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## History and Kerygma in the Old Testament

Recently, in criticizing a book dealing with some aspects of the contemporary theological posture, a reviewer<sup>1</sup> commented on its author's alleged

preoccupation . . . with trying to make sense out of biblical passages for modern man. A common reaction among the young would certainly be: "So what? If it makes sense, fine; but if it doesn't say anything to us, don't try to twist it for the sake of saving it." . . . Instead of "reinterpreting," why not move on?

This kind of question is being raised more and more these days, and—such is the erosion of the common ground on which theology once stood—it is becoming increasingly harder to answer in terms that are mutually intelligible. The biblical theologian—by which I mean here simply the theologian who takes the biblical word as his *point de départ*, who would define the theological task as having an initial stage at least in "trying to make sense out of biblical passages for modern man," —will no doubt be puzzled as to what he is supposed to move on to: what has displaced Scripture as the *norma normans* which will now only tolerate Scripture if it "makes sense," and which indulges "reinterpreting" more as a concession to nostalgia than as a necessary step in methodology? If he is told that the social and behavioral and phenomenological sciences constitute this norm, he may be old-fashioned enough to inquire whether the roles of philosophy and theology have not been dramatically reversed. A decent and dynamic humanism suitably illustrated by biblical parallels—the sort of thing that Erich Fromm, for one, has done very well—can faithfully depict a world of man which

theology must take into account; but it is not theology itself, not Christian theology, unless the humpty-dumpty school of linguistics now prevails and words mean what we choose to make them mean, no more and no less.

There is little point in belaboring this issue. Most of those who consider themselves theologians working within the (Judeo-)Christian tradition will mainly agree that "the Bible is in a peculiar way the foundation of all theology, of all thinking about Christianity. No form of Christianity can afford to dispense with the Bible . . . the foundation document of the Christian faith."<sup>2</sup> Such an affirmation will be made by Catholics as well as by Protestants and, along with conservatives, by those who believe that the Bible must be radically de-mythologized and/or that its canon must be sharply circumscribed. Even those whose theology *de facto* was or is not biblical—the medieval scholastic for whom *scriptura* was in reality patristic tradition, the post-Tridentine Roman Catholic who began with conciliar or papal formulas and eisegeted biblical tags to fit them, the present-day philosopher of religion whose conclusions turn out to be corroborated by the Scripture rather than inspired by it—did and do believe themselves to be biblical theologians in the sense defined above. Theoretically at least, it is agreed that theology is subject to the judgment of the biblical word, however minimal this word may be conceived to be, and it is not at all a question of twisting the word to accommodate it to something else of whatever provenance.

At the same time, what so-called radical theologians are prepared to deny to the Bible as a whole, many of those who qualify eminently as biblical theologians in the above sense are cheerfully prepared to deny to the OT in particular. That is to say, they view OT history and/or its kerygma as having nothing whatever to do with NT faith.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for this attitude are various and not invariably Marcionist. One of the more respectable of them, which has also suggested the topic of this present paper, is the disparity which critical study of the Bible has revealed to exist between the *bruta facta* of ascertainable history and the kerygmatic version of that history.<sup>4</sup> The disparity is not of course confined to the OT; it also poses an acute problem for the NT, as, most recently perhaps, the discussion provoked by the Pannenberg-Kreis has made very clear. The OT difficulty, however, is compounded by associated factors: exotic literary forms, the extreme distance that separates us from most of Israel's formative experiences, and—above all—the new direction into which NT faith has shunted the OT kerygma. Research into the kernel of fact that may lie hidden in a cult legend or in the saga of a thirteenth-century tribal chieftain can much more readily be made to appear meaningless for Christian faith than can research into the circumstances of the historical Jesus, though,

to be sure, the latter appears equally meaningless to many Christians. In any case, and whether or not one is disposed to make a point of it, the disparity between what Abraham, let us say, was according to his putatively contemporary lights—at last account, a donkey trader (and smith?) resembling the Ibsha of the celebrated wall painting from Beni Hasan—and what he is in the book of Genesis, not to mention Galatians and Romans, is more than considerable.

So much more, in fact, that the discovered discrepancy readily encourages both ridicule and caricature. In a rather gloomy view of the prospect of OT studies, Morton Smith has indicted biblical faith as the culprit responsible for a perverse approach to what he characterizes as a "body of documents from the ancient Mediterranean world."<sup>5</sup> His approach is obviously that of an historian who sees his discipline threatened by the aprioristic view of so many who deal with this body of documents, who are ideologically committed to making the biblical construction of events square anyhow with the history of scientific method: *die Bibel hatte doch recht!* With fine impartiality, he scores the conservatism displayed in reproducing biblical texts, some desperate efforts that have been made to wrest meaning from a corrupt textual tradition through recourse to comparative linguistics, romanticizing biblical history on meagre archeological evidence while failing to acknowledge how thoroughly archeology has vindicated the substance of Wellhausen's hypothesis (an ingratitude of which I believe OT study is really guilty), claiming uniqueness to the OT of religious motifs that are not unique at all, and so forth. Only about OT theology does he not speak, because it is "unspeakable." As we will recall, most of these points were given attention in a much milder fashion several years ago at separate stages by that valuable gadfly James Barr.

