

## CHAPTER THREE

# THE GOD OF ISRAEL

The literature of the Old Testament is fundamentally religious in its character, assuming the reality and activity of God even where it does not explicitly mention him. This is so most notably in the otherwise exceptional book of Esther, which is the only one of the Old Testament writings which does not overtly mention God. More often he is mentioned very frequently in these writings, referred to either by the generic title 'God' (Hebrew <sup>ʿ</sup>*lōhîm*) or by his distinctive name 'Yahweh' (Hebrew *yhwēh*). A number of other names and titles also appear, and these all have value in enabling us to see something of the complex religious history through which this Old Testament concept of God has passed. In many cases they undoubtedly reflect distinctive local, and sometimes international, traditions about gods which were current in the ancient Near East. However, in its preserved canonical form the Old Testament certainly intends to present God as one unique supernatural being who had revealed himself to Abraham, Moses and other of the great figures of Israel's life, and who is the Lord and sole Creator of the universe.

More than a millennium of religious history, therefore, anchored firmly in an even older stream of religious tradition deriving from the ancient Near East, is guided and interpreted for us by the Old Testament. This literature contains a revelation of God who is one unique uncreated Creator of all that is. At a literary level the canon itself serves to bind together various local traditions, to link together experiences from different ages, and to lay down a unifying pattern of insights to show that it is the same God that is being described and referred to here. To some extent the use of the same names and titles serves to establish this uniformity of identity, although this could at times be misleading, especially where the use of the title <sup>ʿ</sup>*lōhîm* alone is concerned. Sometimes <sup>ʿ</sup>*lōhîm*, a noun plural in form,

is used to refer to alien 'gods', who are held to be apart from, and even hostile to, Yahweh, the God of Israel. They have no part to play therefore, except a negative one, in the building up of the tradition about the revelation of God in the Old Testament.

Thus there is a very distinctive identity given to God in the Old Testament, which is on the one hand remarkably broadly based, because of its undoubted universalist elements, but which on the other hand is sufficiently circumscribed to assert again and again that particular rites, cultic traditions, and even sanctuaries, do not belong to him and have no place in a true knowledge of his being and will. A very careful line is drawn between a broad syncretism which could claim almost any and every religious tradition as in some sense attributable to 'God', and a narrow exclusivism, which owned allegiance to only one local, or community, tradition.

How this line came to be drawn, on what principles it was established, and by what means and insights its competing interests and tensions were resolved, cannot be reduced to any simple formula. In a very real sense the emergence of *tôrâh* — instruction — was a way of establishing this line of demarcation which became all the more important to grasp once a large number, and ultimately the majority, of Jews came to be living among gentiles in the Diaspora. Yet the nascent Old Testament was not the only means of drawing this line, since we find earlier that an important element of cultic uniformity was established by restricting the legitimate cultus of Yahweh to the sanctuary in Jerusalem. Paradoxically, however, this restriction came at a time when other pressures were forcing the faith of Israel to become more and more conscious of the universal and supra-national power and sovereignty of its God. The very tensions inherent in this meeting of the universalist and exclusivist tendencies in the religious tradition of Israel may be seen to have borne a distinctive fruit in the Jewish and Christian religions.

The Old Testament possesses no one single definition of God, nor any one formula by which he is to be identified, although probably 'Yahweh, the God of Israel' would come closest to this. In consequence the opening self-introductory formula of

the Decalogue may be taken as the broadest and most basic affirmation of the distinctive identity of God in the pages of the Old Testament: 'I am the LORD (Yahweh) your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' (Exod. 20.2).

This formula draws our attention to three elements which recur with such frequency in the Old Testament as to make them a groundwork of the Old Testament faith in God. The words 'your God' identify him as the God of Israel, for there can be no doubt that the situation in worship in which this formula grew up ensured that these words were spoken by a duly authorised priest to the worshipping community of Israel. The question of who constituted this Israel, and on what conditions, will concern us in another chapter. It is sufficient here to note that this relationship to Israel is regarded as fundamental to a knowledge and understanding of God.

The second element, however, also has a bearing on this, for the words 'who brought you out of the land of Egypt' tie this knowledge of God to an event in the national past of Israel, which we find elsewhere was understood to be the foundation-event by which Israel was given birth as a nation. In this way the rise of the nation was attributed to Yahweh its God, so that the entire dimension of national existence and life was held to derive from him. Certainly this ties the knowledge of God to a historical event, but it is misleading to make this historical interest the dominating theological concern. It is not simply that in this event, as event, the hand of Yahweh was revealed, but that all that has ensued from this event, in Israel's very existence, is regarded as dependent on his action. It makes a sense of gratitude, and of obligation deriving from gratitude, fundamental to man's response to God.

To enter into the more narrowly historical question about what actually happened in Egypt to make the departure of Israel's ancestors from there the single most important feature in the tradition of the nation's origin need not be examined here.<sup>1</sup> There must certainly have been some such event, even though the tradition has obviously magnified its significance in all kinds of ways. It was a religious event, rather than a political one in which great numbers of people were necessarily involved.

That there is no independent corroboration for it outside the Old Testament, therefore, should hardly surprise us.

The third element in this formula of God's identity is also interesting for the way in which it modifies the second. The words 'out of the house of bondage' identify Egypt with the conditions of slavery which Israel's ancestors had experienced there, and give to the fact of escape from thence a moral, as distinct from a more narrowly political character. Certainly the whole political side of Israel's existence, with its territorial and governmental claims, was regarded as dependent on the gracious will and actions of God. Nevertheless the overt mention of freedom from slavery, with all its implications in the free development of personal life in accordance with God's will, lend to this formula a peculiarly ethical dimension. Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the God of freedom, the champion of the oppressed, the guardian of the poor and the avenger of those who have been unjustly treated. It is not surprising therefore that later generations of Israelites could be reminded of this ancestral experience as a basic motive for their own obligations to show a like defence of the poor and oppressed (cf. Exod. 22.21; Deut. 15.15). The effect is certainly to give the Old Testament conception of God a very distinctive quality of moral insight and concern. Particularly is this so when we find that the national and political aspects of Old Testament faith come into tension with its more explicitly ethical and personal features. With a reasonable consistency the tensions tend to be resolved in favour of the ethical aspects, so that God's commitment to Israel is not allowed to run out into an unqualified nationalism.

