

Is there Philosophy in the Old Testament ?

THIS question, if not answered by a flat negative, is usually met with a half denial, by saying that in the Wisdom Literature we get the nearest *approach* to philosophy in the Old Testament. The approach, however, is generally admitted to be along the right road in that it is granted that philosophical ideas are not wanting in the Old Testament, but nevertheless there is no attempt to systematise them. Philosophy is thus regarded, as on the older view, as necessarily concerned with some pattern of thought. But if in this case we cannot speak of a philosophy of the Old Testament, can we with any more propriety speak of its theology? For there is no attempt in the Hebrew Scriptures to systematise its ideas of God. Whilst the underlying conception of monotheism unites the books of the Old Testament, a conspectus of its theology cannot be obtained until a definite attempt has been made to create some unity out of diverse theological ideas. Nevertheless, we do not speak of a "nearest approach" to theology in the Old Testament. Rather we regard these scriptures as the basis of any theology worthy of the name.

Perhaps there is a special reason for the readiness to speak of Old Testament theology, even though lacking a system. For in this realm Israel was a pioneer. Apart from monotheism no theology is possible, because polytheism cannot really conform to the rules of ethical, not to say philosophical, thought. If Greece be regarded as the home of philosophy, we remember how Plato in his *Republic* could not permit some of the stories of the deities (because of their unethical notions) to be told in the education of his guardians (Book III, 390). The same critical approach to the poets had already been made by Xenophanes. In Greece the study of philosophy was divorced from popular religion and may be said to have flourished in spite of its myths.

But even in the realm of philosophy was not Israel a pioneer with Greece? The beginnings of Greek philosophy can be traced to Miletus in the early sixth century B.C. As yet it was concerned with the physical world rather than with metaphysics, which comes into philosophy with Plato. But by the end of the sixth century Heraclitus of Ephesus was struggling with the idea of a creative Force, or Logos, the uncapricious source of an intelligible universe. Man had the opportunity to open his mind to the wisdom of the

Logos, yet this opportunity could be, and often was, rejected. Similarly, *Proverbs* sets forth Wisdom to be accepted, or rejected, by man (i. 20-33), but the date of the Hebraic offer is later. Although many of the proverbs in this book are no doubt much older than the Exile, the teaching on Wisdom is concentrated mainly in the first nine chapters, which are usually considered to be the latest part of the book. Oesterley dates this section about 250 B.C.¹ But to compensate for a delay of over three centuries, the conception of Wisdom in these chapters is infinitely superior to the Logos of Heraclitus.

This latter is not personal, although the idea of the Logos must border on personality when it is described as intelligent. In *Proverbs*, however, Wisdom is personified. In i. 20-33, and more especially in ix. 1-6, she is the counterpart of the "strange woman" and competes with her for the hearts of men. Both are to be found "in the streets" and "the broad places" (i. 20; vii. 12) and each invites the "simple one," "void of understanding," to accept her hospitality (vii. 7ff.; ix. 3 ff.). To the same context of ideas belong verses 6-9 in chapter iv. where Wisdom is to be "loved" and "embraced" if life is to be secure and successful.

In the autobiographical chapter viii. of the same book, we have a conception of Wisdom as a dynamic force before the creation of the physical world, and responsible under God for its existence (viii. 22-30).² She is also the inspiration of all that is right in the moral world (viii. 15-20) and is, indeed, the source of life itself (viii. 35). All this is reminiscent of the Stoic doctrine of Reason as a principle of life and action, but Wisdom here is a *spiritual* power, far superior to the Stoic semi-materialistic Logos. Now the Hebrew conception can hardly be later than the Greek in this case, and is most likely to be earlier. Zeno came to Athens about 320 B.C., but it is difficult to ascertain how much of later Stoicism goes back to the founder. Perhaps it is not without significance that Zeno's ancestry was partly Semitic.

In so far as it is legitimate to argue etymologically, philosophy must have originally meant "love of wisdom." Nowhere is wisdom made more attractive than in the pages of *Proverbs*. "I love them that love me; and those that seek me diligently shall find me" (viii. 17). But such an intimate commendation of Wisdom comes very near to making her not only a rival of the "strange woman," but even of Yahweh Himself, who is to be loved "with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." The

¹ Westminster Commentary. *The Book of Proverbs*, p. xiii.

² The translation "master workman" (viii, 30) is admittedly conjectural, but 'amôn is only found here in the Old Testament, apart from a doubtful reading in *Jer.* ii, 15. The translation is based on the Versions and on 'amman of *Cant.* vii, 2. (E.V.v.1) and is consonant with the context.