Smith's article is often incisively witty and of course often quite on the target. No one is unaware of the effort that has been made to prove the Bible right by the naïve use of archeological and other evidence. It is part of the price that has had to be paid to the concerns that made those Mediterranean documents objects of study in the first place, that endowed the chairs of learning and underwrote the publication of the texts and funded the digs. Without those concerns, and despite their incidental aberrations, it is very doubtful that there would have ever been the resources, let alone the occasion, for either Morton Smith or me to be writing at this juncture. Critical method, after all, has not been something lately imposed on biblical studies after having been tested and proved in alien areas. It was the study of the biblical texts that only later led to the idea of extending textual criticism to other literature.<sup>6</sup> It is at least arguable too that it was biblical archeologists who did the most to convert what began as a treasure hunt into an

organized discipline making sense out of—*faute de mieux*, perhaps—shards and walls and queer scratchings. It is true they have dug by the Book, as Schliemann, for example, dug by his book rather than look for Troy in, say, the forests of Swabia. But I do not really find with Smith the unmasking of a sinister plot in “Solomon’s copper foundry that turned out to be a granary, Solomon’s stables that were built by Ahab, a Maccabean fortress that turned out to be Solomonic,” and the rest. No more sinister, at least, than the canals of Mars that disappeared with better telescopes or that extra pair of human chromosomes that float about in limbo now that microscopes have improved. It might be remembered too that Nelson Glueck, who, after all, corrected his own mistake—a thing that is not lightly done in scholarship—went looking in the Ghor for neither smelters nor granaries, but for the docks of Ezion-geber, which he never found.<sup>7</sup>

At all events, on both sides we are being urged to cease trying to find religious meaning in the OT, either because the quest leads nowhere, as far as the presuppositions of Christian faith are concerned, or because it interferes with the serious study of an otherwise significant corpus of written materials. On the contrary, however, I believe the quest to be both legitimate and necessary—necessary too not only for faith but for basic and minimal human understanding. If Morton Smith is serious when he sums up the OT portrayal of Yahweh as “a North-Arabian mountain god who traveled in thunderstorms and liked the smell of burning fat”—the late Colonel Robert Ingersoll lacked the erudition to phrase it quite this well—I must conclude that either his collection of the documents is missing some folios that are in mine or he has gravely misconstrued the character of the literature to whose study he has dedicated his scholarly life.

For the God whom Jesus revealed was very different from this, while at the same time he was the God of Israel, the very God of the OT. “Revelation of God in Christ” cannot but be meaningless unless it takes into account both a prior knowledge of the God whose fullness came to be seen in Jesus and the expectation of his manifestation which was the sum of Israel’s history and the substance of Jesus’ proclamation.<sup>8</sup> This is true not only of the situation of Jesus’ original preaching to the Jewry of his time and place (or of the perhaps comparable situation of a later Jew who hears the kerygma of the gospel), it is likewise true of that of most Christians, who come to a knowledge of Israel’s God and its expectation only through the Jesus of the church’s preaching: there is always a logical if not a temporal “prior.” It is true too, even when it is conceded that Judaism has legitimately retained its own interpretation of the OT based on the Torah which “by no means leads to the companion of taxgatherers and sinners, to the Pauline doctrine of justification, or to the Johannine assertion of the divin-

ity of Jesus.”<sup>9</sup> It is not necessary to denigrate Judaism in order to affirm that for Christian faith the prior of the OT and the direction of its history have found in Jesus an interpretation that is its own, an interpretation, however, that the earliest church considered to be an extension rather than a denial of Judaism’s. At least, what is of key concern in the one acceptance of the OT kerygma is of key concern in the other:

The New Testament does not deny that the Jews pray to the same God as the Christians. Even if we are children of Abraham in a special sense, we are yet subject to the same God and represented by the obedience of the same patriarch. At the same time that Abraham was promised a son and heir, he was also assured that he would become father of many nations. His faith is set before the Romans and Galatians as the decisive type of the faith by which men are justified.<sup>10</sup>

The promise and the God of the promise constitute the one inspiration of both Judaism and Christianity.

