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The Old Testament and the Material World

Dr. Williamson, who is a lecturer in Old Testament in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, here shares with a wider audience the text of the lecture which he gave to the friends of Tyndale House at their Open Day in 1982.

Speakers at Tyndale House Open Days are allowed a completely free hand in the choice of their subject.¹ I should therefore begin by explaining the considerations which led me to choose this particular topic.

First, I believe that the Old Testament's attitude towards materialism and the material world is one of abiding significance. Assuming that what I say this afternoon represents a fair explanation of that attitude, we shall therefore not merely be looking at some fascinating corner of the academic's vineyard; we shall, rather, be touching on an area that still carries authority for our thinking and actions today.

The area is, however, one over which there seems always to have been considerable confusion in the Church. On the one hand, we feel ourselves continually challenged in an uncomfortable manner by such passages as the command to sell all and give to the poor, passages which have been partly responsible for the ascetic tradition in Christianity with 'poverty' regarded as a major virtue. Then on the other hand the Church has rarely been stranger to the quietist attitude towards materialism in which wealth fairly obtained is accepted gratefully and those with less should remember the command not to covet. The children's hymn catches the mood well:

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at the gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.

Appeal to the instructions to slaves and masters in some of the Pauline epistles might be said to encourage such an outlook.

The New Testament, then, could appear to speak with discordant voices over this issue, and the perplexity of much of Western

¹ This paper was conceived and written specifically for the Tyndale House Open Day on 15 May 1982. Apart from some slight revisions for the sake of publication, I have therefore considered it best to retain the informal style of presentation rather than to rewrite it beyond recognition.

Christianity towards it testifies to the dilemma. A second reason for choosing my topic, therefore, is that in my opinion some of the difficulties can be eased if the passages in question are regarded against an Old Testament background. As so often, the wider context of Scripture is frequently illuminating — if only we could understand it.

Thirdly, considerable interest has been shown in academic debate concerning these matters in recent years. In particular one notes the emergence of 'the land' as a possible unifying theme in Biblical Theology. More generally, the increased awareness of the value of a sociological approach to the Old Testament has inevitably tended to focus attention on materialistic rather than purely theological concerns, in so far as it is possible to draw a distinction between these two. So we have, to name but a few, weighty tomes such as W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*,² and *The Tribes of Yahweh* by N. K. Gottwald, subtitled *A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1979; London, 1980). At the more popular level we might mention W. Brueggemann's *The Land*³ and W. Zimmerli's helpful little book *The Old Testament and the World*.⁴ Nor should we forget contributions from researchers at Tyndale House, notably Chris Wright's dissertation, *Family, Land and Property in Ancient Israel*,⁵ which opens up new avenues with regard to property ethics. Indeed, Dick France,⁶ who was actually responsible for inviting me to speak today as his last will and testament to his successor, himself addressed one of these Annual Meetings some years ago on the subject 'God and Mammon', *EQ* 51 (1979) 3-21. Perhaps, therefore, our subject today could be regarded as a somewhat slight counterpart to his paper from the Old Testament side.

I say 'slight' advisedly, for that brings me to the final consideration which influenced my choice of subject. It is unlikely, I imagine, that many Friends of Tyndale House will read many, if any, of the works I have just listed. Gottwald's book, for instance,

² W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land. Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974).

³ W. Brueggeman, *The Land. Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Overtures to Biblical Theology. Philadelphia 1977; London, 1978).

⁴ W. Zimmerli, *The Old Testament and the World* (London, 1976; a translation by J. J. Scullion of *Die Weltlichkeit des Alten Testaments*, Göttingen, 1971).

⁵ Cambridge, 1976. See now C. J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God* (Leicester, 1983).

⁶ Dick France was Warden of Tyndale House from 1978 to 1981 before taking up a position as senior lecturer in New Testament at the London Bible College. He was succeeded as Warden by Dr. M. J. Harris.

is over 900 pages long. It addresses itself directly at specialists and uses all the jargon and apparatus of their trade. It assumes extensive knowledge of contemporary Old Testament scholarship and many of its presuppositions and conclusions would be unacceptable even to what might be called the 'left wing' of the Tyndale Fellowship. And yet, that does not mean that evangelicals have nothing to learn from it or other works of its kind. It seems to me that part of what the Friends of Tyndale House expect of those who work here is to sift just such material as this, to combine what remains with more traditionally accepted guidelines for belief and conduct and to present the whole in an intelligible manner. Perhaps what we consider today can help that effort in a small way.

