

# THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE HISTORY OF RELIGION

We have argued in discussing earlier the problems of method associated with an Old Testament theology that this literature can more adequately be regarded as reflecting 'religion', rather than 'theology' proper in a narrower sense. All the varied institutions of ancient Israel's life, its cultic rites and sanctuaries, its personalities and historical fortunes, are reflected in its different writings. Certainly it may be regarded as a more easily definable undertaking to attempt a history of Israelite religion than to recount the particular theology that this religion gave rise to. If theology is understood as the handmaid of religion, then we can see that only in a very different way from that which now pertains can the religion of ancient Israel be said to have possessed a rounded body of theology. Instead we have argued that an Old Testament theology must more openly recognise that its function is to elucidate the role and authority of the Old Testament in those religions which use it as a sacred canon and regard it as a fundamental part of their heritage.

This points us to the role of the Old Testament in fashioning the theological thought of Judaism and Christianity, and also in a more derivative fashion, that of Islam. The three great 'Abrahamic' religions all find in the Old Testament a source of authority and revelation for their own beliefs and practices. That the institutions and *realia* of ancient Israel's religion no longer exist must be fully taken into account in our seeking to understand how the inner theological 'truth' of this religion can still be an authoritative reality for us. There should therefore be a fruitful interplay between an understanding of the way in which the Old Testament has been read and interpreted in the religions that derive from it, and the results of a scientifically critical investigation into the nature and background of the religion, from which it has itself come.

There is, we may believe, a real measure of continuity between the religion of Israel in the Old Testament and the religions that have derived from it. However, the claim that this is so, and the attempts to present some theological demonstration of the reality of this continuity, raise a wide variety of questions about the nature of religion and the ways in which a continuity of tradition within it can be felt. We may note the facility with which extreme positions can be, and sometimes have been, adopted. On the one hand, it may be argued that all religions are in some degree continuous with each other, since behind each of them the same divine Reality must be manifesting himself to mankind. Against this can be set the opposite position in which the particularism of one religion can be so fervently held as to deny any reality at all to other religious traditions, and the radical discontinuity evident in the one tradition maintained. It is not difficult to find evidence in Christian theological thinking of the adoption of this latter position.

However, the claim that there is a radical discontinuity between Christianity and Judaism, as has not infrequently been held in some streams of Christian thinking, raises questions about the relationship of Christianity to the Old Testament. To assert, as has sometimes been done, that Christianity is the legitimate heir of the Old Testament, but that it is to be sharply distinguished from Judaism, raises questions of a complex kind.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, it has, much less frequently and satisfactorily, been held that Judaism is the natural heir to the Old Testament, which represents an imperfect revelation, and that Christianity is to be distinguished sharply from this as well as from Judaism. The claim that has been defended, that the Old Testament represents a religion of 'failure', would appear to belong in this category.<sup>2</sup>

It is not difficult to recognise that other possibilities of understanding present themselves, and that various positions can be asserted, but much less easily defended convincingly. What constitutes continuity and discontinuity in religion, and how is it to be measured? Clearly identity of doctrine, or of ritual, or of institutions, can all play some part, but it is of the very nature of religious life that each of these undergoes periods of

change and adaptation. The thousand years of Israelite-Jewish history which are reflected in the Old Testament reveal an immense number of such changes. It may be argued here that it is part of the immense theological worth of the Old Testament that it raises these issues and compels us to deal with them. Furthermore, it may also be contended that it has been the frequent neglect of the Old Testament that has led to the adoption of more narrowly assertive positions in Christian and Jewish theology than the study of the Old Testament itself properly warrants. Undoubtedly the Christian attitude to Judaism has been very different when the Christian commitment to the Old Testament has been fully grasped.

Similarly, the indifference to the theological value of a proper study of the history of religion might have been averted, had the resources of the Jewish-Christian tradition in the Old Testament been more fully appreciated. Not least, it may be argued, a number of features which modern discovery has revealed about the Bible and its background would have appeared less disturbing to some traditional assumptions with regard to it than has in fact been the case. Not only is the Old Testament an important guidebook for an understanding of the historical roots of the three great monotheistic religions of the world, but it is also an open window upon the immense riches and insights of the great religious traditions of the ancient orient.

#### I. THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE RELIGIONS OF THE ANCIENT EAST

In 1876 the distinguished orientalist George Smith published a translation of a Babylonian cuneiform text, which he entitled *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*.<sup>3</sup> In commenting upon this text, he, and other scholars who have followed after him, noted the close similarities between the Babylonian text and the biblical account in Genesis 1, and argued that the former had influenced the latter. It is not necessary to recount the vast list of further discoveries which have followed in the wake of Smith's publication and of the remarkable range of Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian and other texts which have now come to light and

which have been used to elucidate the pages of the Old Testament. Close or distant parallels of one kind or another in a very wide range of literature, extending at times to whole sections, at others to words and phrases, and at other times to the type, or general idiom of a story, have been revealed. It would be foolish and rash in the extreme to suppose now that an adequate understanding of the Old Testament can be undertaken without reference to the rich treasures of this comparative literary material.

