

CHAPTER TWO

DIMENSIONS OF FAITH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

It is at once apparent to the student of Old Testament theology that the Old Testament does not present its faith in the form of a creed, or a set of theological treatises. Rather it is an ancient literature, stemming from a remarkably early age in the scale of world literary history, and it covers a great variety of types of writing and composition. The purposes for which these compositions were first made, the situation of their authors, and the identity and circumstances of those for whom they were written are largely matters which have to be inferred from the contents of each of them.

Careful scrutiny shows that the reality is even more complex than this, however, for it is seldom that we are faced with a complete, and separately identifiable, book in anything like the modern sense. The forty-nine books into which this literature is now split up is in large measure an artificial creation of later ages, in which very long collections of material, such as the Pentateuch, have been divided up into shorter, more manageable, 'books', or chapters. Similarly, books such as Psalms or Proverbs are collections of much smaller units in which only a relatively minor amount of editorial shaping can be discerned. In the case of the Psalms, in particular, little convincing explanation is available to show why particular psalms appear in the order in which they now do. The Old Testament, in fact, is a vast collection of material, which can loosely be called 'tradition', but which has been assembled into quite consciously arranged 'collections'.¹ Only in a few cases does any separate part of these collections resemble a book in anything like the modern sense, with a carefully thought-out theme, or plot.

If we are to make use of these great collections it is necessary to learn something about their literary, cultural and religious setting in order to fathom within them that particular quality

of faith which they present to us. Nor is this quest for a re-discovery of the faith of the Old Testament necessarily made easier because there exists an immense edifice of interpretative tradition which has been built upon it. This also is so vast as to require careful sifting and categorising, and it must in any case remain one of the aims of an Old Testament theology to appeal back directly to the faith of the Old Testament in testing, and if necessary correcting, the doctrines and ideas which have been drawn from it.

It is important therefore that we should first consider the nature of the Old Testament and note some salient features about its background before attempting to elicit from it a particular theology.

I. THE LITERARY DIMENSION OF FAITH

The Old Testament is a collection of writings, produced over a period of almost a millennium, which functions as a religious work when it is read, either publicly or privately in a religious context, and when its meaning is grasped and responded to. Yet for us to do this in the modern world requires a considerable amount of background knowledge about the circumstances and purpose of the constituent parts of the whole collection, which has largely to be discovered by a process of scholarly comparison and inference. Certainly once the principle of a canon had been accepted, and began to influence the shaping of the material, we are entitled to conclude that its use in liturgical reading and serious devotional study affected its literary form. At earlier stages, however, this was by no means the case, and we are able to see that in many cases writings that were originally written for one specific purpose or situation have been adapted to another.

Yet even at the later canonical stage of editorial shaping of the material the amount of information that has been passed down to us about the circumstances of the various writings is sparse in the extreme. Sometimes the information itself remains either unintelligible, or is indicative only of later Jewish hermeneutical interests, as in the case of the Psalm titles. Often, however, we appear to be faced with situations in which

information about the sources of compositions was lost, or neglected, and where a bewildering indifference prevailed in regard to questions of date, authorship, and the many other details which are now so important in relation to the study of an ancient text.

We have already seen that questions of date and chronological sequence were never felt to be matters of overriding importance. The result now is that, in the Pentateuch for example, there is no clear pattern of order between material of a late and an early date. Nor is this true in the great 'books' of prophecy, such as that of Isaiah and Jeremiah, where again we have great assemblages of material put together in no obvious chronological sequence. Even more disconcerting for the student of prophecy is the fact that only in a relatively small number of cases have we been given any information about when, and in what circumstances, a particular prophecy was given.

These considerations pose certain difficult conclusions from the outset of our study, and make the pursuit of a literary introduction to the writings of the Old Testament a necessary, even if hazardous, undertaking. We may assume that the way in which the writings of the Old Testament have been put together is not the product of random chance, with almost no attempt made to offer any logical, or temporal, sequence of material. Yet it is equally clearly not an achievement in which any one or two clear intentions have been allowed to dominate. Sometimes there is a narrative sequence; sometimes later material has been placed directly after related earlier material; sometimes a catchword principle has been followed; sometimes sayings, or stories of a particular type, or *genre*, have been placed together. Sometimes it seems that chance has played a part, and at times too it seems that suitability for liturgical use has been considered. The point to which we must pay heed is that there is no uniform, or near uniform, pattern which reveals itself to us as explanatory of the editorial intentions of those who have given to us the Old Testament in its extant form.

This certainly ought to lead us to recognise that where such editorial information is given, as in the headings of collections of prophecy, the superscriptions of particular anthologies or

collections, and in a number of general editorial comments, then they are of very real importance to us on account of their rarity. At times the information that is given is difficult to understand, especially where it concerns questions of authorship. Ascriptions to Moses, or David, or to other of the great figures of Israel's religious history cannot be equated with information about authorship in the same technical sense that belongs to modern books. Rather they must be regarded as concerned with authority and with belief in the origin of a tradition. Nor can we regard prophets as authors in the modern sense, and in no case can we regard a prophetic book as having been penned by its prophet-author. Rather we find that in most cases the prophetic books include much material showing how prophecies were believed to have been fulfilled by events; how they were re-interpreted and developed in later ages, and how they became the basis for the production of further prophecies.

