

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

The large and varied number of theological works which are currently available bearing the title of 'Old Testament Theology' would lead us to suppose that we know clearly what such a subject is. Yet there is a considerable diversity of content in such volumes, and increasingly it has become commonplace for them to devote a good deal of time and attention to a relatively extended treatment of matters of introduction explaining what the discipline is. If we may judge by the progress of scholarly discussion in the past thirty years, we may feel entirely justified in drawing the conclusion that the most interesting and controversial aspects of the subject are to be found in these 'introductions'. Once we know how a particular scholar intends to treat the subject, it is usually not difficult to plot with a reasonable predictability what he will actually have to say about the theological significance of the Old Testament. In other words, the resolution of certain basic issues concerning the nature and proper methodology of the subject tends to exercise a dominant effect upon what the Old Testament is actually believed to offer by way of a 'theology'.

Two other relevant points may be made here. The first is that this pursuit of an Old Testament theology has been an exclusively Christian undertaking. It is hard to find more than a very few tentative essays in this field from the pens of Jewish scholars.

Secondly, and this may be felt to be even more surprising, these presentations of Old Testament theology bear very little relationship either to the way in which the New Testament interprets the Old, or to the ways in which Christian theologians of all periods have actually made theological use of the Old Testament.

In fact, alongside the production of specialised Old Testament

theologies there have still appeared a considerable number of important theological books which endeavour to grasp theologically the contents of the Bible as a whole, with little more than passing reference to the distinctive and self-imposed restraints of those who have chosen the narrower goal.

At other times compromises have appeared, in the form of volumes which set out to be 'Christian' theologies of the Old Testament, but where it immediately becomes clear to the critical reader that an almost impossible task is being attempted. Christian assumptions are taken to be necessary and proper to the work, but their explicit description and nature is forbidden because they cannot be made to conform to the historical limitation of dealing only with those ideas which are to be found in the Old Testament. Even here, however, it is striking to note that far too little space is devoted to noting the actual ways in which Christians have made theological use of the Old Testament, and a rather arbitrary selection is made of particular Christian connections with this literature.

Increasingly, therefore, we find that specialised treatments are being called for regarding the very nature and possibility of a subject calling itself 'Old Testament Theology'.¹ One thing at least is clear: the appropriate methodology for such a subject is much less obvious than it has frequently been assumed to be, and still calls forth a substantial debate.

We may begin our attempt to re-open the question of the proper method for an Old Testament theology by taking as our starting-point one of the simplest and most straightforward of the definitions that have been proposed for the subject. This is to be found in E. Jacob's *Theology of the Old Testament*, and is chosen for its representative character:

The theology of the Old Testament may be defined as the systematic account of the specific religious ideas which can be found throughout the Old Testament and which form its profound unity.²

We may immediately seize upon those words which raise the most far-reaching questions about the subject, and the possibility of fulfilling its demands. These are: *systematic – religious ideas – unity*. In the first place we may take it for granted that a

theology should be about religious ideas. But since religion is very much more than a collection of ideas, we have then got to decide what we should do with all the other information contained in the Old Testament which is only loosely related to these ideas. Are we to ignore that information, or can we in some way make use of it more effectively by drawing out from it an ideological content? This obviously affects historical narrative, but also, in a very profound way, concerns what we do in order to understand prophetic pronouncements as a form of theology.

When we go on to state that we intend to treat these religious ideas systematically the task becomes even more complicated, because it is extremely difficult to see any way in which the Old Testament as a whole treats its religious ideas in this fashion. We find ourselves, unwittingly, but of necessity, imposing a system of our own upon material which is at best more or less indifferent to an order of this kind. Moreover, the construction of such a system would suggest that it actually existed as a conscious reality at some particular time. Yet, with more than a thousand years of change and development preserved within its various writings, the Old Testament so evidently mocks at our tidy-minded desire to achieve such a system.

When we abstract the religious ideas from their context we set out on a road full of abstractions. By the time we have formed these ideas into a system we are building a great house of abstractions by the roadside. When we then go on to speak of these ideas as forming the profound unity of the Old Testament, such a house of abstractions is beginning to grow into a veritable township! The constant danger that faces us, and which we claim that all such theologies in varying degrees confirm, is that our attempts at systematising and building a unity take over the material that we are working with to such an extent that the real Old Testament becomes submerged by them. This is obviously one of the reasons why questions of introduction and methodology tend to predominate over questions of content in formulating an Old Testament theology.

We may conclude from these preliminary remarks that a theology of the Old Testament must be about the religious ideas

contained in this literature. How these ideas are to be systematised, and to what extent they constitute a unifying factor in the literature, are questions that must be considered in relation to the nature of these writings, and, in turn, to the nature of the religion out of which these writings emerged. The constant temptation that faces us is to take short cuts, and in particular to assume that we can readily pick out ideas and group them together in a way which will be meaningful for us, without attention to their proper contexts. One basic danger signal which ought to warn us against doing this, is the history of biblical interpretation. Since other ages have so clearly not found it easy to isolate an Old Testament theology from the context of the literature in which it is set, should we not take warning that the task may in reality prove to be more difficult than we have supposed? Are we not in fact being guilty of showing too much confidence in our methods of interpretation, and too disdainful of older, supposedly 'pre-critical', methods of study that we fail to see obstacles that those who preceded us saw more clearly than we? It will therefore be a basic feature of our efforts to find a new approach to the problems of Old Testament theology that we pay fuller attention than is common in such volumes to the way in which Christians, and to some extent Jews also, have actually heard the Old Testament speaking to them theologically.

