

# Old Testament Interpretation Today\*

A EUROPEAN speaker, whose English had its own peculiarities, spoke recently at a meeting in London of the Society for Old Testament Study of the present stage of Old Testament studies as "the time of the big bangs". He did not mean that there had been a succession of contributions that had "made a big hit", as we might say. He meant, rather, that long established theories and apparently safe conclusions were tumbling to the ground, one by one. He was right. There is a stage of great unrest and uncertainty in many areas of contemporary Old Testament study. It is characterised by a certain negativity and uncertainty of outlook, for while old theories are being demolished, scholars are shy of erecting new ones in their place. We hear much more of a necessary "agnosticism" in our attempts to reconstruct the history and religion of Israel. Where, for example, the interpretation of archaeological research by the Albright/Bright school, utilising such material as the Nuzi texts, and a host of other newly discovered documents from a widely separated range of places and times, had seemed to authenticate much in the patriarchal narratives, this has now been strenuously challenged in the work of J. van Seters (*Abraham In History And Tradition*, 1975) and T. L. Thompson (*The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 1974). Van Seters has gone as far as to argue that the patriarchal traditions in the Yahwist's writing, far from originating in the second millennium B.C., date from the sixth century B.C. While Thompson assigns them to the ninth century B.C., he has argued that we cannot use them for purposes of historical reconstruction but must study them for the tradition-outlook they bear, expressing Israel's own later theological self-understanding, her consciousness at a later time, of her nature and destiny as the people of God.

Again, where for decades there has been a virtual consensus of scholarly opinion on dating the exodus from Egypt in the thirteenth century B.C., a recent work has assigned it again to the fifteenth century B.C. (J. J. Bimson, *Redating The Exodus and Conquest*, 1978). It is too early to say whether this view will commend itself to scholars generally, but its very appearance testifies to the ferment in studies aimed at reconstructing Israel's ancient history.

Martin Noth's view of the organisation of the Israelite tribes after their entry into the land of Canaan, and before the rise of the monarchy, was that it resembled the tribal "amphictyonies" of Greece

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and Italy. He saw the twelve tribes as being united round a common cult, with regular cultic ceremonies at a central sanctuary, when the divine law was promulgated and administered. In this loose, early form of liaison, which marked associations which had not developed settled political institutions, common military action was called for in the name of Yahweh as need arose, as for example, the Song of Deborah in Judges, chapter five, shows. This view became very widely held. A number of scholars saw the roots of "Covenant" theology here. The work of G. Mendenhall (*Law And Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, 1955) and W. Beyerlin (*Origins and History of the Oldest Sinaitic Traditions*, 1965) suggested that Old Testament covenant theology and practice were founded on the Hittite "Vassal Treaty" forms, belonging to the second millennium B.C. It was felt by many that much of the Old Testament literature would have grown in the cultic setting of a tribal covenant renewal ceremony dating originally from this "amphictyonic" period, with its recitation of *Heilsgeschichte*, i.e. the saving activity of Yahweh in history, its call for the response of obedience to Yahweh in the stipulations of the Covenant law, and the promulgation of the sanctions of the Covenant in the solemn reading of its blessings and curses. Some of the Scandinavian scholars saw the Pentateuch growing around some such cultic setting, rather than in the more traditional Wellhausian view of the later redaction of a number of literary sources. J. Pedersen, for example, saw Exodus chapters one to fifteen as a Passover festival legend (*Israel: Its Life and Culture, III/IV*, 1940). Ivan Engnell adopted a very similar position (*Critical Essays On The Old Testament*, 1970, especially pp. 50-67). As we shall see again later, there were those who saw the role of the prophets as being that of "Covenant mediators", whose preaching originated in exposition of the ethical conditions of the Covenant required of the people, and who pronounced the Covenant blessings and curses. They also interceded in prayer on behalf of the people, speaking as representatives of the penitent community. (See, e.g., D. J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant*, 1973; R. E. Clements, *Prophecy and Covenant*, 1965. Clements later changed his mind on this, see *Prophecy and Tradition*, 1975).