All of this adds up to a situation in which we cannot regard any of the books of the Old Testament as expressive of the distinctive religious thoughts of one man. The 'faith' of Moses, or of David, as such, is simply not available to us to examine and reflect upon. Hence we cannot treat the great religious personalities of the Old Testament as theologians in the modern sense. Even though in some isolated cases attempts have been made to identify the work of particular individual authors in the Old Testament, the evidence for this, and for the expression of a single person's religious faith in a theologically rounded form, is seldom above serious dispute. We cannot therefore seek to produce a theology of the Old Testament by reconstructing the theology of specific 'authors' of books, either in the form of the books as they now stand, or in the form of sources, or documents, which have been incorporated into the extant books.²

Still less can we reconstruct a theology of the great prophets, in the manner once attempted by B. Duhm,³ by seeking to elicit the distinctive contribution that each of the great prophets made in the field of religious ideas. The material of the Old Testament neither lends itself to such treatment, nor does it make the results of such reconstructions more than risky hypotheses. Even more seriously it points us in a direction away

from that of the literature which we find preserved here. Consistently this is away from a concentration on the thoughts of individuals and towards the faith of the whole community, which is a message given to all, and open for all to share. It is a message about God and his people, Israel. This social dimension of the writings of the Old Testament has certainly contributed to the extensive development of them at the hands of schools of scribes and editors. A theology of the Old Testament, therefore, ought certainly to concern itself with this particular literary dimension of the faith of the Old Testament.

Alongside of this great variety of authors and editors who have contributed to the fashioning of the Old Testament literature, we also find a considerable variety of literary types within it. The great thematic titles of the parts of the canon: Law, Prophets, and Writings, are readily broken down to reveal a much wider multiplicity of types of literature. Even so broad a category as 'prophecy' easily breaks down into historical narrative and prophecy, but this latter must be divided up into the more explicitly predictive, or pronouncement, material and the admonitory and hortatory forms which serve to substantiate it. So also the Law, or *tôrâh*, includes laws of many kinds. Some correspond closely to modern civil laws, others are in the nature of religious injunctions and regulations, and yet others are more in the nature of admonitions or general ethical injunctions. They cannot all have originated in the same area of religious, or social, life, and it is their broad literary assembly under the general heading of *tôrâh* which now gives to them a degree of common connectedness. The literary formation of the Old Testament therefore has plainly exercised a co-ordinating function in bringing together different types of law, as well as a great variety of other, non-legal, material to constitute *tôrâh*.

From a modern perspective it has been convenient to classify the Pentateuch and Former Prophets, as well as some of the Writings, as 'historical books', thereby introducing a specific category which is not that of the Old Testament itself. This in itself is not necessarily misleading, although it has pitfalls which require careful scrutiny. It is important for the Old Testament, for example, that the Former Prophets are now separated from

the book of Deuteronomy to which they once belonged, and this distinction should not be overlooked. Similarly we can discern in the growth of the Pentateuch a series of developments in which the historical narrative material was more and more expanded by the incorporation of rules and regulations until the whole balance was seriously changed. The book of Leviticus, as it now exists, cannot be regarded as a work of historical narrative, even though it has almost certainly been developed out of one.

In some respects, therefore, the more neutral term *tôrâh* serves to warn us against an over-concentration upon the more obviously historical features of the Pentateuch. The temptation to do this, from the point of view of a theology, has become all the greater on account of the particular academic interest in the history of Israel and the special philosophical concern with history as a dimension of human experience and understanding. Such a concern is not necessarily wrong, but all too readily lends itself towards the support of treatments of the Old Testament which neglect precisely those areas which have proved to be most difficult for the modern Christian interpreter. Particularly is this noticeable in regard to the treatment of the cultus, and in consequence, of those large tracts of the Old Testament which are directed towards the institutions, ordering and life of the cult. It is salutary to recognise that the Christian hermeneutical tradition, with all its uncritical vagaries of typology and symbolism, has sometimes been more open in recognising these exegetical problems, than has a more modern 'critical' interpretation.

One particular aspect of this literary dimension of Old Testament faith is the way in which features relating to the setting of a literary unit may have a bearing upon its meaning. This is quite evidently the case in regard to prophecy, where a relatedness to events is paramount, and only in its later, proto-apocalyptic, forms does this connection with events fall more into the background. However, it is also the case with an interpretation of many of the psalms, that very significant features concerning this are affected by the situations in which they were originally intended to be used. The kind of help from God that is sought, in the form of deliverance, is seldom made

incontrovertibly clear, and the importance of examining the various possibilities of healing from sickness, acquittal from malicious accusations, or of protection from physical attacks by enemies, all play a part in obtaining a satisfactory understanding of them. Here too, therefore, the literary dimension of Old Testament faith cannot be ignored.

It is perhaps not entirely inappropriate to point out at this stage that there is an inescapable tension in the very goal of writing an Old Testament theology. The Old Testament is a literature, whereas a theology is concerned with the world of ideas and their systematic formulation. The ways in which a literature may reflect ideas are numerous, and they increase still further when many different types of literature are involved. Further, the part played in religion by ideas varies a great deal, and the rational and reflective aspects of Israelite-Jewish faith were only beginning to come to the surface in the period during which the Old Testament was formed. It is possible for us to extract the ideas, so far as is attainable, and to pay little attention to their literary setting. Conversely, we may concentrate our attention upon the literature and its complex history, giving only scant attention to the systematic ordering of the religious ideas which we find in it.

Hence we find two very different approaches current among scholars: on the one hand, it has been asserted that the most effective way of presenting an Old Testament theology is to offer a theological commentary on the text of its various writings. At the opposite extreme we find attempts to formulate a system of religious ideas which are found in the Old Testament with almost no regard for the character of the individual writings in which they appear.⁴ The contention in the approach advocated here is that neither extreme is entirely satisfactory, and that something of the inevitable tension that exists in trying to satisfy both demands must be accepted. We must be as systematic as we can be, but we must allow that the form of the Old Testament literature cannot be ignored, and poses its own restraints upon our desire for a completely systematised presentation of the faith contained within it.

2. THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION OF FAITH

Large sections of the Old Testament are made up of historical narrative recounting the events concerning the origin and fortunes of Israel, and especially is this so in regard to the Pentateuch. There exists a firm narrative framework to this, and still the most acceptable literary explanation of this framework is that it was established by the earliest of the main literary sources from which the whole work has been built up. This is usually called J, or the Yahwist, and is thought to have originated in the early days of the Israelite monarchy, probably in the reign of Solomon. The attempt to press behind the structure of this narrative source, to find a brief summary, or credal recitation, of the foundation events of Israel's history, can no longer be regarded as proven. Instead it becomes increasingly clear that the particular texts that have been appealed to in support of this contention (chiefly Deut. 6.21-3; 26.5b-9; Josh. 24.2-13) are late summaries, dating from no earlier than the seventh century B.C.⁵ However, even without the support of the contention that the main fabric of Israel's history-writing originated in the setting of a confession of faith during an act of public worship, there is a clear religious dimension to such history.

On examination we discover that a considerable dimension of depth pertains to all the major narrative parts of the Pentateuch. Even in the case of J, the earliest of its larger sources, the author has acted as a collector of yet older stories and traditions, shaping them somewhat loosely into a longer connected whole. In consequence we find that even when we attempt to break down the Pentateuch into its major constituent sources, it does not present us with a single uniform picture of how God has been active in Israel's history. Instead we find a broad anthology of traditions, developed into epic proportions, but made up individually of separate episodes which are more or less self-explanatory. At this level we find a great many stories concerned with questions of the authority and significance of the cultus, the legitimacy of certain sacred sites, e.g. Bethel (Gen. 28.11-19), the appropriateness of particular offerings and the inappropriateness of others (e.g. Gen. 14.17-24; 22.1-14).

Other narratives bring out more explicit theological themes such as the divine wrath and judgment upon certain sins (cf. Gen. 19.1-29), and the blessedness of the way of obedience to God (cf. Gen. 22.15-19).

It is in the way in which these separate episodes have been woven together that there begins to emerge a religious message of a larger and more enduring kind. This is to be found in the promise to the patriarch Abraham that the land of Canaan is given to him and his descendants, who will become a great nation and a blessing in the earth (Gen. 12.1-3). Here we enter the sphere of the larger structural theme of the Pentateuch, which is concerned with the divine election of Israel, its status as a chosen nation, and the gifts that God intends to bestow upon it as a result of this. Pre-eminently the theme focuses upon the land of Canaan, as a necessary feature of Israel's national existence and the basis of its prosperity, but as the story unfolds other gifts are set alongside it. Most of all here we are directed to the institutions and organisation of worship, which are revealed to Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 19-40).

It is not difficult to see that the use of historical narrative of this kind is readily made to serve a theological purpose, so that a portrait of God himself is delineated. His existence and being become known through the actions that are ascribed to him, and the disclosures from time to time of his purpose and intentions. From being a hidden background figure, he appears so consistently active as to become the leading protagonist in the story, even though his 'hiddenness' is never altogether set aside.

This leads us to note that the ways in which God is presented as imposing his will upon human affairs is never reduced to any one single pattern or formula. Sometimes he is said to speak directly to men (cf. Gen. 3.9, etc.), or to exert his will directly (cf. Gen. 6.5 ff.). At other times he speaks through dreams or prophets (cf. Gen. 28.12, etc.), or acts through the mediation of messengers, or 'angels' (cf. Gen. 18.2 ff.; 19.1). At one point the necessity of his hiddenness is given a theological explanation (cf. Exod. 33.20), and is made into a basis for authorising certain features of cultic life (cf. Exod. 34.29-35). The techniques of providence, therefore, if this is how we should describe

them, are variously understood and presented in the Old Testament. In themselves they stand at a nearer or farther distance from conceptions acceptable to a modern scientific world view. While they fully recognise the fact of divine immanence in the world, they do not offer any uniform doctrine of this.

Here too we encounter a complexity of language, which may be noted later in another connection. God is presented in an anthropomorphic fashion as thinking, speaking and acting like a man. Even his appearance can be taken for that of a man (cf. Gen. 32.24, 28), although that he is a being of an altogether different order is fully accepted (cf. Gen. 6.3). To what extent the language should be called analogical or metaphorical, or even whether it deserves the description of 'mythological', can seldom be determined with the kind of precision and clarity that we should desire. In the Old Testament narratives such expressions are seldom the result of a considered theological explication, but are themselves the product of traditions, which were only gradually being subjected to scrutiny and theological analysis. Most scholars therefore have felt able to discern a gradual toning down, and developing reticence, about the way in which the Old Testament portrays the actions of God in the world, the later strands of narrative being less assertively anthropomorphic and more cautious than the earlier. All of this leads us to see that the picture of the ways in which God's activity is asserted is less important than the aims and purposes for which this activity is employed. There are apparently levels of divine intervention, which have to be taken into account in uncovering the theological meaning of ancient biblical narrative.

This points us further to consider that the Old Testament does not necessarily retain a uniform interpretation of a particular event, but comes to view it in more than one light. A most obvious example of this is to be found in the account of Jehu's revolt (2 Kgs. 9.1-37), which involved a fearful massacre of the royal house of Israel. The narrative report regards this action as instigated by the divine will through the mouths of prophets, whereas the prophet Hosea (cf. Hos. 1.4-5) refers to it in a strikingly condemnatory manner.

It is seldom that a reversal of attitude of this kind appears so prominently, but it enables us to recognise an important aspect of the different literary layers within the narratives of the Old Testament. Events which at one stage appeared in a favourable light, may, at a later stage, appear very differently. The reader who seeks to learn the Israelite attitude to monarchy from the narratives of its institution in 1 Samuel 8-12, is quickly made aware of this. Expressions of both favourable and hostile attitudes appear, and in spite of the editor's attempt to weave them together into a sequence, it is difficult for the modern reader to feel that a consistent view has been maintained.