I. THE ORIGINS OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Since the first-century beginnings of the Church, Christians have consistently retained the Old Testament as a part of their sacred literature for use in worship, and have made use of ideas that are to be found within it in their formulations of doctrine. It is certainly true that from time to time questions have been raised about the correctness of this, or about the terms in which it should be undertaken. However, with very few serious voices of dissent, it has remained the basic practice of the Christian Church. The Old Testament has formed a part of its Bible, and has been used and understood as such. Even so, whereas the Old Testament has played a part in the Church's worship and thinking for nineteen hundred years, the conviction that the

best way to allow it to speak theologically is to produce an Old Testament theology is a much more recent undertaking.

The roots of such an enterprise are to be traced back to the latter half of the eighteenth century, and to the rise of a new awareness of 'historical-critical' issues which affect the study of the Bible.³ The outstanding figures here were undoubtedly the German scholars J. S. Semler (1725-91) and J. G. Eichhorn (1752-1827), who may be regarded as the founding fathers of a new critical approach to the literature of the Old Testament. It was Eichhorn's pupil, J. P. Gabler (1753-1826), who first argued for a proper distinction between a 'biblical' theology, which would be concerned with theological ideas in the context of the biblical setting in which they emerged, and a 'dogmatic' theology, which would be free to evaluate and develop these ideas against a wider background of thought.

When we pause to think about this distinction we may note that it has both strong and weak points. It is evidently a strong point that it can take full account of the differing historical and cultural contexts which separate the biblical world from our own. Ideas are not timeless, eternal realities, which can be assumed to remain constant. They are denoted by words which are affected by what people intend them to mean, and actually conceive them to mean, at a particular time. Nowhere is this more evidently true than in the biblical field where we cannot take for granted that a biblical writer understood religious concepts in the same way that we do. Such a basic concept as that of 'holiness' was undoubtedly viewed and interpreted differently in an age where its cultic associations were more fully understood and felt than in one where these have largely disappeared. Even more dramatically, such an important concept as that of 'son of God' was capable of being understood in a number of different ways, and it is noteworthy that, even in the present, the most exacting Christian scholarship has difficulty in unravelling what it meant in the first Christian century.⁴ There is clearly a necessity, therefore, that a biblical theology should be concerned to understand religious ideas in a way that is consonant with that of the biblical setting in which they are first found. In order to achieve this most of the great disciplines of biblical scholarship become necessary. Textual, grammatical,

literary, and historical criticism all become important aids to establishing the proper significance of biblical ideas. So also is the comparative method an indispensable means to determining how concepts and ideas were understood at a particular time. The distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology, therefore, is to this extent justified.

Nevertheless, we should also note some significant limitations in a distinction of this kind. Most of all we must note that it tends towards the production of two different kinds of 'truth', which may, for understandable reasons, easily become confused. From a historical perspective a biblical theology is concerned with the truth of how a statement or a concept was understood at a particular time. Yet theology, as a systematic discipline of the Church, is concerned with the truth about God and his relationship to mankind. In this sense it is interested in things that may be held to be permanently true, and are not simply the expressions of one particular age.

The distinction would not be a difficult one to maintain were it not for two complicating factors. The first is that the Bible is not simply an ancient literature, but a modern one, in that it is still read and used in church and synagogue. The liturgical use of the Bible affirms that it is still capable of speaking intelligibly to the modern world, and this has to be done with the best, and most suitable, translations available. We cannot withhold the use of the Bible, nor can we easily ensure that every one who hears it takes care to hear in it only those truths that the ancient writers intended to convey.

This 'practical' obstacle to the production of a 'pure' biblical theology is strengthened by an even more important religious consideration. For all who accept the revelatory and authoritative character of the Bible, great importance attaches to the conviction that the sense that the original biblical writer intended to convey is, in some recognisable manner, still true. We can go further and argue that it is precisely the raising of this issue that lifts the statements of the Bible from the category of being 'religious ideas' and raises them to the status of 'theology' in the true sense. In other words, theology is something more than the study of religious ideas, which can be a purely historical and descriptive science, and offers some

measure of evaluation of their truth. We shall have occasion to consider this aspect of the problem of a biblical theology further when we have dealt with the second step in the division of the disciplines of a biblical theology. It is sufficient here to note that the terms which Gabler laid down for the production of a biblical theology leave open a number of issues and raise the question whether what he delineated is not something less than 'theology' in the full sense.

If ideas are to be understood and interpreted in the context of the age and cultural milieu in which they are expressed, then it is not surprising that scholars should have felt that a considerable gulf separates the religious ideas of the Old Testament from those of the New. The former spans an age of almost a millennium, whereas the latter extends across little more than a century, and is for other reasons more historically compact and coherent.