Wisdom writers, however, avoid any possibility of idolatry by making Wisdom Yahweh's Servant, to be honoured only as such. Love of God must come before love of wisdom, not only as a moral imperative, but also as a metaphysical necessity. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning (i.e. first principle, *tehillāh*) of wisdom" (*Prov.* ix. 10). Moreover, this truth is one of revelation only, as the magnificent chapter xxviii. of *Job* informs us. Wisdom "is hid from the eyes of all living" but "God understandeth the way thereof. . . . And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom."³ For the Hebrews true philosophy was rooted in theology, with no real boundary separating "love of wisdom" from love of God.

Modern philosophy has been divided on the basis of its subject matter into five branches: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics and politics.⁴ On four of these, the Old Testament has definite teaching, from seer or sage. With regard to the philosophical problem of Reality, we see at once how theology limits the scope of enquiry as well as helps in offering a solution. On this subject there was much room for speculation for the Greek, who left theology out of account; but for the Hebrew the ultimate Reality must be personal and spiritual, namely the One who had revealed Himself to successive generations from the time of the Patriarchs.

On the subject of the theory of knowledge, early Hebrew thought does justice to objective and subjective aspects of experience. Both the physical world, as apprehended by the five senses, and the inner world of man's personality, known to him through his thought, feelings and volition, are equally real and both are involved in historical events. Man is able, and required, to know himself as well as the world in which he lives.

The Book of Proverbs has been called "a text book on ethics." Again, there is no ethical system and the teaching is rather fragmentary. Some of it, indeed, is somewhat pedestrian, as when it descends to the level of table manners (xxiii. 1ff.). Yet it is possible to see the wood as well as the trees. The ethical principles behind the detailed instructions are those of the great pre-exilic prophets, who are ardently concerned that man should live in right relationships with God and with his fellow. "What doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" This is the basis of the "good life." Long before Kant taught the prime necessity of a good will, the Hebrew sage was instructing his pupils, "Keep thy

³ This brings v. 28 into line with the preceding verses, although it may be taken to be a later addition to the chapter. Even so, the addition can have been made in the interests of the interpretation suggested.

⁴ cp. C. E. M. Joad, *Philosophy* (E.U.P.) p. 23 ff.

heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (*Prov.* iv. 23).

The Old Testament has little direct teaching on the subject of aesthetics. There is one verse in *Ecclesiastes*, however, which may be quoted (iii. 11): "He hath made everything beautiful in its time." But this branch of philosophy is sometimes ignored by philosophers today. On the philosophy of politics the Hebrew Scriptures make a unique contribution. What is their conception of an ideal community? Once more, we see how impossible it was for the Hebrews to keep theology out of the realm of philosophy. Their ideal principle of life for the community was a theocracy, the people being under the rule of God. To the Western world, with its proud belief in democracy, this sounds strange and even idealistic, but it was a familiar, and as they believed, a practical doctrine for the Hebrews. Their political institutions, whenever they were true to the highest traditions, were based on the belief that God was their true King, and all men were primarily his subjects. If no nation of modern times has dared to practise this political theory, the Christian church has taken it over from Judaism. One verse from the New Testament will make this clear. "The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ" (*Rev.* xi. 15). This verse may easily have been borrowed, and enlarged in scope, from a Jewish apocalypse.

We have endeavoured to demonstrate that the Old Testament can correctly be said to include philosophy, the term being understood in its classic connotation. Today philosophy often has a wider meaning, namely that of "Weltanschauung," and in this sense the whole of the Old Testament may be said to be philosophical. This is the theme of a recent book by C. H. Patterson, who says⁵: "When we speak of the philosophy of the Old Testament, we have in mind the world view that is implied in the various writings which it contains." But the Wisdom books may be called "philosophical" even in the narrower and technical meaning, since they teach a philosophy which, though more or less unspeculative, is firmly based on sound principles, and capable, as *Proverbs* shows, of practical expression in every sphere of life.

The newer philosophy, according to one writer, is more concerned with language as a vehicle of thought than with the subject matter. "The object of philosophy is the logical classification of thoughts."⁶ The statements of these thoughts need not be statements of fact, they may be statements of belief. We have moved from the position of the logical positivists, for whom a statement could only be meaningful when checked by sense experience.

⁵ *The Philosophy of the Old Testament* (New York, 1953) p. 20.

⁶ Quoted by Basil Mitchell in *Modern Philosophy and Theology*, "The Socratic" (Oxford, 1952) p. 7.

Otherwise, religious experience could never be a subject of philosophical enquiry.