That Yahweh is the God of Israel is at once both the strength and weakness of the Old Testament. It is a point of strength because it gives its doctrine of God direction, detail, and a concrete relatedness to events, personalities and human affairs which belong to a known and identifiable historical past. There is here no vague, other-worldly, spirituality which can dissipate itself in misty sentiments and subjective longings. It possesses an extraordinary robustness, and at times an almost too immediate relationship with the realities of this world in war, politics, intrigue and commerce. Yet on balance this im-

mediacy of contact with life and history is a major part of the attractiveness of the Old Testament presentation of God. It gives to it an extraordinary vitality which makes the expression 'the living God' no empty title.

At the same time an element of weakness is apparent because the concept of 'the God of Israel' links him very directly to one particular nation and religious community. Furthermore, from the theological point of view, this conception relates the Old Testament understanding of God to a past that is no longer with us, and to certain national and territorial aspirations which must inevitably call forth careful scrutiny. The modern Jew, if he is to see in the God of the Old Testament one whom he can still call 'my God', must come to some understanding of how he himself stands within the community of Israel. For the Christian the link with the God of Israel may appear even less direct, since it involves some understanding of the Christian community as 'the Israel of God' (cf. Gal. 6.15) and raises important issues about the relationship of Jesus to the Old Testament. Some essays in Old Testament theology have sought to overcome this apparent limitation in the Old Testament conception of a 'God of Israel', by arguing that there is a discernible trend in the literature towards a more universal faith, in which a pure religious individualism displaces the older national dimension of faith.<sup>2</sup> That there is some movement in this direction is discernible, but to make this a conclusive pattern of development is certainly to exceed the evidence. In this regard the way in which the New Testament interprets the Old must inevitably exercise a profound effect upon the way in which the latter is interpreted by Christians. The problem, however, is not an exclusively Christian one, since any belief in monotheism must raise these questions, as Jewish interpretation has readily recognised.

If we are to find in the Old Testament a theology – a word about God which still holds good for us today – then we are in some measure committed to asking how the picture of God that the Old Testament gives to us can be properly regarded as true of the One whom we still call 'God'. In other words we must expect to find in the Old Testament truths about God which are more than historical truths, tied to the beliefs and

events of a world that has long since passed. To do this we should not expect to find arguments and theories about his existence, of which we may still approve, but rather a general picture, often in the form of analogies and images, which provide us with a worthy and recognisable portrayal of the God whom we worship.

#### THE BEING OF GOD

The Old Testament uses a number of impersonal images to convey a sense of the majesty and restless activity of God, with which we readily become familiar in seeking language to describe the Ineffable. So God is like 'light' (cf. Ps. 104.2; Ezek. 1.27, 28), and 'fire' (cf. Exod. 19.18; Deut. 4.32, 36), and 'wind', or 'spirit' (Hebrew *rûah*; cf. Hag. 2.5; Zech. 4.6). All of these convey something of the power and transcendence of God, while holding close to the conviction that an inevitable hiddenness remains in his dealings with men and their world.<sup>3</sup> Significant as such images are, however, the overriding impression given by the Old Testament references to Yahweh is that which concerns his personality. No other facet of his being stands out as strongly as this. He plans, wills, speaks, acts and feels like a human being. No other description of his being can so adequately describe him as that which calls him a 'person'. In a number of ways his senses are referred to as being entirely analogous to those of other persons (cf. God's eyes, Deut. 11.12; God's ears, 1 Sam. 8.21; God's nose, Exod. 15.8). While in a number of telling phrases, therefore, an importance is attached to the assertion that he is a different kind of person from human beings, who may be vacillating and deceitful (cf. Num. 23.19), the striking fact about Yahweh the God of Israel is that he possesses personality.

Two features of this vigorous personal life of the deity, as it is presented by the Old Testament, have given cause for reservations, and even theological objections. In many instances the anthropomorphic way in which God's being and actions are described seems to border on the creaturely and the naïve. Thus when he is said to 'walk' (cf. Gen. 3.8), to 'laugh' (cf. Ps. 2.4), and even to 'pant' and 'groan' (cf. Isa. 42.14), the

analogical function of such language seems clearly to be stretched. It is evident in the later parts of the Old Testament literature that a serious effort has been made to tone down some of this language and to describe God's actions in a more restrained manner. This process becomes even more marked in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and was evidently an aspect of Israelite faith which underwent some modification through Jewish encounter with Hellenism. Yet it is never seriously given up, nor indeed could it be if the ascription of personality to God, which is so essential a part of the Old Testament understanding of him, was to be retained.

A second feature concerning the personal nature of God which has occasioned difficulty is the suggestion of male sexuality in the description of him as like a man. A very careful avoidance appears to have taken place of any suggestion that God was feminine, or even that he combined a kind of male-female nature. Yet this objection, relevant as it may seem in a cursory glance at the gender of nouns and pronouns that are used to describe him, is really only superficial. The avoidance of any suggestion that Yahweh possessed female sexuality must certainly owe a great deal to the need for shunning any association with the sexual elements of the cults of Canaan in which the female element, through the goddesses Anat and Astarte, was very prominent. The sexual practices of the cultus associated with these conceptions were strongly abhorrent to the Israelites, as a prominent stream of Old Testament polemic shows (cf. 2 Kgs. 17.16 f; Ezek. 16.15 ff).