M. Noth (*A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, first published in German in 1948 and in English translation, 1972) and G. von Rad (*Old Testament Theology, Vol. I*, first published in German in 1957, and in English translation, 1962) argued that the Exodus and Sinai traditions were quite distinct in origin, being celebrated at different sanctuaries in the amphictyonic period, "Exodus" at Gilgal and "Sinai" at Shechem (according to von Rad). Only at a later stage were they joined, shortly before the Yahwist wrote (Noth), or the merging of them in one great drama of saving history was the original and creative work of the Yahwist himself (von Rad). Noth, arguing that the Pentateuch was composed of five originally separate traditions, Patriarchs, Exodus, Sinai, Wandering in the Wilderness and Entry

into Canaan, said that Moses was only secondarily inserted into the last four, and that all we could know of him historically was that he died! These views have not gone unchallenged, however. A balanced and objective assessment can be found in E. W. Nicholson's work, *Exodus and Sinai in History and Tradition* (1973). The absence of any reference to Sinai in Israel's early credal statements (for such von Rad saw passages like Deuteronomy 6: 21-25 and 26: 5-9 to be) does not necessarily mean that the traditions were originally distinct, in the views of such scholars as A. Weiser (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, 4th German edition, 1957, English translation, 1961, especially pp. 84ff.) and G. Fohrer (*History of Israelite Religion*, first published in German in 1968, English translation, 1972, especially pp. 68ff.). They argue that the so-called "Credal statements" are not necessarily early, but bear strongly Deuteronomistic characteristics; that the two events of Exodus and Sinai are not of the same order, the latter calling for response to the first, and that both come together in such a connection in Joshua chapter 24. Some believe that chapter to be late and itself Deuteronomistic, but others believe it to be early, including the present writer, who believes that its sole insistence on exclusive worship of Yahweh points strongly in that direction. Had it been later it would have included ethical conditions which came to be associated with the call for Covenant obedience, particularly in the Deuteronomistic literature. Fohrer and others have argued that it is much more plausible to believe that Moses appears in all the four major post-patriarchal traditions because he originally belonged to them all than to believe that he was only later inserted into them all. If he had virtually no strong or firm base in history, why should his figure have been seen as the binding one? That is not to deny that he grew in tradition. Almost every later element in Israelite life and faith is traced back to him and given his authority. If, however, he laid down the basic qualities of Yahwism, and if all later Israelite borrowings of forms and institutions of her religion were transformed by her in the light of that basic Yahwistic faith, is there not a real sense in which this tradition may be said to have been well founded? It is probably in such a way that we should see the growing attribution of all the Torah to Moses's authority and, finally, even to his authorship.

But beyond all this, the whole foundation of Noth's "amphictyonic" theory of the tribal league, with all the superstructure reared upon it, has been shaken by a series of massive blows. For a summary of later criticisms together with some very penetrating observations of his own, see A. D. H. Mayes, *Israel In The Period of the Judges* (1974). Again, it has been forcefully argued that there is no real evidence for a "Covenant" theology before the work of the Deuteronomists in the seventh century B.C. This was argued by L. Peritt, in his work *Bundestheologie im Alten Testament* (1969) and the arguments have been adopted by a number of other writers. It may well be that, in time, the pendulum of opinion on these matters will swing back a

little. After all, *something* brought the tribes to act together in the name of a shared Yahwistic faith at the time of the adoption of monarchy and effected the union of north and south in the time of David, even if the process was more gradual and piecemeal than Noth allowed. Again, others besides the present writer, must find in the eighth century prophets at least the "raw materials" of a Covenant theology—election, obligation, *Heilsgeschichte*, law, blessing and curses, and find it incredible that the Deuteronomists snatched the whole concept "out of the air" in the seventh century B.C.

