

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY

Any study of the subject of Old Testament theology ought to be concerned, not only with the way in which the Old Testament may, historically, be held to have given rise to theological ideas, but how the continued pursuit of such a subject may stimulate theological thought. Both on account of its own antiquity, and also as a result of the predominantly historical approach to the main subject areas concerned with the Old Testament, the discipline appears to be more a historical, than a truly theological, one. Certainly the study of the history of ancient Israel, and of the history of its religion and literature, creates an impression that the prevailing methodology is historical rather than theological. To an extent this must be inevitable within the nature of the subject matter, but it must also be questioned whether the trend in this direction has not gone too far.

Can we not now develop a more self-evidently theological approach to the study of the Old Testament which will extend its relevance beyond what is currently customary? A number of factors suggest that this can and should be done. Perhaps most of all in this regard we should note the way in which questions of methodology have come increasingly to occupy the foreground of attention in relation to Old Testament studies, so that a substantial part of any curriculum concerned with it must pay attention to this. As it is, the particular methodological problems of literary and historical criticism have tended to occupy almost the entire field of study, to the unintentional neglect of other aspects of the subject which might well have deserved more consideration.

A further factor arises at the present time which makes a re-examination of the aims and presuppositions of the study of the Old Testament within a theological curriculum particularly appropriate. Both on account of the extensive range of

possible subjects that come within the purview of theology and religious studies, and also as a consequence of changes of motivation towards such study, a far greater degree of choice has become commonplace in the make-up of any particular theological course. How a useful theological course should be planned, and what subject areas and methods it should focus most attention on, have become questions that are immensely relevant to the continuance of theology as an academic discipline. Yet it is very difficult to find more than very brief and elementary discussion of these issues in relation to what theology itself is considered to be, and what entitlement it has to be classed among the major intellectual disciplines of the modern world.

Not least it has become apparent, from a number of sides, that the whole question of what constitutes theological thought has been subjected to extensive re-examination, and that, what have in the past been accepted starting-points for theological enquiry, have in many cases been abandoned. More direct and immediate starting-points have been sought in religion itself, and in the ways in which people interpret their religious experiences, rather than in the historically given data of Bible and creeds. All of this has a prominent bearing upon the Old Testament, because it has encouraged the assumption that this literature is only peripherally related to the religious life of the modern world, and that it might more appropriately be dealt with in a department of ancient history, or of oriental studies, rather than one of theology. The consequence has been that Old Testament theology, and Old Testament studies generally, have appeared more amenable to becoming optional, rather than essential, parts of a normal theological course.

It would be inappropriate to indulge in any form of special pleading on behalf of the Old Testament, but it is at least worthwhile to consider what advantages may be thought to accrue from the theological study of it. Furthermore, it is certainly in order to examine ways in which aspects of the study of the Old Testament, other than those which currently predominate, might be explored and developed. In this way it may also be possible to single out those features of its study which have in the past been felt to contribute essentially to

theological discipline and understanding to see how they might be more adequately furthered. Certainly it would appear to be desirable that even within Old Testament studies some greater range and flexibility should be introduced so that a wider choice can be established as to which subjects and methods are to be most fully explored. At present it is inescapably clear that the major disciplines of the subject – the history of Israel and of its literature and religion – are based upon methodological assumptions which were laid down more than a century ago. While it would be rash, and certainly mistaken, to suppose that they are no longer relevant, it is also evident that their continued dominance leaves other areas and approaches neglected. No doubt it may be claimed in defence that this situation has contributed effectively in the past, but it can scarcely any longer be held to be entirely desirable in the present.

A further point may be made in respect of the study of the Old Testament as an aspect of modern theological enquiry. From within the Christian tradition the value and relevance of the Church's commitment to the Old Testament have been subjected in recent decades to more serious and searching enquiry than at almost any other time in the history of the Church since its first break with Judaism. It is not a little disconcerting to find that, when such major issues that concern the Old Testament are being raised in Christian theological debate, the main areas of the study of it do little to relate to them or to prepare for them. From within the Christian tradition it is increasingly commonplace that little use is made of the Old Testament, or that such use as is made, is based upon liturgical and aesthetic considerations which pay little attention to modern theological discussion. There is undoubtedly present a measure of divorce between what is being used liturgically and what can be defended theologically.