In reality, in spite of the gender of nouns and pronouns that are used to describe God in the Old Testament, it is scarcely true to say that any prominence at all is accorded to his masculinity. On the contrary, the very sharpest attack is made by the prophet Ezekiel upon those of his fellow countrymen who had so misinterpreted their faith as to worship their God with the aid of male images (Ezek. 16.17). Such explicit sexuality, in this case most probably associated with images devoted to Yahweh, was regarded as a doubly false representation of God. The sexual element as a whole, whether male or female, does not obtrude in any significant way in the Old Testament portrait of Yahweh. That the underlying religion

may once have accorded more place to it is possible, but, if so, the Old Testament tradition has effectively expunged it.

Comparable to the avoidance of any explicit sexuality in God, is a marked antagonism in the Old Testament to any suggestion that he may appear in animal form. This is particularly relevant because of the frequency with which the form of a bull is associated closely with both El and Baal in Canaanite religion. Although at times the Old Testament uses the image of a lion (cf. Hos. 11.10; Amos 1.2) or an eagle (cf. Exod. 19.4) to describe the actions of God, it is clear that these are straightforward comparisons. It is expressly forbidden to use images of any animal form in an effort to represent God (Deut. 4.16-18), so that the Israelite tradition contrasts markedly with that of Egypt where such animal images, especially in mixed forms, abounded in the representation of deities.

The most prominent consequence of this insistence upon the personal nature of God, with severe restraint as to the more physical aspects that might be associated with such personality, is that it enables the emotional and intellectual aspects of his nature to be vigorously presented. Hence the most telling and moving pictures of the relationship between God and his people are those which draw upon the realm of human relationships. Most noticeable here are the splendid analogies drawn from the father-son relationship (Hos. 11.1-9; Jer. 31.20) and those of the husband and his bride (Hos. 2.2; Jer. 2.1-3). More than anything else it is images such as these which have tended to characterise the Old Testament conception of God, and have enabled a warm sensitivity to soften its compelling moral earnestness.

The personal nature of God leads naturally forward into an awareness of the morality which colours all the understanding of him. He is a God of justice (Hebrew *mišpāt* Pss. 33.5; 36.6, etc.), righteousness (Hebrew *šedeq* Pss. 7.19, 11.7, etc.) and truth (Hebrew *ʾemet* Pss. 25.5, 10, etc.) so that no deviousness, or corruptness mars his dealings with men. He is the completely impartial judge (Pss. 7.11; 9.4, etc.) whose knowledge of the secret reasonings and plans of the human heart (cf. Ps. 44.21) ensures that no craftily laid scheme can escape the just penalty he will impose (Ps. 64.1-9). Such an unrelenting maintenance

of justice might appear cold, and almost aloof from human emotions, were it not for the fact that it is entirely out of his desire to uphold 'love' (Hebrew *hesed* = RSV's 'steadfast love') and 'loyalty' (Hebrew *'amūndh*) that he acts in this way. In a remarkable formula, which originated in the sphere of Israel's worship, it is the gracious, patient and loving aspect of his nature, including his desire and willingness to forgive (Exod. 34.6-7), which is brought most into prominence. Justice itself is no cold and impartial reality, where Yahweh is concerned, but a basis for peace and loving relationships.

The particular concern of Yahweh with the weak and oppressed sections of society has already been noted, which has certainly had the effect of making the assisting and delivering of the weak a strong facet of the religious life, as seen from the Old Testament point of view. In the Old Testament itself this sensitivity to the plight of the weak, especially widows, orphans and aliens finds a significant place (cf. the book of Ruth). It readily moves in the direction of overstepping the more markedly nationalistic features of Israelite faith (cf. Amos 2.1). Certainly as significant, however, is the way in which the strong moral emphasis in the understanding of God has influenced, and ultimately, remoulded the conception of the cult. This is most forcibly to be seen in the way in which the concept of 'holiness' is progressively moralised, even though it does not altogether lose its cultic associations in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> Not only in its effect upon cultic vocabulary, however, but in its whole approach to the interpretation of the use of the cult, does this moral emphasis make itself felt:

For thou art not a God who delights in wickedness;  
 evil may not sojourn with thee.  
 The boastful may not stand before thy eyes;  
 thou hatest all evildoers. (Ps. 5.4-5)

In consequence we find an interesting development in the way in which the right of access to the cult and the enjoyment of its benefits came to be made subject to moral demands (cf. Pss. 15; 24.4-6). The effects are to be seen in two ways. First, the gifts which the cult was believed to bestow in prosperity, divine protection and good health, which were all aspects of

divine 'blessing', came themselves to be seen as morally conditioned. There could be no enjoyment of life with God, experienced in the bounty of his presence among men, which was not a profoundly moral life. Secondly, in the later Old Testament period, when the cult of Jerusalem became more and more remote from many Jews, we can see that the fulfilment of the moral demands with which God's presence in the cult had been associated, still occupied a dominant place in the thought of man's duty to God. It gave to belief in God's presence a deep moral relevance, and an element of universal appeal, which profoundly affected Judaism and contributed to a continuing sense of the importance of *tôrâh*, even for such Jews who had no expectation of sharing more directly and personally in the Jerusalem cult.

Whatever the many factors are which have contributed to this development, there is no doubt that the Old Testament period witnessed a profound moralising of religion. The conception of a righteous and moral God has influenced at the deepest level the interpretation of the rites, forms and institutions through which he could be worshipped. Ultimately it has so transformed the understanding of religion that this was able to survive, and to find new forms for itself, when the cultus in which it was originally nurtured was swept away by events. At the same time it has enabled a religion of *tôrâh*, contained in a collection of sacred writings, to become an effective and meaningful way in which God's approach to man can be declared.