John Bright, for example, certainly agrees here (*Covenant and Promise*, 1977). Unfortunately, however, in his later works, such as the revision of his deservedly famed and widely-used *History of Israel* (first published 1962, revised edition 1972), and in the book already referred to, Bright has treated too superficially the objections of scholars such as have been mentioned above. More force must certainly attach to the cautious but decisive concluding remarks of James Barr after a detailed semantic examination of the Hebrew term *berith* ("Some Semantic Notes On The Covenant", *Beiträge zur Alttestamentliche Theologie*, 1977). All this discussion, however, illustrates and justifies our contention concerning the present considerable state of flux in which Old Testament studies find themselves.

It is ironic, however, that as the centenary year of the publication of Wellhausen's epoch-making *Geschichte Israels* (1878) has just passed, the "biggest bangs" have been heard at the very foundations of the so-called Graf-Wellhausen documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch which has stood, not unchallenged, but undestroyed, for so long. Notable here is the name of J. Rendtorff. The dating of the Yahwist in the sixth century B.C. by van Seters, already alluded to, would drastically modify the Wellhausen structure if it became established. Rendtorff departs from it altogether, although in a way that was already heralded to some extent by the tradition-critical approach of Noth, von Rad and some of the Scandinavian scholars already mentioned. In *Das Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch*, 1977, he claims that the documentary hypothesis must be abandoned. He argues that the Pentateuch has been formed from a number of large "tradition" units, such as the primeval history of Genesis 1-11, the patriarchal history, the Moses-Exodus tradition etc., all of which developed independently of each other. This work has not been translated into English, as far as the writer is aware, and it is too early to say whether it will command wide acceptance. A number of initial scholarly reactions to it were presented, together with further comments by Rendtorff, in a recent issue of the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, No. 3, 1977.

One could not conclude this brief survey of some of the areas of recent scholarly discussion of the early history and religion of Israel, centering as it necessarily does on Pentateuchal studies, without mentioning the welcome appearance of a recent attempt to deal with the history of Israel in the face of all this uncertainty and confusion. It is

entitled *Israelite and Judean History* (ed. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, 1977). Each section is written by a specialist in the field. It takes full note of all the most recent archaeological work and scholarly debate. Thus it updates all extant "Histories" and adopts, for the most part, an objective and balanced assessment of the present situation in each period of Old Testament history.

It is not our intention in this article, however, to trudge through each part of the Old Testament giving an encyclopaedia-like summary of recent scholarly publications in each field. No survey of the present state of Old Testament interpretation could ignore the very important work which has been going on in Pentateuchal studies and in reconstructing the early period of Israel's history. The works we have mentioned employ a variety of *methods* of interpretation to arrive at their conclusions. And some of the methods which are being employed in the field of Old Testament studies are offering some very interesting and exciting ways forward. This should certainly offset the impression of negativity which may be given by the survey we have conducted. We intend, therefore, to devote most of the remainder of the article to an examination of the interpretation of the prophetic books currently being undertaken, with only side-long glances at other areas of the Old Testament where similar methods are, of course, also being employed. In order properly to assess the effect of these newer methods of interpretation in the prophetic books, it is necessary to take a quick glance back at the methods of interpretation which have been used before. The modern methods do not necessarily contradict earlier ones. Indeed, very often they build upon them, and would have been impossible without the results they achieved. However, it is to be hoped that they do offer positive ways forward by which the Old Testament can be better understood and its importance and relevance more immediately demonstrated.

