

CHAPTER A

METHODOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

I. THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF A THEOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

THIS belief in Jahweh, whose vitality we have described in brief outline, had very many ways of speaking about him. It never ceased speaking of his relationship to Israel, to the world, and to the nations, sometimes through the impersonal media of the great institutions (cult, law, court, etc.), sometimes however through the mouths of priests, prophets, kings, writers of narratives, historians, wise men, and Temple singers. Now, from this extremely abundant witness to Jahweh it would be perfectly possible, as has already been said, to draw a tolerably complete and, as far as comparative religion goes, a tolerably objective picture of the religion of the people of Israel, that is, of the special features in her conception of God, of the way in which Israel thought of God's relationship to the world, to the other nations and, not least, to herself; of the distinctiveness of what she said about sin and had to say about atonement and the salvation which comes from God. This has often been attempted, and needs no doubt to be attempted repeatedly. While Christian theologians may have played a decisive role in fostering this enterprise, the task in itself, however, falls within the province of the general study of religion; and it is therefore fitting that in recent times Orientalists, sociologists, ethnologists, ethnopsychologists, investigators of mythology, and others too have to a considerable extent co-operated in its accomplishment. The theological task proper to the Old Testament is not simply identical with this general religious one, and it is also much more restricted. The subject-matter which concerns the theologian is, of course, not the spiritual and religious world of Israel and the conditions of her soul in general, nor is it her world of faith, all of which can only be reconstructed by means of conclusions drawn from the documents: instead, it is simply Israel's own explicit assertions about Jahweh. The theologian must above all deal directly with the evidence, that is, with what Israel herself testified concerning Jahweh, and there is no doubt that in many cases he must go back to school again and learn to interrogate each

document, much more closely than has been done hitherto, as to its specific kerygmatic intention.¹ The tremendous differences evinced in the specific literary units will be dealt with later on in this volume. None the less we must anticipate, and mention briefly, what unites them all. They are far from comprehending equally all the wide range of statements about God, man, and the world which are conceivable and possible in the religious sphere. In this respect the theological radius of what Israel said about God is conspicuously restricted compared with the theologies of other nations—instead, the Old Testament writings confine themselves to representing Jahweh's relationship to Israel and the world in one aspect only, namely as a continuing divine activity in history. This implies that in principle Israel's faith is grounded in a theology of history. It regards itself as based upon historical acts, and as shaped and re-shaped by factors in which it saw the hand of Jahweh at work. The oracles of the prophets also speak of events, though there is the definite difference, that in general they stand in point of time not after, but prior to, the events to which they bear witness. Even where this reference to divine facts in history is not immediately apparent, as for example in some of the Psalms, it is, however, present by implication: and where it is actually absent, as for example in the Book of Job and Ecclesiastes, this very lack is closely connected with the grave affliction which is the theme of both these works.

Both at this point and in the sequel, we are of course thinking, when we speak of divine acts in history, of those which the faith of Israel regarded as such—that is, the call of the forefathers, the deliverance from Egypt, the bestowal of the land of Canaan, etc.—and not of the results of modern critical historical scholarship, to which Israel's faith was unrelated. This raises a difficult historical problem. In the last 150 years critical historical scholarship has constructed an impressively complete picture of the history of the people of Israel. As this process took shape, the old picture of Israel's history which the Church had derived and accepted from the Old Testament was bit by bit destroyed. Upon this process there is no going back, nor has it yet indeed come to an end. Critical historical scholarship regards it as impossible that the whole of Israel was present at Sinai, or that Israel crossed the Red Sea and achieved the Conquest *en bloc*—it holds the picture of Moses and his

¹ It would be well to scrutinise from this point of view the chapter-headings in our translations or interpretations of the Bible, which often completely miss the intention that the specific narrators had in mind.