## 2. THE NAMES OF GOD

Besides the generic title 'God' (Hebrew <sup>ʿ</sup>*lôhîm*), which occurs frequently in the Old Testament, we find over six thousand occurrences of the distinctive name Yahweh (Hebrew *yhw̄h*), which is consistently translated as 'LORD' in RSV, following an old Jewish tradition which substituted the title 'Lord' (Hebrew <sup>ʿ</sup>*ādōnāy*) in public mention of the name.<sup>5</sup> The Old Testament contains a very distinctive interpretation of this name in Exodus 3.14, when God declares to Moses what his name is and its significance: 'God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM".' This connects the Hebrew letters with the verb 'to be', so that

God is described as the self-existent One. Moreover, the particular construction used (*idem per idem*) appears to signify that God is a category of being that cannot be defined by reference to any other category. He is unique.

It is improbable, however, that the interpretation of the name given here reflects the actual origin of its form, although this may, in fact, have had some connection with the verb 'to be' (Hebrew *hāyáh*). In spite of a great deal of research, how the name originally arose can only be a matter of conjecture.<sup>6</sup> In any case it is unlikely to have been a specifically Israelite achievement, since it is likely that the name was already current when the Israelites adopted it for their God, and effectively filled it with a new content by the distinctiveness of the tradition concerning the exodus from Egypt.

While its original meaning and pre-Israelite currency would be of great value for us to know more clearly from the perspective of the history of religion, it is improbable that much of the Old Testament's theological understanding of God would be greatly affected by it. The exodus tradition, together with the new Mosaic content of the religion, have become such constitutive features of the understanding of who Yahweh is that they have given to the name a new content. Although the Old Testament retained a clear awareness that the Kenites too had worshipped Yahweh (cf. Gen. 4.26), throughout the Old Testament generally it is accepted that Yahweh is the special name of the God of Israel.

In view of the strength and frequency of this tradition regarding the distinctive name of God in the Old Testament, it is at first surprising that other names should also appear to the extent that they do. The most notable here is the title <sup>ʿ</sup>*lōhîm* (= God), and its much less common singular form <sup>ʿ</sup>*lōah*. The latter is certainly a relatively late construction deriving from the fact that <sup>ʿ</sup>*lōhîm* is unusual in being plural in form. In spite of various attempts to explain this as either a 'plural of extension' or a 'plural of majesty', neither explanation is likely to be correct. The plural form is more convincingly to be explained as a consequence of the Hebrew establishing of the cult of Yahweh, as sole God, at sanctuaries where previously a pantheon of several deities (<sup>ʿ</sup>*lōhîm*) had been venerated. In

order to ensure compliance with the demand that no other deities should be worshipped 'beside Yahweh' (cf. Exod. 20.3) the plural title was subsumed under the one new deity.

Etymologically the title *'elōhīm* is connected with the name 'El', who appears as one of the two most prominent deities in Canaanite religion, and whose name, through the form *ilu*, relates even more widely to a popular high-god of ancient Mesopotamian religions. The name 'El' is identified with the Israelite Yahweh, especially through the identification of the latter with the gods worshipped by Israel's ancestors in the land. These bear such names as El-Elyon (cf. Gen. 14.18 ff.), El-Roi (cf. Gen. 22.14), and El-Shaddai (cf. Gen. 17.1), which must be regarded as local forms of the god El, venerated in the land of Canaan in pre-Israelite times. The Old Testament makes a point of very strong emphasis concerning the identity of these gods worshipped by the nation's ancestors with the God Yahweh (cf. Exod. 3.13, 16). Since the Old Testament also witnesses firmly to the original Mesopotamian homeland of the nation's ancestors, a good deal of historical uncertainty remains concerning the precise nature of the El deities worshipped by them.<sup>7</sup>

To what extent an older religion concerned with 'gods of the fathers' had survived alongside, or subsumed under, the local Canaanite El deities of the land is difficult to determine. Conversely, it could be argued that these Canaanite religious traditions had been much modified by the patriarchal inheritance. In any case, that there was asserted a basic element of continuity of tradition between the worship of Yahweh and the El deities of the Israelite patriarchs is a prominent feature of the Old Testament tradition. It marks an important aspect of the broadening and even 'universalising' of the Old Testament religious tradition.

This contrasts rather markedly with the very much more negative attitude of the Old Testament to the cults of Baal, which formed a parallel, and in some respects more vigorous, part of the Canaanite religious tradition. Although there are some relatively minor traces of attempts to identify Yahweh with Baal (cf. 2 Sam. 5.20 and the names Ishbaal/Ishbosheth, Meribaal/Mephibosheth; 2 Sam. 2.10; 9.6 ff.), these are

largely eliminated by the developing Old Testament tradition. Evidently aspects of the cult of Baal were felt to be so inimical to the Yahweh faith that the very name of Baal, and with that any suggestion that Yahweh could be identified with him, has been rejected. In this we see the very real consciousness in the Old Testament that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is unique, and that not all religious traditions are identifiable with him. At the same time, the exclusivism which we should expect to see deriving from this is not applied with the rigour which we might have anticipated. The use of the title *'elohim* is itself a witness to this, as also are other features of the history of Israel's religion.

When we come to ask, therefore, how and why these distinctions have been drawn, we are not provided with any very explicit explanations. So far as the 'how' of the making of distinctions, it appears that this has very largely been achieved by the careful protection and the use of the divine name Yahweh. This name alone defined the extent and legitimate authority of the worship of the God of Israel. In respect of 'why' other traditions, or aspects of them, were felt to be hostile and unacceptable to the worship of Yahweh, we can only learn this by examining the polemic which the Old Testament directs against the cults of these other gods.