Now the one God common to Christians and Jews, the God whom Jesus revealed in fullness, is the God who first came to be known in Israel’s history. Lately we have been warned against making too much of this historical factor,<sup>11</sup> to the detriment of revelation through the spoken word, which is likewise attested to by the OT; but it still seems to be an unassailable fact that history throughout has been the determinant of OT revelation in a way that nothing else has, and to it everything else has been subordinate.<sup>12</sup> The earliest bearers of the prophetic word in Israel of whom we have any firsthand acquaintance already presuppose the decisive deeds of Yahweh in history—basically the kerygma of the Pentateuch, in fact—as having revealed the God in whose name they speak: prophecy is a consequent, not the determinant, of this historical process of revelation (Amos 3: 9–12; Hos 9: 10; 11: 1–4; etc.). It may be rejoined that the prophetic word was required to give interpretation to the historical event in the first place before it could become a medium of revelation, and this in a sense may be true; but if it is true, it is unverifiable from the prophecy we know: as with all history, event and interpretation have come down together and are encountered together in the ancient “cultic credos.” A prophet may, indeed, give a prior interpretation to a coming event,<sup>13</sup> but, whatever may be the source of his word, it is intended to set that event in corroboration of a primary one that is presupposed: *ky ’ny yhwh*. There is no purpose in denying that the OT represents God as being encountered other than through the indirect mediation of history. Yet it is doubtless not without significance that even the priestly Torah has at all turns been worked into the framework of Israel’s history. Neither is the wisdom literature, with its alleged

lack of interest in history, usually concerned with the God of Israel's revelation. However, wisdom did display an interest in the history of Israel. Not only has it strongly influenced the didactic, so-called secular histories of Joseph and the Davidic succession narrative,<sup>14</sup> its motifs have probably entered into the portrayal of sacred history as well.<sup>15</sup> It is worthy of note too that the apocalyptic view of eschatology which, after much reluctance, present-day scholarship is willing to ascribe to Jesus as well as to the early church, a perspective which gave Israel's history universal and cosmic dimensions,<sup>16</sup> is with some probability attributed to the wisdom tradition as having played a predominant role in its formation.<sup>17</sup> In its end as in its beginning, therefore, the OT presupposition of NT faith has had a strong historical orientation.

And thus we are brought back to the question of the tension between the data of history as we are able to know them and history as it has been told in the kerygma. To be concerned about the facts of OT history as relevant to biblical faith, to find other than philological significance in literary and historical criticism and what is turned up by the archeologist's spade, is not, as some seem to take it, the reversion to a religious historicism. It is, simply, to take the Bible seriously in its claim to represent a history of revelation—to take that claim seriously, that is, with the same critical approach and resources one is expected to bring to bear on other claims to credence. The claim is not taken seriously in the existentialist *als ob* acceptance of the OT kerygma seemingly favored by, among others, Gerhard von Rad, much in the manner of Martin Kähler's repudiation of historical criticism in relation to the kerygmatic Christ. History and interpretation are inseparable—granted—and the one comes to us only by means of the latter; but to exhibit no curiosity over what has been interpreted is hardly to enter into the spirit of the OT, which from first to last is concerned with things that happened or would happen. No necessary distinction between the historic and the merely historical should be allowed to obscure the fact that, in the biblical view, history always contains something that is *einmalig*, and that something cannot be dispensed with.

Morton Smith has justly praised an article by Roland de Vaux on historical method in which, it should be observed, de Vaux, qualifying von Rad's *Theology of the OT* as rather a history of Israel's religion, maintains:

The theologian takes for his starting point the conclusions of the historian of religions, and he judges of their validity, not only according to the criteria of rational science, but according to their conformity to the established truths of his faith. He then goes beyond these conclusions by integrating them into the whole of revelation. The connection between religious history and objective history, between the history believed by Israel and

the true history of Israel, is apparently more difficult to establish; however, it must be established in the eyes of the believer, for if the historical faith of Israel is not in a certain way founded in *history*, this faith is erroneous and cannot command my assent.<sup>18</sup>

I see no realistic option to this one. It involves what Helmut Thielicke has called "the irrevocability of anti-criticism."<sup>19</sup>

By this expression, Thielicke designates the task of historical research in relation to faith as not to define the territory in which faith can settle down but, rather, to come to grips with those historical-critical considerations that would, if validated, deprive faith of any ground on which to settle. Oscar Cullmann has recently seen the force of this kind of argument in his response<sup>20</sup> to the (unconscious) challenge thrown down by, among others, S. G. F. Brandon's *Jesus and the Zealots*.<sup>21</sup> There must be no mistake about it: if Brandon's (re)construction of the Jesus of actual history is peremptory as well as merely plausible, then Christianity has lost the basis of its kerygma. There can be no talk of adjustments or of reinterpretations or of higher truths; it must only be admitted that the doctrine of the cross, behind which, as a *brutum factum*, lies the event which Brandon calls "the most certain thing known about Jesus of Nazareth," was, by a colossal mistake or by one of the most successful deceits known to history, a groundless myth created out of the routine execution of a convicted *λησστής* by a second-string civil servant in one of the backwaters of the Roman empire. (I am by no means denying the undoubted contribution which Brandon has made to *Leben Jesu-Forschung* but, rather, acknowledging, as he has not explicitly, that the conclusion he has drawn from it quite negates the Christian gospel.) The historical validity of Israel's kerygma is of course not as intimately connected with NT faith as is the person of Jesus, but the connection is no less real for being of relatively less importance. If historical research should force us to acknowledge that there had never been those *ἰδὼντες τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ* in which Israel had found its God, it is not merely that Jesus addressed himself to a mythical Father; there simply was, by definition, no God for him to reveal, no God reconciling us to himself in Christ in culmination of a *Heilsgeschichte* that never was.

