos of its own day, not of an era long past. So, when trying to distinguish folklore from anthropology, of which it has often been considered merely a branch, Dorson contrasts the folklorist's immediate contact with the man in the street with the anthropologists who 'venture off the beaten track'. Obviously, there are problems in the application of the insights and techniques of contemporary folklore study to the Old Testament. From the standpoint of the twentieth century, the culture and society of the Old Testament, at whatever stage of their development and at whatever level, are indeed 'far off the beaten track' and can only reflect the ethos of an era long past. Nor are there any ordinary ancient Israelites around from whom we can collect living folklore material. More importantly, the written records that comprise the Old Testament are the products of what Dorson would call an official or elite culture. They are the work of what may fairly be called sophisticated authors and intellectual circles, genuine writers and thinkers, who, even when they use what are unquestionable genuine folklore elements, re-interpret them in a variety of ways to express a particular point of view as a part of a greater coherent whole. It has been one of the achievements of recent Old Testament scholarship to demonstrate that this is so even in the case of what might appear at first sight as merely a straightforward and artless narrative. So the history of traditions usually means something rather different to the *Alttestamentler* from what it will to the folklorist: the former is primarily concerned with their transmission and interpretation in learned circles, the latter with their growth and development among the folk.

Nevertheless, the kind of description of folklore given by Dorson can be of great value in helping Old Testament scholars to appreciate its importance for their own specialist concerns

and in putting them on their guard against certain misapprehensions about it which have all too often characterized their work in the past. If folklore is the study of traditional or unofficial culture, then the folklore material in the Bible is the chief, if not the only, means of discovering the outlines and the character of that type of culture in ancient Israel; and the sympathetic appreciation and study of it should lead to a better understanding of the Hebrew 'miss of mankind' than has often been the case. Over twenty years ago, S.H. Hooke, who himself had a great interest in folklore, called attention to the danger inherent in such frequently occurring expressions as 'the religion of Israel', 'the genuine Yahwism' or 'the official religion of Israel.' To speak in this way is to isolate out just one element in the Old Testament picture of Israelite religion—and, we may add, of ancient Israel's culture in general—and to ignore the rest as being of little or no significance. Even if, as Hooke did, we feel able to discover in the Bible 'a depth of religious experience without parallel in the religious literature of any other people', yet what he went on to say is equally true: 'but such a level of religious experience ... was not to be found in the nation as a whole at any period of Old Testament history.' In other words, unless we take seriously *all* the levels of Israel's religion, not least that folk religion which is very much the province of folklore, we shall be bound to give a very inadequate account of it. Indeed, we shall be in danger of misunderstanding the higher level reached by Hebrew religion as well, for this never lost its links with what may be described as Israelite folk religion nor can its real achievement be grasped except in relation to the latter, as Hooke again demonstrated in his comment on Hosea.

The second chapter of Hosea, to take only one example, shows that there were levels of religion in Israel, widely spread throughout the country, in which Yahweh was spoken of as Baal and was associated in popular thought with those sexual elements in the fertility cults of Canaan whose existence is well attested. If this be denied, Hosea's polemic loses its point, and the poignancy of his transformation of the ritual marriage element in that level of Israelite religion which he is attacking into the magnificent symbolism between Yahweh and a repentant Israel is destroyed.

Hooke's point may seem a fairly obvious one but no-one who has perused what has been written about Hebrew life and religion since he penned his words can doubt that the methodology he criticized remains highly influential. At this point, one may perhaps refer to another statement by J.W. Rogerson, whom no-one could accuse of underestimating the significance of folklore for Old Testament studies, because behind it there still seem to lurk outdated views about the position of folklore in the Bible which are no longer fully in line with what we have suggested is the contemporary folkloristic approach. Dealing with the story of Gideon's fleece in Judges 6: 36-46, he observes that this is an example of the way in which a folk-tale has 'entered the biblical tradition with little or no assimilation to the distinctive faith of ancient Israel.' Leaving aside the problem of what could be meant by 'the distinctive faith of ancient Israel', which has already been touched upon, Rogerson's comment raises two questions: first, if a folk-tale has 'entered' the Old Testament tradition, where did it come from? and, secondly, what is implied by saying that it has not been 'assimilated' to the religion of Israel?