However, underlying literature there are concepts, ideas, rituals and a range of mythological images, all of which are reflected in the content of the writings. It is, in retrospect, not altogether difficult to understand that the initial surprise at these discoveries should have led to a movement in which the dependence of the Old Testament on the more readily discoverable sources of Mesopotamian religion and culture, namely that of Babylon, should have led to extreme assertions of biblical dependence. Hence the pan-Babylonists, as they became known, and the 'history-of-religion school', to which they were related, pursued a kind of reductionism in which a large part of the biblical tradition came to be traced back to antecedent stages of Mesopotamian religion.<sup>4</sup> Everywhere parallels were noted, but differences ignored.

So, too, the belief that a common culture pattern reveals itself across the ancient orient, including the biblical world of Israel, has found its advocates, particularly in the so-called 'myth and ritual school'.<sup>5</sup> Properly and understandably, reactionary and defensive positions have been taken up, and the unsatisfactoriness of such extreme assertions about the dependence of the biblical tradition exposed. Especially has this been so in the presentation of an Old Testament theology, where the uniqueness of the Israelite religious tradition has been vigorously defended. Consequently, the task of presenting an Old Testament theology has become an increasingly complex one, since some knowledge of its religious background has become indispensable.

The problems that are raised by the availability of a considerable wealth of literature, with a much enhanced knowledge of the world from which this literature came, are them-

selves substantial. We may simply note a few of them, and the bearing which they have upon the Old Testament and its theology. At a literary level it is undeniably clear that the Old Testament rests on the compositions and achievements of an ancient oriental tradition which can be traced back to the Sumerians. In mythology and law particularly, the great history of these literary traditions is evident. However, in psalmody also Mesopotamian and Canaanite forms can be traced beneath the surface of the Old Testament psalms, and in proverb, fable and anecdote a great range of oriental parallels have been noted.

Yet even here to speak of 'dependence' raises questions at a literary level which are not easy to answer. What does similarity denote in such a context, and how close does a parallel have to be in order to claim that one text is dependent upon another? Furthermore, it is evident from a religious point of view that a psalm becomes a very different composition if the God to whom it is addressed is changed. So also if texts, particularly mythological texts, are transferred from a polytheistic to a monotheistic frame of reference they are altered to a very substantial degree. Yet in almost every case it is evident that we are faced with differences and modifications of a more substantial character than this when we note the similarities of Old Testament passages to comparable written sources of the ancient Near East. It cautions us to proceed in the most careful way in speaking of 'literary dependence' in trying to describe and understand the literary connections of the Old Testament with the literatures of the peoples which formed its background.

The question of literary connections, and the attempt to evaluate these in determining direct, or indirect, dependence of one tradition upon another, is however, less difficult than related issues concerning religious dependence. Nevertheless, the raising of the literary question enables us to see that there are inevitable similarities between the problems raised by comparative studies of literature and those concerned with religion. When we examine the history of Israel's religion in the light of all the evidence that is now available to us from the Canaanite and Mesopotamian spheres we are presented with a surprising number of undoubted connections. The Old Testament itself

is fully aware of this, although it offers little information about the particular sources, or origins, of rites and institutions. Nevertheless, the sanctuaries of ancient Israel were certainly very like the Canaanite sanctuaries which they displaced, and the Jerusalem temple was built with the aid of Phoenician craftsmen (1 Kgs. 5.1-12; 7.13-14). In many instances the physical appearance and furnishings of a particular shrine can scarcely have been altered when it passed from Canaanite to Israelite hands. Similarly, in artefacts, rites and symbolism there were innumerable connections between the religion of Israel and the older religious traditions of Canaan which preceded them. For many worshippers it must have been very difficult at times to detect obvious physical signs of the change of religious occupation. It is unnecessary to list examples of all the parallels that have been discovered because they are so many that any survey of the Canaanite and Babylonian religions quickly brings them to light.

Yet if this element of continuity between the religion of Israel and the older religions of Canaan and Mesopotamia is everywhere evident, so also is evidence of change and discontinuity. No doubt the most obvious and inescapable change was that the new religion was devoted to Yahweh, the God of Israel, and that this in itself carried with it a unique tradition. In particular it is noteworthy that the Israelite tradition was blatantly and almost self-consciously, aware of its separate identity, and of the dangers of confusing one tradition with another. The very insistent demand that Yahweh alone should be worshipped points us in this direction. Other features of the religion serve to support such an assessment. It is easy, therefore, to make assertions that all the practices, sanctuaries and ideas that it 'borrowed', Israel also transformed. Myths were re-interpreted, ideas were subtly adapted and modified, new concepts added and older, cruder, ideas pruned away. Always the old tradition was being reminted and refashioned so that it became more truly expressive of the Israelite tradition.

Yet we must remember that Israel possessed no consultative committee, or doctrinal commission, which could meet to decide such issues. Changes usually had to be fought for, and to make their way by force of conviction in the light of the

traditions that already existed. Continuity was not something that could be determined by vote, or by reference to an agreed set of principles. It had to be felt and accepted as experience was combined with tradition. In this sense there must have been a kind of nascent 'canonical tradition' long before the written canon of the Old Testament came into existence. In many ways the needs and changes which made a sacred canonical text an appropriate way of guiding the development of the religion were simply the continuing reflection of needs which had existed since the days of Moses. In such a context it becomes a very unsatisfactory proceeding to speak exclusively in terms of either 'borrowing', or of 'radical separation'. To a very real extent both phenomena are to be found, and in some respects they represent the same developments looked at from different points of view. An example of this may be cited in the case of rites of sacrifice, where substantial agreement exists among scholars that most, if not all, the types of sacrifice that became current in Israel were already extant in Canaan before the rise of Israel.<sup>6</sup> Some may have been taken over from further afield and instituted in Israel along with other aspects of the royal cultus of Jerusalem at the time when the temple was built there. The precise occasion and source of Israel's adoption of such rites is of less consequence than the certain assumption that the rites themselves were not new when they were introduced into Israel. Nevertheless, the act of adopting such rites established them in a new context of tradition and religious life which immediately began to change and modify the way in which they were understood and used. Hence we find that eventually Israelite-Jewish faith arrived at a unique conception of the meaning and significance of sacrifice which has left a profound legacy of ideas and spirituality long after the original rituals have ceased to be practised.

