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CHANGING PATTERNS OF OLD TESTAMENT STUDY

Richard Coggins

It was approximately a century ago that the historical-critical method of studying the Old Testament came to its first flowering. As with most new developments in biblical study it was in Germany that the great pioneering work was done, and the one man above all others with whom this work has come to be associated is Julius Wellhausen whose history of Israel first appeared in 1878. It is not surprising, therefore, that one feature of recent Old Testament study has been the look back over the road that has been travelled during the last century. This has been done most effectively by R.E. Clements, whose *A Century of Old Testament Study** provides fascinating sketches of the giants in the field, and with remarkable economy of space outlines the characteristic emphases in all the major areas of Old Testament study.

It is characteristic of the celebration of centenaries and such-like occasions to refer to even greater progress in the future; what has been done so far as only the beginning of yet more remarkable achievements that may be anticipated; and so on. (Here at King's, as we complete our 150th anniversary celebrations, the genre quickly becomes familiar.) Can anything of this kind be said of the historical-critical method of Old Testament study? Ironically, there appears to be an increasing number of Old Testament scholars who would wish to express doubts on this score. They would say that much of its achievement is now substantially complete, and that for further progress we must look to other ways of approaching the Old Testament.

Broadly speaking, there are two main reasons for this view, and, since both can easily be misunderstood, it is important in a survey of this kind to examine them a little more fully. The first is a familiar enough phenomenon in virtually all areas of scholarly activity. It is quite simply the fact of increasing specialisation, and the fragmentation which is its inevitable concomitant. Until quite recently, for example, it was accepted that it was possible to write a history of Israel into which might be interwoven the religious viewpoints expressed by, for example, the pre-exilic prophets. The standard works of Bright and B.W. Anderson, both recently re-issued in revised form, have made of the Old

Testament a 'living world', to borrow a phrase from the title of one of them. Yet their basically historical presentation of the Old Testament material poses problems: in what sense is the frequently made claim to a unique sense of history on the part of Israel a justified one? When can a historical approach properly begin? Is it legitimate to introduce religious value-judgments into a historical account? In general terms it may be said that the optimism with regard to historical reconstruction which was characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s is no longer present. An exhaustive study of the evidence which allegedly linked the Hebrew patriarchs with other peoples and movements in the ancient Near East led T.L. Thompson to basically negative results in his detailed analysis, while the most recent large-scale survey of the problems of Israel's history has done more to show how much remains uncertain, and how specialised the study is, than to solve the various problems raised. The work in question is entitled *Israelite and Judaeon History*, but it is not a history in the traditional sense. Rather, a team of authors, all specialists in the problems of particular periods or areas, set out the nature of the evidence, the extent to which detailed reconstruction is possible, and the main outstanding problems, in a way which is fascinating as a piece of historical analysis, but far removed from the study of the Old Testament as a religious text. (The religious neutrality of the work is perhaps most vividly illustrated by the use of BCE and CE rather than BC and AD as indicators of dates—a forceful reminder of how the very name 'Old Testament' implies a Christian standpoint.) Alongside this, it is an interesting but vain speculation how far the late Pere de Vaux would have been able to carry through his project of a three-volume history of Israel in the Old Testament period planned on more traditional lines; his death means that only the first and part of the intended second volume were completed.

*The works referred to in the text are listed in detail at the end of the article.

This increasing specialisation has the effect of making scholars increasingly reluctant to be described as 'biblical historians', just as the term 'biblical archaeologist' is now the kiss of death for anyone who wishes to be recognised by his fellow-archaeologists. Those whose expertise is as historians are concerned with the reconstruction of the history of their chosen period, or with its various social and economic aspects; they will use the evidence of the Old Testament as one tool among others in their reconstruction and of course if that reconstruction helps to shed some light on the biblical material, well and good. But to shed such light is not their primary intention. Clearly, for the student whose main concern is with the biblical material, the result is liable to be a divorce—or at least a separation—of the exegete from the historian, traditionally regarded as allies. Indeed, many would now say that as far as texts relating to the pre-settlement period are concerned, only the exegete has the right to speak: such texts, it is argued, cannot be the matter for the historian's study.