It is fitting that after a year which marks the centenary of the publication of Wellhausen's *Geschichte Israels*, we should begin our summary of interpretation of the prophets by recalling the very high place he gave them in his assessment of Israel's religion. For Wellhausen, the prophets marked the summit of her faith. The law, with all its emphasis on ritual matters, marked only a decline from the ethical and spiritual religion of the prophets. It represented a slide down the slippery slope to legalistic, post-exilic Judaism. This view saw the prophets as the founders of the religion of ethical monotheism, which was the culminating achievement following a long, evolutionary climb upwards in man's religious awareness from animism, through polytheism, henotheism and non-ethical monotheism. Wellhausen was closely supported in such a view by Bernhard Duhm who, in *Die Theologie der Propheten* (1875), saw the prophets as above all teachers of lofty religious and ethical ideas. They stood for the purity of a direct, spiritual, ethical and individual type of religious experience, in contrast to the cultic forms of priestly religion which the prophets sharply repudiated in their famous attacks upon the cult

(especially in the "classical" anti-cultic passages of the prophets like Amos 5: 21-25; Hosea 6: 6; Isaiah 1: 10-17; Micah 6: 6-8; Jeremiah 7: 21-26). Such a view which looked on the prophets as primarily religious teachers with messages for their own contemporaries sharply divided this approach from that of the old fundamentalists of the time, who interpreted the prophets primarily as inspired predictors of future events, either those events associated with the birth, life and death of Jesus, or those associated with the end of this world epoch. Today we cannot quite as easily ignore the predictive elements in the prophecy of ancient Israel, which face us with issues to which we must return.

Although Duhm modified this extreme view in later commentaries, the belief that the Old Testament portrays two quite different forms of religion, the priestly and the prophetic, based on a kind of Hegelian opposition of form and spirit, persisted in a remarkable way. It was reflected in the comparative scholarly neglect of the post-exilic period in Old Testament research and the persistent under-evaluation of such works as those of the Priestly writers of the Pentateuch and of the Chronicler. Echoes of such misunderstanding still appear too often in works of our own time. It was given added longevity and popularity in such a standard and influential work as Troeltsch's *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (first published in German in 1912, and in English in 1931), in which he traced the continuation of this dichotomy in the history of the Christian Church in what he described as the "Church-type" and "Sect-type" of churches. In its application to the treatment of the prophets it finds elegant expression in so influential a work as J. Skinner's study of the prophecy of Jeremiah, *Prophecy & Religion* (1922). He can quote with favour Davidson's description of Jeremiah as one whose purpose was "to draw men's minds away from all that was external—sacrifices, Temple, ark and law-book—to that which was inward and real" (p. 325).

Duhm was also a pioneer in the application to the prophetic books of the method of *Literary Criticism* which had brought such momentous results in Pentateuchal criticism. He developed criteria by which to separate "authentic" sayings of the prophet from "inauthentic" material which had been added to it later. Although we should now wish to emphasise that literary criticism by itself is a very limited tool as a method of understanding and interpreting the prophets and the prophetic literature, it remains a vital one, on which other methods of interpretation have to build. Only a few very conservative scholars would wish to try to return behind its principles and insist that each prophet spoke or wrote each word in the book which bears his name in the form in which it appears there. Duhm's criteria have remained influential and valid, but his negative attitude to material which he saw as later additions, dismissing them often as "mere glosses", is one which most contemporary Old Testament scholars would not share. Now we see them not just as unfortunate obstacles intervening

between the reader and the prophet's message, but as affording a very valuable insight into the way that word was understood, re-interpreted and re-applied to later situations by those who transmitted the message. To this we shall return.

Duhm was also interested in the psychological state of the prophets as they received their visions and auditions, and such an interest was vigorously pursued by G. Hölscher in *Die Propheten: Untersuchungen zum Religionsgeschichte Israels* (1914). Clearly, as he rightly saw, there are traces of ecstatic elements in the early phenomenon of prophecy in ancient Israel as it is recorded in the Books of Samuel. Hölscher believed that all the major prophets of the Old Testament exhibited ecstatic elements, although their ecstasy was characterised by a strongly ethical element lacking in their predecessors. Although later scholars have questioned the extent of the ecstatic element in the experience of the major prophets, feeling more cautiously that the exact manner of the prophets' inspiration and their receiving of revelation remains a mystery, this is clearly seen as a very important area of our understanding. For it stresses that the prophets were not only, or even primarily, theologians, or teachers of religious ideas, but men who underwent profound religious experiences and preached in what we might now call an "existential" dimension.