From the literary point of view we can discern in this that reports and accounts from different ages and circles of tradition have been employed in putting together the present narrative, which also attempts to offer a viewpoint of its own. Once we begin to put the different stories into some chronological order, and to note their ideological affinities, the differing viewpoints take on a valuable significance. Had only one, late, viewpoint been expressed, we should clearly have lost something of importance in understanding the history of monarchy as an institution in Israel.

The literary tangle, therefore, is not without its virtues. Even so it requires that we involve ourselves in a process of literary analysis and historical ordering, if we are to glean from the accounts any overall theological evaluation of the way in which Israel regarded the monarchy as a divine institution. That different ages may view the same event in differing perspective as its consequences and implications become more transparently obvious, is a commonplace of historical research. It is important for us therefore not to be misled through allowing a concern with the recovery of a 'factual' history, so far as this may in any way be accepted as an attainable goal, into regarding those sources which stand closest to events as always the most theologically revealing. The revised viewpoint of a later age has its own measure of theological insight to give. Nor is this always to be restricted to the view that it can tell us only about the later narrator's own age, and has little to add to the knowledge of the past it describes.

This dimension of depth within historical narrative, in which

viewpoints and sources from different ages have been woven together, is a prominent aspect of the Old Testament. It marks the strongest theological feature which has arisen as a result of the source criticism of this literature. The more central the event, such as the promise to the patriarchs or God's revelation at Sinai, the more likely it is that we shall find a number of layers of narrative interpretation incorporated into the material. Clearly, from the perspective of setting out a history of Israel as well as a history of the tradition, a considerable importance attaches to our being able to sift out the earlier from the later accounts. By doing so we can obviously hope to see something of the changes and developments which affected Israel's self-understanding. Even the ways in which central figures such as Abraham or Moses are presented in the different strata of tradition have their own value in revealing to us many of the changing religious insights which affected the varying ages of Israelite history-writing.

What is less clear is the extent to which we should interpret these compoundings of tradition as a desire to put forward a comprehensive picture of the past and its heroes, and how far there is a clear development in it. Are later presentations, for example, intended in some measure to displace earlier ones? Here we come up against a repeatedly disconcerting feature of the history-writing of the Old Testament. On the one hand we have insisted that it is in the final canonical form in which it is preserved that the Old Testament speaks to us. Yet, since this final form can be split up into strata of earlier forms, it is not always easy to see what this integrated final form is saying of itself.

This presents us with a range of leading questions which relate to the theological implications of the historical dimension of faith in the Old Testament. How far are we entitled to see here progress and a consistent direction given to its changing patterns of thought? It has so often been taken for granted that a theological approach to the Old Testament can detect an upward trend of thought. In this the conception of God is progressively spiritualised and moralised so that higher and higher forms of religious understanding come before us. Such views have in the past frequently been accounted for in terms

of theories of 'progressive revelation'. Certainly there are important changes of religious outlook, in which more mature and theologically reflective ideas of God and his activity in the world can be traced. Notions of the universality and transcendence of God become more prominent in the later writings and traditions, while anthropomorphic language becomes more restrained and less evident.

Yet there are other changes which cannot so readily be accounted for as the result of more mature theological insight and reflection. Conceptions of Israel's place in the world change from that of a tribal community to that of a nation, and then to a less clearly defined religious community, or 'congregation' as its altering political fortunes are reflected in its self-understanding. That these add up to any obvious pattern of development away from a religious tribalism to a nationalism and then on to a clear religious individualism is far from being clear, even though such has frequently been claimed.

We cannot attempt to sort out these problems in brief compass here, but some points regarding this dimension of historical change in thought-patterns are relevant. To recognise these patterns of change and to be able to relate them wherever possible to particular periods and situations in the development of the religion would clearly be an inestimable advantage in understanding them. At the same time to speak of 'progress' or 'development' implies some kind of coherence and direction in the way in which these changes occur. A theological approach to the Old Testament is almost bound to be committed to tracing some such directional patterns of thought. This is certainly the case if we are to be guided by the ways in which the New Testament can interpret Old Testament history in accordance with such patterns, e.g. that of a 'remnant' (cf. Rom. 11.5) or of rebellion against divine grace (cf. Acts 7.51-3). Yet we must be wary of appealing to such patterns as though some logical, or necessary, movement of thought was controlling them.

This particularly applies to the gradual decline and atrophying of the cult and its influence in favour of a more intellectual and 'spiritual' type of faith in which the formal cult played little part. The legacy of this change is to be found in

both Judaism and Christianity, which each developed its own kind of apologetic to account for its dispensing with the demands and obligations of the Old Testament cultus. To appeal to a 'progress of thought' in defence of this abandonment, which was in any case necessitated by historical realities, becomes a somewhat circular argument. That which survives is always defended as that which is most fitted to survive, with little being offered by way of further explanation. In all, therefore, there are a number of aspects of the dimensions of change and movement in regard to the history of ideas in the Old Testament which prompt us to caution.

Perhaps the most salient point here is that to undertake to set out a clear history of religious ideas in the Old Testament is a particularly difficult undertaking. Those who have done so in the pursuit of a theology of the Old Testament have certainly been guilty of acting with greater confidence and assurance than the evidence really warrants. To write a history of the religious institutions of the ancient Israelite religion is a formidable enough task because of the many lamentable gaps in our knowledge of critical periods of its development. Seldom have the occasions of great changes in the cultus and its ministry been reported for us with information as to when these occurred. To attempt to go beyond this and to write an intellectual history of the growth and development of religious ideas is an even more daunting undertaking. This is not because such a growth and development did not occur, but rather because the kind of information which the Old Testament preserves for us seldom indicates how and when new religious ideas became current.