It is not, obviously, that we are called upon to make history out of the cult-inspired recitals of the conquests of Jericho and Ai, or whatever literary form we are supposed to assign these perennially interesting etiologies, or to ask ourselves whether the axe head really floated. Solomon's granary is all one with his foundry, which is to say that it matters neither more nor less nor at all. Considerations of this kind are irrelevant to the question of whether we may continue to regard the OT as a record of historical revelation, and no service is paid to the cause of reasonable discussion when

such considerations are dragged in as though they were entirely germane to that issue. Neither is the issue changed in the least because earlier Christians, who lived in an uncritical and unhistorical age, did mistakenly believe such considerations to be germane to it. We know, as they usually did not, that the OT, like history in the mass, contains its share of myth and legend, and we have learned, in part through their mistakes, to disengage the question of historical revelation from the outmoded category of biblical inerrancy.

Neither is there question of historical criticism being expected to confirm that God covenanted with Israel, thereby somehow proving right the prophets and the pentateuchal histories in the moral and religious implications they discovered in his having revealed his mercy and loving-kindness. Historical criticism cannot do such a thing; as we have said, its task is the much more modest one of ascertaining the facts, as best it can recover them, of which history has been fashioned. History itself is not facts but the interpretation of facts. The best—or worst—that historical criticism can do is to establish that the interpretation is or is not, as the case may be, compatible with the facts. This is not to reduce the function of historical criticism to a purely negative one, as though it served its purpose only by not coming up with data that would make a peremptory judgment against biblical history inevitable. Its business is with facts, and the more facts we have the better we are able to understand how the history came about and what are its virtues and shortcomings, how we must qualify it if we still choose to accept it. But even if we should someday find a record from, let us say, the nineteenth Egyptian dynasty telling of a flight of Asiatics through the Sea of Reeds, though for some reason we might think that our biblical history had been proved to be more “factual” than we had hoped it to be, actually we should be not much affected in regard to our disposition to accept or reject the history of the exodus. I have chosen an example which, though highly unlikely, is not entirely inconceivable: there was a time, after all, when far more recent happenings, such as the Babylonian captivity, and the Ezran-Nehemian restoration, and the prophet Ezekiel, could all be written off as so much romanticizing provoked by theology, until the Babylonian chronicles turned up to present their own version of certain facts that were indisputably the same. Facts again, not history. To have the Babylonians confirm independently that King Jehoiachin was, indeed, one of their guests in exile did clear the air a bit. It did not, however, speak to the evaluation of Jehoiachin made by Jeremiah or Ezekiel or the Deuteronomic historian, or to the meaning of the exile ventured by any of these or by the Second Isaiah or Ezra and Nehemiah and the Chronicler. We have Sennacherib’s version of his siege of Jerusalem and his bottling

up of Hezekiah in the capital (probably recounting the first of two campaigns which the OT has united into one). It is good to have this agreement on facts; yet what could be further removed than the separate interpretations that have been given the facts? The excavator of an Israelite town of the age of Amos and Hosea may be able to show, by the mute evidence of archeology, the glaring contrast of rich and poor that called forth the prophetic denunciations of these eighth-century spokesmen for human rights,<sup>22</sup> but the evidence, which is undoubtedly far less abundant than that which will be available to the same effect to the remote archeologist of twentieth century America, must have been as ambiguous to men of good will then as it remains to men of good will now. Who wrote the proper commentary on the agreed facts? Historical criticism, it seems to me, can mainly offer interesting suggestions, the value of which should not be minimized; but it can offer no final solutions. And thus we must reluctantly conclude that its findings, in any positive sense, are usually of far more interest to the biblical scholar in his capacity as student of Near Eastern culture and religion than as biblical theologian.

Still, since history is an interpretation of facts, the facts are always a comforting thing to have, and thus must be of interest to the biblical theologian. Has the possession of the facts damaged, in any way that we now know, their interpretation as offered by the OT? I am not aware of any, or at least of any that is significant. Recognition that the facts are patient of interpretations other than that of the Bible, even that a contemporary interpretation of them, as in some instances mentioned above, would have inevitably differed from it, constitute no apodictic argument against the OT kerygma. Not, first of all, in point of principle. As Alan Richardson has correctly stated, history does not automatically become “truer” the closer it is brought to the events it chronicles and interprets. He uses as an example the meaning of Bismarck in history, which could be accurately appraised only in the light of what happened in 1933 and 1945.<sup>23</sup> The thing is, history simply cannot be written by contemporaries, a fact that seems to be generally accepted by practically everyone except biblical critics.<sup>24</sup> It is probably the most respectable of the reasons for the *loi de cinquante ans* governing access to the French national archives, a provision understandably frustrating to a journalist like William L. Shirer in his recent inquiry into the 1940 collapse of the Third Republic, yet indirectly given some sort of justification by Shirer’s own decision to make the first act in his drama the Dreyfus case of 1894.