We can discern a need, therefore, for the Church to bring out into the open, more fully than hitherto, its own understanding of its commitment to the Old Testament and for this to be more adequately integrated into the common basis of theological study. As it is at present, it is not at all uncommon to find that a large mass of historical and literary information about the Old Testament is presented as a groundwork for a theological

understanding of it. What is to be done with this information, how it is to be used theologically, and even how it relates to the kind of use made of the Old Testament in past ages of the Christian Church are dealt with only marginally, or not at all. To look more widely than this, and to ask how the Old Testament is understood in Judaism, and how this relates to its use in Christianity, are issues that are almost entirely neglected, save in relation to specialised courses in the study of Judaism. There are clearly areas, therefore, in which a considerable range of studies concerned with the Old Testament can be integrated into modern theological thought with probable advantage to the understanding of theology as a whole. In many cases it may be considered best that these should supplement, rather than supplant, the disciplines that are at present followed. In other cases it may be felt that a wider choice may be established so that the student can decide for himself which areas are best likely to serve his own needs.

#### I. THE OLD TESTAMENT AND BIBLICAL STUDY

Since the Old-Testament is a constituent part of the Christian Bible, it may appear at first glance somewhat strange that the issue of how it should be studied as a part of this Bible should be raised separately. Yet there are several points that may be held to arise from issues dealt with in earlier chapters. The first of these concerns the predominantly 'historicist' approach to the study of the literature of the Old Testament. The major disciplines of study tend predominantly to be concerned with historical dimensions of interpretation and with the criteria and critiques of historical investigation. Since any special subject area of ancient Israelite life, be it political institutions, religious thought, or political and social history generally, are all dependent on the literary-historical criticism of the Old Testament, there is a measure of overlap. In fact, it may be argued that the 'history of Israel' as a major subject-area has obtained the widest popularity, and contributed most usefully to the understanding of the Old Testament, only when its remit has been drawn unusually widely. It is questionable, for example, whether the study of the major Old Testament prophets should

be dealt with at all in a political history of ancient Israel, and it is very clear that for some periods the gaps in knowledge are so large as to raise major problems of understanding.

Even more strikingly, it must become apparent that the very emphasis upon a discipline that is primarily a 'history', tends to elevate the question of 'historicity' in the biblical narratives to an unusually high degree. This has been doubly unfortunate in regard to the Pentateuch, for example, and particularly in respect of the patriarchal narratives. What they are as narratives, whatever terminology is chosen to describe them either as legend or saga, must be understood first, which does not necessarily mean that we must simply concern ourselves with what history lies behind them. This is not at all to suggest that the question of historicity is not important, or should not be raised, but simply to insist that it is not the only aspect of the material that matters to us from a religious and theological point of view. As it is, a negative evaluation on the question of historicity, has tended to become confused with a negative evaluation about the value of the literature.

Primarily it would appear that a major significance of the raising of questions of historicity in regard to the oldest narratives of the Old Testament is an apologetic one. Yet this must often lie at the edge of the literary and theological study of a narrative. This is clearly so in regard to the life and work of Moses, where it must be insisted that there are overwhelming arguments of a broad and general nature which point to his historical reality.<sup>1</sup> He is all but indispensable to our acceptance of the fact of Israelite religion. Yet it is also true that the tradition of his achievements has become so central a part of the Israelite heritage that it is virtually impossible now to uncover the flesh and blood personality that lies buried beneath them. Moses is lost beneath his own greatness, so that by a strange historical paradox the strength of the record that leads us to recognise his historical reality also veils him from us.

In another area, too, we must note how the very achievements of modern research make the more familiar subject-areas of the history of Israel and its religion increasingly difficult to undertake. This is through the archaeological investigation of the Holy Land and its neighbouring territories. The wealth of

relevant material that is now available, the range of sites that have been explored, and the store of information that has been accrued, make it almost impossible for the non-specialist to keep abreast of it all. Yet it is of great importance to the student of the Old Testament that he should acquire some knowledge of the techniques and limitations of archaeology so that he may gain some broad impression of where it fits in. The dangers of either exaggerating or minimising its contribution can then be avoided.