We shall have opportunity of considering the significance of this polemic later, in connection with the uniqueness of Yahweh, but two features come to the fore. First, we must note the marked hostility felt by Israel to the immorality associated with certain cultic traditions. Most obvious here is the sexual immorality associated with the cult of Baal (cf. Hos. 4.13-14; Num. 25.1-17). Here then the ethical element in the Old Testament religious tradition has exercised its effect. The second feature in the formation of the distinctiveness of the tradition about Yahweh is the sharp opposition to the use of images in worship, which has made their widespread use in other traditions a focus of the sharpest antagonism. So much is this so that the very word 'idolatry' has virtually come to sum up all that is false and unacceptable about the non-Yahwistic forms of religion. In the outcome all that is unacceptable to God can be described as 'idolatry' (cf. Col. 3.5).

One other feature has played a part in moulding the way in which the name of the God Yahweh has been used in the Old Testament. This is the directly political factor, which naturally infers from the assertion that Yahweh is the god of Israel that the gods of other nations are not to be identified with him. Hence the gods of Egypt, of Assyria and of Babylon are, in various ways, evidently assumed to be the rivals of Yahweh. In this factor in the tradition we can see that the political conflicts between Israel and these nations have undoubtedly been reflected in the ways in which their respective deities have been understood. The rivalry of the nations has led to the portrayal of a rivalry between their gods. Important as this feature is, it is not as prominent as we might have expected, and is certainly not the decisive factor in creating the unique Old Testament portrayal of Yahweh. Yahweh's superiority to the gods of Egypt becomes an integral part of the exodus tradition (cf. Exod. 7.11, 22; 8.7, etc.), and even more strikingly, the exilic prophet of Isaiah 40-55 makes a vigorous and effective attack upon the gods of Babylon, especially the supreme Babylonian god Marduk (Isa. 40.12-14, 18-20; 41.21-4, etc.).

All in all, however, it would be mistaken to regard the political conflicts between Israel and various of its neighbours and other great powers of the ancient Near East as the leading factor in creating the unique conception of Yahweh in the Old Testament. Where necessary the Old Testament writers have not been afraid to draw upon elements of the wider Near Eastern religious traditions in filling out the portrait of the God of Israel. At the same time they have not made themselves dependent upon any single one of these traditions to the extent that would enable us to regard it as a major 'source' for the Israelite conception of God. Perhaps it is most in the conception of creation that this wider tradition has had its part to play.

### 3. THE PRESENCE OF GOD

It is an oft-noted feature of the Old Testament that it contains almost nothing by way of argument to assert the existence of God. Even those who deny his existence are subjected to rebuke, rather than to any counter-arguments in defence of his reality.

This has sometimes been taken to imply that the existence of God is 'taken for granted', and H. H. Rowley comments that, in the Old Testament, Yahweh is 'the God of experience and not of speculation'.<sup>8</sup> This is in fact only partially true since there is a very clear reason why the existence of God is not made the subject of enquiry or discussion in the manner that we might expect of a theology. The reality of God, and the possibility of man's knowing him and dealing with him, are taken care of by the cult.

First and foremost in the Old Testament God is a presence to be sought and experienced at a sanctuary in an act of worship, rather than the postulate of any particular argumentation. Time and again we find that the sanctuary is the place where God's presence (Hebrew *pānīm*, literally 'face') is to be found. Hence the layout of the sanctuary, the rites and symbols used in worship, and the whole tradition concerning why the place was sacred, served to support the claim that the sanctuary was a place where men could meet with God.

We have already pointed out that a considerable proportion of the information contained in the Old Testament, especially about the origin of sanctuaries in the book of Genesis and the origin of Israel's cult in the book of Exodus, is of this kind. Certainly God was not the object of speculative thought in the Old Testament, but his existence and accessibility by men was in no way taken for granted. What we find throughout the pages of these writings is evidence that the cult itself was progressively 'theologised', and the traditions that served to authorise the cult have eventually become more important than the cult itself. So such a story as that of Jacob's founding of the cult at Bethel (Gen. 28.11-19), which originally belonged to the use of the sanctuary at Bethel, has become transformed into a tradition about the blessedness of Jacob and a confirmation of the truth that God was with him (Gen. 28.20-2).

In the earliest forms of the religion of Israel not only did the traditions preserved at the sanctuaries of Israel serve to interpret their religious authority, but the presence of certain major symbols also served to affirm the fact of Yahweh's presence among his people. Three such symbolic institutions stand out most prominently. First of all we find mention of the sacred

ark (Hebrew *'ārôn*), the name of which indicates that it was a box of some kind, and which was used in leading Yahweh's people into battle. The ancient rubric that is associated with this institution shows that the ark could be addressed very directly as though it were Yahweh himself:

Arise, O Yahweh, and let thy enemies be scattered;  
and let them that hate thee flee before thee. (Num. 10.35)

Later, in the Deuteronomic literature, this older view of the ark is subjected to a theological development, which almost entirely discards the implication that Yahweh's presence is directly associated with it (cf. Deut. 10.1-3).