This increasing specialisation has been illustrated by reference to the study of history. Other areas could produce parallels, but the historical point is a particularly important one, in view of the overwhelmingly important part played by historical concerns in traditional Old Testament study. Much attention has been devoted to spelling out the historical setting of the different prophets, so that their original words, appropriate to that situation, could be established, and others dismissed as of secondary importance. Far more time has been spent in arguing about the historicity of Moses or the entry into Canaan than in assessing the theological significance of these stories. It may well be that the specialisation which is producing a gap between the historian and the biblical student may to some extent prove to be a blessing in disguise, since it may militate against too great a concern for historicity at the expense of all else. Even biblical theology has not escaped this overwhelming historical anxiety, since the work of the late Gerhard von Rad, with its stress on salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*, to use one of the few German words which has become part of every theological student's vocabulary), remains extremely influential, despite many criticisms which have been levelled against it.

But the feeling that the traditional methods

of historical-criticism may be due for reappraisal is not purely a negative one, arising from a kind of law of diminishing returns. It is caused also by the development of new methods of study: the second of the two reasons already alluded to for uncertainty about the historical-critical method. Some of these new methods of study are far removed from the traditional pattern. Thus, for example, the methods of structuralist linguistics, modelled on the work of C. Levi-Strauss in particular, have been applied on an increasing scale to a variety of Old Testament texts. Some have hailed this innovative work as a great break-through in understanding; others have been more sceptical, at times even cynical, alleging that the structures are simply in the mind of the beholder, and finding it intolerable that they are not subject to any external principle of establishment or refutation. In reply, some adherents of structuralism claim this as a positive virtue; the Bible is literature, and it is impossible to set out testable hypotheses to establish that one kind of literature is 'better' than another. Literary study is bound to be subjective, and, as one of its leading exponents has himself said, "Structuralism is certainly not a science nor even a discipline". And so the debate goes on, owing at least part of its liveliness to sharp differences of opinion among the structuralists themselves. But these differences should not be seized upon as a stick with which to attempt to discredit the whole method of approach, any more than differences of opinion among historical critics discredit their method.

Other new emphases in Old Testament study are less far removed from the traditional forms of that study. One such emphasis concerns the importance of the canon as a datum, a starting-point which defines for us what the Old Testament actually is. An influential book by Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, drew attention to the way in which the 'biblical theology' movement of the last quarter-century seemed to have lost its momentum, and noted as one relevant point the way in which that movement often seemed to use a 'canon within the canon', selecting certain books or parts of books, and rejecting or ignoring others, as the real nucleus which could be usefully put to service in the interests of a biblical theology. As part of his discussion of possible ways out of this situation, Childs suggested that we need to take much

more seriously the canon of Scripture, as providing the appropriate context within which the theological study of the Bible should be undertaken. There are clearly problems here: if, for example, the unit with which we are to work is "the basic Christian confession, shared by all branches of historic Christianity, that the Old and New Testaments together constitute Sacred Scripture for the Christian church" then clearly the relation of the Christian Old Testament to the Hebrew Bible as the Jewish Scripture becomes problematic. Childs' forthcoming volume, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, will be awaited with more than usual interest for its contribution to this question.

Despite—perhaps because of—this and similar problems, the view adumbrated by Childs and others has proved a fruitful topic of debate. Not precisely identifiable with that view, but arising from broadly similar concerns, is what might be termed the 'synchronic/diachronic tension'. The overwhelming emphasis of critical biblical study has been diachronic; to trace back a particular book, or section of a book, or a particular oracle, or even the meaning of a single word, to its origins; and having done that, to regard the result thus attained as in some way 'better' than the larger unit with which our bibles confront us. The New English Bible provides a characteristic end-result of such a process, with its many footnotes to the effect that 'Hebrew adds . . .', as if the words and phrases so dismissed were not part of the 'bible' which the volume sets out to be. To take a familiar example, the headings of the Psalms are ignored entirely, since they are taken as not having been part of the 'original' psalm. Such a series of value-judgments was, of course, typical of many older commentaries, and is still not extinct, but another emphasis in recent years has been the recognition of the propriety of a synchronic approach; to deal with the text in its final form, and to consider how it functions at that stage in its development, which will, after all, be the most familiar one for a majority of readers.