It is not difficult for us to understand therefore that, shortly after the time when Gabler argued for a biblical theology, G. L. Bauer (1755-1806) went one stage further in contending that an Old Testament theology should be distinguished from one pertaining to the New Testament. The first volume presupposing this distinction⁵ dates from 1796, and since that time the definition has become so commonplace as to have continued down to the present. Admittedly not every scholar has been happy with it, and some have sought to re-establish biblical theology as the basic discipline, and even to propose 'Christian' theologies of the Old Testament, as we have already noted. At one time, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the whole quest for an Old Testament theology was challenged on the ground that the goals of such a discipline can be better achieved by a history of Israelite religion. Some of the arguments in support of this are still worthy of serious reflection, even though there are few Christian Old Testament scholars today who express serious doubts about the possibility of achieving an Old Testament theology.

In spite of such a widely felt consensus that an Old Testament theology is a right and proper undertaking for a Christian scholar to pursue, we ought at this juncture at least to point out a certain strangeness in such an aim. In what sense is the Old

Testament a Christian book? By itself it has never constituted the canon of sacred literature of the Christian Church. It has always, rather, been the first part of the Christian Bible, and never considered to be the entire Bible of the Church. Even if we were to think of the very earliest Christian community, as it existed before the New Testament canon was established, we must nevertheless recognise that the Old Testament was seen and interpreted by means of the early Christian gospel and teaching. In other words something essentially comparable to the New Testament existed to provide a means by which to interpret and use the writings of the Old Testament. If we say, with full justification, that the Old Testament constituted the 'Bible' of Jesus, then this would suggest that an Old Testament theology ought, in some fashion, to concern itself with understanding how Jesus would have read and interpreted these sacred books. Yet this is certainly not what the vast majority of scholars have meant by an Old Testament theology, nor, with only minor exceptions, has the way in which the New Testament interprets the Old been accorded any significant place in such a theology. All of these issues concern historical questions about the structure and shape of the canon of the Bible, which we shall have occasion to refer to later, but they do raise far reaching questions about the possibility of an Old Testament theology.

Admittedly several scholars have noted in introducing the subject of Old Testament theology that it needs to be approached from an open avowal of Christian commitment. Yet it is this conceding of the Christian basis of an Old Testament theology that needs most careful examination. We might have concluded that some clear treatment would be offered of the way in which Christians have actually used the Old Testament in expounding Christian truth, and, most of all, in interpreting the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet this has hardly ever been the case, even though, in some instances, some guidelines are provided pointing the way to the New Testament interpretation of the Old. At most we are usually offered some assurance about the 'unity' of the Bible. Yet in fact is not the attempt to produce an 'Old Testament' theology in some degree a disavowal of belief in this unity? It puts asunder what we believe God has joined together.

To express the matter in this way is undoubtedly more than a little polemical, but the idea of an Old Testament theology raises questions which cannot be ignored. Certainly if we were to suppose that an Old Testament theology concerns only the 'Jewish' inheritance of the Christian Church, we should be sadly misinformed about the content of those works that present this theology. They do not recount the main ideas and teachings of Judaism as it existed in New Testament times, and it becomes important for us to learn something of these from elsewhere, if we are to come to an understanding of how there can be a unity in the Bible. We have already had occasion to mention that the pursuit of an Old Testament theology has not been a significant concern of Jewish scholarship, neither have such theologies particularly sought to show us how Judaism has used and understood its sacred literature. In fact we are pressed here back into a corner where we must face carefully what an Old Testament theology may be expected to achieve. What religion, for example, is it expected to serve – Judaism, Christianity, or ancient Israel?

To answer this might lead us, on the one hand, to answer 'all three', or on the other hand 'ancient Israel'. Since the Old Testament, as a canon, or part canon, of sacred writings, has only existed within Judaism and Christianity we ought to expect that it should reveal to us something of the reasons which have led to this canonical use. It might be expected to show us something of the way in which Jews and Christians have found theological meaning in this literature. In fact, however, the historical-critical method of approach has led to a turning away from these 'post-biblical' questions to a concern with the life and thought of ancient Israel and early Judaism in the period within which the Old Testament was in process of formation. The result is that such a theology has a barrier imposed upon it which prevents it from addressing itself to those problems which have arisen by its actual use in Judaism and Christianity.

We have already questioned the view whether we can speak at all of any systematic, or unified, theology of ancient Israel, although there undoubtedly existed something that approximated to it. The important questions would appear to be

raised, however, not simply by considerations about the nature of the writings contained in the Old Testament, but by the nature of our interest in them. In the modern world, our concern with this literature and its theology arise, more or less exclusively, from the fact that we are either Jews or Christians. There seems no reason at all, therefore, why we should not be clear from the beginning that our theological interest has arisen in this way, and go on to hope that our study of Old Testament theology will illuminate and enrich our own particular religious faith. If it is the task of theology to serve religion, then these must be the two primary religions which an Old Testament theology can serve.