These considerations suggest that the time may well be ripe for some re-appraisal of the way in which the historical-critical approach to the literature of the Old Testament should be undertaken. The traditional disciplines are already so large as to be scarcely manageable if they are to be tackled in depth. Yet they represent only one dimension of the way in which the Old Testament as a whole can be held to contribute to the study of theology. What we have advocated in the preceding chapters has in part been directed towards widening the area of study that is associated with the Old Testament. This would suggest that some reasoned narrowing of the specifically historical aspect of its study must be accepted. If so, then it would appear practicable to combine together the particular fields of the study of the history of Israel and its literature and religion with a special emphasis upon the methodology of historical criticism generally. Clearly this would apply first to the literary criticism of the Old Testament, where questions of method require to be assessed and evaluated before we can achieve the 'results' that past generations have so easily presumed to be 'assured'. In any case, it must be insisted that there is a considerable measure of overlap between literary and historical criticism, since so much that is important within the criteria of literary criticism depends upon questions about the development of religion in ancient Israel. Similarly, it is almost impossible at times to make firm distinctions between the history of 'Israel' and of its 'religion', as the case of the prophets testifies. It may also not pass unremarked that a volume covering the history of Israel, which has become one of the most widely used of all theological textbooks in the English-speaking world, takes an extremely wide remit of its subject.<sup>2</sup> A great deal that belongs to the field of

literary criticism and the history of religion is to be found within it. There would appear to be no reason, therefore, why this process should not be more fully carried forward, and already some particularly useful and successful volumes of this kind have appeared.<sup>3</sup>

It may be suggested in the light of this that the distinctively historical-critical side of Old Testament studies could be brought into a more compact compass in order that other aspects of the subject should be given more adequate attention. Certainly in this respect it would appear to be of the greatest importance to the Christian study of the Old Testament that very full and careful attention should be devoted to the manner, method and presuppositions of the interpretation of the Old Testament in the New. From the theological point of view this is the very groundwork of the commitment of the Christian to the Old Testament. That this is so has been noted on more than one occasion in volumes on Old Testament theology, but with next to no attention being devoted to its details.

It may be felt in rejoinder to this that this particularly is the responsibility of the New Testament scholar, which is undoubtedly partially true. However, we have had occasion to point out the marked separation that has grown up between New and Old Testament approaches to such a basic subject as 'the message of prophecy'. To the average student the impression is created, with some genuine justification, that the New Testament writers simply misunderstood the Old Testament and made of it whatever they wished. The whole study of the interpretation of scripture, which begins in the Old Testament itself, is seldom pursued as a major aspect of biblical study generally.

From the very foundations, therefore, the understanding of the Christian commitment to the Old Testament is set under a peculiar cloud. It is made to appear a consequence of the ephemeral fads and fancies of the age of the New Testament, and to have little or no valid connection with what the Old Testament actually says. To some extent this situation has resulted from the complexity of the problems that are involved in studying the development of a tradition of biblical exegesis in Judaism. Yet it is also a reflection of the sharpness of the

separation that has tended to result from the division of biblical studies between the Old and New Testaments. There are obviously some areas where the separation is advantageous, but there are also some features in which it has acted as a stimulus to separation and, sometimes, divorce. By more careful defining of the problems, and by a proper degree of co-operation between specialists in the two Testaments, a more satisfactory basis of study could be built up in which the contributions from both sides could be examined. Certainly, it must be held to be mistaken to suppose that the way in which the New Testament interprets the Old is only primarily of concern to students of the former. It reflects very directly upon the latter as well, since the reasons why the Christian has, in the past, been committed to the Old Testament are first found there.

This particular issue also concerns the question of the unity of the Bible, which obviously has quite far-reaching importance for any approach to the use of the Bible in theological research at all. From a historical-critical point of view it is plainly unsatisfactory to express such a unity simply by imposing patterns of thought upon the whole.<sup>4</sup> Rather, we must examine fully and critically those key themes by which the unity is set out in the Bible itself. We have already suggested that the starting-point for doing this must lie in a study of those key concepts of 'law' and 'promise', by which such a unity has been discerned within the Old Testament.

## 2. THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY

The extent to which use has been made of the Old Testament by the great theological giants of Christendom has varied considerably, but it has seldom been entirely absent. Certainly within the Reformed tradition the impact of Luther's and Calvin's handling of the Old Testament, with their own great differences, have tended to mould the approach to the Old Testament in preaching, liturgy and hymnology for a vast number of Christians.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is unusual to find any consistent concern to study this impact as a facet of understanding the Old Testament and its theological meaning. Rather, the ten-

dency has been to consider it appropriate almost exclusively within the general area of research of the particular theologian in question. Hence Luther's use and understanding of the Old Testament has been thought to reflect upon Luther, but scarcely upon the Old Testament. This is plainly wrong, and has undoubtedly contributed to the general impression that Old Testament theology is unrelated to any other branch of theology and is free to develop its own methods and to pursue its own goals. This is not the case, and the way in which this literature has been used and interpreted by theologians must be held to provide a significant datum of what Old Testament theology is about. As it is at present, the general tendency to leave aside such questions, as outside the orbit of Old Testament studies proper, has meant that the serious academic study of this literature has become isolated from the questions of what we are to do with it once we have studied it. Certainly this must be held to have contributed to the situation in which the liturgical and theological approaches to the Old Testament have parted company.