Neither in point of principle nor in point of specific detail do I conceive of the facts’ having dislodged the biblical interpretation. Certainly we know that the history of Israel was a far more complicated one than the keryg-

matic version of it we find in the Bible. We have learned to separate the exodus tradition from the wilderness tradition, and both of them from the tradition of Sinai, and to trace the paths by which they came to be united.<sup>25</sup> Or, alternatively, we have left Sinai with the exodus complex but separated it from the cultic credos and the promise of the land, stressing in the process the importance and the complexities of the patriarchal traditions.<sup>26</sup> We have agreed that the major components of what came to be the people Israel were three or perhaps four, that for all practical purposes this people came to be in the land of Canaan, that the *Landnahme* might with some justice be better termed an insurrection than a conquest. In many ways, therefore, our reconstruction of what happened must be quite different from the story which Israel told of itself. Yet when we reconstruct, we go back to the same facts that Israel presupposed in its story. So far as I know, no responsible research into biblical origins has done other than confirm that there was an exodus, that there was a wilderness experience, that something important took place at Sinai. Is the historical reality of these events diminished by their being assigned to only one element or other of the forebears of the covenant people Israel? I do not see how, unless at the same time we must deny any relevance of the events of 1776 to other than the relatively few descendants of certain Dutch and English colonists who now inhabit thirteen of our southern and eastern states. In the biblical view of history, Israel was created by covenant granted it by its God. I do not know of any finding of critical history that invalidates such an interpretation; I do know of some that support it, to the extent that they suggest Josh 24 as a scene taken from life, even though what is represented there as a renewal may well have been a beginning. Here as well as elsewhere in scholarship, there have been false starts and necessary corrections. Albrecht Alt's seminal work on Israel's laws has been modified by the studies of Erhard Gerstenberger, and George Mendenhall's pioneer recognition of the relevance of the treaty form has had to undergo numerous refinements. But it would be hard to think of an area where research has been more rewarding,<sup>27</sup> offering a realistic alternative to the Wellhausenian synthesis of the past century. More and more too, it is taking us back to the kernel of historical fact which underlies the patriarchal legends, which may in the long run prove to be a more fruitful field for biblical understanding than the Nuzi parallels have been.

When I say that historical criticism, thus far at least, has served the study of the Bible not by validating the history of the OT but, rather, by not invalidating it, I recognize that I am subject to various objections. The discrepancy between interpreted event and the often recoverable facts that have been mentioned above has to be admitted by even the most conservative biblical theologian. It is a question, I presume, as to whether the dis-

crepancy has become so wide that the one must exclude the other. I do not see that it has become so wide in any significant instance, but others may well disagree. Some scholars there are of course whose concept of the discrepancy is far more radical than the majority of their peers, and it is safe to assume that they would consider the scientific evidence to have ruled out rather thoroughly the biblical construction. The late and great Martin Noth, for instance, to all practical purposes eliminated the not inconsiderable figure of Moses from his purview of the history of Israel. I doubt that most OT scholars would agree with Noth in this respect, but his and other extreme positions do tell us of the continuing need we have for rigorous critical study of Israel's traditions. Would the OT interpretation have to go if we had to discard Moses as an historical character? In his brief study of the Moses question of a few years back, which in my view demonstrated the need of common sense as the climate required to save scholarship from absurdity, Rudolf Smend<sup>28</sup> concluded, if I read him rightly, that Moses could be dispensable: he contrasted his case with that of Jesus, who is identified with the gospel in a way that Moses is not with the OT kerygma. Certainly critical study has forced us to reduce the figure of Moses, though not so much the Moses of the OT as the one of later legend and mysticism. Not Moses but the exodus is represented in the OT as the event in which God was revealed, just as the conquest—or whatever we are to call it, in fidelity to the facts—of the land is represented as the fulfillment of divine promise, not the Ephraimite chieftain Joshua, whom the biblical historian has transformed into Moses' successor and leader of a united Israel. Moses' case is somewhat different from that of Joshua, it is admitted, but I think it fair to say that the OT kerygma is never concerned with persons or dates or geographical routes to any of the degree that it is definitely concerned with the deeds of the Lord. The deeds of the Lord certainly involved all these, but in ways that the biblical traditions had often forgotten and which we may sometimes rediscover only with difficulty. Even where in the OT revelation is presented as separated from historical event (the prophets serve as a partial example here just as they serve as a partial exception to what follows), the characteristic of the divine "inbreaking" into human consciousness is remarkable for its anonymity.