The earliest tradition about the ancient tent-shrine of Israel shows the same kind of immediacy regarding the way in which God's presence was believed to be related to it (Exod. 33.7-11). In the later tradition this too was subjected to a theological development which came to invest it with all the apparatus and significance of a much more elaborate shrine (Exod. 26.1-37). The Tabernacle is in fact a rather idealised portrait of a sanctuary, in many respects reminiscent of the great temple building of Jerusalem. This latter building (cf. 1 Kgs. 6.1-36) also shared in the elaborate traditions of religious symbolism and iconography that had grown up in the ancient Near East. Solomon's employment of Phoenician architects and craftsmen almost certainly was reflected in the style, layout and symbolism of the building. In particular the cherubim, which formed the most prominent of these symbols (cf. 1 Kgs. 6.23-8), must be regarded as guardians of the way to the divine throne (cf. Gen. 3.24). They, like the sanctuary as a whole, expressed the specific assumption and purpose of the cult, which was that, through his chosen shrine, God was present with his people. The language of the Psalter abundantly testifies to the way in which the hymns and prayers of worship reflected and interpreted this belief. Only later, in the seventh century, do we begin to find a determined effort to recast in more refined theological concepts how this divine presence could be known and experienced through the cult. This appears in the Deuteronomic theology which asserted that it was God's name which was present at his sanctuary (Deut. 12.5 ff.), and which could re-interpret the

temple as essentially a house of prayer to the God who dwelt in heaven (1 Kgs. 8.22-53).

A further development in the same direction towards the 'theologising' of the cult and its symbols is to be seen in the post-exilic Priestly theology which regarded the cloud of the divine 'Glory' as the means by which God's presence could be found on earth (cf. Exod. 24.15-18; 40.34). In many ways the particular vocabulary and imagery used to describe how the cult could serve to mediate the divine presence is of less importance than the fact that such a process of 'theologising' was felt to be necessary at all. Underlying this development we can discern a greatly enhanced awareness of the transcendent nature of God, and a growing loss of faith in the power of the visual and spatial symbolism of the cult to mediate his presence.

It is difficult to avoid the conviction that this progressive rejection of symbolism, and its replacement by the development of theological concepts was related to the entire rejection by Israel of the use of any image of Yahweh. We shall need to consider the reasons for this in examining the unique features of the worship of Yahweh, but for the present it is worthy of note that the rejection of the use of any image of Yahweh came to be associated with the specifically spiritual and transcendent nature of God. 'Idolatry' summed up that which was felt to be flagrantly pagan and hostile to the true nature of Yahweh. It seems improbable that any one single feature of a historical or theological nature has alone been responsible for this development. Rather a feature which belonged to the very earliest stages of the Yahweh religion has acted as a catalyst, and has drawn to itself a number of insights and convictions about the true nature of God which have ultimately proved to be among the foremost theological assets of the biblical tradition.

Not only has the process of theologising the cult affected the way in which this was itself interpreted and understood, but it has also served to strengthen several other concepts and images concerning the activity of God upon earth. Increasingly this activity came to be expressed through concepts and language of a decidedly a-cultic character. Foremost here we must undoubtedly place the concept of God as 'spirit', or 'wind' (Hebrew *rúah*), which gave a remarkable realism to the sense

of his vitality and omnipresence. Nowhere is this more effectively expressed than in the words of Psalm 139.7:

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?  
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

What is so remarkable about this assertion is not simply that it makes 'spirit' a leading concept for the portrayal of the divine presence on earth, but that it does so with an apparent complete independence of the concepts and symbols of the cult. Later, in the post-exilic age, the concept of spirit became an important part of the vocabulary concerning the nature of God, and enabled the language and ideas concerning his presence with Israel to develop outside the narrower confines of the cult (cf. Hag. 2.4-5; Zech. 4.6). The role this played in sustaining and fostering a strong religious life among Jewish exiles and those in the Diaspora can only be guessed at, but must have been quite profound.

Alongside the concept of 'spirit' we find other concepts of divine mediation coming into vogue, notably those of Word and Wisdom. Later still, by the first century of the Christian era, the concept of the Shekinah, the tabernacling presence of God among men, became a richly used means for explaining the language and ideas of the Old Testament which referred to God's presence on earth.<sup>9</sup> In its own way it both witnesses to the way in which this language had given rise to the need for fuller theological explanation, and also sought to supply that explanation by the formation of a concept in which the immanent and transcendent aspects of the divine nature were linked together.

In another way also the ideas associated with the concept of the divine presence have undergone a considerable development in the Old Testament. The belief that the institutions of the cult could themselves mediate this presence carried with it certain very important consequences concerning the relationship of the deity to space and time. The sacred area of the sanctuary was 'holy' because of the divine presence there, and the physical consequences of this were a prominent aspect of all that was understood by the term 'holiness'. To be near the sanctuary was to be close to God. In the Priestly stream of cultic

legislation in the Old Testament the exact location of this presence could be given with remarkable precision (cf. Exod. 29.42; 30.6; Lev. 16.2). This stands in a measure of tension with belief in the divine omnipresence to which Psalm 139.7 witnesses. Increasingly the emphasis upon the ubiquity and omnipresence of God seems to have prevailed, so that the spatial language concerning the 'nearness' of man to God has taken on a new dimension of interpretation in relation to a spiritual, and almost mystical, sense of man's communion with him.

A comparable effect on the cult has taken place in regard to God's relationship to time. The Psalms attest very strikingly the sense of immediacy and directness with which God 'appeared' to his people when they came into the sanctuary to worship him at the set festivals (cf. Ps. 96.13). So marked is the language that attempts have been made to explain it in terms of a tradition about a cultic theophany.<sup>10</sup> The sanctuary was not only the place where God 'dwelt', but to which he 'came', and no inherent contradiction seems to have been felt between these two metaphors for the manner of God's acting through the sanctuary.