This carries us back to the issue of the division into Old and New Testament theologies as separate biblical disciplines. There must clearly be something distinctly 'odd' about a Christian biblical theology which deals with only one part of the Church's canon. Yet this 'oddness' may be justified for one very clear reason, and this is that the Old Testament is that part of the Bible which the Church shares in common with Judaism. In the interests of a better mutual understanding, and of a dialogue which is more than merely an entrenched polemic, there are very good reasons why Christians and Jews should study the Old Testament together, and should seek to understand how each has drawn from the older faith and writings of ancient Israel. If an Old Testament theology is to be justified as a modern theological discipline, and is to continue to have a place in the theological curriculum of colleges and universities, it must surely be on the grounds that it can provide a place of useful theological encounter between Jewish and Christian faith. In this each should have the opportunity to view its intellectual convictions in the light of the distinctive ancient religion from which they both sprang, and with a reference to the sacred literature which they both continue to use liturgically. Admittedly this is not how G. L. Bauer conceived of the discipline taking shape, which was certainly on somewhat narrower lines, but to take the narrower view appears, in the light of the many attempts to write an Old Testament theology, to do less than justice to the true nature of theology.

2. HISTORICAL CRITICISM AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD

To view the task of writing an Old Testament theology in this way, undoubtedly raises questions about the extent to which it is to be a descriptive science committed to the historical-critical method. It was indeed the very rise of this method in the eighteenth century which led to the search for a historical 'biblical' theology of this kind. To abandon it now would certainly be to throw away one of the most important tools of scholarship which we possess, and which it has taken almost two centuries to develop. As a consideration of the origins of the specific attempt to write an Old Testament theology shows, this goal was very directly an offshoot of the new critical approach to the Bible. There can therefore be no serious justification for abandoning this critical approach in seeking a freer and more open one in the interests of theology. The main point, however, is not whether proper regard should be paid to the historical-critical method, but whether this alone should be allowed to determine the form and structure of an Old Testament theology. As we have argued above, there are good reasons why it should be regarded as proper to theological method to go beyond this. Nevertheless there are certain basic features of the historical-critical approach to the Bible which have a very distinct bearing on the problems of an Old Testament theology.

We must note here in the first place that a fundamental aim of historical criticism is to establish what should be regarded as the correct meaning of a text. In this respect an interesting feature of the eighteenth-century background to the new criticism is to be seen in the extensive debate about messianic prophecy in the earlier part of that century. What is the meaning of such a prophecy as that of the Immanuel child in Isaiah 7.14, and to what extent can it properly be called a 'messianic' prophecy? This raises further questions in relation to the New Testament interpretation of such a prophecy in Matthew 1.23. In order to answer such questions most of the basic disciplines of historical-critical research become necessary since it becomes essential to establish the correct text and the original context of such a saying. In turn these can only be

reached by a thorough examination of the literary and historical contexts in which the prophecy was originally given, which are dependent upon conclusions about the date and authorship of it. Clearly there must remain areas of doubt and uncertainty in deciding some of these issues, which is highly inconvenient for theology, but there can be no way of by-passing these questions. It is absolutely essential, therefore, that an Old Testament theology should evaluate its material and establish its conclusions upon the basis of the results of historical criticism. An Old Testament theology that ignores this would have little to commend it, or to command authority.

However, the very methods and results of historical criticism show that to speak of the 'meaning' of texts in this particular fashion is often far too simple. Our example of Isaiah 7.14, with its important declaration regarding the Immanuel child, highlights this problem very clearly. It is clear that Matthew 1.23 interprets the prophecy in a very different way, and in relation to far later events than could have been envisaged in Isaiah's time in the eighth century B.C. To treat the two passages as though they were not related to each other, however, is to ignore a very important dimension of biblical faith. The appeal to ancient scripture, particularly in prophecy, becomes a widely used technique for demonstrating the divine significance and purpose that is discerned within events. If a theology is to be truly biblical then it would appear to be important to be able to show how such different interpretations of a saying, and very specifically of a name, arose. To what extent are they related to each other? Already the Old Testament shows that there is some kind of biblical 'bridge' between the Isaianic and Matthean interpretations of the prophecy since the book of Isaiah contains other interpretations of the Immanuel name (Isa. 8.8, 10; cf. Mic. 5.3). The whole question of the interpretation of prophecy becomes a complex one in which old sayings are subjected to a continuing process of interpretation and re-interpretation. The very demand of a truly historical criticism requires that we look at the biblical dimension of faith in all its aspects, and seek to proceed beyond the view that works with simple monochrome meanings for sayings. This is not to set aside the need for understanding the parts of the

Bible in their respective historical contexts, but to use it in order to link the various parts of the Bible more meaningfully to each other. One of the most deeply felt, and widely attested, canons of biblical interpretation in the Christian Church and Jewish Synagogue has been that scripture must be interpreted by scripture. An Old Testament theology should endeavour to do this, and should make use of the results of biblical criticism in order to do so more effectively and intelligently.

In some respects the kind of problem illustrated by the aid of the Immanuel prophecy represents a feature peculiar to the prophetic literature, but it is certainly not restricted to this. We find many of the same features and difficulties emerging when we come to interpret the significance of the divine promise to Abraham in Genesis 12.1-3; 15.1-6. The great importance of this in the New Testament, and its part in the Pauline formulation of a doctrine of justification by faith, need no further elaboration here. Obviously there are aspects of this which belong to the specialised area of New Testament studies, but they are not exclusive to these. In the Old Testament literature the theme of the divine promise to the patriarchs becomes a motif which re-appears in several forms and at different times. It becomes very unsatisfactory to attempt to deal with each of these in historical isolation, since there is a clear consciousness of connection in which succeeding generations of Israelites re-appropriated their own faith. A truly biblical theology ought therefore to concern itself with these connections, and to interpret leading ideas with a real awareness of the way in which they are developed in a wide biblical context. It becomes clear then that a single historical context cannot, by itself, determine the biblical meaning of a text.