Two books of very different kinds may be noted as exemplifying this tendency. Childs put into practice the principles he had set out in a massive commentary on *Exodus*, which gave full weight to the final form of the text as well as to the various stages by which modern scholarly hypotheses have attempted to trace its previous

development. To an extent almost unparalleled in modern scholarly commentaries, he is able to take seriously and comment sympathetically upon the way in which the book of Exodus has been handled by Jewish and Christian commentators of 'pre-critical' days, as—with unconscious arrogance—works of more than a century ago tend to be described. The result is a remarkable achievement by any standards, though it is questionable how far it is practicable to do justice to all the different ways of approaching a book like Exodus in one volume; Childs' commentary runs to 659 pages, and is inevitably selective in its handling of the material.

The second example is a much slighter work, which in fact owed its genesis to lectures to non-specialist audiences. J.F.A. Sawyer ends his introduction to *From Moses to Patmos* with the reminder that "There is very much more to Old Testament studies than the history and archaeology of ancient Israel", and his concern throughout the book is to give full weight to the history of traditions, drawing out the significance even of those traditions which at one level are clearly not true, such as the characterisation of the Pentateuch as the five 'books of Moses', or the ascription of the whole book of Isaiah to the eighth-century prophet of that name. Just as the psychologist is often more interested in why statements are made in the form that they are than in their precise accuracy as statements, so should it be at one level in the study of ancient traditions, including those of the Old Testament. The historical and critical analysis is an entirely proper study and is not to be neglected; but it is not the whole story, and if it is treated as such, our engagement with the Old Testament becomes seriously deficient.

One further characteristic of recent scholarship which has given a new dimension to some familiar problems may properly be considered at this point, for it is closely allied with, though distinct from, the concern for a synchronic rather than a purely diachronic approach which has already been noted. It is an increasing awareness of the importance of the redactional process through which the various literary units which make up our Bible have gone. Time was when the word 'redactor' was essentially a dismissive term, to be applied to those who cobbled together the ideas and expressions of others which were inherently superior by virtue of their

originality. In part, too, this was related to disputes about authorship. Issues of that kind are not dead, but even strongly conservative scholars now accept that the Pentateuch reflects an extended period of growth, or that Isaiah 40-55 cannot originate in its present form from the eighth-century prophet.

The Book of Isaiah, indeed, provides an excellent example both of the limitations of the older historical-critical method and of the increased interest in the redaction process. The *Good News Bible*, with a nice irony, provides an example of the acceptance of the results of one particular critical approach just at the point when that approach was being called into question. The introduction to the Book of Isaiah states that it "may be divided into three sections: Chapters 1-39 come from a time when Judah was threatened by a powerful neighbour, Assyria. . . . Chapters 40-55 come from a time when many of the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon. . . . Chapters 56-66 are for the most part addressed to people who were back in Jerusalem." It is, of course, very difficult to summarise in a short space the process by which a book like Isaiah may have reached its final form, but such an outline statement would be widely criticised today on two grounds in particular. First, it makes no allowance for the extremely complex redaction history underlying each part of the book. To imply that chapters 1-39 can be dated from the eighth century is especially misleading. Some sections, such as the apocalyptic-like chapters, 24-27, have long been recognised as later, but even those sections which may contain oracles going back to Isaiah himself have also been reworked, remodelled and differently understood by being placed in a fresh context to such an extent as to render questionable the propriety of seeking to establish which individual sections should be regarded as 'genuinely Isaianic'. The theological tendency and the historical background of this redaction process have been much studied in recent years, notably in a very detailed examination by J. Vermeulen, *Du Prophète Isâie à l'Apocalyptique*, which both builds on and moves away from the older traditions of critical scholarship.