This modern aspect of philosophy has a certain foreshadowing in *Job*. Here we have a philosophical book in dialogue form, somewhat on the lines of Plato's *Republic*. The problem is the cause and nature of suffering, with special reference to Job's physical and, to some extent, mental and spiritual suffering. Job's friends argue about it inductively, taking the suffering as an effect, and seeking its cause. The ethical theory of the day made their argument easy. Suffering was no longer conceived as the action of an arbitrary Deity. He, indeed, sends suffering, wherever and whenever it comes. But He works on an ethical principle, by which suffering only comes as a consequence and punishment of sin. It is a simple matter then to prove that whoever suffers does so because of responsibility for some evil. The sin may be unconscious, but it is a fact nevertheless. The logic of the argument is, of course, fallible. A universal truth cannot be established upon particular examples, even if all these examples can be verified. And when Job protests his innocence of any sin sufficiently enormous, on the above theory, to account for his intense sufferings, the friends are really at a loss for a reply, and can only repeat the ethical principle, with minor variations. A further weakness in the friends' case is that an argument based on physical facts cannot prove a conclusion which is strictly outside the sphere of the physical world. Evil is a moral phenomenon and no amount of so-called physical consequences can prove its existence. The friends of Job, therefore, are not stating a fact, but only a belief, namely that behind all suffering one can detect the punishing hand of God. None of the arguments then, whether Job's or his contestants', can be described as soundly "philosophical" in the older sense of the word. The wider scope of its meaning, however, afforded by modern philosophy enables us still to call the book philosophical.

This is true especially of its conclusion, that is the poetic ending, not the prose epilogue which, with its nicely calculated material rewards, seems to be an anti-climax. The climax of the poem is reached in its last two verses where Job confesses: "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes" (xlii. 5-6). Here we are in the realm, not of philosophical speculation, but of direct religious experience. Again we see how difficult it is to define the boundary between philosophy and theology. Job is now making a statement based on a higher experience than the sense experience which used to be the touchstone for verifying a philosophical statement. It is essentially a spiritual sense, which enables us to be aware of the "numinous," as Otto

would say, or, more simply, as Job says, "aware of God." "I had heard of thee . . . but now mine eye seeth thee."

Such a statement of religious experience comes within the purview of philosophy if its object is the logical classification of thoughts. But how can the philosopher, as such, deal with this kind of data? He must be something of a theologian as well, or, at any rate, he must be able to understand the kind of experience Job is talking about. For this, not only the book of Job, but the whole of the Old Testament will equip him. And surely whatever book makes a philosopher a better philosopher, deserves to be called "philosophical."

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Index to Religious Periodical Literature, an Author and Subject Index to Periodical Literature, 1949-1952 including an Author Index to Book Reviews. Prepared by Libraries of the American Theological Library Association and compiled and edited by J. Stillson Judah with the assistance of Leslie Joan Ziegler. American Theological Library Association, 1953. (Distributed by The American Library Association, 50, East Huron Street, Chicago II, Illinois, ix, 220 pp. \$5.00 paper, \$6.00 cloth.)

An index by author and subject, with cross references, to thirty-one scholarly periodicals not included in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, or the *International Index to Periodicals*, in the fields of Bible, Theology, Church History, and related disciplines, covering the years 1949-1952, together with an index to book reviews, appearing in these periodicals. The resources indexed may be suggested by the following: 83 entries found under Dead Sea Scrolls, 41 under Church and State, 27 under Lord's Supper, 15 under Karl Barth, 27 under Reinhold Niebuhr, 55 under Communism, 32 under the World Council of Churches, and 15 under Missions (plus 19 cross references to related topics). The *Index locates* critical reviews for approximately 2,000 books, viz., nine titles by Oscar Cullmann are covered by 21 reviews, and seven titles by H. H. Rowley are covered by 30 reviews, etc. It is expected that succeeding volumes of the *Index* will be issued in the future.

The periodicals reviewed are:

Anglican Theological Review.
Baptist Quarterly.
Biblica.
Biblical Archaeologist.
Catholic Biblical Quarterly.
Christianity and Crisis.
Church Quarterly Review.
Congregational Quarterly.
Crozer Quarterly.
Interpretation.
Jewish Quarterly Review.
Journal of Bible and Religion.
Journal of Cuneiform Studies.
Journal of Near East Studies.
Journal of Pastoral Care.
Journal of Religious Thought.

Journal of Theological Studies.
Lutheran Quarterly.
Modern Churchman.
Muslim World.
Palestine Exploration Quarterly.
Review and Expositor.
Revue Biblique.
Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse.
Scottish Journal of Theology.
Social Action.
Studia Theologica.
Syria.
Theologische Rundschau.
Theology Today.
Vetus Testamentum.