No doubt much of the reasoning that lies behind the assumption that the study of how the major theologians of Christendom or the philosophers of Judaism have interpreted the Old Testament does not belong to the subject of Old Testament theology, arises from certain convictions about the nature of theological truth. We have endeavoured to argue in the preceding pages that summaries of the religious ideas that are to be found, either directly or indirectly, reflected in the Old Testament, should not by themselves be called a 'theology'. Some basis of 'system' or 'unity' is necessary in order to provide a context and a frame of reference by which such ideas can be brought into an inner theological harmony as an expression of truth about God and the world. This is what the theologian or philosopher does, and it is important for an understanding of the religious significance of the Old Testament that the way in which this is done should be examined critically.

There is therefore a great deal of relevance for the appreciation of the Old Testament as a collection of theological writings in a critical examination of the way in which major theologians have dealt with it. At the outset we suggested that this concern

has come increasingly to dominate the discussion about Old Testament theology. Basic questions of methodology and ordering of the material have come to provide the more essential 'theological' dimension of enquiry about the religion of the Old Testament. Since this is so, it would appear highly desirable that the way in which the Old Testament has been understood and interpreted by one or two of the greatest thinkers of Christendom should normally have a place in the study of it as a theological work. Such would not simply reflect upon the theologian himself, but upon the material he handles. For the modern Protestant, it is evident that such figures as Luther and Calvin would have to be considered as major candidates for such a task.

To some extent we must note the lack of readily accessible books dealing with Old Testament theology from this point of view, and the fact that the greatest work in this field has long since become lamentably out of date.<sup>6</sup> The temptation is all too readily at hand to deal with such a subject as a history of Old Testament interpretation. Yet this is not what is required, and simply reflects the modern temptation to see all subjects from a distinctively historicist point of view. The enormity of the task of dealing with anything like an adequate history of the interpretation of the Old Testament in Christianity, let alone noting developments in Judaism as well, rules out any fully comprehensive course of study in this area. Yet what is needed is the ability to appreciate the particular problems of the theologian, so that the singling out of one or two major figures could undoubtedly serve admirably to reveal the distinctive problems of a theological frame of reference.

It cannot then escape our notice that it was in many ways the difficulties which revealed themselves between the different approaches, with their separate assumptions, varying from one theologian to another, that prompted the search for a more adequate historical and critical examination of the theological ideas of the Bible. Does it not then appear as if the new theological enquiry about the Old Testament is simply reversing this process and choosing to ignore the results of historical criticism? The answer must certainly be in the negative, for it would be a sad failure of nerve were we to allow the achieve-

ments of two centuries of critical research to be discounted. What we have advocated is the bringing together of the results of historical criticism and theological research into a more fruitful period of cross-questioning and confrontation. All too readily the situation has come into being, as a result of the division of subject matter, in which neither historical criticism nor theological explanation have much to say to each other. Certainly this is so in respect of the Old Testament. It is not misplaced to suggest, therefore, that 'Old Testament theology' has scarcely been a branch of theology at all, but rather a subordinate area of the history of the religion of ancient Israel.

By bringing more fully into the open the way in which theologians of the past and present have viewed the Old Testament it may be hoped that a new stimulus can be given towards re-opening a dialogue that has all too often appeared to be closed. The reader will quickly recognise in this a re-opening of the debate about the role and function of biblical criticism within theological research. Perhaps more than any other single facet of modern Christian theology the fact of a critical knowledge of the make-up and origins of the Bible has forced theology to seek new directions. For this reason a new phase of interest into the aims and origins of modern biblical criticism has taken place, turning attention back from the theological aims of the nineteenth century to those of the eighteenth. Nor has Judaism escaped the effects of this enquiry so far as the Old Testament is concerned, even though it tended to maintain a greater aloofness at first to the major claims of literary and historical criticism. Consequently both Christianity and Judaism have come to see the Old Testament in a different light from that which prevailed almost unquestioned for many centuries. We now see very clearly that it is an ancient literature, which belongs to a relatively distant past, and must be understood accordingly.

It is perhaps not altogether surprising that in the first flush of excitement at this realisation there should have been an extreme tendency to regard the Old Testament as a 'primitive' literature, and even at one time to question whether writing was at all commonplace in the age of its founding heroes. This extreme misconception must now happily be abandoned.