A not dissimilar development faces us when we consider the building of the temple of Jerusalem, which, in design and concept, marked one of the most radical steps in a 'syncretistic' direction that Israel's religion adopted (cf. Acts 7.47-50). Yet out of this institution a whole new range of thought and understanding about the presence of God among men was engendered (cf. 1 Kgs. 8.27-53), so that the importance of the temple to

post-exilic Judaism is readily intelligible. From being a questionable institution, which many must have regarded as a symbol of pagan infiltration, the Jerusalem temple became for Judaism the bastion of orthodoxy and the guardian of tradition.<sup>7</sup>

In this respect the use of such terminology as 'syncretism' and 'uniqueness' in describing religious changes needs the most careful examination. A number of scholars have pointed to the age of David and Solomon as one in which a powerful 'syncretistic' movement took place in Israel, with the adoption of a wide range of institutions, ideas and mythological traditions which subsequently played a considerable part in Israel's life.<sup>8</sup> Conversely the age of Nehemiah in the fifth century BC has been regarded as one of vigorous exclusivism and even of religious intolerance. It has been believed to mark a strong 'anti-syncretistic' tendency in Israelite-Jewish life.

There are clearly good reasons why such terminology should be used, but it remains questionable whether they do adequate justice to the complex nature of religious development. At a deeper level, which is the level to which theological investigation must probe, these developments are not altogether unrelated expressions of the same consciousness of a unique religious tradition. The great difference between the developments of the two periods lies in the markedly different political and cultural circumstances which prevailed at the different times. At the time when the Israelite empire was founded under David a whole new territory and culture had to be claimed for Yahweh. The buoyant optimism and confidence of the period reflects itself in the confident freedom in which the Yahwistic tradition felt able to mould and absorb all that it retained and re-established of the older Canaanite tradition. It was an age in which the religion and cult of Yahweh was creating its own forms and patterns, and therefore it was inevitable that these should have drawn upon the traditions and institutions which were already to hand.

When we compare this with the age of Nehemiah the historical contrast is immense. This was an age of recovery, when some return to the past and its glories was essential if Judaism was to be reborn on the ruins of the old Jewish state. The needs of religion pointed in a very different direction. To call one

'syncretism' and the other 'exclusivism' is to see only the surface of the situation. The differing circumstances of the time required that the consciousness of preserving and developing a distinctive religious tradition should manifest itself in different ways.

Nor is this simply a question of the history of particular religious rites and institutions, although it is somewhat easier to trace the way in which the development moved in regard to these. In the conception of God we find that the same complex interaction between Israel's own nascent tradition concerning Yahweh and older strata of religious worship manifests itself. The most clear-cut example of this is to be found in the way in which the identification of Yahweh with El, the high-god of Canaan, whose worship can be traced still further back into the Mesopotamian sphere, is freely accepted by the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, any attempt at identifying Yahweh with Baal appears to have encountered resistance, so much so that the final form of the Old Testament tradition openly rejects such identification. Baal becomes a name of shame and abhorrence.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that these developments have occurred has become commonplace to historians of Israel's religion, and they have been illuminated by the availability of the resources of ancient Near Eastern texts from Ras Shamra and elsewhere. What is more difficult from a theological point of view is to identify the reasons why the development took place in the way it did. The common assumptions that the sexual elements of the Baal cult are sufficient explanation of this leave too much in doubt. For one thing it is clear from certain of the Ras Shamra texts that a prominent sexual element also prevailed in connection with El, and the supposition that certain deities were uniquely 'fertility gods' is almost certainly overdrawn. The giving of life and fertility was an aspect of deity in many forms, and elements of sexual imagery and ritual are to be found in an immense area of ancient religious life as comparative studies show. Furthermore, it is seldom clear why particular aspects of deity tended to polarise around the names of particular gods. There were almost certainly features of tradition and ritual associated with El which were unacceptable to the early Israelite religion, and which had to be dropped, or more actively repressed, by

the mainstream of that religion. Even as late as rabbinic times, we find that practices of an orgiastic and sexual nature continued to survive, or re-appear, in Jewish worship at the temple itself, even though every effort was made to suppress them. The ways in which a particular religious tradition develops are many and varied, and it becomes impossible to bring them all under one or two labels, such as 'syncretistic' or 'exclusivist'. Nor can these issues be relegated to the more abstract and theoretical worlds of the study of the history of religion. They carry with them the most profound theological implications.