These two questions, and the answers that may be given to them, are of course inter-related, but perhaps they can be separated for the purpose of convenience in discussion. When we ask where, on the assumption that folklore material has entered the Biblical tradition. It has come from, again two broad answers seem to be advanced, or pre-supposed, by Old Testament scholars. Before going on to discuss them, however, it should be realized that both of them, or

indeed any other answers that might be given, rest on the application to the Bible of what has been called the 'comparative method' and it is important to give some consideration to this because any attempt to construct a theory, or what Dorson calls a 'philosophy' of folklore really depends on it—if folklore is to lay claim to being a distinct and recognizable discipline it must be, among other things, *comparative* folklore. In a recent essay, S. Talmon has penetratingly examined 'The "Comparative Method" in Biblical Interpretation', in the course of which he distinguishes two main approaches to the Old Testament material. The first is that described by Marc Bloch as 'the comparative method on the grand scale... the basic postulates of which, as well as the conclusion to which it constantly returns, is the fundamental unity of the human spirit.' But those who adopt this approach have always been clear that the fundamental equality of mankind in thought processes and societal characteristics is much more marked in the so-called 'primitive' stages of human development rather than in the 'higher' societies. What is argued is, to quote Talmon, that 'the intrinsic unity of mankind still manifests itself in relics from those early phases which can be identified, and then compared, in societal and conceptual moulds of more developed historical peoples.'

Hence, folklore elements in the Old Testament have often been regarded as indeed 'relics' of a somewhat vaguely conceived primitive stage of Israel's evolution, simply preserved as Israel progressed to a higher level and from there entering into the developed Old Testament tradition. Viewed in this light, Israel, or her remote ancestors, would have gone through the same 'primitive' phase as was the case with humanity in general and its folklore would be among the features which provide the evidence for such an opinion. This kind of outlook was especially characteristic of an older generation of Old Testament scholars—for example, Adolphe Lods who had a lively appreciation of the significance of folklore—and it is best exemplified in J.G. Frazer's *Folklore in the Old Testament*, published in 1918. For Frazer argued very clearly both that folklore material in the Old Testament was the remains of an earlier and outmoded Weltanschauung, surviving as no more than mere superstitions, and that this could be demonstrated by comparing it with similar, and originally virtually identical, beliefs and customs from a wide range of primitive peoples from a vast area of time and space. Nor are the Frazerian method and assumptions by any means dead as far as concerns Old Testament studies: they are still very much alive in the work of T.H. Gaster whose important book, to which we have already referred, is basically a revision and up-dating of Frazer.

Now, 'the comparative method on the grand scale', particularly as exemplified by Frazer, has been widely and sharply criticized, mainly for its indiscriminate use of evidence drawn from an amorphous mass of societies, with little or no historical, geographical or other connection between them and for its failure to realize that every individual culture imposes its own stamp on apparently similar beliefs and customs, so that the differences between one society and another are even more important than the resemblances. One may accept such strictures as being largely justified but is it really the case, as has often been suggested, that, because of them this kind of approach is wholly discredited and can no longer be considered as a legitimate tool either for the study of folklore in general or the Old Testament in particular? Surely there are real resemblances as well as real differences, there remains a residuum of beliefs and practices in one culture which are basically similar to others to be observed in another culture, as compared with other beliefs and practices for which this can not be claimed. In fact, it is only the comparative method, and even the comparative method 'on a grand scale', which enables us in many cases to identify the presence of folklore elements and folklore motifs at all in the life or literature of any given group, to