There are serious problems, therefore, which face us in appealing to trends and patterns of thought in the Old Testament as justification for the relative degree of importance which we attach to particular ideas. As we must constantly remind ourselves, a theological approach to the Old Testament involves us in a task of evaluation which goes beyond mere historical description. To explain this evaluation as simply the necessary consequence of historical development would be essentially to mask its proper theological nature. It is the presence of so many 'hidden' judgments of this kind which has

enabled so much that passes for Old Testament theology to appear as more historically grounded than it really is. All in all, therefore, we must remain constantly aware of the historical dimension of faith in the Old Testament, but beware of using the breadth of ideas to which this has given rise as a means of obscuring the true nature of a theological approach.

3. THE CULTIC DIMENSION OF FAITH

In noting that the religion of ancient Israel was a cultic religion in the full sense, we remarked that the transition from the religion of the Old Testament to those of Judaism and Christianity was a transition from a religion of cult to book religions. We now have opportunity for noting the extent to which the religious language, ideas, and practices to be found in the Old Testament have been moulded by this cult.

Perhaps most of all is this obvious in relation to the understanding of God, for what is of paramount importance in the Old Testament is the presence of God, rather than any doctrine of his existence.⁶ To seek God was to go up to see his face at a sanctuary, rather than to engage in an intellectual debate. In consequence the information that the loyal worshipper needed to know concerned where, when, and how God could be found. So much of the information contained in the Old Testament is of this kind. The God of Israel was believed to be present in his temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem (cf. Pss. 9.11; 11.4; 14.7; 18.6, etc.) so that to worship before him there was to stand in his presence. Information concerning when to come, on the occasions of the great religious festivals (cf. Exod. 23.14; 34.23), what to bring by way of offerings (cf. Exod. 23.15, 19), and how these were to be made (cf. the Manual of Sacrifice in Lev. 1-7) formed the basic outline of a knowledge of God.

A great deal of ancillary information can be readily seen to have a dependent relationship upon this groundwork of knowledge. So traditions about the legitimacy of certain shrines, and the illegitimacy of others, the authority of the priestly families and their privileges and duties, and not least the significance attached to the symbols and rites of worship, all formed a part of this religious tradition.

When we extend this further to see how it also embraced a range of admonitions concerning the benefits and blessings that would accrue from right worship and the dangers that were attendant upon errors of religious behaviour or even its outright abuse, we find that a surprisingly large part of the traditional material contained in the Old Testament is covered. Most of the account of God's revelation at Sinai (Exod. 19-40) falls within this category as does much of the book of Leviticus.

Because of its cultic character these traditions have frequently been given only very secondary attention in theological treatments of the Old Testament. At an early stage of its interpretative tradition in respect of the Old Testament the Christian Church came to isolate the more directly ethical admonitions, such as we find in the Decalogue of Exodus 20.2-17, and to place them on a much higher plane of authority than these cultic demands and regulations which had so obviously become obsolete in a Christian context.

The reasons and justification for acting in this way will be mentioned again later, but it is important in the present context to note the great extent of cultic material of this kind. Critical historical study of the religion of ancient Israel shows it to have been through and through a cultic religion of this nature.⁷ The cult was in no sense merely an adjunct – a concession to the attitude of the times – which might later be dropped without any serious impairment of the basic religious tradition. On the contrary in origin the cult of Israel was the heart of the religion, and the more verbal and rational elements of faith emanated from this. It quickly becomes apparent in surveying the main events in the history of Israel's religion: the reform of Josiah in 622, the destruction of the temple in 587, the restoration of the temple in 520-516, the controversy with the Samaritans, and not least the separation of the early Christian community from Judaism, that these were primarily controversies about the cult and its obligations. In many respects it was in the course of these great upheavals in the cultic life of Israel and Judaism that it became necessary to bring to the surface underlying theological convictions. This is most obviously evident in the question put to Jesus by the woman of Samaria in John 4.20, 'Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and you say that in

Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship', (RSV). The answer that is presented by Jesus affirms in the most categorical way the necessity of a theology: 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth' (John 4.24).

There are an abundant number of historical questions pertaining to the cult and its history in Israel which require fuller explanation and investigation. However, this is far beyond the scope of our brief notice of the subject here. What is important for us to do is to note the way in which the cult has affected the ideas and language of the Old Testament to such an extent that it is this cult which has formed the cradle of biblical theology. The basic vocabulary of religion in the Old Testament is basically a vocabulary of the cult, although we can begin to trace in the study of many of its basic concepts a trend away from this cultic association. Such words as 'holiness/profanity', 'cleanness/uncleanness' and 'acceptable gift/abomination' are all terms which belonged directly to the cult.⁸ What they connoted was at first unintelligible apart from the sanctuaries of Israel and the rites that were performed there. Over a period of time, by their use as metaphors, by a natural extension of meaning, and by underlying changes in the understanding of the cult, they acquired a greater range of signification, so that we can see why, by the time the Old Testament came to be translated into Greek, they had taken on a profoundly ethical significance. Such a process of 'spiritualising' cultic concepts had already progressed a very long way by New Testament times. All of this has had the most far-reaching theological effect, since it forms a basic step in the process of moralising, universalising and theologising the religion of ancient Israel. Without it the emergence of a religion of a book – the Old Testament – would not have been possible. Yet when it comes to tracing what has made this development possible we must note more than one contributory factor.