The name of Hermann Gunkel is indissolubly linked with the method known as *Form Criticism*. This concentrates on the repeated formulae and stereotyped patterns which, as they recur in the written literature, betray the stage of its oral transmission behind the final written literary deposit. The methods applied to the study of the Pentateuch saved Pentateuchal study from too narrow and obsessive a pre-occupation with purely literary questions. Where literary critics had divided and subdivided sources to account for every little tension or inconsistency within the written source, a realisation of the major role oral transmission had played in shaping the material led to greater flexibility. It also directed attention to the function the various types or forms of material had played in the community that led to its being preserved, used and passed on by them. This function of the oral material was called in German, the *Sitz im Leben*. The application of these methods to the study of the Psalms led to a quite new awareness of the part those Psalms had originally played in the cultic life of ancient Israel, and this understanding of the Psalms has affected all study of them since Gunkel. Gunkel employed the same approach to the prophets in his work *Die Propheten* (1917). He examined the major forms of prophetic speech, showing that originally the prophetic utterances consisted of short oracles comprising a single saying, usually depicting the future. However, in developing their messages, and particularly when they wrote them down, they borrowed all kinds of largely secular speech forms, promise and threat, admonitions, Priestly Torah, disputations, songs, liturgies, parables, allegories, etc. In this process also they gave moral reasons why their oracles must come to pass. A very useful summary of the history of the form

critical approach to the study of the prophets, which also offers one of the most succinct expositions of the present state of its investigations, is offered by C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (1967).

A very important step forward in this was taken by Sigmund Mowinckel. Two works of his were particularly significant, *Zur Komposition des Buches Jeremia* (1914) and *Prophecy and Tradition: the Prophetic Books in the Light of the Growth and History of the Tradition* (1946). Mowinckel argued that the forms of prophetic speech, revealed by the form critical approach, showed that their original *Sitz im Leben* was the cult. A more complete break with the ideas of Wellhausen and Duhm it would be difficult to imagine. Mowinckel found evidence to suggest that the prophets' activity developed from an original role in the cultic worship of the community, in which the prophet acted as spokesman for the people in intercession, in expressing the communal statements of penitence and lamentation and in bringing to them the divine answer in oracular form.

This emphasis on the cultic role of the prophet was developed by A. Haldar, *Associations of Cult Prophets among the Ancient Semites* (1945) and A. R. Johnson, *The Cultic Prophet in Ancient Israel* (1st edition 1944, 2nd edition 1962). Johnson argued that prophets functioned alongside priests at centres of cultic worship, and particularly in Jerusalem. He did not advance any opinion as to whether the great canonical prophets functioned in this way. Even in his most recent work, *The Cultic Prophet and Israel's Psalmody* (1979), he still does not pass judgement on this issue (p. 329) except to strengthen earlier suggestions that Haggai and Zechariah had an official connection with the temple cultus (pp. 64, 329).

Although the question of the relationship of the major Old Testament prophets to the cult is still much disputed, it is safe to say that the old view of a complete dualism between "priestly" and "prophetic" religion in the Old Testament is now dead. The prophets' attacks on the cultic worship of their contemporaries is seen by almost all Old Testament scholars as an attack on the abuse of such worship, rather than a rejection of the worship as such. (See, for example, H. H. Rowley, "The Prophets and the Cult", *Worship in Ancient Israel*, 1967).

Once literary criticism had taught us to distinguish within the prophetic books between original words of the prophet and later additions, and form criticism had taught us to examine the oral stage of the prophets' teaching and the way in which basic forms of prophetic speech had been developed, modified and expanded in their written records, attention was bound to focus next on the actual process of the transmission of the prophets' teaching. Attention is directed towards the stages between spoken word and written book. This has been the particular interest of two branches of Old Testament study known, in the current jargon, as "tradition criticism" and

“redaction criticism”. While both have their roots in the earlier work of the period we have been surveying, they mark the particular concerns and approach of more recent study.