At the same time, alongside this sense of the antiquity of the Old Testament, there has been an accompanying awareness that it is a human literature and that it has a human origin. The doctrine of divine inspiration and the belief that the Old Testament is a gift of divine revelation had both, at one time, tended to hide the fact that the Old Testament was given to the world through men. That behind the human writers we can discern the Spirit of God, and that behind their thoughts we learn the truth of God, cannot any longer lead us to suppose that the Old Testament may be treated as a collection of books that fell from heaven. The men and women of Israel who were the heroes, authors and preservers of these writings are themselves a part of this work of inspiration and revelation. In fact it is very hard to see how there can be any satisfactory belief in the inspiration of the Old Testament which is not very closely connected to the belief in the divine election of Israel. The Old Testament itself is so clearly and unmistakably a product of this belief in God's electing will.

All of these factors point us to a deeper involvement in the work of biblical criticism than simply to learn its main results and conclusions. As a substantial aspect of theological method it has a significance in its own right, which suggests that its theological implications ought to be given careful consideration. It is undoubtedly when the work of 'pre-critical' interpreters is set against the modern critical approach that very marked differences in the understanding of the Old Testament begin to emerge.

Yet it must not be supposed that this has always been exclusively to the advantage of the critical approach. All too readily this has appeared restricted and barren because it has been unable to deal adequately with some of the wider theological issues that are raised. As an example of this we may note again the questions raised by the prohibition of images in the Old Testament. The original historical reasons for making this restriction are not known to us, and are never clearly and decisively set out in the Old Testament. Nor indeed can we obtain more than a partial view of the way in which it was interpreted in relation to different kinds of ancient religious iconography and visual symbolism. Nevertheless, from a theo-

logical point of view, it has had a very lasting effect upon the understanding of God in the religions deriving from the Old Testament. It has been especially linked with a doctrine of divine incorporeality, and with ideas of God's uncreated and transcendent nature. There would, therefore, appear to be more to be said about it from a theological, than from a more narrowly historical, point of view. In any case, it is the theological ideas that have been related to it that have made it so profoundly important in religion, rather than the original motivating reason which had long since been forgotten even within the period of the Old Testament's growth. This would firmly point us in the direction of accepting that the bringing together of historical and theological questions about such basic issues can only be of benefit to Old Testament studies.

What we are advocating through the comments made above, and more broadly in the argument that the time has come for a fresh approach to the study of Old Testament theology, is that a different and much wider starting-point for this subject must be accepted. Instead of treating it as a subordinate branch of the historical criticism of the Old Testament, it should be regarded properly as a branch of theology. Without the contribution that the theologian can provide in bringing system, structure and some evaluation of priorities into the organisation of the material, the task of writing an Old Testament theology would appear to be an impossible one. It would simply record a phenomenology of the religious ideas of ancient Israel.

### 3. THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

We have already had more than one occasion to point out in the preceding pages the value of the Old Testament for the study of religion. This arises first and foremost as a result of the fact that it forms a major part of the Christian Bible, and the whole of the Bible of Judaism. It has also greatly influenced Islam. In a remarkable way, therefore, it establishes a bridge across three religions, which challenges the common assumption that they can each be treated and understood quite independently of each other. Yet, having made this claim, it

must also be fully admitted that the distinctive way in which the Old Testament has usually been studied has meant that this ambivalence in its religious significance has seldom been explored.

At times it has not been uncommon for Christian teaching concerning the Old Testament to remain totally indifferent to the aims and assumptions of Jewish interpreters of this literature. Jewish-Christian dialogue has been regarded as a specialised field in its own right which is scarcely felt to be part of the province of Old Testament study. However, as soon as any serious attempt to put together an Old Testament theology is made, it raises questions which inevitably impinge upon the way in which Jewish interpreters of the Old Testament have gone about their task. This becomes especially noticeable once any concern is expressed for the unity of the Bible as a whole from the Christian point of view.

At a somewhat conflicting opposite extreme, the advocates of a radical discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New have held that it is the negative aspects of the former which have survived in Judaism. It is presented as a religion of 'Law' in contrast with the Christian religion of 'Grace'.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, therefore, a rather ambiguous attitude towards the Old Testament has emerged in modern Christianity which has tended to read the Old Testament through the eyes of St Paul. On the one hand it has been accepted as an inherited and necessary part of the Christian Bible, and on the other its very 'Jewishness' has frequently been looked upon as a part of its imperfection. Undoubtedly one major step which, it may be hoped, could lead to some crossing over of these traditional boundaries of attitude would be for a more adequate understanding from a Christian perspective of the way in which Judaism has understood and used the Old Testament.