leadership drawn in the traditions of the Book of Exodus to be as un-historical as the function which the Deuteronomistic book of Judges ascribes to the "judges." On the other hand, it is just the most recent research into the Hexateuch that has proceeded to deal with the extremely complicated origin of the Old Testament's picture of Jahweh's saving history with Israel. Scholars are even beginning to allow a scientific standing of its own to the picture of her history which Israel herself drew, and to take it as something existing *per se* which, in the way it has been sketched, has to be taken into account as a central subject in our theological evaluation. Research into the Hexateuch has established that this picture is based upon a few very old *motifs* around which subsequently have clustered in organic growth the immense number of freely circulating separate traditions.² The basic *motifs* were already pronouncedly confessional in character, and so were the separate traditions, in part very old, which made the canvas so very large. Thus the Hexateuch shows us a picture of the saving history that is drawn up by faith, and is accordingly confessional in character. The same holds true for the Deuteronomistic history's picture of the later history of Israel down to the exile. These two pictures of Israel's history lie before us—that of modern critical scholarship and that which the faith of Israel constructed—and for the present, we must reconcile ourselves to both of them. It would be stupid to dispute the right of the one or the other to exist. It would be superfluous to emphasise that each is the product of very different intellectual activities. The one is rational and "objective"; that is, with the aid of historical method and presupposing the similarity of all historical occurrence, it constructs a critical picture of the history as it really was in Israel.³ It is clear that in the process this picture could not be restricted to a critical analysis of the external historical events: it was bound to proceed to a critical investigation of the picture of Israel's spiritual world, her religion, as well.

The other activity is confessional and personally involved in the events to the point of fervour. Did Israel ever speak of her history

² M. Noth, *Pentateuch*.

³ "The historical method, once it is applied to biblical science . . . is a leaven which transforms everything and finally explodes the whole form of theological methods." "The means by which criticism is at all possible is the application of analogy. . . . But the omniscience of analogy implies that all historical events are identical in principle." E. Trötschel, *Über historische und dogmatische Methode*, Tübingen 1889 (*Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II, pp. 729ff.).

other than with the emotion of glorification or regret? Historical investigation searches for a critically assured minimum—the kerygmatic picture tends towards a theological maximum.⁴ The fact that these two views of Israel's history are so divergent is one of the most serious burdens imposed today upon Biblical scholarship. No doubt historical investigation has a great deal that is true to say about the growth of this picture of the history which the faith of Israel painted: but the phenomenon of the faith itself, which speaks now of salvation, now of judgment, is beyond its power to explain.

It would not do, however, simply to explain the one picture as historical and the other as unhistorical. The kerygmatic picture too (and this even at the points where it diverges so widely from our historical picture) is founded in the actual history and has not been invented. The means by which this historical experience is made relevant for the time, the way in which it is mirrored forth in a variety of pictures, and in sagas in type form, are those adapted to the possibilities of expression of an ancient people. But it would be a very hasty conclusion if critical historical scholarship were minded to be itself taken as the only way into the history of Israel, and if it denied to what Israel reports in, say, her sagas a foundation in the "real" history. In some respects, this foundation is an even deeper one. Only, in these traditional materials the historic and factual can no longer be detached from the spiritualising interpretation which pervades them all.

We are not here concerned with the philosophical presuppositions of objective, rational, and critical scholarship, or the methods with which it works. On the other hand, the particular way in which Israel's faith presented history is still far from being adequately elucidated. Admittedly, we are acquainted with the various basic historical and theological ideas of the Jahwist, or of the Deuteronomist's history, or the Chronicler's. But we are much less clear about the mode of presentation of the smaller narrative units, although it is in fact the mass of these which now gives characteristic stamp to those great compilations. The way in which faith perceives things has its own peculiarities, and it is perhaps therefore possible to point to some constantly recurring features, certain "patterns," which are characteristic of a confessional presentation, particularly of early historical experiences. In this connexion a very common datum would have to

⁴ N. A. Dahl, *Der historische Jesus als geschichtswissenschaftliches und theologisches Problem, Kerygma und Dogma*, Göttingen 1955, p. 119.

be taken into consideration by the theologian as well as by others—the fact that a great part of even the historical traditions of Israel has to be regarded as poetry, that is, as the product of explicit artistic intentions. But poetry—especially with peoples of antiquity—is much more than an aesthetic pastime: rather is there in it a penetrating desire for knowledge directed towards the data presented by the historical and natural environment.⁵ Historical poetry was the form in which Israel, like other peoples, made sure of historical facts, that is, of their location and their significance. In those times poetry was, as a rule, the one possible form for expressing special basic insights. It was not just there along with prose as something one might elect to use—a more elevated form of discourse as it were then—but poetry alone enabled a people to express experiences met with in the course of their history in such a way as to make the past become absolutely present. In the case of legend, we now know that we must reckon with this coefficient of interpretation. But in thinking of the literary stories, which extend from the Hexateuch to II Kings, and which we must also regard to begin with as poetry, we have to learn to grasp this coefficient more clearly in its special features in any given story.⁶ As far as I can see, Israel only finally went over to the prosaic and scientific presentation of her history with the Deuteronomistic history. Thus, right down to the sixth century, she was unable to dispense with poetry in drafting history, for the Succession Document or the history of Jehu's revolution are poetic presentations, and are indeed the acme of poetic perfection. No wonder that in Israel, and in her alone, these historical narratives could develop so profusely and in such perfection—the faith needed them. On the other hand, there is no mistaking that the effort to interpret historical events in this poetic-theological guise imposes a limit upon the possibilities of our understanding such narratives. The understanding of lists and annals is independent of the presuppositions of faith. But these poetic stories appeal for assent; they address those who are prepared to ask questions and receive answers along like lines, that is, those who credit Jahweh with great acts in history.