answer the question ‘how do we know whether a particular piece of evidence is an example of folklore or not?’ One of the most solid achievements of folklore study has been the discovery and listing of a vast range of traditional motifs which can provide assured results precisely because their occurrence can be demonstrated among so many and so diverse cultures—Stith Thompson’s famous *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* in one of the indispensable tools for the folklorist. It is just this which can make it possible to recognize the existence of themes have their origin in folklore in ancient records where otherwise their presence could pass unnoticed: in particular, we may often be able to glimpse the influence of folklore motifs, as well as more overt theological or ideological concerns, on narratives of the Old Testament, which might appear as just straightforward history. Let us take a small and simple example to illustrate how the recognition of a folklore motif may effect our understanding and appreciation of a Biblical episode. In 2 Sam. xi., in the story of David and Bathsheba, Uriah the Hittite is sent by David to the Israelite commander in chief with a letter containing an order for his own death. This is a theme which occurs in tales among many peoples, both classical and more recent, so it is easily discerned as a common folklore motif. Now this does not mean that the event recorded never took place, for the mistletoe of folklore often grows on the oak of history, although sometimes the reverse is the case. Neither is Gaster’s comment that here we simply have an Israelite version of a well-known folk story entirely adequate, for one of the special concerns of folklore study is to examine how such material changes and develops in its use and transmission within an oral culture, for here, following the observations of Kurt Ranke, the basic folktale had a happy ending, or it does in most of its versions, with the messenger discovering the truth and being able to avoid his fate, whereas in a saga, the context in which it occurs in the Old Testament, it ends in tragedy with the human participants unable to escape the inevitable outcome of the drama. What can perhaps be said, however, is that, by recognizing that the episode in question is presented in the terms of a folklore motif, we see something important about the narrator’s technique and of his understanding and treatment of history, we catch over-tones which he wanted his audience to grasp—and which, because of their folklore heritage they would have grasped but which the modern reader could all too easily miss. But, to return to the point from which we started, this kind of deeper understanding of the story would be impossible unless the application of the despised comparative method had made us able to recognize a folklore theme in the first place and we could not do so without its aid. As we have said, this one small instance has been chosen merely to indicate what is involved in a folkloristic approach to the Old Testament and what might be involved in it for our understanding of the Bible but the implications of such an approach could be very far-reaching with respect to current fashions of interpreting much larger units. For example, Westermann has recently emphasized that we should at least begin by viewing the patriarchal narratives as tales reflecting the concerns of a particular type of family as those are expressed in folklore, rather than combing them ‘so that history can be produced’ or seeing them as primarily theological reconstructions. In a similar way, we shall make a very different assessment of the whole complex of 2 Sam. ix-xx, from which our example was taken—assuming we have drawn its boundaries correctly—if we see it as a collection of tales originating a background of folklore rather than as authentic history, dynastic polemic or wisdom reflection.

Comparative folklore, then, even on ‘the grand scale’ need not be regarded simply as the listing of a greater or less number of random parallels to the customs and beliefs of any one particular society, however often unskilled practitioners may actually have operated along

these lines. Once elements of folklore have been recognized, they need to be carefully examined with a view to discovering the function they fulfil and the human needs they seek to satisfy in the real life of the group in question. So what is basically unsatisfactory about the Frazerian method is its reliance on a rather crude and mechanical evolutionary theory of the development of human societies in general, namely, in Frazer's own words, that 'all civilized races have at some period or other emerged from a state of savagery' and that folklore beliefs and practices are only 'preserved like fossils in the Old Testament'.

Similarly, T.H. Gaster has written with direct reference to the Semitic field

The present writer has adopted the principle of assigning to folklore any element of a popular ceremony or any feature of a tale or myth which is no longer intelligible to performer or narrator, which is neither logically nor organically related to the whole, and which is out of harmony with the normal thought and usage of the period.