Secondly, the note in the *Good News Bible* gives no place to the sense in which the whole book of Isaiah is properly to be understood as a unity. We might be back in the days of some of

the critical introductions which supposed that chapters 40-66 were added purely fortuitously to the earlier chapters. Recent study has drawn out the unity of the book of Isaiah in two related, but slightly different senses. First, there is what may be called a 'compositional unity', that is to say, the redaction process through which the different elements of the whole passed, however complicated in detail, was nevertheless *one* process. Some would speak of an Isaianic school, keeping alive the traditions stemming ultimately from Isaiah of Jerusalem, adding to them and up-dating them in the light of changing circumstances; others would acknowledge a greater degree of uncertainty as to the details of the composition of the book. But in either case, the unity of the book of Isaiah is being asserted, though in a sense markedly different from that of the fundamentalist apologetic of an earlier generation. Secondly, there is what may be called a 'perceived unity', that is to say, the sense in which Isaiah 1-66 is *there*, a fact to be reckoned with. In all probability either the Isaiah scrolls from Qumran or Ecclus 48: 22-25 provide our earlier example of this reflection upon the whole book of Isaiah as a unity; it is clearly assumed in the New Testament, and has been determinative for Jewish and Christian tradition ever since. The limited horizons of the historical-critical method are well illustrated by the fact that Eissfeldt's exhaustive *Introduction*, almost certainly the fullest such treatment of the literary and critical problems of the Old Testament, nowhere gives any consideration to the phenomenon of the book of Isaiah. For him, as for many others before and since, the differing historical backgrounds simply mean that "the two main sections, or more properly the three, must be treated separately".

Shifts of emphasis with regard to Isaiah have been examined in slightly greater detail as an example of a widespread process. The other great prophetic collections have been re-examined in the same way. In regard to Jeremiah, for example, a penetrating study by E.W. Nicholson has shown how the message of the prophet took on a new significance when edited in a Deuteronomistic milieu and used as the basis for *Preaching to the Exiles*. More speculative for the moment is the suggestion that the redaction process underlying the 'Book of the 12'—the Minor Prophets—should also be

regarded as a unified one.

Here again, it is possible to see an important shift of emphasis away from the over-riding concern with an historical approach and critical problems. Conventionally the present order of the 'Book of the Twelve' has been of little concern; rather, the 'Book' has been divided up into its constituent elements, and detailed attention given to Amos, Hosea and the rest, placing each prophet in his historical circumstances, debating how much may be known of the prophet as an individual, dismissing certain parts of each book as secondary, and so on. The process is a familiar one to virtually everyone who has undertaken Old Testament study at almost any level, since the eighth-century prophets in particular have been regarded as an ideal subject of study from 'O'-level onwards.

Yet, as with Isaiah, questions arise. Is the recognition of twelve distinct and separate collections the only proper way to study the minor prophets? What has prompted the present arrangement of the collection as a whole, which reflects only in the most general terms a historical development? What is the role of the book of Jonah, which is formally quite unlike the other books, but has its counterpart in the stories about the prophet to be found in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel? These, and related questions, have led scholars to explore the redaction process of the minor prophets not in terms of a series of separate collections accidentally grouped together at the very last stage, but as a unified process. The point has been well illustrated by R.E. Clements with regard to the hopeful elements to be found in each of the individual books, but widely regarded as secondary by the older generation of critical scholars. Clements argues that this hopeful element is an integral and important part of the redactional process of the prophets. "No hesitation and compunction has been felt in applying this message of hope to each of the books. Such a hope belonged to the prophetic 'message', even though, from a strictly literary viewpoint, it did not derive from each individual prophet."