When we come to consider a question which must ever lie in the background of any serious study of Old Testament theology, namely, the reasons why Christianity diverged and separated from Judaism, so that it could no longer be regarded as an unorthodox Jewish 'sect' but had to be regarded as another 'religion', we are presented with issues of this kind. From a Jewish viewpoint the early Christian movement must have appeared dangerously 'syncretistic' and rash in the way in which it dealt with, and interpreted, the inherited tradition of *tôrâh*. Yet from the other side, it is equally clear that the early Christian advocates and apologists regarded Jewish developments, especially in the wake of the destruction of the temple in AD 70, as falsely 'exclusivist'. We can see that each was able to appeal to recognisable traits and characteristics of religious life which the Old Testament reveals to us. The study of the nature of religion in the Old Testament, therefore, and of the signs of continuity and discontinuity with older ancient Near Eastern religious life is itself a task of great theological consequence.

All of this points us in the direction of a fresh need to examine the nature of religious polemic in the Old Testament and for some attempt to trace the ways in which Israelite tradition itself developed and moulded theological thought. As we have already claimed, the emergence of a written canon of *tôrâh* was certainly preceded by a kind of unwritten, semi-official 'canonical tradition'. In this the various kinds of religious authority in ancient Israel all had their part to play; royal, priestly, and prophetic voices all contributed to the establishing of norms and patterns of religious life. The role of tradition, developing

ultimately into a canon of *tôrâh*, thereby becomes a subject of great consequence to an Old Testament theology.

## 2. RELIGIOUS POLEMIC IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The foundation of all religious polemic in the Old Testament is to be found in the first of the Ten Commandments: 'You shall have no other gods before me' (Exod. 20.3).

The words 'before me' (Hebrew *'al-pānāy*) could more easily be translated 'alongside me', and would appear to have had most direct relevance to a cultic situation in which it was usual for more than one god to be worshipped at a sanctuary. However, it certainly came to imply that no other god was to be worshipped in preference to Yahweh, or instead of him.<sup>11</sup> The firmness and rigidity of this tradition clearly betokens the strength that it had obtained in Israelite religion, and the deep roots that it had there. Certainly at a later stage, when monotheism had come to be fully accepted within Israel, this demand could be understood in conformity with the belief that to acknowledge any god other than Yahweh would have been to turn to a false god who had no real existence. This demand, and the prominent position which it holds in the Old Testament, must be seen as the basis of all other forms of religious polemic in the Israelite tradition and as central to the unique way in which Israel's religion developed. It asserts that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the worship of Yahweh and all other religions which involve the worship of 'other' gods. Yet decisive as this distinction becomes, the demand inherent in this commandment leaves a great deal unclear and indefinite. The more we study the tradition the more this becomes evident. For one thing it leaves undefined what exactly is meant by 'having' another god, and what degree of recognition might be accorded to such. This issue clearly became important in the political sphere where the acceptance of a treaty might well involve some limited recognition of the existence and authority of other gods. The sharp antagonism that appears in certain prophets to the making of such treaties, especially Isaiah (cf. Isa. 28.18; 30.1-5), has usually been associated with an interpretation of the commandment in this way.

The commandment also leaves open what it is precisely that constitutes the religion of Yahweh. In cases where the worship of other gods involved the recognition and use of images, it is clear that the second commandment would have precluded this. However, we find that the religion did not proceed in easily predictable ways. As we have noted earlier, the Israelite found little difficulty in identifying Yahweh with El, so that the old El-shrines where Israel's ancestors had worshipped could be freely adopted into Yahwism. In some cases there are reasons for believing that even the cult-images of the older tradition were adopted in this way, as appears to have happened at Bethel (cf. 1 Kgs. 12.28). That this came eventually to be firmly rejected reveals to us something of the way in which a growing stringency appears in the manner in which the demand was interpreted.

It is certainly in regard to the widespread use of images in religion in the ancient east that the strongest form of Old Testament religious polemic emerges. 'Idolatry' becomes the term *par excellence* by which to describe all forms of religion unacceptable to Yahweh. Eventually this came to apply to virtually every form of visual and iconographic symbolism, so that the religions of Judaism and Islam have become strongly iconoclastic as a result of it. Even where such symbolism had at one time been fully accepted within the Israelite Yahwistic tradition (cf. 2 Kgs. 18.41; cf. also 1 Kgs. 15.12-13) it came eventually to be rejected. Not only were images of gods rejected, but images of all kinds. The original cult-polemic progressed more and more into a form of theological evaluation which regarded all visual symbolism as illicit and objectionable. Such a viewpoint was capable of becoming profoundly theological when understood as based on a doctrine of the incorporeality of God, and his transcendent nature, which reflects itself in the later Jewish view that all images were gods 'made with hands' (cf. Mark 14.58; Acts 17.24). Eventually such a polemic came to be directed at the temple itself, as falling under this category of symbolism (cf. Acts 7.48). The primary reasons which have moulded the religious polemic of the Old Testament, therefore, are seldom overtly expressed, and were evidently capable of a good deal of flexibility in their interpretation.