If some stories, chiefly older ones bordering upon legend, represent

⁵ The idea of poetry as an "organ for the understanding of life" goes back to Dilthey. Cf. P. Böckmann, *Formgeschichte der deutschen Dichtung*, Hamburg 1949, pp. 17ff.

⁶ A few more specific references are to be found in G. von Rad, *Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel*, pp. 43ff.

events which happened to a group as connected with an individual, this is doubtless mainly a poetic proceeding. They are removed from the realm of political history and projected into the wholly personal world of an individual. This usage which personalises and at the same time symbolises can be plainly seen in the stories about Ham and Canaan (Gen. ix. 25), and in those about Ishmael or Judah (Gen. xvi. 12, xxxviii. 1). But exegesis probably must take still greater account of it in the patriarchal stories dealing with Abraham and Jacob. To symbolise things in a single person in this way is in itself not at all peculiar to Israel. But since it also crops up in stories which are markedly minted by faith, we must make ourselves familiar with it. In every case, through this transference into a personal picture these stories have been given an enormous degree of intensity, for events or experiences of very different times have been pulled together as a single episode in an individual's life. Thus, for our historical and critical understanding, stories such as these have from the very start only an indirect relationship with historical reality, while their relation to what was believed by Israel is much more direct. We have further to consider that in their presentation of religious material the peoples of antiquity were not aware of the law of historical exclusiveness, according to which a certain event or a certain experience can be attached only to a single definite point in history. In particular, events bearing a saving character retained for all posterity, and in that posterity's eyes, a contemporaneity which it is hard for us to appreciate.⁷ The upshot is that, in what they present, the later story-tellers blatantly make capital of experiences which, although they are invariably brought in on the basis of the ancient event in question, still reach forward into the story-teller's own day. It is only from this standpoint that the story of Jacob's struggle (Gen. xxxii. 22f.), or the story of Balaam (Num. xxii-xxiv), or the thrice-repeated story of the endangering of the ancestress of the race (Gen. xii. 10ff., xx. 1ff., xxvi. 5ff.) can be interpreted as they should. What is historical here? Certainly some definite but very elusive particular event which stands at the primal obscure origin of the tradition in question—but what is also historical is the

⁷ L. Köhler, *Hebrew Man*, trans. P. R. Ackroyd, London 1956, p. 39. This cannot of course be taken as meaning that "the conception of history itself hardly plays any noticeable part" for Israel. These words are incomprehensible in face of the fact that Israel's faith gave itself sanction in a series of ever vaster theological sketches of her history.

experience that Jahweh turns the enemy's curse into blessing, and that he safeguards the promise in spite of all failure on the part of its recipient, etc. Israel did not dream up this confidence, but came to it on the basis of rich and wide experience, of her history in fact; and, symbolising it in a person, she illustrated it in a story. This of course occasions another and rather severe clash with our critical way of thinking about history. Did the historical Balaam actually curse, or did his mouth really utter blessings? We may assume that it was only in the story that that which was given to Israel's faith became presented as a visible miracle. This process of glorification is quite clear in many of the stories about the Conquest—the events are depicted with a splendour and a strong element of the miraculous which are impossible to square with older strands in the report.⁸ The later story-tellers are so zealous for Jahweh and his saving work that they overstep the limits of exact historiography and depict the event in a magnificence far transcending what it was in reality.⁹ These are texts which contain an implicit eschatological element, since they anticipate a *Gloria* of God's saving action not yet granted to men.