One of the most widely used and best known studies of the Old Testament prophets in recent times is that of Gerhard von Rad (*Theology of the Old Testament*. Vol. II, first published in German 1960, translated into English 1965. The section relating to the prophets has been published separately as a paperback, *The Message of the Prophets*, 1968). His approach is that of tradition criticism. He examines the varied use by the prophets of the older traditions of Israel and Judah, in Amos and Hosea, for example, of the northern traditions of Exodus, Election and Legal traditions, in Isaiah of the Zion/David traditions of Jerusalem. Such traditions had their roots in the cultic celebration of the covenant (shades of Mowinckel) in which proclamation of Yahweh's saving deeds in history (*Heilsgeschichte*), and call for response in obedience to the legal terms of the covenant were part of the liturgy. Other scholars argued that the prophets had a specific role within the cult as covenant mediators who, in their oracles of threat or promise, were activating the covenant curses or blessings. Wellhausen's view had been stood on its head. The cult and the law *preceded* the prophets who functioned within it and were its spokesmen. The prophets were not religious and ethical innovators but recalled their contemporaries to traditions they already knew but had overlooked or distorted. As we have seen, some of these assumptions have been challenged more recently (see, for example, R. E. Clements, *Prophecy and Tradition*, 1975; H. W. Wolff, *Amos geistige Heimat*, 1964, translated into English as *Amos the Prophet: the Man and his Background*, 1973). Nevertheless little doubt remains that the prophets drew on earlier and familiar traditions as the basis for their preaching.

Tradition criticism has also pointed the way to a much more positive evaluation of what literary and form criticism had suggested was secondary material. Whereas earlier critics tended to look on the differentiation of “genuine” and “false” material like the separation of wheat from chaff, after which the chaff could be thrown away, more recent study has sought to examine the particular tradition, or outlook, at work among those who have thus added to, or modified, the prophet's material in the course of its transmission. The way in which the original word of the prophet has been re-interpreted and re-applied to new and later situations in the secondary material reveals a great deal of the greatest interest and importance about the outlook, faith and nature of the tradition circle in which the material was handed down. Such an approach has characterised much commentary work on the prophets (and indeed on other parts of the Old Testament material) in recent times. So Zimmerli, in his great commentary on Ezekiel (1955-69), saw three stages in the development of the material: the original preaching of the prophet; the expansion of that preaching by the prophet himself in the light of later historical

development; and a third stage in which disciples of the prophet applied the prophet's teaching to the situation after the exile. Several scholars have argued that, for all the differences between Isaiah chapters 1-39, 40-55 and 56-66, differences which led scholars such as Duhm rightly to separate them and assign them to different authors, there is nevertheless a continuity of tradition running through them which suggests that they are the work of a continuing "school" of Isaianic tradition (cf. Isaiah 8:16 for reference to the prophet's disciples). This school, or "circle" of tradition as it is sometimes called, re-interpreted and re-applied Isaiah's teaching in the situation of the exile (chapters 40-55) and soon after the return from exile (56-66). Similar traditions mark all three, for all their differences, such as the concept of God as "the Holy One of Israel", and the centrality of the Zion tradition. (For a clear and concise exposition of this point of view, see D. R. Jones, "The Traditio of the Oracles of Isaiah of Jerusalem" in *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, LXVII, pp. 226-246, and J. H. Eaton, "The Origin of the Book of Isaiah", *Vetus Testamentum*, IX, 1959, pp. 138-157). Perhaps most contemporary scholars would feel rather more hesitant in talking about "disciples" of the prophets, since only in the case of Isaiah are they mentioned, and the book itself suggests no very active role of theirs. Either we must think of men like Baruch for Jeremiah, or, as many have suggested, Levitical circles involved with the Jerusalem temple, or Deuteronomistic circles (if these last two groups are to be differentiated), so that once more the strong connection between the cult and the prophetic books, if not the prophets, is being stressed. Some have found suggestions that the prophets were strongly influenced by Wisdom traditions (e.g. Wolff, in the work on Amos already cited; S. Terrien, "Amos and Wisdom", *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, ed. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson, 1962; and J. Lindblom, "Wisdom in the Old Testament Prophets", *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, III, 1955, pp. 192ff.). However, some signs of caution over extreme claims for Wisdom influence on the prophets, and indeed throughout many sections of the Old Testament, are now being expressed more widely. The present writer thinks it most unlikely that any but superficial, stylistic influences can really be proven. One may cite the very cautious note sounded by J. Crenshaw in the article on "Wisdom" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Supplementary Volume, 1976, p. 953).