Since the scale of such a task, and the complexities of historical and linguistic expertise which it requires, cannot be said to be less than those that are necessary for a history of the Christian interpretation of the Bible, it is clearly impossible for any overall comprehensive coverage to be attempted. Yet once again, we must not allow the impossibility of achieving an extensive coverage to discourage us from exploring some basic

resources. What is important from the point of view of Christian theology, as well as from that of the history of religion, is the realisation that a major realm of cultural and academic achievement lies to be discovered in the way in which Jews have interpreted their sacred scriptures. It must surely be of greater value to the average theological student to obtain some elementary knowledge of the great Jewish interpreters of the Old Testament, and of the way in which they have carried through their task, than to extend into greater detail the amassed results of historical criticism. From the point of view of orientation and general perspective it may be held that this basic knowledge would in itself contribute significantly to the general awareness of the value of the Old Testament for the history of religion. Once again this is not to advocate the ignoring of the historical-critical approach, but rather to attempt to set it in a better perspective. By allowing it to be set against the conclusions of the older philosophers and commentators of Judaism, as well as of Christianity, its own special use and contribution can the more clearly be seen.

It must certainly also be claimed that the attempt to look at the Old Testament from within a Jewish, as well as a Christian, standpoint, brings to the forefront some of the most valuable discoveries from the side of religious understanding. Constantly we are made to recognise that the hearing of the word of God in the Old Testament, which must be an essential part of the task of finding within it a theology, is a task which implies a context and a tradition of understanding. We cannot read this literature in a vacuum, but only within the assumptions and preconceptions that are provided for us by the homiletical and theological traditions of Judaism and Christianity in which we stand. It must be held to be one of the major aims of a genuinely historical-critical approach that it can begin to discover what these assumptions and preconceptions are, and to learn how they have arisen. In this it is primarily the discovery of finding that they are challenged, and sometimes, rejected, by a different tradition that establishes the starting-point for a truly theological self-criticism.

It is very important, therefore, for the study of the New Testament, and of the history of Christian theology more

generally, to examine what constitutes the 'Jewishness' of the Old Testament and how this relates to the origin and development of Jewish faith. Clearly, one aim of such an elementary introduction to Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament would be to provide a more informed basis for dialogue between these two sister religions. Yet the assumption that this is the sole aim of such a study must be rejected. It matters as much to an understanding of the nature of religion itself.

From a social and intellectual perspective it may be argued that the role of the sacred text in the great 'book' religions of the world is itself a subject of considerable interest and value. Basic problems of textual transmission, semantic development and history, and of the whole culture-relatedness of ancient texts and ideas begin to reveal themselves. Few exercises are more salutary in examining apparently clear and unambiguous ancient writings than to discover the extraordinary variety of ways in which they have been understood. How these changes of understanding occur, and the intellectual, social and cultural pressures that give rise to them, are an essential part of the study of the remarkable phenomenon of religion itself. In the modern world, in which sensitivity to features of historical change and the common acceptance of beliefs in progress and development are present almost universally, the role of the sacred text in religion needs fuller appreciation and examination than ever before.

Undoubtedly, one eminently useful and conveniently accessible introduction to these theological problems is provided by the study of the very different paths which Christian and Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament have followed. At times they have proceeded independently, and at other times they have exercised a powerful mutual interaction upon each other. If the Reformation of Christianity in the sixteenth century can be seen to owe much to the stimulus of the new Jewish and Hebrew learning about the Old Testament, so in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can Judaism be seen to have been greatly affected by the historical-critical approach to the Old Testament, the main aims and methods of which were fashioned in Christianity. Perhaps also it is not altogether out of place to suggest that the very difficulty, and perhaps near impossibility,

of understanding fully a sacred text such as the Old Testament from within another religious tradition, is reason enough why it should be attempted.

If there are evident advantages for the Christian in obtaining some elementary knowledge of the way in which Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament has proceeded, so also must there be some gain in recognising the legacy of the Old Testament in Islam. The difficulties here are immense, and the available literature lamentably small for the Christian to use. However, the discovery that the subject exists and is capable of useful exploration is itself a further pointer to the way in which the Old Testament can contribute to the study of religion.