It is hardly necessary to point out how many questions are begged by almost every phase of this statement but, in general, the effect of it is that, as far as the Old Testament is concerned, it will inevitably impel the scholar to leave folklore material on one side and to take the view that it has been preserved only by inadvertance or unthinking convention. Of course, this is no doubt sometimes the case but surely we should, as is all too rarely done, also consider the option that it has been transmitted because it still had a positive value in the continuing tradition in which we now find it. Let us look again at Rogerson's comments, to which we have already referred, about Gideon's fleece. He makes two points, the first of which is that the incident is in no way deeply embedded in its context; it interrupts the flow of the narrative from Jud. vi 35-vii 1'. About this, it may be pointed out that perhaps one of the most valuable insights the folklorist can bring to the study of the Old Testament is through his analysis of the method and structure by which the folktale operates and not least the folk narrative containing a number of episodes, such as that generally called a saga, to which category the account of Gideon belongs. Such an examination readily reveals that the folk mind operates according to its own laws, that it does not seek the logical and consistent narrative pattern which seems so natural to us, and that it can tolerate apparent irrelevancies and even inconsistencies within a single unit. Old Testament scholars have never sufficiently taken account of such facts, either in the past or in the present, for, if they were once obsessed with literary documents, they now tend to be just as much with specific theological presentations of the material and this concern can produce an unbalanced appreciation of its true nature. We hear a good deal, for example, about the so-called Deuteronomistic picture of David or of the Yahwist's understanding of the patriarchs. No doubt these interpretations are there in the Old Testament, but one may wonder whether they really can be carried through with the great precision that is often claimed for them, with every detail or episode in the text seen as being presented so as to contribute specifically to an organic whole. For, from a folkloristic approach, the sagas of David or the patriarchs are basically a collection of popular tales of diverse backgrounds, clustered around a traditional figure of history and legend. To repeat, this is not necessarily to deny the existence of such modern scholarly hypotheses and as the Yahwist or the Deuteronomists, but only to suggest that they were perhaps often more preservers and than conscious and deliberate authors.

Rogerson goes on to assert that Gideon's request for the sign of the fleece goes against too much that is said elsewhere in the Old testament about signs and trust in God for us to take the narrative at its face value. What is meant by 'taking the narrative at its face value' is perhaps not wholly clear, but we can observe one or two things about its function in the whole

Gideon complex. The account of Gideon's campaign in Jud. vii is almost a paradigm of the ritual procedures which characterized the 'holy war', as that has been reconstructed above all by Von Rad. Now an essential preliminary to the undertaking of that war was to inquire from God for a sign or oracle which would indicate that the enterprise enjoyed his approval and this is the role of the episode of the fleece in the Gideon saga. Certainly, the detail of the test being repeated under conditions which are the opposite of what has previously occurred is a well-known folklore motif, but this does not empty it of all religious significance: it represents both the greatness of God's miraculous power and the absolute certainty of his approval. Again, the episode appears to have taken place at Ophrah, which was a sanctuary and the threshing-floor, on which the fleece was placed, sometimes appears in the Old Testament as a specially sacred spot. We cannot, therefore, exclude the possibility that, as is often the case with folklore, the story took its rise from an existing practice, a living reality in the people's life.

This last comment brings us to the consideration of a rather different and more limited type of comparative procedure, one in which, to quote Marc Bloch again 'the units of comparison are societies that are geographical neighbours and historical contemporaries, constantly influenced by one another'. Hence, as far as the Old Testament is concerned, the area of comparison is restricted to what is referred to as the Ancient Near East. With regard to our subject, the most outstanding example is again provided by T.H. Gaster who describes the folklore of the Old Testament as consisting of material which was mostly 'derived by the Biblical writers from the popular lore of Canaan and the adjacent lands and was by no means their own primary invention.' Some of the considerations which we have reviewed already in our general discussion of the comparative method of course apply here also: how far can we suppose a clearly defined Israelite society that did the deriving from its neighbour? How far is it correct to see the material in question as something essentially alien to a genuine Old Testament tradition rather than forming an authentic part of it? But in trying to compare Biblical folklore with Ancient Near Eastern folklore one particular difficulty and one particular question arise. On the one hand, almost all the material we have from that area comprises texts that are literary, religious, legal or administrative in character, that is, they reflect what we have called the elite culture, rather than the popular culture which is the proper matrix of folklore. From that world, we have no pure folktales, no pure descriptions of popular ceremonies. So it is necessary to apply the same wider comparative method, the comparative method 'on the grand scale', to the Ancient Near Eastern evidence also, if we are to have any hope of uncovering folklore material in it: in fact, because, in marked contrast to the literary deposit of its environment, the Old Testament contains so much that very directly reflects the customs, relationships, and, above all, the speech of real life and ordinary people, it probably throws more light on Near Eastern folklore than the other way round. It would, therefore, seem equally unjustified to think of biblical folklore as originating from the Ancient Near Eastern, or even the specifically Canaanite background, as it is to think of it simply as the residue of a primitive stage of human development.