We must also recognise the very important level of political motivation which has affected the lines of religious polemic which are to be found in the Old Testament. This comes most markedly into the forefront in regard to Assyria, where the prophet Isaiah could argue that the actions of the Assyrian king had impugned the sovereignty of Yahweh (Isa. 10.5 ff.; cf. Isa. 37.23). It is therefore possible that some of the polemic to be found in the books of 1 and 2 Kings against the 'high-places' of the land (cf. 2 Kgs. 17.9-12; 18.4; 21.3-5; 23.4-14), contained an element of hostility against forms of Assyrian practice which had become established in Judah. Certainly it is hard to avoid the conclusion that much of the sharp polemic directed against the cults of the northern kingdom, which resulted as a consequence of the division into two kingdoms, was politically motivated (so esp. 1 Kgs. 12.25-33; 2 Kgs. 23.15-20). The same would also appear partly to explain the sharpness of the polemic against idolatry in Isaiah 40-55, where the condemnation of images almost certainly refers to images of Babylonian deities (Isa. 40.18-20; 41.7; 44.9-20). Yet here we see how specifically religious, and more obviously political, reasons became intertwined, so that it is no longer possible to insist that one is uppermost. This also appears to be the case later, when we consider the sharpness of the antagonism that arose between Jews and Samaritans (cf. Eccles. 50.25-6).

Yet a third type of religious polemic in the Old Testament is firmly based on ethical convictions and the recognition that the worship of particular gods carried with it participation in immoral sexual rituals. We have already mentioned this in connection with the cult of Baal, where a strong ethical condemnation appears, as is shown by the story of the cult of Baal-Peor (Num. 25.1-13). Although sexual immorality gains the greatest notoriety in such ethical polemic against what was regarded as alien to the true Yahwistic tradition, we also find more subtle ways in which opprobrium could be heaped on what was offensive. An instructive example is to be seen in the story of the unsavoury origins of the image and cult of the Danites (Judg. 17-18). This is all the more interesting on account of the connection that this cult had with the family of Moses (Judg. 18.30). In the Old Testament the very emphatic

attention to the righteousness of Yahweh suggests a familiarity with forms of religion in which a marked indifference to moral issues could be tolerated and even encouraged. We unfortunately lack sufficient evidence to make a detailed comparison between the ethical patterns of Israelite religion and those of Canaan, but there is no serious reason to doubt the validity of the assessments that the Old Testament makes (cf. Deut. 9.4-5). It is in every way likely that many of the cults and traditions that Israel found in the land did not link the idea of God directly with moral behaviour.

It is in this area of ethical polemic that we encounter the great changes that occurred in the Israelite conception of holiness. This cultic concept was associated with various related beliefs about the 'taboo' qualities of holiness and the special dangers that attached to the 'profaneness' (Hebrew *hōl*) of those places and artefacts which belonged to other gods (cf. Isa. 52.1, 11). The special demands of warfare also came to be linked with this (cf. Josh. 7.10-21). Yet gradually all became moralised, and the reasons that were looked for in explanation of the unacceptability of what was 'profane' came to be seen as predominantly moral (cf. Mark 7.14-23). Just as *tôrâh* became a wide-ranging body of instructions and regulations dealing with religious, political and moral life, so also the polemic which was directed against other religions, and those features of these religions which were felt to threaten Yahweh, became a mixture of religious, political and moral issues. Whereas the Old Testament suggests to us a situation in which a clearly rounded datum of religious truth was given by Moses, and needed only to be preserved, we find upon historical-critical investigation, that the hammering out of this Yahwistic tradition was itself the result of a prolonged development.

When we turn to the Persian period of Israelite-Jewish religious development we encounter yet new forms of polemic and new measures to maintain the authority and strength of the old Israelite tradition. Most marked here is the growth of arguments based on the claim that alien ethnic groups had entered into Israel as a consequence of Assyrian deportations (cf. Ezra 4.2-3). Behind such assertions many scholars have seen the beginning of the Samaritan schism, since such polemic

came to play a significant part in this. Furthermore, the concern to maintain the purity and currency of Hebrew as the language of Judaism gave rise to measures designed to remove the risk that this might be abandoned (cf. Neh. 13.23-7). How far this concern was motivated by cultic interests, and how far it reveals that language had become an important badge of community identity, is now not entirely clear. In post-exilic Judaism ethnic purity became a desirable goal in itself, once the political and social instability of the Jewish community in Judah and Jerusalem came to imperil the continuity of what was felt to be essential to the Israelite-Jewish tradition.

Even more forcibly we find a polemical antagonism appearing in Judaism in Hellenistic times, once certain basic institutions of Jewish life were threatened. These were particularly those of circumcision and the purity of worship in the Jerusalem temple, as the Maccabean rising attests. By this time, however, the main lines of Jewish polemical argument had become so well established that it was sufficient to insist that these evils had befallen Jews as a result of pagan idolatry (cf. esp. Ezek. 20.8, 24, 32). In apocalyptic imagery it was possible, not only to ridicule the evils of idolatry (cf. Dan. 3.1-30), but also to argue that great supernatural powers of evil were manifesting themselves through it (cf. Dan. 11.36-9).

From a historical perspective it is not difficult to see that religious polemic plays a very powerful and positive role in establishing the identity of a particular religious tradition. Certainly this was so in Israel, where issues came clearly to the surface, and the distinctive identity of the religion manifested itself, in opposition to the religious traditions of its environment. What was 'pagan', 'profane', or 'idolatrous' came to be defined in terms of actual realities of practice and artefact which Israel encountered in its religious environment. It is impossible to suppose that the Old Testament would be what it is, or that Israel's religion would have developed in the way it did, if it had not grown up against the historical background of the ancient Near East. Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece have all left their mark upon the Old Testament and have affected in different degrees the kind of religious thought and practice which we find there. They have therefore

'influenced' this religion; but to interpret this to mean that such influence was always of one kind, or moving in the same direction, would be totally false. At times such influence was positive and at others negative, and only the most careful comparative studies can bring to light the full measure of its effect upon Israelite-Jewish thought.