This leads us to consider another way in which historical criticism has an important contribution to make to the presentation of an Old Testament theology. A basic feature of J. S. Semler's new critical initiative in biblical research was to re-examine the structure of the biblical canon.⁶ No longer was its accepted form to be regarded as the sole level at which it had authoritative meaning. As critical scholarship had already begun to sense, and as its wider application was soon to demonstrate more emphatically, the canon of the Bible was the result

of a long process. A great multitude of authors and editors, for the most part unknown to us, composed, revised, and shaped the Bible in the form which we now have.

This desire to probe behind the form of the biblical writings to enquire after an earlier form of them was related for Semler to a change in the conception of biblical inspiration. This was a shift from a conception of *Wortinspiration* (inspiration of the text) to one of *Realinspiration* (inspiration of the subject).⁷ It led to a fresh concern with sources, and to the raising of new questions about who the original authors of a document or saying were. The result has certainly been to complicate yet further the problems associated with the interpretation of leading themes and ideas of the Bible. Instead of looking at the biblical books as relatively uniform and self-contained realities, it becomes clear that a great history lies hidden within them. The book of Isaiah, for example, is not a uniform document dictated, or penned, by one man, but a great collection of material built up around the great prophetic ministry of the eighth-century Isaiah of Jerusalem. So also the Pentateuch is formed out of a multiplicity of source material. It may be likened in many respects to an anthology of anthologies, for so much of the central core of Israelite religious tradition has been preserved there.

The result is that today, it is no longer sufficient for us to view the biblical writings as expressive of single interpretations, which may then subsequently have been added to. Already a complex history of meaning lies contained in the traditions which underlie the text of scripture. Of course not all texts are so fraught with meaning, but it becomes clear on examination, that it is precisely those major thematic conceptions such as the divine promise to Abraham, God's revelation to Israel at Sinai and his promise of rebirth out of Babylonian exile which have been the subject of such extensive elaboration and development. In some respects to speak of clear 'doctrines' associated with such themes is mocked by the great variety of insights and images which are employed to affirm them in the Bible. There is a sense, therefore, in which the theological need to provide circumscribed accounts of what the Old Testament means by such great key-words as 'covenant', 'salvation' and

'peace' is too abstract and limited an undertaking to do justice to their proper biblical setting. It is essential, therefore, that an Old Testament theology should retain a proper consciousness of the literary setting of the material it utilises, rather than to seek a body of quite abstract 'doctrines'.

All of these factors bring us back to a fundamental consideration about the aim and purpose of an Old Testament theology. It should be concerned to provide some degree of theological insight and significance in relation to the Old Testament literature which we have. This canonical form of the literature represents the 'norm', if only in the sense that it represents the way in which the Old Testament is read and interpreted in the Jewish and Christian communities. To probe behind this canonical form is important, and should provide a basis for obtaining a better understanding of it, as also is the way in which this canonical form has subsequently been understood and interpreted in Jewish and Christian tradition. The questions of tradition and canon are interrelated, since the canon of the Old Testament represents a kind of 'freezing' of the tradition that was central to Israelite-Jewish religion at a critical moment in its history.

3. THE OLD TESTAMENT AS CANON

All of these considerations lead us to recognise the great importance that attaches to the form, function and concept of the Old Testament as canon. It has therefore been a welcome feature of recent approaches to the problem of biblical theology to have rediscovered the notion of canon as a central feature of the Old Testament, which must be allowed to play its part in the presentation of an Old Testament theology.⁸ At a very basic level we can see that it is because the Old Testament forms a canon, and is not simply a collection of ancient Near Eastern documents, that we can expect to find in it a 'theology', and not just a report of ancient religious ideas. There is a real connection between the ideas of 'canon' and 'theology', for it is the status of these writings as a canon of sacred scripture that marks them out as containing a word of God that is still believed to be authoritative. There are good reasons, therefore,

why it matters a great deal that the historical and literary problems relating to the formation and acceptance of the canon should occupy a place in our discussion.

One point becomes immediately clear, and this is that the date of composition of a document, or writing, in the Old Testament does not, of itself, determine its place in the canon. Similarly where, as is supremely the case in the Pentateuch, there is evidence that a great multitude of sources have been used to create the extant whole, then we are in a real way committed to trying to understand this whole, rather than to elucidating the separate parts.