We may also note another feature of the study of religion to which the Old Testament may be regarded as a very convenient introduction. Since the eighteenth century an increasing interest has been drawn to 'the natural history' of religion, with its particular concern with the forms of growth evident within it. Out of it there have grown up the important branches of study dealing with the sociological and anthropological aspects of religion, as well as attempts to trace patterns of evolution in religious ideology. There now exists, through the past century of discovery about the ancient Near East, a vast wealth of comparative literature to the Bible from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. The various forms of religion, with its mythological texts, its sacred rites, and its vast temples and images, which these discoveries have brought to light form an indispensable background to the Old Testament. The resources now exist, therefore, for a critical and balanced appreciation of the history of religion in the ancient East, which are closely related to the Old Testament. It would in no way be a reflection on the distinctive genius and achievements of ancient Israel, to argue that through this literature an even larger legacy than that contributed by Moses has been bequeathed to the modern world.

It is not at all uncommon to find even today that the sheer antiquity of the Old Testament, and the remarkably fresh world that it uncovers for us, which is so unlike our own, are barely noted by many who read it. Yet this dimension also is one which can be obtained by the study of the Old Testament as a branch of modern theological discipline. It can serve to

challenge the prevalent myth of modernity, and the falseness of many assumptions about what is 'relevant' in religion, by forcing us to think afresh about such claims. Its very ability to reveal to us the practice of religion in a culture different from our own, may be held to be among one of the great assets of the study of the Old Testament.

#### 4. THE OLD TESTAMENT AND MANKIND

Different periods of human history have been felt by philosophers and educationists to have their own worth as expressive of certain fundamental human values. Most of all in this regard we are familiar with the importance that has been attached to the great ages of classical Greece and Rome. It is interesting to find that attempts have been made in recent years to suggest that ancient Israel belongs along with the study of these great ancient civilisations. Perhaps this is so, but it would be hard to defend the inclusion of this extra candidate without considering the claims of others too, especially ancient Babylonia and Egypt. There are no criteria to which all would agree which can be employed in such a competition.

We may none the less seek to note some of the important features which have been discerned within the Old Testament, and which may be held to have a special value for mankind as a whole. Several years ago it was suggested that a distinctive feature of Israel's faith was that it attained a great vision of humanity as a reality in and for itself.<sup>8</sup> Probably the perspective here was more than a little overdrawn, with a measure of undervaluing of the more uniquely 'Israelite' characteristics of the Old Testament. Nevertheless there is a vision of this kind, and the immense potency of the image of the pilgrimage of the nations to Mount Zion (Isa. 2.2-4 = Mic. 4.1-5) and of a great kingdom of peace with its centre at Jerusalem (Pss. 46, 48, 76) undoubtedly point us in this direction. The emphasis upon the special role of Israel's election, and of the inclusion of nationalistic sentiments in the Old Testament, ought not to be allowed to obscure this wider humanitarian vision. However imperfectly it was grasped at various periods in Israelite-Jewish history, there is present in the Old Testament a vision of all

mankind attaining the peace and prosperity that the 'goodness' of creation foreshadows (cf. Isa. 11.1-9).

Along with this we must certainly also place a marked sensitivity in its pages to the plight of all who are oppressed or disadvantaged in one way or another. The cry of the prophets for righteousness, and their merciless exposure of injustice, corruption and the abuse of power and wealth, reveal a universal dimension of human social existence. The insistence that there can be no true religion and no knowledge of God without righteousness, has given to the legacy of the Old Testament a measure of perennial vitality and relevance. So, too, the belief in a God who brought his followers 'out of the house of bondage' has given to the conception of divine providence and care a more than 'nationalistic' dimension. He has come to be seen directly as the God of all who are oppressed, so that the cry of all who are suffering as the result of injustice and violence is interpreted as a prayer to him. Because morality itself knows no national boundaries so inevitably such a conception of God has broadened out into an awareness of his concern for all humanity.

This has also led to a particular attractiveness of the presentation of religion and its duties in the Old Testament. This is concerned with its world-affirming nature, and what has, for want of a more adequate term, been called its 'worldliness'.<sup>9</sup> The concerns of God are the concerns of man in his real world, so that 'sin' is not another realm of behaviour which relates to a separate area of cultic activity. Rather, it belongs to daily life itself and to the obligations which man encounters in his family, social and political existence. In this regard one of the most striking and memorable facets of the Old Testament lies in its portrayal of righteousness as a claim that is laid upon all, and which none can manipulate to their own advantage, or escape from. The narratives of the prophetic exposure of David's sin against Uriah and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12.1-23) and of Elijah's condemnation of Ahab for his abuse of the law (1 Kgs. 21.1-24) stand as classic expressions of the belief that 'right' stands above every human institution, even that of the monarchy. The former narrative is particularly instructive on account of its great antiquity, combined with its exposure of 'murderous intention' as the basis of a royal crime.