### 3. AUTHORITY IN ISRAELITE RELIGION

If the different forms of religious polemic which are to be found in the Old Testament disclose to us what was felt to be opposed to the Israelite religious outlook, then its own conception of authority should enable us to see what distinctively belonged to it. That which had been 'revealed' to Israel was that which belonged uniquely to its faith, and which had to be defended. Supremely the Old Testament expresses this conception of authority through its assertions and traditions about the origins of its faith and practice. That which God had given to Moses, or even earlier to Abraham, or even earlier still to all mankind (cf. Gen. 9.1-7), was that which was authorised as valid and authoritative.

It is in this area that historical studies of Israel's religion, comparative religious studies and biblical criticism have appeared to challenge basic assertions of the Bible. Here, too, we find that the conceptions of the Old Testament canon, which represents the end product of more than a millennium of religious development and literary growth, seem to stand in tension with its own assertions about the origins of its traditions. The Pentateuch covers the 'Mosaic' period of Israel's origins, when the covenant was established and the birth of Israel as a nation affirmed. Yet, from a literary point of view, we know, as a result of historical literary criticism, that the final shape of the Pentateuch was not arrived at until the fifth, or fourth, century BC. The final form of the Prophets and Writings was reached later still. The assertions, therefore, in the Pentateuch that 'God said to Moses', or that 'God spoke (through Moses)', are evidently a shorthand way of affirming the Mosaic authority of traditions that had established themselves over a long period of time. What is more, this intervening period of growth in the

tradition is very fully reflected in the way in which the final 'authorised' form of the tradition has been preserved. For the Old Testament, therefore, the figure of Moses, and the occasion of the making of Israel's covenant with Yahweh, have become key themes, or models by which the authority of what had shown itself to belong to the Israelite religion could be asserted and maintained. We see this particularly in the way in which the great wealth of cultic legislation in the Pentateuch, which is ascribed to revelation through Moses, in reality records and reflects so much of the history of Israel's worship in the Jerusalem temple. What might, superficially, appear to be a mistaken ascription to Mosaic origin, is in fact a most important feature of the Old Testament understanding and interpretation of religious authority. That which belongs to the tradition became that which was ascribed to Moses.<sup>12</sup>

It is in consequence of this developing sense of authority that we find that the interpretation of the work of Moses has been greatly enlarged and enhanced in the course of the building up of the Old Testament literature. From initially being a historical leader of the escaping slaves of Egypt, Moses has come to be viewed as prophet, priest, and even in some measure a kingly figure. In the finished form of the Old Testament Moses is the 'founder' of the religion of Israel and the figure whose mediation was felt to be essential to provide adequate authority for what was to be believed and practised by Jews. To this extent the growth in the concept of a canon, and the building of this around the names and work of a few great individuals, was an important aspect of the development of a concept of authority in the religion of Judaism. Moses, David and Solomon become names by which a special authority was accorded to the traditions of various aspects of Jewish life and faith.

It is in this area particularly that a peculiarly complex range of historical, literary and theological issues begin to show themselves. The concept of a canon was itself not a given datum of the earliest forms of Israelite religion, but rather one which increasingly obtruded itself as the effective way in which religious authority was to be asserted. By it the various streams of tradition were united and woven together into a fixed whole. It would be quite wrong, in consequence, for us to accept the

canon uncritically as a given basis of revelation and authority which precluded our looking behind it to the circumstances and literature out of which it arose. Equally, however, it would be wrong to neglect this 'finished' form of Israelite-Jewish tradition as though it represented only an accidental deposit of tradition from a particular age. As we have already claimed, there was a nascent 'canonical tradition' long before the written form of the canon began to appear with Josiah's 'book of *tôrâh*'.

The distinctive way in which Israelite religious authority came to manifest itself in the canonical Old Testament is itself of great interest. Basically we can discern that, as in other religions, various kinds of authority were effective in ancient Israel. The role of the king is the most obvious, and we find throughout the entire monarchic period of Israelite history that the kings of Israel and Judah acted with sovereign freedom in the way in which they determined the shape of Israel's cult. From David's installation of his sons as priests (2 Sam. 8.18), to Solomon's building of the temple (1 Kgs. 6.1-38), and the innumerable ways in which each of the kings is praised or blamed for the way in which he controlled the cult (cf. 1 Kgs. 15.11-15; 22.52-3; 2 Kgs. 10.18-31; 12.4-16, etc.), we find that the king's authority in religion was recognised and accepted. Yet Josiah's acceptance and encouragement of the great reform (2 Kgs. 22.11-23.27) was both a reflection of this royal privilege and the acknowledgment of a greater authority (cf. Deut. 17.18-20). With the demise of the monarchy as an ongoing institution after 587, the acceptance of a *tôrâh* of unique authority to the religion became of the greatest importance.