Perhaps most of all, however, the concern with canon forces us to realise that the Old Testament has a distinctive, and in many ways unexpected, shape. This becomes clearest as soon as we follow out the guideline provided by the Hebrew (Jewish) shape of the canon, which must be accorded full authority as the oldest, and most basic, form of it. The earliest Christian Church took over the Old Testament in its Greek (Alexandrine) form, whereas the separation between Judaism and Christianity led Judaism to revert exclusively to the Hebrew (Palestinian) form. In spite of many problems and historical obscurities concerning the way in which the formation of the canon developed in the first century BC and in the ensuing century, we may confidently recognise that this Palestinian form of the canon represents the oldest, and most basic, form of the Old Testament. In this it is made up of three separate parts: the Pentateuch, or *tôrâh*, the Prophets (later subdivided into the Former and Latter Prophets), and the Writings. These three parts correspond to three levels of authority, with the Pentateuch standing at the highest level, the Prophets below this and the Writings further down still. When therefore the New Testament characterises the entire Old Testament as a book of 'Law' (Greek *nomos* translating Hebrew *tôrâh*) this reflects the canonical priority accorded to the Pentateuch. In a similar fashion the characterising of the historical narratives from Joshua to 2 Kings as 'Prophets' is not without significance when it comes to understanding them as a whole.

From a literary perspective, enlightened by historical criticism, one feature becomes very marked in regard to the struc-

ture of the canon. This is that each part contains material from very different ages, spread rather broadly over the period from 1000 BC to approximately 200 BC, or a little later. Age is not of itself therefore a determinative factor in explaining why particular books are in the part of the canon where they are now found.

In addition to this we also discover as a result of source criticism that there are interesting areas of overlap between some of the circles to which we must ascribe authorship of parts of the Pentateuch and Prophets. This is most evident in regard to the book of Deuteronomy in the Pentateuch and the 'Deuteronomic' character of prominent editorial tendencies in the Former and Latter Prophets. Other literary affinities are also to be seen, as for example between some psalms and certain parts of the prophetic corpus.

Yet further literary puzzles reveal themselves, for historical-literary criticism shows us that the Pentateuch has in some respects acquired its canonical status in a curious reverse order. There is widespread agreement that the book of Deuteronomy, the last book of the Pentateuch, was the first to acquire canonical status, albeit in a somewhat different form from that which it now has. Furthermore it is now widely accepted that it once was joined on to form the first 'chapter' of a work which stretched from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings, and thus combined 'the Law and the Prophets'. The point need not be explored further here, although its consequences will be referred to again later. For our immediate concern it is sufficient to note that the canonical shape of the Old Testament cannot be assigned to the result of accident, nor to a simple process of aggregation of documentary material until it formed a massive whole. There is evidently some design and system about the shape that has been accorded to the material.

Our concern at this juncture is to draw attention to the way in which the structure of the canon affects its interpretation. As the canon is primarily made up of the Law and the Prophets, so its contents are broadly to be interpreted as either 'Law' or 'Prophecy'. In fact we quickly discover that 'Law' is a somewhat inadequate term by which to reproduce the Hebrew *tôrâh*, but a legal connotation is not altogether to be discounted.

So far as interpretation is concerned, we find that the categories of 'Law' and 'Prophecy' are not rigidly restricted to their separate parts of the canon, but each tends to spill over to affect other parts. Hence we find, for example, in Matthew 11.13 that 'the Law and the Prophets' are both said to 'prophecy', so that parts of the Pentateuch can be treated as prophecy. Similarly we find in Mark 2.23-8, for example, that a narrative from the Former Prophets is made into an affirmation of a 'law', or *tôrâh*. Even more importantly from the point of view of understanding the New Testament use of the Old we find that numerous passages from the Psalms can be treated as prophecy (cf. Acts 2.25-8, etc.). The details of these categories of interpretation need not detain us at this point, since it is sufficient for our purpose to note the way in which the shape which is given to the canon has served to establish an elementary, but significant, basis for interpretation. The literary context inevitably serves to create a basis of ideological context, for the Old Testament was not meant to be read as a collection of independent 'proof texts', but as a series of three great literary wholes. This is in line with the contention we have already mentioned that scripture should be interpreted by scripture.

Another point also falls to be considered in relation to the canon. If Old Testament theology is intended to be an examination of the theological significance of the Old Testament as it now exists as a canon, then this supports our view that it should not be a purely historical discipline concerned only with the world of ancient Israel and Judaism in which this canon was in process of formation. Rather it must address itself to those religious communities who accept and use this canon as a central feature of their religious life. This points us to both Judaism and Christianity as the religious communities who can be expected to concern themselves with the Old Testament as theology.

In this light we cannot remain altogether indifferent to the liturgical use made of the Old Testament within these communities. This, too, provides part of the context in which the Old Testament is understood. It is inevitable that the situation in worship in which the Old Testament is read, as well as the

particular choice and ordering of it, play a part in its being heard as the word of God. The 'I and Thou' of scripture become readily identifiable with the 'I and Thou' of worship in which God addresses man and vice versa, and it is of the utmost importance that the theological justification for this identification should be considered. We cannot tolerate a divorce between theology and liturgy, and we cannot therefore be indifferent to the way in which the Old Testament is used liturgically. A very clear example of this need for a theological reflection upon liturgical use is provided by the Psalter and its extensive employment in Christian worship.