I.

Although it might seem logical to broach our study at the point where the Old Testament begins — namely creation — it is in fact clear that Israel's developed theology of creation only followed after her awareness that God had called her to be his own people and to live, not all mixed up with others in Mesopotamia, nor as slaves in Egypt, not even in separated isolation in the desert, but as a nation, both like and unlike other nations, in her own land. Israel worked back from this conviction to consider its implications: this God had also created the world alongside the land of Israel; he had populated it with peoples other than just Israel. And so it is that much of the teaching about creation reflects the most developed of Israel's theological thought. From a systematic point of view it naturally comes first, but as we try to build up our own edifice it should perhaps come last as the final capstone.

An easier, because more localized, point of entry is therefore through God's promise and ultimate gift of the land to Israel. It is the first element in the foundational promise to Abraham:

Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land which I will shew thee; and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and make thy name great . . .

(Gen. 12:1-2).

Significantly, land comes first, and then people. It is a moot point to what extent one can speak of a nation in isolation from its territory. Certainly in the Old Testament, at any rate, Israel is never her true self when she is separated from her land. From the first words of promise on, people and land are inseparably joined. This is not just a matter of primitive religion which believed that God could only be worshipped on his home

ground, so to speak. Of course, there are examples of that too, such as when David complains to Saul that 'they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of the Lord, saying "Go serve other gods"' (1 Sam. 26:19), or where Naaman the Syrian takes two mules' burden of earth in order to be able to worship the Lord back in his own country. But these are not typical. Rather it was that, as we shall see, so many of the social structures and institutions which characterized Israel and made her into the unique people she was were related directly to the land, the soil, of Israel. The nature of Israel's first call in Abraham ensured that there could be no opposition of 'spiritual' and 'worldly', if by the latter was meant maintaining one's distance from anything to do with life in, and management of, the material world.

Now why was this so? and how did it work out? We can answer this most easily by comparing the ideals which Israel was intended to follow with what we can glean of God's own relationship to this land.

Fundamental here is the well-known statement in Lev. 25:23:

And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine: for you are strangers and sojourners with me.

Some scholars have run into difficulties by finding here a theology different from that in which God 'gives' the land to Israel by leading the conquest against the indigenous population. But we need not delay here, for the difference is one of emphasis only; the ability to give implies ultimate ownership in the first place.

Now, if God was thought to have remained as landlord, we might have expected Israel to have to pay a steep rent for what was regarded, by all accounts, as a very attractive tenancy. He would not have been the only God in the ancient near East to do so. One must not generalize too glibly about these things in view of the huge geographical distances and long time scales involved in which we both expect and find enormous variation. But one is impressed with the extent to which amongst Israel's neighbours the economy was dominated by the temple, its lands and personnel. Of course, the positive role which the temples could and did play should not be overlooked: not all offerings remained in temple storehouses, but could be used as a means of redistributing produce from farmers to workmen and others engaged in the temple employ, itself to be defined quite widely. But if the temple organization as a whole was in any way regarded as 'God's business' in, say, Egypt, then, for all its exaggeration,

Gottwald's following statement still makes a point worth weighing:

The priesthood among Near Eastern peoples was closely tied to the ruling and aristocratic circles and tended to have disposal of a considerable share of the economic surplus. In Egypt, under the New Kingdom, the priesthood came to own or to control immense amounts of land. Public sacrifices in the ancient Near East consumed considerable quantities of agricultural and pastoral products, and these sacrifices tended to be symbolic accompaniments of the delivery of economic surpluses from the general populace into the keeping and control of the ruling classes (p.695).