Another objection may be that historical criticism has, indeed, invalidated much of the OT historical kerygma, and that I am simply refusing to acknowledge the fact by taking refuge in an idealized and selective anamorphosis of the OT that bears little resemblance to the real article. I do not believe this to be the case, however. When I speak of the OT kerygma, I mean the kerygma of the OT canon. To accept a canon of Sacred Scripture is to make an act of faith, but, as an historical phenomenon, the formation

and composition of the Biblical canon are matters for critical study. It has become a truism to say that the biblical canon testifies to a unity of diversities. Those who hold to a canon-within-the-canon principle have stressed the undeniable diversities, contradictions, indeed—at least incompatibilities—to conclude to the necessity of taking one's stand on one or another enunciation of the canon at the expense of the rest. That this stand may not appear to be merely an arbitrary choice, appeal has been made to the hermeneutical principle<sup>29</sup>—resulting, however, in what many will judge to be a choice which, if not arbitrary, is still highly personal. I think that the argument may fairly be turned in the opposite direction. What is wrong with the assumption that the hermeneutical principle was operative in the formation of the canon, that it is this that accounts for what unity the canon possesses? For a unity of some kind, the canon demonstrably is: a selected body of materials gathered of set purpose with full awareness of its inner tensions. Earlier, I objected to the caricature of the God of the OT as “a North-Arabian mountain god who traveled in thunderstorms and liked the smell of burning fat.” If such were the kerygma of the OT, I doubt very much that its word would have much to say to me. But it is not the kerygma of the OT, or even of one part of the OT, though I am perfectly aware that all the terms of this composite portrait are to be found in its pages. Many years ago, Otto Eissfeldt made some sound observations on the interaction of OT theology and historical criticism which seem to be entirely applicable at this point.<sup>30</sup> Historically considered, the OT is a corpus of writings produced over many years and subject to all the changes that time and, it is hoped, the development of the human spirit inevitably bring. Within this historical perspective, it is not hard to see how the patriarchal legends, or the Davidic theology of the Yahwist, or the Chronicler's retrojection of post-exilic Judaism into the era of David and Solomon, could have had meaning and significance proper to the age of their devising and have lost them in a subsequent generation. The same history that first made them relevant might also later declare them superseded. This is not simply to decide in favor of the most recent, but to submit the canon as a whole to the judgment of history. The early prophets had already in principle examined and rejected the more naive kind of covenant theology manifested in the doctrine of holy war or the schematic outline imposed by the D author on the portrayal of Israel's past in the book of Judges. Historical criticism, no less than the balance of the OT canon, rules in favor of the prophets: history does not recur in the cyclic fashion described in Judges, however useful it may have been at the time to think of it so doing. In the same way, when the canon of the OT is seen as the record of an historical process, the God who emerges from its kerygma has assumed more subtle attributes than those

once ascribed to Baal Zaphon. The fault of the rabbis and the fathers of the church was not, as I see it, their acceptance of the whole OT canon, which they then felt obliged to interpret as having uniform weight throughout, despite all its internal tensions. Living in an uncritical and unhistorical age, they simply did not have the impulse to read the OT historically, to see what by the historical nature of the case was residual and what had been merely provisional.

Neither is it a question, as far as I can see, of having to take the NT as the standard of interpretation of the OT—of beginning with the OT from the standpoint of its position in the church's canon, in other words.<sup>31</sup> In the first place, while the NT presupposes an OT scriptural canon, it is not of one mind concerning either the dimensions of that canon or, except in general terms, the details of its kerygmatic message. There is more about the OT that the NT presupposes than that it attempts to define and assimilate, so that its invitation is for us to seek the meaning of the OT with the means at our disposal rather than to find a ready-made interpretation of it at hand. Further, as Eissfeldt pointed out, it is not through the NT, but rather through historico-critical method, that much of the authentic message of the OT has been recovered. For example:

The prophets as personalities, as religious figures in their own right, remained unknown to Christianity for eighteen centuries. They lived and functioned—one need only think of the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel—as those who had prophesied Christ, and thus a few of their words were of significance. But as personalities they remained not understood and inoperative. It was the historical research of the 19th century which taught us to understand the grandeur of the prophetic figures by entering into a living experience of their proclamation. And who would deny that this newly discovered value in recognition has also enriched the life of faith?<sup>32</sup>

We do not, as I see it, take our interpretation of the OT from the NT, even though we take a general direction from it, just as Judaism has proceeded to the OT from another general direction. Our understanding of much of the kerygma of the OT and of what is really central to it depends on interests and means that were not always those of the NT and its age. This is the more positive side to the function of historical criticism in relation to OT understanding, and one which can often reach conclusions acceptable to Jew and Christian alike.