On the other hand, when we compare the Old Testament with its contemporary world we can hardly avoid raising the whole question of myth and ritual, and their relation to folklore, because it is in this particular area that the comparative method we are discussing has had its main influence on Old Testament studies as a result of the activities of the so-called myth and ritual school, whose proponents at least have had

this in common, that they drew support for their often very diverse theories from the evidence of the Ancient Near East. If it is difficult to define folklore precisely, it is even more difficult to define myth and its relation to ritual, but folklorists have always had to concern themselves with theories of myth and Old Testament scholars have generally tended not to draw any sharp distinction between mythology and folklore and indeed have often rather unthinkingly adopted the view that folklore practices and beliefs are actually relics of original myths and rituals—one may think of the title of a book about the Old Testament by that very careful scholar A.S. Peake ‘Faded Myths.’ Nevertheless, although at least as far as the Old Testament is concerned, myth, ritual and folklore must remain closely linked, yet even here we should draw a distinction between folklore, in the modern understanding of it, on the one hand, and myths and rituals on the other, however hard that distinction may sometimes be to apply in practice. Folk narratives will frequently contain what were once mythological elements or reflect actual rituals; there occur folk narratives which have a plot similar to that of a true myth, and this is not surprising since both can have a similar function in answering to the same human needs and concerns. But, as we saw earlier, folklore has more than one root. It can be set off by an historical event or, as is so often the case in the Old Testament, by the life of an outstanding personality; or, as with aetiological material, by a place, or a name, or a natural object; or it may arise from the need for expression and identification of family or group. So not all examples of folklore take their origin from myths or rituals. Some of them may do but even when this is the case it does not follow that they retain their mythical association, when they are employed in popular tale and narrative.

One or two illustrations may help to bring out the significance of these observations for the exegesis of the Old Testament. In Jud. xv we read how ‘Samson went and caught three hundred foxes (or jackals) and got some torches: he tied the jackals tail to tail and fastened a torch between each pair of tails. He then set the torches alight and turned the foxes loose in the standing corn of the Philistines.’ It used to be suggested that this episode originally represented the action of the burning sun on the crops and it was used as one piece of evidence that Samson was in fact a sort of demoted solar deity. Even though few, if any, would still want to uphold this theory, it could still be a piece of religious ritual, for there is a striking parallel in a passage in Ovid’s *Fasti*, telling, of the ceremonial hunting of foxes with torches attached to their tails that took place in the Circus at Rome at the annual festival of Ceres, and it is generally agreed that this was originally a ritual usage designed to remove mildew from the crops. Since the story of Samson can fairly convincingly be shown to have taken shape as a sacred legend at the old tribal sanctuary of the Danites, it is possible, following a common procedure, that a rite practised there has been ascribed to him as its originator. But the folklorist will observe that, even in Ovid, the episode is a story, not a ritual, it is folkloric rather than cultic, for the poet ascribes the act to a twelve-year-old farmer’s son, the typical innocent child of folklore, and claims that he heard the story from an old countryman. And the folklorist will also observe that elsewhere a very similar motif occurs as a military stratagem, without any aetiological reference at all, ascribed to such diverse figures as Hannibal, Tamerlane and Harald of Norway. Perhaps, then, this transformation has already taken place in the case of Samson: it is a genuine folklore theme, which was attached to Samson to express, as a living reality, his outstanding character as that was seen in the tradition about him.