Similarly, a recent text book on law and the administration of justice in the ancient near East can generalize on the earlier Sumerian city states by saying:

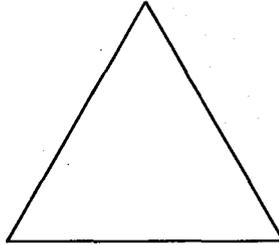
The priests at the temples exercised a dominant influence. The temples were the main, perhaps even the sole, landowners. Apart from their religious functions, they also had therefore a decisive economic importance . . . Secular and spiritual power were amalgamated, individuals enriched themselves from the temple goods, and the socially weak were oppressed.⁷

With this, a contrast may certainly be drawn from the Old Testament side. Again, there is variation to be noted through the centuries, but prominent throughout remains the insistence that the tribe of Levi, the primary cultic functionaries, had no tribal inheritance. They were dispersed throughout the other tribes, and in Deuteronomy they are frequently commended to the charitable care of their fellow Israelites. Further, as a general rule sacrifice seems to have been on a modest and limited scale in Israel. There are a few occasions, such as the dedication of the temple, when the numbers of sacrifices involved are enormous, but this came from the king's bounty rather than from the common people. Again, however important the temple may have been for the religious life of the people, its economic role in the pre-exilic period, at least, would appear from the silence of our sources to have been quite modest. Nor, indeed, must we forget that Israel was well established in the land long before the Jerusalem temple was ever built.

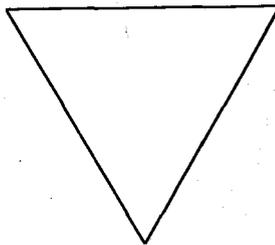
We may confidently assert, therefore, that God's ownership of the land was not at all regarded as being for his own benefit. Rather, if he owned it, then that was in order that he might 'give'

⁷ H. J. Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and the Ancient East* (London, 1980) 53 (E.T. by J. Moiser of *Recht und Gesetz im Alten Testament und im Alten Orient*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1976).

it to his people. By 'his people' is meant not Israel regarded as a single unit which could then organize itself economically along the lines of 'might is right'. Far from it! The people in the relevant texts are the smallest land holding units into which Israelite society was split up. Thus it is no coincidence that the verse I quoted earlier from Leviticus which contains one of the strongest assertions of the Lord's ownership of the land comes in the heading to the passage dealing with the redemption of land which an Israelite may have had to sell to another Israelite because he had fallen into debt. In other words, if God was the land-owner *par excellence*, who had chosen to have the smallest units of Israelite society as his immediate tenants, then there was, in theory at least, a guarantee against wealth ever being concentrated into the hands of just a few. One might illustrate the point diagrammatically with two triangles:



In this first one, the base represents the people whose effort and resources move upwards to support the one — in this case God himself — at the top. This is the pattern which we normally associate on the human level with any kind of feudal system, and in religious terms it is diagrammatic of much ancient near eastern religion, in which mankind was formed for, and should continue to work for, the benefit of the gods.



In this second diagram, the triangle is precisely reversed. While this may be oversimplified, what we have seen so far would

suggest that in the sphere of the material world God's ultimate ownership does not lead to activity from below to support him, but rather is itself the springboard for activity to support those whom we normally regard as being at the bottom of the pile. His representatives in Israel — the Levites — are actually found amongst them; his cult imposes but a small burden on the people, and He himself is active to ensure that the wealth, represented predominantly by land ownership, is kept on as broad a base as possible.

II.

From this simple proposition, I wish to go on to suggest that many of the laws, institutions and other aspects of Israelite society which we see in the Old Testament have their explanation as being imitations of this same pattern on a reduced scale.

Let us start again with the land itself and its distribution amongst the people. Israel never lost sight of the fact that God had not just given them any land, but one whose natural resources and agricultural potential were very considerable. There is a note of innocent delight and wonder in what is probably the best known description:

the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, springing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, and vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of oil olives and honey; a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack anything in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig copper (Deut. 8:7-9).

That this good land was intended to be enjoyed equally and fairly by the people is clear from the way that its distribution is described, particularly in Joshua 13:19. This passage lists in detail the extent of the various tribes' 'inheritance'. The actual distribution, however, is said not simply to have been to the tribes alone, but to each tribe 'according to their families'. — 'And Moses gave unto the tribe of the children of Reuben according to their families' (Josh. 13:15), and so for each of the tribes in the following lists. In practical terms, this emphasis on what is translated as 'families' was of the greatest significance. Virtually all recent studies of the organization of Israelite society have agreed that it is extremely difficult to define exactly what a tribe was — how it was administered, what its function was within the nation, and so on. The really important unit so far as the bulk of the population was concerned was this one of the family, or perhaps better 'the clan'. This was a unit which stood midway between what we

think of as a 'family' and the larger tribe. The family, or 'father's house', as it is generally called, consisted of three or even four generations of descendants from a single, living man, the head of the father's house. (Hence the saying about 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the children's children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation'.) These families were grouped together into the larger unit of the clan on bases that are not made fully clear. No doubt considerations of natural descent played an important part here too, but as any who have tried to trace their own family tree will quickly realize, these would not have been sufficient on their own: society is too fluid for such a distinction to continue indefinitely, so perhaps other factors like geographical considerations — for instance those closely related families which inhabited a single valley — also played a part.