I would like to conclude on this note. Far from being superfluous or detrimental to the faith which approaches the OT seeking to hear a word, historical criticism serves the dual function of setting its critical affirmations in credible relief and of bringing to its text the resources necessary for the

better understanding of its message. Without destroying its value for faith, historical research helps us to define the kind of history, and its limitations, that has been made the vehicle of revelation. It has become a commonplace to designate this as history become myth: "The Exodus from Egypt is a historical datum, it becomes a matter of religion only when myth has portrayed it in paradigmatic terms."<sup>33</sup> I remain not entirely convinced of the aptness of this category. It is true that by now we have long been schooled away from a simplistic conception of myth as stories about disreputable goings on among the gods; we have learned that this is a distortion of myth, that myth is in fact a genuine, if not an empirical or strictly rational way of attempting to get at a truth. There are, we are told, good as well as bad myths, and even just harmless myths which, nevertheless, give men direction and motivation: myths of race and of nationhood, the American dream and Yankee know-how, the lost Eden to be regained or the utopia to be achieved, and so forth. It may be that in this sense we will have to understand kerygmatic history as myth—that is, all history that man lives by as a faith can be called myth.<sup>34</sup> But it seems to me that we are in danger of taking away myth's distinctive meaning by making it mean too many different things. Also, I would prefer a term for biblical history other than one which, to the extent that the Bible uses it at all—which is rarely—it sets precisely in opposition to its kerygma.<sup>35</sup> Nor is this usage merely a reflection of an unsophisticated appreciation of myth, since the same wealth of meanings now attached to myth was available to the biblical authors as well. I would prefer, in other words, a term that did not apply equally well to the biblical kerygma and to those cleverly concocted tales (2 Pet 1: 16) that the Bible sets against it. If myth is to be the phrase, we no longer have a means of distinguishing what the Bible calls myth—and is myth, by anyone's definition—from that which it sets in the most profound opposition to it, and we set on one and the same level an historical faith in election with its caricature in *Blut und Boden* superstition. Faced with the same option some years ago, G. E. Wright preferred to define the OT idea as one of history interpreted by faith.<sup>36</sup> This is the way I believe the Bible would want to describe itself, and that I believe is what historical criticism assists us in defining more precisely.

The scholar who is being honored in these present pages has, among the many other contributions he has brought to biblical studies, always evinced a concern for theological interpretation, pointing out the enduring value of biblical meaning once it has been wrested from the text. (I think, for one thing, of his work on the Chronicler's history in the AB series, dealing with material that has not always been judged to hold much promise for

the Christian reader.) Whether or not he will approve of the views expressed in the article preceding, I trust that he will accept them as having been uttered in appreciation of and in the same spirit with which he has always approached the OT.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Mary Daly*, on Gregory Baum's *Man Beginning*, in *National Catholic Reporter*, July 10, 1970, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> R. P. C. Hanson, in *The Pelican Guide to Modern Theology*, Volume 3, *Biblical Criticism* (Penguin, 1970), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Bultmann ("To Christian faith the OT is no longer revelation"), "The Significance of the OT for Christian Faith," in B. W. Anderson, ed., *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (London: SCM, 1964), p. 31. Friedrich Baumgärtel ("The OT is a witness out of a non-Christian religion; its self-understanding is not identical with evangelical prior understanding"), in Claus Westermann, ed., *Essays on OT Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1963), p. 135. Franz Hesse ("Der alttestamentliche Zeugnis ist in seinem Selbstverständnis ein fremdes Wort aus einer fremden Religion, ein Wort ausserhalb des Evangeliums"), "Kerygma oder geschichtliche Wirklichkeit," *ZTK* 57 (1960), 17–26. See the discussion in my "History and the Word," *CBQ* 29 (1967), 512–23. See also the sensitive study of G. E. Wright, "Historical Knowledge and Revelation," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament*, Essays in honor of Herbert Gordon May, ed. by H. T. Frank and W. L. Reed (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), pp. 279–303.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus is not extremely helpful on this point in the revised edition of his *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchener Verlag, 1969). After bringing the discussion only to the point of von Rad's *Theology* and its sequelae, he asks (p. 509): "Wird ein Weg gefunden werden, auf dem die Spaltung überwunden kann? Das ist jetzt die Frage."

<sup>5</sup> "The Present State of OT Studies," *JBL* 88 (1969), 19–35.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. C. F. Evans, "The Inspiration of the Bible," *Theology* 59 (1956), 11–17.

<sup>7</sup> For a much more balanced and informative assay of the role of archeology in controlling "tradition," and *vice versa*, see the article of one who is well informed of both: Roland de Vaux, "On Right and Wrong Uses of Archaeology," in *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, Essays in honor of Nelson Glueck, ed. by J. A. Sanders (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 64–80.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Revelation of God in Jesus," in James M. Robinson, John B. Cobb, eds., *Theology as History*, New Frontiers in Theology 3 (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 102–5.

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Käsemann (critique of the 1967 report of the Dutch church on the authority of the Bible), in *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), pp. 347 f.

<sup>10</sup> Markus Barth, *Israel and the Church* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969), p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Notably by James Barr, "Revelation through History in the OT and in Modern Theology," *Interp* 17 (1963), 193–205; then in his *Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). Barr is much better at puncturing exaggerated claims and conclusions—a valuable function—than he is at articulating positively what he believes the fair assessment of the situation to be. However,



it seems evident that he does not intend to deny that history has been a chief vehicle of the knowledge of God in the OT.

<sup>12</sup> Cf Hans Lubczyk, "Die Einheit der Schrift. Zur hermeneutischen Relevanz des Urbekenntnisses im Alten und Neuen Testament," in *Sapienter Ordinare*, Festgabe für Erich Kleineidam, ed. by F. Hoffman *et al.* (Leipzig: St Benno-Verlag, 1969), pp. 73–104.