As in many religions we find that the various local priestly dynasties also exercised a considerable authority in ancient Israel. The sharp contention between particular priestly groups (cf. Num. 16.1-50), and the obvious effect of the restriction of priestly service to the single sanctuary of Jerusalem (cf. Deut. 12.2-14), all reflect an awareness that priestly duties were specially authorised by God (cf. Exod. 28.1-43). Nevertheless, we find in the Old Testament that there appear always to have been certain limitations upon the degree of authority which priestly families exercised in Israel. Against the king they were powerless, even when a long tradition and popular regard gave

to them a special position (cf. 1 Kgs. 2.26-7). In the longer term we find that the emergence of a written *tôrâh*, addressed to, and interpreted by, lay persons, progressively eroded away the distinctive authority of Judah's priestly families. The many controversies which underly this are only partially known, although it eventually led to a way of Jewish life which required no priests.

It is in regard to prophecy that we find the most striking and influential development of the concept of authority in the Old Testament. The ability of the prophet to speak as the mouth-piece of God himself, and so to declare directly the divine will, was of great significance. The form of Israel's kingship (cf. 2 Sam. 7.1-17), and the building of the temple in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Sam. 7.13; 24.1ff.), were both developments in the religion which found authorisation through prophets. Even more, the role of Moses, as the unique founder of Israel's religion, could be interpreted as that of a prophet (Hos. 12.13; Deut. 18.15; cf. Num. 12.6-8). However, the whole canonical corpus of prophecy shows us further that the resurgence of Jewish life and religion after 587 was very largely guided and encouraged by the work of particular prophets.

Not least we may claim too that the special emphasis upon individual personalities, and the way in which the entire canonical tradition has been moulded around the names of a few great *epigoni*, or 'leaders', of the religion reflect the experience and unique regard for prophetic authority. This did not, of course, solve all problems, since we encounter the phenomenon of false prophecy (cf. Deut. 13.1-5; 18.20-2; Mic. 3.5-8; Jer. 6.13-15; 28.1-17), and there was evidently a need for an established tradition by which prophecy could itself be tested. Yet overall, and even exceeding that of the king (cf. 2 Sam. 12.1-15; 1 Kgs. 21.1-24), the authority of the prophet would appear to have had a profound influence upon the way in which a uniquely given 'word of God' came to be enshrined in a sacred canon of writings.

A conception of authority is undoubtedly of the essence of religion, since it affirms the particular value of traditions and practices, as well as enabling religions to meet and deal with change. The immense upheavals that took place in Israel's

history, involving the almost total collapse of its major religious and political institutions, reveal how deeply a sense of authority was embedded in the religion. It was sufficient, both in its strength and flexibility, to enable Israel to overcome these setbacks, and to create new forms sufficient to deal with them.

In a number of respects we may argue that the problems of continuity in religion and of authority are closely intertwined. They are, in their respective ways, simply the same phenomena looked at from different methodological and historical points of view. When we ask why religions survive and maintain a sense of continuity, we are looking, from a neutral historical position, at a phenomenon of social and religious life. Change is accepted and new forms and institutions welcomed, because they are regarded as necessary for a continuity with the past. Yet from the 'inner' theological perspective of the religion itself, the possibility of continuity, and the acceptability of new institutions, are decided by assumptions and beliefs about authority. That which is 'authorised' is that which is necessary for maintaining continuity. Not only do we find in the Old Testament most instructive illustrations of the way in which the role of authority in maintaining a sense of religious continuity operated in ancient Israel, but we also find in it important guidelines for recognising the connections which Jews and Christians have found between their own faith and life and that of the Old Testament. The question of the authority which the Old Testament should have within Judaism and Christianity must be considered in the light of the way in which authority itself came to be considered in the religion of ancient Israel.

#### 4. THE OLD TESTAMENT IN RELIGION

From the general perspective of world religions the legacy of the Old Testament is very distinctively marked. It has given rise to three great 'book' religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, although the connection with the latter is somewhat different from that in the other two.<sup>13</sup> The authority of the 'book', the canonical literature, has been so highly regarded that the main patterns of life and worship have been moulded around it. Most obviously has this been so in Judaism where the basic forms of

worship are built up around the sacred scriptures. So also the various features of Jewish life, and almost every aspect of conduct and custom, have required to be authorised by the book. In order for this to come about a vast literature in the Mishnah and the Talmud has become necessary, which provides an indispensable part of the interpretative approach to the contents of the Old Testament. On the one hand this has given rise to what one Jewish scholar has described as 'the burden of the Book',<sup>14</sup> yet on the other it has assisted in the maintenance of a sense of continuity with the Old Testament.

This continuity has seldom been allowed to slip into being a mere veneration for an ancient and sacred text. Rather, its ethical and theological content has been explored, considered and re-applied in an ongoing process of intellectual discussion. The many shades of Jewish life and religious opinion have all found themselves compelled to relate themselves to the preserved text of the scriptures without which Judaism would not be what it is. The nature of this Jewish appeal to, and involvement with, the Old Testament, may be looked at briefly after we have noted the main patterns of Christian concern with this literature.