Nevertheless we observe two developments occurring in relation to this language. In the first place the language of a direct 'coming' of God to his people during the great festivals has been set aside. In its place we find that the whole understanding of the cult was gradually transformed to make its rites and praises into acts of 'remembering' the work of God in the past (cf. esp. Deut. 16.3, etc.). By such a subjective act of 'remembering' the past the worshipper appropriated its benefits and meaning for himself anew. The related development was to project the language concerning God's 'coming' to his people into the future to make it an expression of the hope of the blessing which would belong to Israel when God fulfilled his declared purposes for it. The language of God's 'coming', therefore, has been transformed into the language of an eschatological hope which originated in all its main essentials with the prophets. Concepts of sacred time and sacred space have thereby both been profoundly affected by the way in which the understanding of the presence of God in the cult underwent a process of change. In many cases the most marked effects of

these changes do not become manifest until a very late Old Testament period, or even beyond this. In other cases, however, we can see, as most noticeably in the way in which the book of Deuteronomy interprets the cult, that the initial stages of such a development began to make their appearance quite early. As we have had occasion to mention earlier, it is no easy task to establish any kind of clear chronology to the course of Israel's intellectual and theological development. Changes which were of the greatest importance to the Jews of the Diaspora seldom appear to have originated with them. Rather it was because certain far-reaching theologising tendencies were already present in the religion that so much of the tradition of Israel's religious past, which had been nurtured in the cult, retained its meaning for Jews in the much changed circumstances of the post-exilic age.

#### 4. THE UNIQUENESS OF GOD

The Decalogue of Exodus 20.2-17, which sums up so much that is central in the Old Testament religious tradition, makes the foremost of its demands upon Israel: 'You shall have no other gods beside (RSV, before) me' (Exod. 20.3). This command not only prohibits the giving of precedence to any other God, but it firmly precludes the acceptance by an Israelite of any allegiance to another god alongside Yahweh. In a situation in which the Canaanite religious tradition usually regarded the god of its major sanctuaries as the head, or 'king', of a pantheon of gods, this prohibition was particularly meaningful. It effectively meant that the loyal Israelite was to be a person who had dealings with only one God. That this obligation had existed from the very beginnings of the religion is scarcely provable, but is hardly to be doubted. So marked a change as its introduction would have entailed could scarcely have taken place without leaving its mark in the tradition. Because of this demand the sense of uniqueness attaching to Yahweh, and an awareness that other cultic traditions could not simply be combined in his worship, belong to the very essence of the religion of Israel. Yahweh is a unique God, who is held to be unlike other gods.<sup>11</sup>

Eventually this sense of uniqueness finds its fullest and firmest expression in the Old Testament in the monotheism of Isaiah 40-55 (cf. esp. Isa. 40.18, 25; 41.21-4; 43.11; 44.6-8). Here with this exilic prophet the ultimate consequence is clearly drawn that Yahweh alone is God, and that other gods that men seek to worship do not in reality exist. However, the path from the earliest Mosaic sense of the uniqueness of Yahweh to the polemical monotheistic assertions of the exilic prophet is a very difficult one to trace. Some have argued that the sense of uniqueness concerning Yahweh amounts to a monotheistic faith all through, while others have regarded the unknown exilic prophet as the first of the truly monotheistic thinkers of the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> Others have sought to coin a suitable expression by which to define the particular Israelite understanding of God, such as 'incipient monotheism'. There are indeed recognisable stages at which various of the writers of the Old Testament accord to the belief in other non-Israelite deities some measure of reality (cf. Deut. 32.8-9; Judg. 11.24). Perhaps little is to be gained by either attempting a suitable definition of the Mosaic conception of God, or of a precise outlining of the 'stages' by which this developed into a full monotheism. Two points, however, deserve some special attention.

The first of these concerns the helpfulness, or otherwise, of such a relatively speculative concept as monotheism. Many have pointed out that it is in many respects a rather abstract concept, and one which, for this reason, is not very suited to the more pragmatically oriented faith of the Old Testament. More than this, however, it is a concept which is capable of several interpretations. One possible conclusion that could be deduced from it is that all the names, titles, forms and traditions by which men have venerated their separate deities, must in reality have been offered to the one true God, who alone exists. In this way the sense of multiplicity and variety which everywhere faces us in looking at religion, and nowhere more than in its ancient Near Eastern forms, is treated as an illusion. The 'One' that exists behind the 'many', is regarded as the reality which has become overlaid by an appearance of variety. Israelite monotheism was certainly not of this kind, else its

antagonism to other religious traditions, especially those which it found in Canaan, becomes quite inexplicable.

At the other extreme, the idea that the apparently rather insignificant deity of a nation that was historically a very small one among those that emerged, and briefly flourished, in the ancient Near East, is alone the true God, can appear quite ludicrous. There is some necessary sense in which a realistic monotheism compels a concern with the other forms of god that men worship: There is no doubt that the Israelite tradition was fully aware of this, and was willing to identify its faith with aspects of other religious traditions where this was appropriate. We have already drawn attention to this in regard to the identification of Yahweh with El, and there is ample evidence to support the view that this carried with it some very significant elements of the religious tradition of ancient Mesopotamia. The Israelite conception of the uniqueness of Yahweh managed to create a surprisingly homogeneous tradition out of a great variety of separate parts, and to bring together a coherent picture of one unique deity. This retained both universal and particularist elements in a measure of tension which we can believe has ultimately proved profoundly fruitful and convincing. The more abstract concept of monotheism would not, by itself, have necessarily been particularly helpful in enabling this picture to emerge.

A second feature concerning monotheism is also important. We find a number of tendencies present in the polytheistic religions of Canaan and Mesopotamia which can best be termed 'monotheistic'. This is in no way to claim that we find here a clear-cut and comparable monotheism in the background of ancient Israel from which its own conception of God might be held to have been adopted. This is not the case. Nevertheless we do find both in Babylon as well as in Canaan tendencies to exalt one deity to a position so far above all others that he comes to exercise a kind of supreme authority. The most notable example of this is in connection with the Babylonian god Marduk, who was the supreme deity of Babylon, but the exaltation of El in Canaanite religion shows some comparable tendencies. Furthermore the cultic celebrating of the role of one god as 'king', follows in the same direction. We find

therefore in religious traditions that have been generally regarded as polytheistic that a strong trend is often apparent in the direction of elevating one god to a position of greatest eminence, and even supremacy.