Now, if it was to such units as these that the allotment of the land was made, it is clear that an important part of their social role thereafter was to maintain intact not just the group's hold directly on the land, but the hold of each individual member who made up that group. This is impressed upon us by the wide variety of texts, both legal and narrative, which deal with the function of the *gō'ēl*, often translated as 'kinsman redeemer'. The extent of kinship within which the 'redeemer' operated was precisely the clan as we have defined it and not just the immediate family, as is sometimes supposed on first reflection.

There are four main circumstances in which the *gō'ēl* was to function, and it will be seen that three of these relate directly, for the most part, to different aspects of the individual's security of land tenure.⁸

First, and most obvious, is the case of someone who has fallen into debt to the extent that he may have to sell, or may have already sold, his property. The relevant legal text comes immediately after the passage we looked at earlier asserting God's ultimate ownership of the land. It states

If your brother becomes poor, and sells part of his property, then his next of kin (*gō'ēl* *haqqārōb*) shall come and redeem what his brother has sold.

However utopian laws such as this may appear, two narrative passages indicate that its implementation was certainly a practical option. The first relates to Jeremiah at a time shortly before the

⁸ The fourth deals with blood vengeance and so with protective association, but not in our specific terms. Hence no more will be said about it here.

exile when most people would have considered that dealings in real estate were a lost cause:

Jeremiah said, 'The word of the Lord came to me: Behold, Hanamel the son of Shallum your uncle will come to you and say, "Buy my field which is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours". Then Hanamel my cousin came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, "Buy my field which is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself". . . . And I bought the field at Anathoth from Hanamel my cousin . . .'

(Jer. 32:6-9).

The second example is part of the more involved case in the well-known story of Ruth:

Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there; and behold, the next of kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, 'Turn aside, friend; sit down here'; and he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, 'sit down here'; so they sat down. Then he said to the next of kin, 'Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land which belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and say, Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you'

(Ruth 4:1-4).

The second role of the *gō'el* is closely related to the first, for it concerns someone who has had to go so far as to sell himself into slavery in order to repay his debts. As it is already implied in the story of Ruth just cited, here it is explicitly stated that this role could be performed by any member of the clan:

If a stranger or a sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him is poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner with you, or to a member of the stranger's family, then after he is sold he may be redeemed; one of his brothers may redeem him, or his uncle, or his cousin may redeem him, or a near kinsman belonging to his family (clan) may redeem him

(Lev. 25:47-9).

The third role of the *gō'el* might seem to take us a step further away from our immediate concern, but in fact it is probably to be linked in quite closely. This concerns the question of the Levirate marriage where a 'brother' is expected to father children to a childless brother's widow 'that his name may not be blotted out of Israel' (Deut. 25:6). Clearly here there was no danger of the property of the deceased passing out of the hands of the clan, since the brother could himself inherit it; as far as material

concerns go, therefore, the aim was again the protection of the rights of the smallest family unit, and not just of the larger group.

In passing, we should note here the similar emphasis in the celebrated case of the daughters of Zelophehad. This man, we are told in Numbers 27, died without a male heir; could his daughters then inherit? The ruling given was that they could:

you shall give them possession of an inheritance among their father's brethren and cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them.

Only if the man had no daughters, the law continues, should the inheritance pass to his brothers, or his father's brothers, and only failing that 'to his kinsman that is next to him of his family'. Thus here too the clan existed to protect the individual, and not vice versa.

To sum up so far, then, it should be clear first that the distribution of the land was made initially to the comparatively modest sized clan and secondly that the social function of these clans was not just their own protection, but rather the protection of the material rights of their individual members. They have thus been fairly defined as

a protective association of families which operated to preserve the minimal conditions for the integrity of each of its member families by extending mutual help as needed to supply male heirs, to keep or recover land, to rescue members from debt slavery, and to avenge murder. These functions were all restorative in that they were emergency means to restore the normal autonomous basis of a member family
(Gottwald, p.267).