Recent studies in the book of Jeremiah provide an instructive example of the approach of tradition criticism. Mowinkel had already, in the work cited above, isolated three types of material, poetic oracles, biographical prose material and prose sermons which, with their striking parallels to the Deuteronomistic literature, he believed represented a transmission of a Jeremiah tradition in Deuteronomist circles. He saw them somewhat negatively, however, as Deuteronomistic inventions made up from typical phrases of Jeremiah and cast into the first person to give them an air of authenticity. John Bright

in his commentary on Jeremiah (Anchor Bible, 1965) thinks that there was a gradual coalescing of various strands of Jeremiah tradition by editors in the exile who shared the common style and terminology of the Deuteronomists. Some agree with the older view expressed by Oesterley and Robinson (*An Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament*, 1934, p. 302) that this was the common prose style of the seventh century, shared by both Jeremiah and the Deuteronomists alike. But a more recent tradition-critical approach by E. W. Nicholson (*Preaching to the Exiles*, 1970) offers a more positive way forward. He argues that in the prose oracles, nuclei of Jeremiah's sayings have been taken by the Deuteronomists and used as a basis of their preaching to their fellow-exiles in Babylon, so that Jeremiah's words and ministry received a fresh impetus and new application in a new situation.

It will be readily seen that such tradition criticism affords a very positive value to "glosses" and later additions. Far from being unfortunate "false" accretions to the prophetic books, they are testimony to the continuing vitality and relevance of the Word of God. That Word always addresses a specific and particular situation, but proves to have a capacity for coming fresh to new situations. For a very sensitive and forceful expression of this view, see P. R. Ackroyd, "The Vitality of the Word of God in the Old Testament", in the *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute*, I, 1962, pp. 7-23. The same principle is to be seen at work in the way that later Scripture passages offer exegesis of earlier ones. It is not that invention ran out in the later prophets, but rather that they saw in the later events of their own time a working out and fulfilment of the Word of God spoken through earlier prophets and expressed in the old traditions. This understanding characterises the present writer's treatment of the post-exilic prophets in his commentary on Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi (*Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 1977). It is being expanded to cover a wider section of the post-exilic Biblical literature in a forthcoming book, *Exegesis after the Exile*. The process is continued in the inter-testamental Jewish literature, among such groups as the Qumran Community with their Bible commentaries, and, of course, in the use of the Old Testament by the Christian Church in the New Testament and in its continuing liturgical use. This brings us to the point of departure for those who are now urging a consideration of the Canon as a vital principle for Old Testament interpretation, what might perhaps be termed "Canon Criticism".

However, we must mention first another contemporary method of interpretation, namely that of "Redaction Criticism". While earlier literary criticism, as we have seen, concentrated upon analysis and division of the writings into their constituent parts and originally separate sources, more attention has been given lately to the process by which all these individual parts have been brought together and arranged into their present order. The purpose and theological aims behind such redaction are seen to be a very important part of the study of the books and, indeed, of the Old Testament as a whole. To select