In the Old Testament it is thus this world made up of testimonies that is above all the subject of a theology of the Old Testament. The subject cannot be a systematically ordered "world of the faith" of Israel or of the really overwhelming vitality and creative productivity of Jahwism, for the world of faith is not the subject of these testimonies which Israel raised to Jahweh's action in history. Never, in these testimonies about history, did Israel point to her own faith, but to Jahweh. Faith undoubtedly finds very clear expression in them; but as a subject it lies concealed, and can often only be grasped by means of a variety of inferences which are often psychological and on that account problematical. In a word, the faith is not the subject of Israel's confessional utterances, but only its vehicle, its mouthpiece. And even less can the "history" of this world of faith be the subject of the theology of the Old Testament. Admittedly, the presentation

⁸ It is well known that an older and less miraculous picture of the events is given in Jg. i. 1ff. than in the larger complex in Josh. 1-11.

⁹ "Poetry is not the imitation of a reality which already exists in the same quality prior to it . . . ; the aesthetic faculty is a creative power for the production of a concept which transcends reality and is not present in any abstract thinking, or indeed in any way of contemplating the world." W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Leipzig 1914-18, vol. vi, p. 116. In this "production," the chief force in Israel in forming tradition was Jahwism.

of the "ideas, thought, and concepts of the Old Testament which are important for theology" will always form part of the task of Old Testament theology.¹⁰ But is this all that there is to it? Would a history confined to this leave room for discussion for example of the saving acts of grace, on which the faith of Israel regarded itself as based, and with reference to which it lived its life? A world of religious concepts later systematically arranged is of course an abstraction, for such a thing never existed in Israel in so complete and universal a way. So too the idea of a "religion of Israel," that is, the idea of the faith as an entity, appears more problematical still as a result of the investigation of the history of tradition in our own time. There were up and down the land many traditions which little by little combined into ever larger complexes of tradition. Theologically, these accumulations were in a state of constant flux. Religious thought cannot be separated out from these traditions and represented thus in abstract. If we divorced Israel's confessional utterances from the divine acts in history which they so passionately embrace, what a bloodless ghost we would be left with! If, however, we put Israel's picture of her history in the forefront of our theological consideration, we encounter what appropriately is the most essential subject of a theology of the Old Testament, the living word of Jahweh coming on and on to Israel for ever, and this in the message uttered by his mighty acts. It was a message so living and actual for each moment that it accompanied her on her journey through time, interpreting itself afresh to every generation, and informing every generation what it had to do.

We cannot here give a critical review of the course followed by the discipline of Old Testament theology since Gabler's classic work which outlined a programme for it.¹¹ Certainly, it was entirely necessary to free this discipline from dogmatics. On the other hand, this meant a great impoverishment, and seriously handicapped it on its course. In spite of all dogmatic prejudices, how rich and varied nevertheless were the relationships of the theology of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the Old Testament! At that time theology still had a vital interest in the details of the Mosaic cult, in the anthro-

¹⁰ Köhler, *Theology*, p. 1.

¹¹ J. Ph. Gabler, *De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus*, Altorfii 1787. Cf. for the history of Old Testament theology H. J. Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments*, Neukirchen 1956.

pology of the Old Testament, and in the elucidation of intricate questions of archaeology. With the rise of rationalism and the assertion of the autonomy of Biblical theology, the properly theological connexions with the Old Testament all at once became much more unilinear and abstract—in a word, poorer. Theological interest is now directed to the "religious ideas" of the Old Testament and their bearing upon the "truths of Christianity"—not that the change brought research into the historical world of Israel to a standstill: as is well known, this flourished in the nineteenth century as never before. But this study of the Old Testament disengaged itself more and more from theology. As far as her historical experience went, Israel appeared to be a nation like the rest of the nations of the ancient Near East, and one can well understand that the picture which historical scholarship outlined could have no particular relevance for theology. The result was that theology broke away more and more from the history of Israel and left that to the historians. However, this parting of the ways was quite amicable, for theology believed that she was retaining within her own competence the subject that was her real concern, namely, the spiritual world of the religious truths of Israel. But what is left for theologians if it were to be discovered that Israel's spiritual world too had a thousand threads tying it closely to the world of the ancient Near East and the factors that determined it historically, and if in consequence it became clear that it could be just as well, or perhaps even better, analysed by the Orientalist? But in the second half of the nineteenth century such results lay far beyond the horizon.