We may now move on to observe next that this kind of protection was not only left to the efficiency or otherwise of the social structure; it was also given the force of law, and enshrined in Israel's instruction literature, the Book of Proverbs. We have time for only one example here, but it is particularly clear and instructive. It concerns boundary stones which, of course, marked the extent of an individual's property before such matters were regulated by the kind of title deeds with which we are familiar today. It was not difficult, as can be imagined, to enlarge one's territory at the expense of one's neighbour by simply moving such stones while his back was turned. Prohibition of such an anti-social practice is, not surprisingly, found elsewhere in the ancient near East. In the Egyptian wisdom text of Amen-em-opet, we find these words:

Do not carry off the land mark at the boundaries of the arable land, nor disturb the position of the measuring-cord; be not greedy after a cubit of land, nor encroach upon the boundaries of a widow.⁹

Now there is nothing remarkable whatever in the fact that very similar words are found on more than one occasion in the Old Testament. What is interesting, however, is the way that they have been adapted so that they become expressive of the very different kind of outlook which we are examining.

In the legal text of Deut. 19:14, notice the distinctive addition to the ancient law:

you shall not remove your neighbour's landmark, which they of old time have set, in your inheritance which you shall inherit, in the land which the Lord your God gives you to possess.

The same thing is true in Israel's wisdom literature. This is particularly striking, both because it is often thought that the wisdom literature stands at some distance from characteristically Israelite thought, and because the section on boundary stones comes in a passage which seems to show some kind of relationship with Amen-em-opet and may even be quoting from it. Whether or not this is so, the characteristically Israelite addition is found here too:

Do not remove an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless; for their Redeemer (*i.e.* God) is strong; he will plead their cause against you (Prov. 23:10-11).¹⁰

So fundamental was the protection of the individuals' land tenure to Israel's distinctive identity that we find it coming time and again in the eighth century B.C. Prophetic condemnations. A couple of examples relating explicitly to the law of the boundary stone must serve for the innumerable passages which deal with the wider concerns of our subject in general:

The princes of Judah are like them that remove the landmark: I will pour out my wrath upon them like water (Hos. 5:10).

Woe to those who devise wickedness
and work evil upon their beds!

When the morning dawns, they perform it,
because it is in the power of their hand.

They covet fields, and seize them;
and houses, and take them away;
they oppress a man and his house
a man and his inheritance

(Mic. 2:1-3).

⁹ Translation by J. A. Wilson in J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament* (3rd edn, Princeton, 1969), 422.

¹⁰ Note also Prov. 15:25: 'The Lord tears down the house of the proud, but maintains the widow's boundaries'.

Here, then, is one small example of how Israel's law, her instruction literature and her prophetic writers are deeply influenced by her understanding of society which works for the benefit of the poorest rather than the most privileged. Other examples could, of course, be given: laws for the periodical release of slaves, the year of jubilee, gleaning rights at harvest time, and so on.

III.

From this 'grass roots' protection, I want now to move up the social scale. We could stop off at various levels, but there is something always to be said for going to the top, so let us take a look at the role of the king himself. Here, the contrast between the ideal that was expected and the actual practice of which we read so often is not just a question of degree, but of complete contrast — of upside down triangles, if you like.

For a change, we may start with the negative side. When the Israelites first asked for a king in the days of Samuel, we are told that one of the reasons they gave was 'that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles' (1 Sam. 8:20). Now, the precise nature of kingship amongst Israel's neighbours at that time is of less significance for our purposes than the way in which Israel herself perceived that type of rule. And in case they had any doubts about it, Samuel gave them a forceful reminder which deserves to be quoted in full:

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and your asses and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves
(1 Sam. 8:11-17).

This is as clear a portrayal as could be wished of society organized exclusively for the benefit of the one at the top of the pile — the king. Nothing whatever is said about his responsibilities towards his subjects. The movement of manpower, resources, capital and income are all upwards, towards himself.

Now, Israel had a number of kings who fit that description very well. Best known of all, of course, is Solomon. Solomon is given a mixed press in the Bible. Judged from our standpoint, he does not come out at all well. He organized his kingdom with apparently complete disregard of all that had gone before. The old tribal boundaries were ignored as the land was redivided into more convenient taxation units. A lavish court and massive programme of public building demanded that an intolerable burden be carried by the people. Israel was secure and prosperous, but it led to bitter division, as Israel separated herself from Judah and so ultimately to loss of land.