one example, almost at random, one may cite the recent commentary on Micah by J. L. Mays (Old Testament Library Series, 1976). Although, in common with a great number of recent commentators, he finds "genuine" Micah sayings only in chapters 1-3, he devotes more than one third of his introduction to an examination of the theological and other motives which lay behind the present arrangement in the book of alternating bands of threat and promise. There is not space here to trace his argument in detail, but he can offer the following as a summary of the process of the creation of the book which he traces from the end of the eighth century B.C., through the Babylonian exile down to the fifth century B.C.: "The creation of the book seems to have taken place in all its phases as a self-conscious act of prophetic work. That is to say, not only are the units collected in the book primarily of prophetic genre, but the discernible stages of its growth reflect an intention to maintain a focus on the proclamation of YHWH's reign as the purpose of the emerging whole". In other words, redaction criticism argues that the whole had something to say, in the view of the final redactor, which was more than the sum of its individual parts, more, perhaps, than Micah himself had to say in the eighth century; but none the less a vital and relevant Word of God to the exilic and post-exilic community in Jerusalem.

Another line of study which also takes seriously the final form of a narrative or a passage, is that which has come to be known as "Structural Analysis". This has tended to be welcomed a little more enthusiastically on the western side of the Atlantic than in Britain. It naturally concentrates most upon narrative material within the Old Testament. In responsible hands it can again, like redaction criticism, direct our attention away from mere analysis to the skill and high theological purpose of the one who is responsible for the final form of the narrative. A very good recent example is the all-too-brief work by Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Genesis 1-11: Studies in Structure and Theme*, 1978. In the hands of the less responsible, however, this method can become an exercise in the fanciful, throwing more light on the ingenuity of the commentator than on the designs of the original redactor.

There is space only for a brief mention, finally, of the principle of "Canon Criticism" to which allusion has already been made. Those who are directing our attention in this way, argue that we cannot study the Old Testament as though it had not become part of the Christian Canon. Indeed, we should probably most of us not be studying it at all, had it not done so. It comes to us across whole centuries of understanding, interpretation and application. It has not only its original context in ancient Israel, but a "secondary" context in the life, the faith and the worship of the people of God in every succeeding age. Obviously, we must start from the closest, most scholarly examination possible of that original meaning and setting. Without that, it becomes loosed from its roots, prey to every whim and fancy of the commentator. But without seeing it also in its setting in the life of the

community of faith, as it is further applied in the later parts of the Old Testament itself, as it is used in the New Testament with Jesus Christ as the key to its understanding, and in subsequent Christian exposition and use, the critical and historical studies are barren and lifeless, condemning the Old Testament to aridity and irrelevance in the eyes of large sections of the membership of our Churches. Such an approach has been most powerfully employed in the quite epoch-making commentary on Exodus by Brevard S. Childs of Yale (Old Testament Library Series, 1974) where each section is not only treated to literary and form criticism of the standard type, but treated in its Old Testament context, its use in the New Testament and in the history of Christian exegesis since. This method has been taken further, in his new introduction to the Old Testament, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979). This approach has also characterised a most interesting new treatment of the subject of Old Testament theology by R. E. Clements, in a book of that name, published in 1978. Insofar as the present writer may himself venture to turn prophet, he would say that this field of enquiry offers one of the most hopeful ways forward in the Old Testament studies of the future.

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## Baptism in Context: Further Reflections on Louisville 1979

THE LAST issue of the *Quarterly* included the official report of the consultation on baptism held at Louisville in 1979 between representatives of the Baptist World Alliance and of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.<sup>1</sup> It also contained an introduction to the consultation by Dr. Morris West and his comments on it, written from the background of many years' involvement in Faith and Order discussions.<sup>2</sup>

I have been asked to add my comments as someone who was also present at Louisville but there very much as a new boy to Faith and Order at the world level. I was fortunate to have been invited there to feed into the discussions the experience of those Local Ecumenical Projects in England where both forms of baptism are practised within one local congregation. My major concern therefore is with the context of baptism in both church and society and I was glad to be included in the small group at Louisville which discussed "Contextuality". My comments in this article are all on this aspect and I note that Morris West remarked "It may be that the section of the