Foremost here we must certainly place the actual course of Israel's religious development, with its narrowing down of cultic life to that of the sanctuary of Jerusalem in the seventh century, followed so shortly after by the tragic destruction of the Jerusalem temple. After this the experience of Jews in exile, which passed gradually into an experience of more permanent

Diaspora, gave rise to a situation in which a large number of loyal Jews found themselves to be effectively people without a cult. Historical reality, therefore, more and more compelled a widened interpretation of Israelite religious obligation. Yet this in itself cannot be the whole explanation, since it was in considerable measure the presence in the religion of certain theologising and spiritualising tendencies that enabled Israel's cult to survive these shocks. Other religions underwent similar threats to their cultic institutions and show no signs of having developed a theology which could take account of them.

Of paramount importance in the Old Testament we must place the understanding of God himself at the centre of this move towards the emergence of a theology. The fact that the God of Israel had no image which could be set in a sanctuary and viewed as the representation of his person was clearly one factor of significance here. So also we are entitled to conclude that the part played in the cult by verbal elements and human speech, voiced through prophets and priests as well as the worshippers themselves, all helped towards the creation of a more reflective attitude to the rites of the cult. As so many psalms reveal to us, it was possible in ancient Israelite worship to conduct a kind of dialogue with God through the agency of the cultic personnel. Yet most of all it lies in the way in which God himself was understood, and was believed to reveal himself to worshippers and to make himself accessible to them, that this reflective spiritual attitude to worship came to prevail. It is evident that when Israelites and Jews found themselves separated from the cult to which they had grown accustomed, they did not at the same time interpret this to mean that they were thereby separated from God and his power to help them. It was important therefore that a knowledge of God, which was larger and richer than a knowledge of the cult which served him, should have taken hold in Israel.

It is also noteworthy that we find in the Old Testament, alongside the direct assertions about the presence of God in his sanctuary, the development of more carefully formulated theological concepts to account for this. Hence we have in the Deuteronomic literature the development of the idea that the sanctuary was the place where God had chosen to set his 'name'

(cf. Deut. 12.5), and in the Priestly strand of the Pentateuch the concept of the divine 'glory' (Exod. 40.34-8) as the means whereby God's presence on earth was effected. All of this is fully in line with the deep awareness that the traditional language about God's presence at his chosen sanctuary was an inadequate formulation of the reality since God was too great and exalted for his being to be locally restricted in this way (cf. 1 Kgs. 8.27).

We must accept therefore that a continuing process of interaction has taken place in the Old Testament between the understanding of God and the understanding of the cult. To suppose that ideas about the cult always followed the history of its institutions would be too doctrinaire a view to carry conviction. This may have been the case on some occasions, but at other times it seems much more probable that it was the conception of God which forced deep changes upon the interpretation of the cult. By the end of the Old Testament period it is clear that there had emerged a conception of God which was much fuller and richer than the old concepts of the cult would have allowed. As these had become obsolescent, so there had been an adequate depth of theological understanding available for later generations to recognise that 'God is spirit'.

This concern with the cultic dimension of faith in the Old Testament also raises for us the complex questions concerning the 'meaning' of cultic actions. It is obvious that such rites as the offering of sacrifice and the burning of incense were believed to effect certain necessary, or desirable, ends when properly performed in worship. In order for this to be so they had to be interpreted in a way that gave them meaning, and that was in accordance with, if not always an explanation of, the particular end that was sought. It is a fundamental fact of the history of cultus that very different interpretations, or explanations, may be offered of a particular rite. In course of time these interpretations may change in order to accommodate new ideas or new circumstances. Similarly, different communities may interpret the same rite differently, each in accordance with its own particular interests and concerns. Such was certainly true of Israel, where the interpretation of basic rites such as sacrifice were subjected to very substantial changes.

That there was an even older pre-Israelite history to many of the rites of sacrifice which the Old Testament records, must be regarded as certain.

It was precisely this flexibility in the area of meaning which the interpreters of the Israelite tradition within the Old Testament have so eagerly seized upon. In this area at least it is not difficult to speak of a very marked trend of thought and understanding. As a result we find that the Hebrew word for 'sacrifice' (*zebah*), which basically designates an act of slaughter, could ultimately be translated into Latin as *sacrificium*, which more broadly denotes a religious act, or oath. Throughout the development which has taken place here we can detect that the emphasis has apparently shifted from a concern with the physical and external action to a concern with the inner spiritual intention. By New Testament times a variety of actions which involved costly self-deprivation could be designated as 'sacrifice'.

The cult therefore has provided a cradle for many of the most fundamental theological concepts of the Old Testament, but it has not determined their meaning in any circumscribed way. Rather the flexibility of interpretation which the cult allowed has enabled these old concepts to acquire new meanings, in some cases far beyond the interests and expectations of the original cult. This process of theologising cultic concepts has undoubtedly taken place extensively within the Old Testament period, even though this period did not altogether witness the cessation of the cultus.

It is when we come to look at the ways in which Jewish and Christian interpreters have approached the Old Testament that we see a marked acceleration of this tendency towards theologising the cult. Within a relatively brief period after the destruction of the Jewish cultus in Jerusalem in AD 70, we find that an almost complete process of moralising and ethicising of cultic language and concepts had taken place. Ideas of holiness and purity had been transferred into a new frame of reference. The cultic dimension of faith in the Old Testament therefore is a very important aspect of its nature. The process of re-interpreting the ancient Israelite cultus, with all its rites, symbols and concepts, has gone hand in hand with the process

of establishing a religion in which its 'theology' – its understanding of the being and activity of God – forms a central part.