As early Jewish interpreters like Philo, or the Christian Tertullian, saw clearly, the Ten Commandments have a significance and importance which stretches far across the frontiers of those who can trace their descent to Moses and those who came with him out of Egypt. With very little adaptation they become a brilliant summary of fundamental moral demand. Questions of the date of origin of the Decalogue become of relatively minor significance when compared to the extraordinary comprehensiveness of its moral awareness. It has given to religion itself a foundation of morality, which has enabled those religions which derive from the Old Testament to find in it a continued challenge and standard by which to test their own, more complex teachings.

We ought not to omit in regard to the Old Testament a brief comment upon its value as literature. The artistry of story-telling, the skill of coining witty and clever sayings, the freshness of poetic image and metaphor, all combine to make the Old Testament an especially rich literature.<sup>10</sup> It is unfortunate to find that the search for accuracy and precision of translation has, in recent years, tended to forgo the attempt to capture the special nuances of style and poetic imagination which grace so much of the Old Testament. Few tales have been recounted with more feeling and pathos than the story of David's receipt of the news of Absalom's death (2 Sam. 18.31-3), and yet this is accomplished with an incredible economy of words, and with no employment at all of any distinctively 'psychological' vocabulary. If the Israelite iconoclastic rejection of images, and so much that belongs to the visual and plastic arts as a sphere of religious aspiration, has led at times to a devaluing of many aspects of visual beauty as an approach to the divine, yet it is at least partly compensated for by the wealth of literary artistry that the Old Testament contains. Seldom has writing of great theological worth been expressed more beautifully than in its pages. The study of it, therefore, cannot be thought to slump into a dull and barren experience.

It may also be worthy of comment that the Old Testament, precisely because of the rich variety of its literary forms of expression, has frequently been abused by an irrational fringe of misinterpretation. Failure to appreciate the complexity that

belongs to the proper understanding of an ancient text with an inability to appreciate its different stylistic and formal characteristics have given rise to a curious 'underground' of biblical misappropriation. Instead of poetry, metaphor, and a very complex tradition of symbolic imagery and expression, a continued stream of misapplication has survived. Nor has this remained outside the mainstreams of Jewish and Christian life. The oddities of Kabbala, the absurd assumptions of astrology, the political eccentricities of pseudo-interpreters of apocalyptic, and the high-handed claims of those who would find in the Old Testament evidence of the visits of ancient space-men, have all contributed to a bizarre underworld of biblical 'follies'. All of them are, in their separate ways, the result of a curious combination of literary insensitivity and religious, or pseudo-scientific, imagination. Their existence is more prevalent than the claims for the rational and scientific nature of our age would lead us to expect. They are also witnesses to the dangers of neglect, so that their very vitality in our times is a testimony to the ignorance of the basic realities of the Bible among a people who have not forgotten the centuries of Jewish and Christian insistence upon its authority and unique character. The average minister is far more likely to find himself faced with questions which arise from these popular misconceptions than he is from enquirers who have been perplexed by the writings of a serious Old Testament theologian. In their own strange way they characterise the curious puzzles and uncertainties that beset an age in which religious education has moved further and further away from a serious reading and exposition of the Old Testament.

We may, in closing, note again the very important values and perspectives which may be held to derive from a continued concern by modern man with his own more distant past. The Old Testament remains an ancient literature, even though it has now been antedated considerably by the recovery of so many writings from Sumeria and ancient Egypt. Nevertheless, it is not a collection that has been recently recovered by the skill of archaeologists, but one that has been preserved, and in this way, willed to survive. The reason for this clearly lies in the belief held by so many in its divine origin and inspiration. It has thereby maintained for many a constant sense of continuity

with their own past. It has, in fact, become a bridge between the past and the present. In it men have expected to find something more than a history, valuable as this in itself is, and to see lasting and unique expressions of truth. Such a truth has not simply been about the past, or about the conditions and achievements of human existence in the past. Rather, such truth has been about man himself, and his eternal and inescapable confrontation with God. Its very humanity has mirrored more than human values, and affirmed a belief that wherever he goes man is faced with decisions about himself and his world which lead him to recognise the presence of the Spirit of God:

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?

Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!

If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!

If I take the wings of the morning

and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

even there thy hand shall lead me,

and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, 'Let only darkness cover me,

and the light about me be night,'

even the darkness is not dark to thee,

the night is bright as the day;

for darkness is as light with thee. (Ps. 139.7-12)