Another example will show the complicated questions which confront the scholar when he seeks to assess the part played by history, folklore, myth and ritual respectively in some important sections of the Old Testament. In the narrative of the plagues of Egypt—and we must leave aside all the problems relating to the literary transmission of this material—comparative study reveals the presence of a large number of folklore motifs, as may be seen from a glance at such headings in the Stith-Thompson *Index* as ‘plague’, ‘pestilence,’ ‘water’, ‘darkness’, ‘sticks’ or ‘rain’. This fact makes it highly unlikely that there is any close correlation between the existing tradition and a supposed series of natural calamities which afflicted Egypt at the time of the Exodus: it cannot of course be categorically denied that there may have been one or more such disasters in actual fact, but the evidence does not allow us to assert this either. On the other hand, it may well be the case that some individual episodes, such as the changing of water into blood, have a definite origin in Ancient Near Eastern mythology: and this in turn has raised the question as to whether the background of the whole story may not be found in the sphere of myth and ritual, whether it is not, in Engnell’s words, ‘a historicizing representation of an original cultic myth.’ Here, again, the folklorist may advise caution. He will be aware that mythical elements in folklore stories rarely in fact point to the existence of an actual current myth, however much one may talk about historicization. He may wonder whether the turning of the water into blood has not already become a motif in its own right and with its own independent existence which could be used in various contexts—for example, do we find another use of it in 2 Kings iii, where, by a divine miracle, a valley is filled with water and, when the sun shines on it, the Moabites say ‘it is blood’ particularly as it is slightly odd that they should have been so deceived in actual fact? All this is not to deny that the plague complex has a cultic character and had a cultic use, for there is much to suggest that it had, but only to question whether such was its *origin* and to wonder whether it is not rather the case that a saga of the hero does come to be used liturgically in an Israelite festival of which the re-selling, and perhaps re-enacting, of the Exodus tradition formed part.

In much of the preceding discussion, we have in fact touched at several points on the second question we broached as to what might be meant by speaking of folklore material being *assimilated* to the religion of Israel. Certainly, one of the principal concerns of folklorists is to concentrate on a particular folktale, or similar piece of material, and to trace its history as far as possible. On many occasions, one can, with some degree of certainty, pin-point the place, or date, or circumstances in which a particular version of a folk motif originates and then plot its transference to another environment and its adaptations and transformations in its new home. The investigation can be extremely complicated and subtle and an apparently simple narrative will often reveal many layers of development when it is examined in the light of a folkloristic approach. It is just this complexity of which Old Testament scholars frequently fail to take adequate account, even when they are aware that they are in the presence of folklore material, but it is only by dealing with *all* the aspects of a folk tradition that the way in which it has become rooted in the general Israelite tradition can be properly appreciated, and hence its significance in the Old Testament. For instance, in discussion; the note in 2 Sam. xxi that Elhanan of Bethlehem killed Goliath of Gath; commentators rarely, if ever, seem to do more than assume that there was an actual historical event and then discuss whether this originally involved Elhanan or David but has subsequently been transferred to the other. But there are several other factors in the pericope in which Elhanan is mentioned. There we hear of four men of great stature, descendants of the Raphah or giant, clearly a