4. THE INTELLECTUAL DIMENSION OF FAITH

This regard for the deep changes in the attitude towards cultus which are to be found in the Old Testament raises for us some of the most profound questions about the nature of religion and the role of rational, theological and philosophical thought within it. Very markedly the religions which have been strongly influenced by the Old Testament (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have been profoundly reflective 'theological' religions. In many other religions this rational and reflective aspect plays only a very minor part.

It is not surprising therefore that the study of the faith of the Old Testament has often been set within a wider context of the history of ideas, and especially of the history of religious ideas. The move away from an explicitly cultic world of thought towards a more subjectively rational and ethical one has frequently been claimed to mark a natural 'evolution' of religious ideas, and to relate to a natural 'progress' in human thinking. It may indeed be claimed that this is so, although it would carry us beyond the proper area of an Old Testament theology to assert, or defend, such claims. What we should note at this stage is their inevitably doctrinaire character, and the dangers that are attendant upon establishing too early an interpretative scheme of this kind.

In particular we must beware of the tendency that is inherent in such schemes to establish a pattern of evaluation which forces the historical evidence which the Old Testament provides into a fixed pattern. All too easily such schemes become self-justifying, and exercise a more far-reaching control over the ideas of the Old Testament than a stricter historical criticism can properly support. There seems little ground for disputing the claim that it has been the presence of such convictions about the natural history of ideas, often unconsciously held, which has in the past led to a great under-estimation of the role and significance of the cult in ancient Israel.

Not only here, however, but the adherence to related theories

about the natural history of religion, with belief in its propensity to move through certain necessary stages of development, have also tended to affect the study of Old Testament theology. Especially here we are concerned with the popularity of such ideas that religion moves through necessary stages from animism, through polytheism to monotheism. Comparable schemes are to be found asserting that religion moves through recognisable stages from a tribal to a national, and then on to a universal, frame of reference.

All of these are interesting suggestions which have at varying times affected the study of the history of religion and which have found their way into the study of Old Testament theology. It is not necessary here to do more than note the fact that they have at times gained currency and support in regard to the Old Testament. In noting them, however, we must also take some warning against allowing them to intrude their own interpretative patterns upon the study of the religious ideas of the Old Testament. The result all too often of failing to heed this warning has been that the study of Old Testament theology has developed into a form of apologetic for various semi-philosophical theories, which are relatively modern in their appearance. By doing so, the historical and critical function of such a theological task in relation to the use of the Old Testament in church and synagogue is set aside.

We cannot engage in the study of an ancient literature like that of the Old Testament without being made conscious that it has arisen in a culture and world of ideas which is strikingly different from our own in many respects. The very necessity of translating the Old Testament from its ancient Hebrew and Aramaic original into modern English raises questions which are more than simply textual and grammatical, and which reflect upon wider areas concerning the relationships between language, culture and ideas. We may pause therefore to consider three very prominent features in which significant aspects of the relationship between language and ideas has been thought, in varying degrees, to be reflected in the Old Testament.

The first of these relates to what has been termed 'primitive thinking', to use the terminology made current by the French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.⁹ This concerns the view that

primitive societies, both in the ancient and modern world, do not think in the same rational categories as more sophisticated communities but in a more intuitive and symbolic manner. Hence there is a tendency towards collective thinking, in which the individual does not readily isolate his own thought-processes from those of the community to which he belongs. The validity, or otherwise, of Lévy-Bruhl's theory from an anthropological point of view is not our concern, but we must note the way in which his ideas have influenced Old Testament studies especially in relation to the belief that we find there signs of the 'corporate' thinking of ancient Israel. The role of the tribe and clan, the solidarity of the family, and even the complex interchange between 'I' and 'we' in the language of psalmody and prophecy have all been adduced as evidence of such corporate thinking in the Old Testament. The case is far from being proved, and the general distrust of such theories from an anthropological point of view, warn us against any firm reliance upon them in order to understand some of the particularly complex features of the Old Testament's world of thought. In general, the belief that there can be delineated any such rounded-and clearly definable category of 'primitive thinking' remains unproven. In any case the evidence of the Old Testament must be examined and interpreted in its own context, and not be made subject to explanation by dubious theories which have arisen elsewhere.

A somewhat similar word of caution regarding the possibility of our tracing in the Old Testament a number of firmly recognisable categories of primitive thinking must be made in regard to the analyses of basic categories of thought presented by J. Pedersen in his volumes on Israel.¹⁰ Here we find repeatedly an emphasis upon a distinctively 'dynamistic' pattern of thought in ancient Israel in which words, symbolic gestures and rites were thought to be capable of a measure of self-realisation. Certainly there is strong evidence in the Old Testament that an importance was attached to the spoken word and to the demonstrative gesture far beyond that which is normal in more modern societies. However, the evidence that is adduced by Pedersen in respect of categories of curse, blessing and prophetic pronouncement all appeal to a certain 'primitiveness' in relation

to processes of thought and speech as to raise questions about their validity. For all the greatness of Pedersen's achievement in bringing to light many of the strange and unexpected processes of thought which have given rise to particular cultic and social patterns of behaviour, the picture he offers goes too far in the direction of irrationality and primitiveness. Furthermore, it is often difficult to detect how deeply submerged some of these thought processes are held to be, and to what extent they had long since been forgotten by the time they make their appearance in the Old Testament.

For all the insights that are to be obtained therefore from this analysis of a primitive culture, the very concern to uncover its irrational, symbolic and dynamistic elements has led to a rather exaggerated neglect of its more reflective and rational features. On the one hand, such an approach has been of benefit in challenging the assumption that we find in the Old Testament an almost idealistic world of theological reflection. Yet on the other hand, it has set against this a picture of primitive and irrational thought patterns which allow too little for the remarkable discernment, maturity and often sophistication of thought which comes to us through the pages of the Old Testament. That there is a genuinely theological dimension to the faith of the Old Testament seems assured, else the quest that so many have set themselves in recounting this would be in vain. Even so, such a theology has to be viewed in a context of religious life and behaviour in which much was taken for granted which the more critical outlook of the modern world finds hard to understand.