Thanks to Wellhausen and his disciples, Old Testament theologians became still more assured that this was their presumed proper subject-matter. Wellhausen was in the last analysis strongly influenced by Hegel: he looked on Israel's history as a history of ideas, and presented it above all from the standpoint of a spiritual evolution. A number of theologies of the Old Testament were written following Wellhausen; but their theme was very uniform—the emancipation of the spirit of Israel from the bonds of the natural and the corporate, and the increasing moralisation of Jahwism. Then, on this philosophical and theological basis, B. Duhm depicted the prophets as people so spiritual, so personal, so ethical, and so creative that this conception of Israel's religion reached a *ne plus ultra*. Meanwhile, however, a more recent phase in the science of religion had shown that there was no such thing as a spiritual religion of Israel, and that this conception of it was in fact

rather a reflexion of the religion of modern Protestant Europe.¹² And so the prophets had to come down again from their lofty throne; for investigation of the more primitive forms of religion, and particularly the more intensive elucidation of the world of myth and the cult, showed how much stronger were the ties which bound even the prophets, and all the more the people of Israel as a whole, to the material side of ancient Oriental religion. But even this new investigation of the religion of Israel was concerned more with Israel's spirituality, her distinctively ancient religious concepts, than with what Israel herself regarded as the proper subject-matter of her faith, namely, the revelation in word and deed of Jahweh in history.

No one who follows the work done on the Old Testament in the nineteenth century can fail to notice how, broadly speaking, the theological impulse grows weaker and weaker. It was incomparably much more genuine and direct in the later period of rationalism than, say, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Because Old Testament theology took as its task the construction of a history of piety and of the contents of consciousness, and because, above all, it thereby kept to that which has its growth from nature and history, it dismissed what the Old Testament itself had to say, and, leaving this aside, chose its own subject of interest for itself.¹³

So then we see today, 170 years after Gabler, that at that time theology lost the right relationship to what can alone be its proper subject—what Israel herself made the content of her testimonies concerning Jahweh—and has not regained it until the present day.

It will certainly not be possible for us to confine our theological work to testifying to the divine historical acts. Other things as well took place for Israel in the orbit of these acts of God. Men emerged whose function within this activity was to clarify it; offices came into being and cultic usages became necessary, because they were meant to make life in proximity to this revealed God possible for Israel. The various officials often stood up wonderfully to the test, and they often failed. Israel told the story of all this, and of much besides, and then she

¹² J. Pedersen, "Die Auffassung vom Alten Testament," in *Z.A.W.*, 1931, p. 180.

¹³ Since I do not go into details here, no mention is made of the reaction which began in the 1920's and again became conscious of its special theological task in, for example, W. Eichrodt's *Theologie des Alten Testaments*. Much as the picture given in this book presupposes this renewed self-evaluation on the part of theology, and conscious as I am of my great debt to it, I none the less mean to show that even here Old Testament theology has still not yet completely envisaged its proper subject.

thought the whole thing through again and called fresh concepts to her aid to re-tell it, in order to come to a better understanding of her experience and a more adequate realisation of her own peculiarity. In particular Israel became revealed to herself in the sphere of this divine activity: she recognised herself, both her refusals and the completely new possibilities which opened up for her in the history whenever she laid herself open to the working of her God. And the only way for her of managing this was, in her language and her religious thinking, to enter into this action of God in which she found herself, to show herself elastic enough to frame or borrow concepts which were appropriate to the peculiar nature of her historical experience. This too must be dealt with in a Theology of the Old Testament. But its starting point and its centre is Jahweh's action in revelation.

2. THE UNFOLDING

The extremely difficult problem of a relevant unfolding of the witness of the Old Testament is indicated as early as in the Epistle to the Hebrews, by the summary statement that God of old spoke to Israel "in many and various ways" (Heb. i. 1). Unlike the revelation in Christ, the revelation of Jahweh in the Old Testament is divided up over a long series of separate acts of revelation which are very different in content. It seems to be without a centre which determines everything and which could give to the various separate acts both an interpretation and their proper theological connexion with one another. We can only describe the Old Testament's revelation as a number of distinct and heterogeneous revelatory acts. Even the deliverance from Egypt, which, as is well known, is regarded in the various complexes of tradition as Jahweh's all-sufficient saving act, cannot be taken as the theological centre or as the bedrock of the whole of the Old Testament. Certainly in the older period it appears to have been given the rank of a unique saving event excelling all others. But this rank was later diminished through other theological ideas. The Deuteronomistic historical work seems to have regarded the building of Solomon's Temple as a middle-point in the history of Israel (1 Kings vi. 1); but for the Chronicler it was David's cultic and messianic decrees that were the determinative saving order for all the times to come. But Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah see a time coming when avowal of Jahweh as the one who led Israel out of Egypt will be done away with (Jer. xxiii. 7; Is. xliii. 16-20).

How then can the *kerygma* which appears in the Old Testament be

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