The quotation is from Clements' *Old Testament Theology*, and in these days when, as we have seen, questions of literary structure are much discussed in Old Testament study, it may seem appropriate to end this article (which has perforce said nothing about many areas of Old Testament study where much new work has

been done) by means of an *inclusio*, that is to say, the return at the conclusion of a passage to the idea or person referred to at the outset. We began by commending Clements' *Century of Old Testament Study* as a valuable guide to the great names and developments of the past hundred years; we can as appropriately end by commending his *Old Testament Theology* as a penetrating and perceptive guide to some of the outstanding issues that are likely to exercise scholars in years to come. Not the least of its merits is to force Old Testament scholars and theologians whose prime concern is with other parts of the total discipline to ask what their relation to one another should be. In a period which, as we have seen, is marked by increasing specialisation, it becomes all the more important to see the place of Old Testament study as part of a larger enterprise.

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(Mention should also be made of the forthcoming volume by the Society for Old Testament Study: G.W. Anderson (ed.): *Tradition and Interpretation*, OUP,

which will continue the series of survey volumes of which the last was H.H. Rowley, *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (1951). Publication has been delayed, but is expected during 1979.)

SOME REFLECTIONS ON INDIAN SPIRITUALITY

Friedhelm Hardy

INTRODUCTION

'The dominant character of the Indian mind which has coloured all its culture and moulded all its thoughts is the spiritual tendency. Spiritual experience is the foundation of India's rich cultural history. It is mysticism, not in the sense of involving the exercise of any mysterious power, but only as insisting on a discipline of human nature, leading to a realisation of the spiritual. While the sacred scriptures of the Hebrews and the Christians are more religious and ethical, those of the Hindus are more spiritual and contemplative.'¹

This quotation from one of the great myth-makers about India, which I selected almost at random from his voluminous writings, could be discussed in a number of different ways. It could be criticized for the facile stylistic transition from 'Indian' to 'Hindu' and the thereby insinuated identification of the two. One could ponder over the somewhat odd contrast between 'religious/ethical' and 'spiritual/contemplative', or explore what is meant here by 'spiritual' which occurs four times in this brief passage. But for our purposes it is sufficient to say that a very specific hierarchy of values is assumed here, from the material, via the 'religious/ethical', to the 'spiritual', and that the drive towards the last-mentioned is regarded as the quintessence of 'India's rich cultural history'. Thus it seems that Radhakrishnan is proposing here the ultimate abstract or formula which can summarize the intellectual history of a large country over a period of three and a half millenia, with all its social ramifications. It is this kind of generaliza-

tion which is widely made by exponents of the Indian religious traditions and which is, for the most part unconsciously, accepted by Western seekers of 'Eastern forms of wisdom', people who are dissatisfied with religion whilst they search for the 'spiritual' or 'mystical' (notice how also Radhakrishnan contrasts these notions),—it is this generalization that there exists a teleological drive towards the spirit, away from ordinary reality, as the defining factor of Indian culture, which has stimulated the present reflections.

However, my aim here is not to 'test' in an empirical manner the validity of Radhakrishnan's interpretation. The knowledge which we in the West have accumulated of the Indian traditions, through the research of scholars, the expositions of Indian *gurus*, the practice of religious or 'alternative' communities and the imagination of novelists², is still far too limited to allow for a complete survey of these traditions. What I shall attempt here is to trace some of these 'tendencies' of 'India's rich cultural history', which Radhakrishnan so easily reduces to a drive towards the 'spiritual', in their development, social position, and mutual interaction. The trends selected here for scrutiny, along with the examples adduced to illustrate them, are not to be understood as 'most typical' or representative of the variegated traditions of India, but as a few signposts scattered over a vast landscape. My usage of the word 'spirituality' is intended to draw attention to the fact that the 'landscape' mentioned in the metaphor constitutes a realm which the more systematic disciplines of philosophy, theology and psychology reflect upon. In other words, an only partly reflex interpretation of reality and man's role in it, the functions of