reflection of the well-known folk belief in a race of primordial giants known as Rephaim in the Bible, and, in view of other evidence, in this case a tradition which the Israelites took over from the earlier inhabitants of Palestine. The folklorist will be interested too in the locution of the tradition at Gath and its association with the Philistines, and with the other topographical associations in these verses. All these elements need to be given their due weight in attempting; to describe both how this piece of folklore has indeed become assimilated to the Old Testament tradition by being brought into relation with David and also the particular significance it has as part of that tradition. For it is rarely, if ever, the case that a piece of folklore, even when it has come in from the outside, is entirely emptied of its original meaning, however much it may be transformed and developed in its new context. To take up again the example to which we referred at the very beginning of this lecture, no doubt the tale of Jacob's wrestling at Peniel is only a variant of a common folklore motif and the concept of a river spirit trying to prevent a traveller crossing which lies behind it is probably much older than the Israelite occupation of that particular area. And, of course, the narrative as it now exists in Gen. xxxii has been expanded in several ways by other themes reflecting the special religious and theological concerns of Israel. But the underlying folklore motif, with very much its original sense, remains in the Old Testament tradition as a vital part of what Jacob, the founder of the nation, signified for Israel. When, centuries later, the prophet Hosea came to speak of Jacob as 'the type of his people, it is this ancient theme of a man's victory over a supernatural opponent that he reproduces. Scholars have been so astounded at the idea of a prophet accepting a piece of primitive superstition that they have frequently emended Hosea's text to make the divine being the victor and not Jacob. There is no need for this: indeed, comparative folklore suggests that the words 'he wept and made supplication to him' is just what the spirit would have done with his human antagonist and that Hosea is relying on an oral tradition of the episode, fuller and more vivid than the obviously edited version in Genesis. However, even if the prophet has re-interpreted the legend to present Jacob in an unfavourable light, it is still with the basic folklore motif that he works—'in manhood he strove with God.'

But, as already suggested, we ought not to think of the folklore of the Old Testament entirely as either the residue of a long distant past or as borrowing from other cultures. Folklore represents a mode of thinking characteristic of all societies, at least at the popular level, and it is continually re-created, as a living reality, in generation after generation. So the Old Testament is full of what could be called contemporary folklore, folklore that emerges in successive periods. Thus all the great figures in Israel's history create their own folklore—or rather, a folklore is created round them, using well-known and standardized motifs, which is how it can be recognized, to express the significance which they possessed for the nation and its individual members. Again, as we noted earlier places and natural objects and much else spawned their own folklore, especially in the form of aetiology, as they acquired importance at different periods. Once more, Old Testament scholars, under the influence of the idea that all folklore indicates a primitive stage of development, have usually treated this material as being early and, as we have seen, rather alien to the genuine Biblical tradition. But clearly this is not always the case: the stories of Isaiah causing the sun to go backwards or curing Hezekiah with a plaster of figs, both common motifs, are likely to be contemporary with the prophet himself, the Chronicler thought it worthwhile to expand his borrowings from the books of Kings with folkloristic materials, probably drawn from oral sources, the second chapter of 2 Maccabees shows how a folklore had grown up around Nehemiah and, above all, the rich flowering of Biblical folklore in much later Jewish sources, such as Talmud and

Midrash, proves that this way of thinking never died and remained a fundamental component of the society with which we are concerned.

This lecture has endeavoured to concentrate mainly on those aspects of Biblical folklore which, it may be suggested, have often been overlooked by Old Testament specialists as providing a valuable contribution and important tool for their own particular concerns. We have left aside those areas in which the value of folklore investigation has been more widely recognized and hence several important topics relevant to our theme have been largely omitted for example, we have only touched upon the light that folklore studies, which are primarily concerned with a non-literary environment, can throw on the problem of the nature and circumstances of oral transmission in the Bible or on the complicated question of the relationship between folklore and history which is acutely posed by the Old Testament. One can only plead that an adequate treatment of such matters would require a detailed study of the texts which would have extended this lecture beyond any bearable length. But perhaps it has been possible to indicate the mutual help that the two disciplines might give to one another. For if it is true that Old Testament scholars do not always appreciate the real importance of folklore—and it is this fact to which we have largely addressed ourselves—it is equally the case that folklorists either neglect the Bible altogether or, to give Theodor Gaster the last word, when they do study it ‘indulge in highly fanciful and even fantastic combinations, unsupported by disciplined control of the original texts or familiarity with the known facts of Semitic culture’.

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