<sup>13</sup> Cf Walther Zimmerli, "Das Wort des göttlichen Selbsterweises (Erweiswort), eine prophetische Gattung," in *Mélanges Bibliques rédigés en l'honneur de André Robert* (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1956), pp. 154–64.

<sup>14</sup> See, most recently, R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative: A Study of II Sam. 9–20 and I Kings 1 and 2*, Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 9 (Naperville: Allenson, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> See Martin J. Buss, "The Meaning of History," in *Theology as History*, p. 149.

<sup>16</sup> Cf Jürgen Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*, 5th ed. (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1966), pp. 120–24.

<sup>17</sup> Cf Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1960) II, 319 f. Without sharing all of the author's assumptions (e.g., his conviction of an absolute dichotomy between prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology), one can nevertheless agree that he has made a good case for wisdom influence.

<sup>18</sup> "Method in the Study of Early Hebrew History," in J. Philip Hyatt, ed., *The Bible in Modern Scholarship* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), p. 16. Parallel in "Les patriarches hébreux et l'histoire," *RB* 72 (1965), 7: "Si la foi historique d'Israël n'est pas fondée dans l'histoire, cette foi est erronée, et la nôtre aussi."

<sup>19</sup> "The Resurrection Kerygma," in *The Easter Message Today* (New York: Nelson, 1964), p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> *Jesus und die Revolutionären seiner Zeit* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> Manchester University Press, 1967. Also in articles and books previously and subsequently.

<sup>22</sup> Cf Roland de Vaux, "La quatrième campagne de fouilles à Tell el-Far'ah, près Naplouse," *RB* 59 (1952), 566. Parallel in "The Excavations at Tell el-Far'ah and the Site of Ancient Tirzah," *PEQ* 88 (1956), 133 f.

<sup>23</sup> *History Sacred and Profane* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), p. 222.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>25</sup> See, most recently, Brevard S. Childs, "A Traditio-Historical Study of the Reed Sea Tradition," *VT* 20 (1970), 406–18.

<sup>26</sup> So Horst Seebass, *Der Erzvater Israel und die Einführung der Jahweverehrung in Kanaan* (BZA W 98 [Berlin: Töpelmann, 1966]).

<sup>27</sup> See, among recent studies, Gene M. Tucker, "Covenant Forms and Contract Forms," *VT* 15 (1965), 487–503; and M. Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the OT and in the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90 (1970), 184–203. Also the interesting work of R. E. Clements, *Abraham and David*, Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 5 (Naperville: Allenson, 1967).

<sup>28</sup> *Das Mosebild von Heinrich Ewald bis Martin Noth* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1959).

<sup>29</sup> Käsemann, *op. cit.*, pp. 355 f.

<sup>30</sup> "Israelitische-jüdische Religionsgeschichte und alttestamentliche Theologie," *ZAW* 44 (1926), 1–12 = *Kleine Schriften* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1962) I, pp. 105–14. For a much more negative view of Eissfeldt's article, cf Norman W. Porteous, "Old Testament Theology," in H. H. Rowley, ed., *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (Oxford University Press, 1951/61), pp. 318 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Despite my basic agreement with Brevard S. Childs, I much prefer to his idea of the OT as emerging from the Christian canon my notion of its canon as validated by its own internal history. See his *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), pp. 99 ff.

<sup>32</sup> *Loc. cit.*, 7 = 10. Eissfeldt goes on to argue that historical criticism also helps in other ways to separate the perennially valid from the unacceptable in the OT—for example, by pointing out the kind of narrow nationalistic motivation which Israel itself outgrew.

<sup>33</sup> Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. xxxvi. Also Joseph Jensen, in "What Happened to Moses?" *CBQ* 32 (1970), 404–17 (an article with which I am in almost total agreement), ends by accepting "myth" as a valid designation of the kerygmatic history of the OT.

<sup>34</sup> So, apparently, R. A. F. MacKenzie, "The Problem of Myth and History," in his *Faith and History in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 69–81.

<sup>35</sup> In the NT, *μῦθος* occurs late in 1 Tim 1: 4; 4: 7; 2 Tim 4: 4; Tit 1: 14; 2 Pet 1: 16, always in the sense of fable, deceptive story, the very opposite of what is historically true. In the intertestamental literature, it might seem to have been given a more neutral sense: Sir 20: 19 has it equal *mšl* (cf Gustav Stählin in *TWNT* (IV), 787); still, the fact that it is here ascribed to a fool has doubtless determined the translation. The *μυχός* reading at Wis 17: 4 B S is doubtless preferable to the A *μῦθος*. In Bar 3: 23, *μυθολόγοι* occurs in the sense of sloganists, manufacturers of empty tales.

<sup>36</sup> *God Who Acts*, Studies in Biblical Theology 8 (London: SCM, 1952), pp. 126 ff.