It is from within the Christian tradition, as we noted in the opening chapter, that the primary search for an 'Old Testament Theology' has developed. Only on the fringes of the major Christian theological traditions has it been contended that the Old Testament should be abandoned, and even where this has occurred, there has been little consistency in the reasons advocated for doing so. We may, however, return to the point that the Old Testament does not by itself constitute the Christian canon, but has existed alongside the New Testament. It is here that we encounter the greater theological dilemma. The New Testament accepts and interprets the Old Testament by appeals and arguments which are very different in method from those of historical criticism. Simply to repeat, or to elaborate upon, the appeals of the New Testament to the Old by a system of typology has found only limited support among modern Christian scholars. Rather, it has seemed preferable to look for broader ways in which the necessity of the Old Testament to the Christian tradition has been maintained. Ideas of

'progressive revelation' and of 'preparation' have frequently been used. So, even in a modern critical theology of the Old Testament, it has appeared necessary to assert the rightness of reading the Old Testament through 'Christian' eyes: 'A theology of the Old Testament which is founded not on isolated verses, but on the Old Testament as a whole, can only be a Christology, for what was revealed under the old covenant, through a long and varied history, in events, persons and institutions, is, in Christ, gathered together and brought to perfection'.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar vein it may be claimed that the unity of the Old Testament within itself is entirely consonant with the unity of the Bible as a whole: 'Unless it is based upon the principle of the unity of the two Testaments, and *a fortiori* on the internal unity of the Old Testament itself, it is not possible to speak of a theology of the Old Testament'.<sup>16</sup>

Neither of these positions can properly be regarded as self-explanatory, nor particularly convincing without a great deal of modification. It is clearly right that a Christian should approach the Old Testament through the New, and with a clear consciousness of his commitment to Christ as the 'goal' of the Old Testament. At the same time it is also essential that this commitment should be examined critically, by tracing the ways in which the particular assertions that Jesus represents the 'fulfilment' of the Old Testament have arisen. Similarly, in regard to the unity of the Bible, it is obviously important that the Christian should be aware of other ways of tracing this than those which the New Testament alone adumbrates.<sup>17</sup> The 'unity' of the Old Testament can appear very differently when looked at through Jewish, rather than Christian, eyes. Nor should such a consciousness of the Jewish approach to the Old Testament hinder the Christian from recognising his own commitment to it. We have argued earlier that the various patterns of Christian, New Testament, interpretation of the Old, have important antecedents in the Old Testament itself and the way in which it has been put together.

However, it is most noticeable in regard to the attitude to *tôrâh* that the Christian approach to the Old Testament has differed from that of Judaism. The belief that Jesus has author-

ised a new freedom towards the *tôrâh* (cf. Matt. 5.17-48), has enabled Christians to approach the Old Testament with considerable detachment in so far as it concerns the obligation to obey each rule laid down in that literature. The principle that 'the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life' (2 Cor. 3.6) has encouraged a confidence in regarding the *tôrôth* of the Old Testament as no more than a compendious illustration of certain basic religious and ethical principles. Within the mainstream of Christian tradition these basic principles have been seen as outlined in the Decalogue (Exod. 20.2-17), but even this has been brought into briefer summary (cf. Luke 10.25-8). As a consequence of this approach to *tôrâh* no particular problem has been found in an almost total disregard by Christians of the cultic legislation of the Old Testament. This has been treated as an obsolete 'ceremonial' law, the greatest exegetical use of which has been in the number of typological applications to which it has been put (cf. Heb. 4.14; 5.10; 7.1-28, etc.).

However, alongside this relatively limited concern with the practical implications of the *tôrâh* of the Old Testament, Christian tradition has continued to find a profound theological significance in it. Its comprehensive divine demand has been felt as a necessary summons which must lead Christians to the central core of the New Testament message of salvation, with its doctrines of atonement and forgiveness.<sup>18</sup> Looked at from the viewpoint of these very rudimentary summaries, it is evident that the Christian and Jewish approaches to the Old Testament have differed very widely. Even where closely related conclusions about the nature of the divine demand in *tôrâh* have been arrived at, the exegetical routes that have been followed have differed considerably.

If we look at the role of the Old Testament in Islam we find that yet another, widely divergent, approach reveals itself. Throughout the Qur'an the assumption of a fundamental revelation to Abraham is accepted, to which the life and work of Muhammad can be related. Furthermore, the centrality of the most basic Old Testament theological demands in monotheistic doctrine and the rejection of idolatry are profoundly in evidence. So too are many of the Old Testament's central

ethical demands. It is noteworthy in connection with Muhammad's role as a prophet that this overall category for the interpretation of his life and work continues and develops one of the most prominent forms of the Old Testament's understanding of divine revelation and authority. Neither Judaism nor Christianity has developed an understanding of the prophetic office to anything like the extent that this has taken place in Islam. There are therefore grounds for recognising that, in this, Islam has preserved and made use of an aspect of the Old Testament which neither of the other two 'Abrahamic' religions has been able to do.

These outlines of the way in which the Old Testament has left a legacy in three great modern world religions are necessarily brief and elementary. Yet they are sufficient to show that the realities of this legacy are not difficult to find and to trace, and that they project an important role for the study of an Old Testament theology. That the 'message' of the Old Testament can be reduced to any simple formula, or brief outline of ideas which are to be found within its writings, is clearly a very inadequate theological approach. If theology is to serve as a handmaid of religion, then it must endeavour to trace and understand the particular way in which the Old Testament has moulded and fashioned theological thought in the modern world. No simple reductionist approach can possibly suffice, but only the most careful scrutiny of the way in which the ideas and concepts of the Old Testament have been taken up, developed and used historically. Such an approach must surely have an important part to play in establishing some bridges between the traditional lines of theological study and the more recently developed concern for an adequate historical and comparative study of religion. In a very real way the theological legacy of the Old Testament provides such a bridge which spans the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.