However, the issue does not end there, but affects the whole use of the Old Testament, as is most strikingly exemplified by the use of 'messianic' prophecies in Christian Advent services. A wide range of theological questions are raised, which relate to the canonical form and use of the Old Testament. We cannot in consequence leave the question of the canon out of reckoning in an Old Testament theology. On the contrary, it is precisely the concept of canon that raises questions about the authority of the Old Testament, and its ability to present us with a theology which can still be meaningful in the twentieth century. If we restrict ourselves solely to reading the Old Testament as an ancient text, and endeavour to hear in it nothing that the ancient author could not have intended, then we should be denying something of the tradition which asserts that God has continued to speak to his people through it. In reality we do not need to insist on such a rigidly historicising approach, if we believe that the Old Testament does present us with a revelation of the eternal God.

4. THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE BIBLE

We have already pointed out that the Old Testament is not, by itself, the Bible of Christians, although it forms a very substantial part of it. On the other hand it does represent the Bible of Jews for whom it is the whole scripture. Accordingly, we have suggested that one reason for undertaking the writing of an Old Testament theology should be in order to explore that part of the biblical heritage which Jews and Christians share in com-

mon. Although this concern has played some part in the quest for an Old Testament theology, it has, however, not usually been a very large one. Rather, the overriding factor which has stimulated such a quest has been the historical awareness that a chronological gap separates the Old from the New Testament. That this gap also marks the period at which Christianity broke free from Judaism has been treated as relatively incidental to this. A number of considerations, however, lead us to suggest that it is now time to re-examine this orientation of the subject of Old Testament theology and to approach it with somewhat different aims.

The first of these is that it is in the very nature of theology to concern itself with living faith, rather than with the history of ideas, which belongs more appropriately to the field of religious phenomenology. The latter is certainly important for theology, especially in its historical aspects, but it lacks the evaluative role of theology. We are, therefore, in seeking an Old Testament theology, concerned with the theological significance which this literature possesses in the modern world, which points us to an openness to its role in Judaism and Christianity. In many respects such a theology should serve as a critique of such a role, where it is able to employ the insights of historical criticism to correct misunderstandings and errors. So also it will note differences and mark contrasts, seeking out the ways in which patterns of interpretation and continuity have diverged. This is not to abandon the historical-critical role which the founders of biblical theology so eagerly sought, but rather to relate it to those areas of religious debate in which alone it can be theologically meaningful.

Certainly we must concede that there is a place, and even a necessity, for the study of Israelite-Jewish religion in the period from its beginnings to the close of the Old Testament canon. Yet this must be the province of a 'history of religion', rather than of theology as such, if only because the form and structure of that religion now belong to the past and can never be recovered. Most obviously this relates to the cultic nature of the ancient Jewish religion, with its centre and natural focus on the temple of Jerusalem and all the apparatus of worship that was conducted there. Questions of the significance of temple, priest-

hood, sacrifice, and a host of other rituals all devolve upon this. The shift from the time of the Old Testament to that of the New and beyond is a shift from the religion of a cult to the religion of a book. It is this change which raises all the essential issues of an Old Testament theology, since it gives rise to the question whether any genuine continuity of faith and tradition is possible as a result of it. Very basic questions of theology are concerned with religious continuity, and hence with the claims to continuity voiced in Judaism and Christianity.

It is not without significance in this connection that we find that the great areas of controversy which the Bible discloses to us – Israelite and Canaanite, Jew and Samaritan, Jew and Christian – are controversies of this kind. They involve questions of where the lines of continuity are to be drawn. The claim that it is through its theology that the Old Testament retains its authority and significance for us is no doubt true, but it raises the question as to what this theology is, and how it can exist and be authoritative as theology, outside of the cult which formed its cradle.

It is an outworking of this concern with continuity of tradition that reveals itself in the Christian concern with belief in the unity which binds together the Old and New Testaments. Concern with this unity, at the level of theological ideas and not simply historical conjunction, must be a basic area of interest for a Christian biblical theology. Yet it immediately faces us with one of the most far-reaching and disconcerting of problems. It was of the utmost importance to the writers of the literature of the New Testament to argue that what had been revealed to them, through Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, was of a piece with the revelation that God had made in the Old Testament. More than this, it represented the 'fulfilment' of that earlier history of revelation. The means by which the New Testament writers endeavour to demonstrate this, by presenting Jesus as the 'new Moses', the bringer of the 'kingdom of God', and the 'Messiah' foretold by the prophets, among other such themes, involves a type of biblical interpretation which conflicts with that acceptable to a strict historical-critical science.⁹ The result has been that, whereas to understand this method of interpretation has become of key importance to New Testament

scholars, it has largely been discounted in the search for an Old Testament theology. Instead, other, often quite different, parts of the Old Testament have been appealed to in order to show the continuity between the two Testaments. Even more broadly an appeal has frequently been made by Christians to a kind of natural historical progression from the age of the Old Testament to that of the New.