So far as the Old Testament tradition of Yahweh's uniqueness is concerned, a marked emphasis was placed by the tradition upon his superiority to other gods. Hence the narratives regarding the plagues in Egypt greatly exalt Yahweh over the gods of Egypt. Furthermore we find in the prophets and their interpretations of events that they regard Yahweh as controlling the actions of non-Israelite rulers, even when they do not acknowledge him (cf. esp. Isa. 10.5 ff.; 41.2-4; 45.1-5).

The feature in the Israelite tradition about the uniqueness of Yahweh that has achieved most prominence is undoubtedly that which concerns the prohibition of the making or worshiping of any image of him. The origin of this prohibition goes very far back, but, surprisingly, the earliest layers of the Old Testament tradition offer no clear explanation for it. Various suggestions have been put forward, most plausibly, that the setting up of an image could be thought to convey to the worshipper some measure of direct access to, and even control over, his god. The freedom and transcendent nature of Yahweh could then have been felt to have been prejudiced in this way. By the time that clear explanations are offered in the Old Testament, we find that a more historical reason is given (cf. Deut. 4.15-18). It is, however, in the exilic age that the sharpest polemic against the use of images emerges, in which the whole understanding of the reason for the prohibition is set on a profoundly theological plane (cf. Isa. 40.18-20; 44.9-20). The creation of an image is taken to suggest that the workman who makes it must in some sense be thought to be making a god. Against this the whole idea of God who is himself the Creator and source of all things stands in opposition. Ultimately it is this line of polemical argument which comes to predominate in the discussion about the making and use of images. They are taken to be images made 'with human hands', and therefore as created things, cannot serve to represent the Creator (cf. Philo, *De Decalogo*, 58-61).

Certainly the prohibition of the use of any image for the

deity grew to be regarded as the most characteristic feature of the cult of Yahweh. It naturally came to enjoy prominence as an expression of the uniqueness of the theological conception of Yahweh held by Israel. Conversely 'idolatry' was to express all that was hostile to him, and all that was palpably 'false' in the religious traditions of the non-Israelite nations. That there is underlying this theological development a very much more complex history of religious controversy concerning the use and legitimacy of symbolism in worship is evident. Since the immense wealth of symbolism and iconography in the religions of the ancient Near East can only be brought with difficulty into clear categories of meaning and significance, the precise course of these controversies are far from easy to trace. So far as the Old Testament is concerned, the period when the most forceful attack on idolatry was made, in so far as it had been accepted at all in early Israel, regards it as already so expressive of an alien tradition that it is condemned in the sharpest possible terms (cf. Jer. 2.27; Ezek. 20.7, 18, etc.).

The uniqueness of Israel's conception of Yahweh its God might easily have led to a narrow and exclusive attitude in regard to him, so much so that such a faith would in no way have broadened out to become a universal religion. Yet this it has done in Christianity and Islam, and, with some limitations, in Judaism also. Several factors have contributed to this wider understanding of God, which was not content to think of him as 'the God of Israel' in a restrictive and purely nationalistic fashion. First of all we must certainly place the belief in Yahweh's role as Creator of the material universe. That there are two separate creation narratives in Genesis (1.1-2.4*a* is ascribed to the source P, and 2.4*b*-3.24 to J) has gained almost universal acceptance among scholars. One of the consequences of this is that it points us to a relatively early date for the emergence of the earliest of these (the J narrative), to a time when the buoyant nationalism of Israel was very strong. That Israel's faith should have incorporated this concern with Yahweh's role as Creator has undoubtedly been an important factor in widening the theological horizons of the tradition to a universal dimension. When we survey the arguments adduced to affirm that Yahweh alone is God, we find that the claim that he alone

has created the world unaided is foremost among them (cf. Isa. 40.28; 42.5; 45.18, 22). That the theme of creation in the Old Testament should have drawn upon even older elements of Near Eastern tradition, involving a connection with creation mythology, is in no way surprising. What is particularly striking about the Israelite reminding of this is the genuinely universal character that is accorded to the material. Neither in the early (J) nor late (P) accounts is there any suggestion that the order of creation has been fashioned to give some special precedence to Israel, or its geographical setting. In spite of some minor echoes of the tradition that Jerusalem lay at the centre, or 'navel', of the universe, the Old Testament fully recognises the openness of the entire created order to Yahweh's control. Israel is not accorded any exclusive 'right' or 'privilege' in respect of the created order, even though its history then unfolds in a unique way. That other nations also have their own role to fulfil within creation is fully accepted in the narratives of Genesis 1-11.

A further element in the direction of widening Israel's understanding of God has certainly been contributed by the prophetic insistence upon Yahweh's control of all nations and their histories. This is particularly brought out in the inclusion of large collections of 'foreign nation' oracles within prophecy (esp. Amos 1-2; Isa. 13-23; Jer. 46-52; Ezek. 25-32). God's interest in the changing political fortunes of the world do not cease at the borders of Israel. Nor was it necessary for Israel to be directly involved with the fortunes of other nations for such a concern on Yahweh's part to become manifest. Sometimes this is the case, but by no means is it true in every instance. The genuine universality of Yahweh's concern with the affairs of men is accepted as a presupposition of the prophets and their preaching.

A third element in the move towards a universal faith must be accorded to the unique moral emphasis in the Israelite understanding of Yahweh. Morality itself is a supra-national reality, and the needs, sufferings and ambitions of all men, as men, were thought to come before Yahweh. We have already had occasion to touch upon this aspect of Old Testament faith, and it is apparent that it has found its way into the prophetic

preaching. There is an unbounded note of universality in the address of the prophet to mankind in Micah 6.6-8:

He has showed you, O man, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly (or 'circumspectly') with your God?