The second feature of the thought world of the Old Testament which has been seen to bear illuminatingly upon the relationship between language and ideas is that of mythology. That certain stories and episodes concerning a rather vaguely defined past can be classed as 'myth', and that such myths formed an important part of the intellectual life of antiquity, is clear.¹¹ It may be frankly accepted that there are stories in the Old Testament which should be properly classed as 'myth', and few would deny this. In this category we should certainly include such episodes as the marriage between the sons of God and human women (Gen. 6.1-4), and the story of the confusion

of languages at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11.1-9). Most scholars would go far beyond this and find a consistent mythological element in Genesis 1-11, and note wider mythological allusions also in other parts of the Old Testament. Yet others would go so far as to see the entire world-view of the Old Testament as predominantly mythological. Against this we also find claimants to the view that myth plays a relatively small part in the Old Testament, and that the predominant trend is away from mythology towards a more positively historical type of thinking. The subject itself is sufficiently complex for more than one viewpoint to maintain a reasonable credibility, and for different approaches to its complexities to appear plausible. So far as an understanding of the intellectual world of the Old Testament is concerned we may take note of two important points.

The category of myth is itself so difficult of definition that it is improbable that any one single attempt at this is likely to obtain widespread assent. The nature of myth is many-sided, and how it is to be differentiated from saga, and even from a highly metaphorical type of language, is not easy to determine. The portrayal of God as 'the Rider of the Clouds' (cf. Ps. 18.10-11) may appear to be self-evidently mythological, or it may be interpreted as no more than a particular example of metaphor, with a complex tradition-history underlying it. Similarly, in comparison with the very extensive myths from a Mesopotamian sphere which have come to light (as in the *Enuma Elish* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*), it is evident on even a relatively superficial examination, that the narratives of the Old Testament are of a very different order. To insist that the Old Testament belongs to a markedly mythological world of thought, therefore, would appear to be a highly exaggerated claim. At the same time to deny the presence of myth altogether, or to insist that the clear trend of the Old Testament is to discard myth in preference to a more historical type of thinking is likely to be in excess of the truth.

In this field in particular the value of a proper literary criticism comes to light, since it is important to make some distinction between 'myth' as a category of literature, and 'mythological thinking', as though it were an easily identifiable stage in the history of ideas and thought. The modern world is

perfectly capable of creating 'myths' from a literary point of view, even though it cannot restore to them the kind of authority which ancient society accorded to them. That mythical thinking is itself a natural precursor of rational thought, or that rational thought naturally dispenses with or overcomes myth, are themselves theories of a complex literary and philosophical kind as to remain outside the scope of a study such as this.¹² Certainly it appears hazardous to make the dispensing with myth a leading feature of an Old Testament theology, even though the very nature of theology makes it critical of the role of myth in religion. Furthermore, it is scarcely satisfactory to endeavour to understand the Old Testament from the assumption that it is through and through coloured by mythological processes of thought. All too easily the manner of defining the questions tends to determine the kind of answers that the Old Testament is then made to yield.

In a somewhat similar vein we may note the third area of contrast in which the ideas and language of the Old Testament have been thought to be especially revealing in relation to the history of religious ideas. This concerns the role of magic, and the problems of differentiating between the world of magic and the world of religion, where often very similar aims and assumptions can characterise the two spheres. The belief that man may, by his words or actions, influence the outcome of events by supernatural means, and without directly participating in them, inevitably means that there is a degree of similarity between religion and magic. The distinctions between a curse and a spell, a word of good omen and a prophecy, or between a ritual and an incantation are far from easy to draw. Certainly in comparison with the kind of picture that emerges of the ancient Babylonian religion, it is clear that whatever magical element there was present in Israelite religion was of a very much more restrained kind.

Hard as they are to draw, distinctions are nevertheless important, and it seems that certain features of Israelite faith have tended to combat and reject the more overtly magical features of much ancient religion. In this area two features stand out, and render the contrast a very meaningful one. First of all, the Old Testament's strong insistence on the personal

nature of God, especially as this has been brought yet more into the forefront by the recognition of his oneness, has led to a restraining, and ultimately a discounting, of the more impersonal and coercive features that belong to magic. Secondly, the awareness of the moral nature of God, and that his blessing and power are morally governed, has overthrown the beliefs, associated with magic, that divine power can be in any sense available to man for his manipulation through magical techniques. Morality, not magic, has gradually influenced, and eventually completely dominated, the belief in the presence in the world of divine power and energy. In this regard the influence of the Old Testament against any magical interpretations of religion has been very pronounced, both in the formative stages of the literature, and in the way in which it has been understood.

It is probably going too far, however, to suppose that there is an identifiable magical stage through which religion passes before its more moral and spiritual features come to the fore. Rather it seems that the temptation to relapse into magic, and magical assumptions, is constantly present in religion, and that it is one of the tasks of theology to challenge this. To this extent therefore the Old Testament, when interpreted theologically, has a valuable function to fulfill.

In all of these three areas of the history of religious ideas – primitive thinking, mythical thinking, and the realm of magic – the Old Testament has had a significant perspective to offer. As subjects of investigation they all touch upon areas of learning which range far beyond the pages of the Old Testament. Yet they are of relevance to the Old Testament, or have at least been held to possess such relevance, and it is useful to note here that they impinge directly upon the task of presenting an Old Testament theology. It would be wrong, however, to allow them, either separately or together, to exercise a dominant role in determining the way in which the theology of the Old Testament is presented.