The problems here are real, and are not easily to be evaded, since it is a matter of importance to Christianity to assert this unity of the Bible. Yet this is clearly an area in which a concern with the structure and shaping of the Old Testament canon, and the hermeneutical consequences of this, have a considerable amount to offer towards a theological study of the Old Testament. So also does it lead us to a deep concern with the 'inter-testamental' period of Jewish life and thought, even though such an adjective must fall strangely on Jewish ears. It is an unfortunate consequence of the neglect by biblical theologians of the emergence and growth of early Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament that has contributed to this disregard of the way in which the New Testament interprets the Old. It does in fact bring us to recognise the real connections that exist between early Jewish and early Christian exegesis, so that each comes to command a new respect from the point of view of the biblical theologian. Certainly we cannot, as Christians, be altogether happy with a situation in which we cling resolutely to the Old Testament as a part of our religious heritage, but almost totally disregard the reasons and arguments which led the earliest Christians to claim the Old Testament as their book. The Christian therefore does not, and should not, pretend that the Old Testament is his entire Bible, since this has never been the case. It is, in contrast, by way of the New Testament that he comes to claim the Old. We shall have opportunity to explore more fully some of the consequences of this for an Old Testament theology later.

For Jewish faith, however, there also exists a foundational guide and groundwork for the interpretation of the Old Testament in the Mishnah and Talmud. These lay down the guidelines by which the continuity of Judaism with the Old Testament is asserted. It is not necessary, nor possible, to

explore the consequences of this here. What is important to note is that some such hermeneutical 'bridge' becomes essential if we are to find a theology in the Old Testament which can be meaningful in the modern world apart from the cultic and institutional life in which it originated. The transition from the religion of a cult to the religion of a book, which we find taking place in the later Old Testament period, is an immense theological achievement. Far from regarding it as an incidental development, in which Judaism discarded a cultic dress for which it no longer had any use, we find that it lies at the very heart of what theology is. The belief that God is real, present and knowable, aside from all the rites and symbols by which the cult disclosed his activity, marks the very foundation of theology as such. No longer are religious ideas appealed to in support of symbolic actions and realities, but they themselves become a more direct avenue of approach to God. This is the development which the Old Testament made possible, and which has enabled both Judaism and Christianity to become universal religions, which are truly theological in their nature.

We noted at the beginning of this chapter that the quest for an Old Testament theology has consistently been compelled to concern itself with the grasping of unity in the Old Testament and the use of this in presenting a systematic approach to the religious ideas which are to be found there. In many respects this becomes the major question affecting the overall form of the material which is then to be presented. Yet the Old Testament has little formal unity of ideas, and does not arrange them, or relate them to each other, in any obviously systematic fashion. It is in fact the theologian, by his approach, who must do this. Ultimately we believe that it is the nature and being of God himself which establishes a unity in the Old Testament, even though this is to place the resolution of the issue beyond the actual written pages of the Old Testament. The implications of this are quite far-reaching in their consequences, for it appears that the drawing of the lines of a theology and the search for unity and a system of religious ideas are so closely interrelated as scarcely to be separable. The belief that God exists, and that he is active in the world of men, leads us to accept that we shall see the signs and effects of his activity. We

shall expect all such signs and effects to be coherent and consistent, and yet this coherence and consistency will be dependent upon what we take such signs and effects to be. The two questions become interconnected, and it is the importance of not allowing one part, or text, of the Bible to override all others that has led interpreters of past ages to insist that we must interpret scripture by scripture. The Christian who accepts belief in the unity of the whole Christian Bible, must inevitably allow that this will affect his understanding of unity in the Old Testament, yet it ought not to blind him to recognising other ways of tracing this unity. In this regard, far from regarding as irrelevant attention to the ways in which Jews and Christians of post-biblical times have approached the Old Testament, such approaches serve as an important check on more modern, and historically critical, avenues of study.

We ought, in consequence of this, to be wary of allowing a concern with unity and a systematic account of the religious ideas of the Old Testament to become a determinative framework into which everything is fitted. Regrettably all such structures seem doomed to be circular. Where we begin will determine where we will end up. Rather we must, in the interests of a truly historical and critical approach, submit to becoming less systematic than this, and more open to trace the broken lines of unity where the Old Testament draws them. In doing this we can then see how far they connect up with the more firmly drawn lines which later ages have found there. In particular, this must concern the great themes of 'Law' and 'Promise' which have exercised so profound an influence upon the understanding and interpretation of the Old Testament.

We may also note the importance of the theological study of the Old Testament to the questions of biblical authority and its use in liturgy. Here too the issues are interrelated, since it is out of a sense of the authority of the Old Testament that its liturgical use can continue to be justified. Already we have sufficiently stressed that it is through its theological content that the Old Testament can be claimed as authoritative for us. However important we may regard its historical and aesthetic literary qualities to be, and consequently deserving of scholarly attention, these are not the reasons which have led to its being

claimed as an authoritative part of the Christian revelation, nor as the central religious focus of Judaism. Yet the questions of how God has spoken in this literature, and how his voice may still be heard through it, are questions of theology. They are also questions which are bound up with the way in which parts of the Old Testament are used in liturgy. Especially is this a very relevant issue for Christianity on account of the great freedom with which the Old Testament either does, or does not, play a part in the multiplicity of liturgical forms in use in Christian Churches. Such liturgical use provides a very significant groundwork and context of interpretation, which may either help, or hinder, a positive understanding of the text. It is important, therefore, that some degree of theological, as well as aesthetic, insight should be accorded to the Old Testament when it is used liturgically in the Christian Church. Once again it is a question of how we are still to hear in this literature the authentic voice of one who is not simply 'the God of Israel', but more fully and universally 'God'.