Another example which is no doubt running through your minds is of King Ahab and the affair of Naboth's vineyard. You will recall that Ahab was coaxed into using his royal power to override Naboth's unwillingness to sell his vineyard to the king. 'The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers' (1 Kgs. 21:3). In the outcome, Ahab got what he wanted, but at what price? Elijah's words indicate once more that in God's land a different scale of values is in force whereby such manipulation of power and wealth leads precisely to its loss:

Behold, I will bring evil upon you; I will utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam (1 Kgs. 21:21-22).

Turning to the positive side of the coin, we find that Israel had its own ideal of kingship to set alongside this rather depressing reminder of a king 'like all the nations'. The ideal is set out in Deut. 17:14-20 in three parts. First, Israel may have a king, but only 'one from among your brethren . . . not a foreigner', that is to say, one with the same historical memory as the rest of Israel and who shares their same sense of values rather than lording it over them.

Second, he must observe certain prohibitions:

Only he must not multiply horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to multiply horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You shall never return that way again'. And he shall not multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply for himself gold and silver.

Military strength, international political alliances, as symbolized by the wives, and wealth: these are the basics of kingship as normally conceived, as seen already from Samuel's warning. And yet they are explicitly rejected here. What sort of king should Israel have then, and how is he to maintain the security of the kingdom? The third stipulation in Deut. 17 spells this out:

And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, from that which is in charge of the Levitical priests; and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes and doing them; that his heart may not be lifted up above his brethren, . . . so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children in Israel.

The king should, then, adopt those values which are found in the Pentateuchal law, and Deuteronomy in particular, values which, as we have seen, give top priority to the importance of respect for Israel's historical memory, with all that that means of the land as God's gift and of the protection of the poor and oppressed, the landless Levite and the stranger within it. In fact, care for 'the fatherless and widow' is a frequent feature in ancient near eastern legal codes from many different periods and places. Israel's distinctiveness in this regard is not simply in the words themselves, but rather in the completely new framework in which they occur: such a duty is not just one amongst others which, if overlooked, might lead to oppression as an inevitable out-working of the values naturally adopted in such societies. Rather in Israel, such concerns have been elevated into the very function of kingship itself, and so of those such as judges and elders further down the administrative scale until the lines link in with the base of the triangle already examined, formed by the clan as a protective association of families. Once again, therefore, unlike our usual understanding of the structure of society whose viewpoint is from the base upwards, we see that at no matter what point we break into Israelite society as ideally conceived in the Old Testament, its regard is steadfastly from the top down.

Not surprisingly, this ideal comes most forcefully to expression in some of the prophetic and poetical books. We may thus conclude this section of our investigation with one well-known example of each. First, the ideal figure of the coming king in Isa. 11. After stating that God's spirit will rest on him, the prophet continues:

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
 or decide by what his ears hear;
 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
 and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

...

Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist,
 and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.

Second, from Psalm 72 comes a prayer on behalf of the king,

which characteristically assumes that social justice and prosperity, long life and fertility are all inextricably bound up with each other:

Give the king thy justice, O God,
and thy righteousness to the royal son!
May he judge thy people with righteousness,
and thy poor with justice!
Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor!
May he live while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon,
throughout all generations!
May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth!
In his days may righteousness flourish,
and peace abound, till the moon be no more!

...

For he delivers the needy when he calls,
the poor, and him who has no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.

IV.

So far, I have tried to suggest that for Israel the material world in which she had been set — the land of Israel and the produce which derived from it — was good in itself. Ethically, the land *per se* was quite neutral, of course, but the Old Testament never for one moment suggests that there is anything morally wrong in the people enjoying its fruits. Danger ever only arose when powerful individuals or groups within society were tempted to exploit their position for personal ends rather than for the protection of those who were experiencing difficulty for whatever reason. There is no need here to document what is no doubt familiar to us all, that according to the prophets it was the overthrow of this ideal which was in large measure responsible for the loss of land itself in exile. Indeed, we should not overlook the poetic justice of 2 Kgs. 24: 15-16:

And he (Nebuchadnezzar) carried away (king) Jehoiachin to Babylon; the king's mother, the king's wives, his officials, and the chief men of

the land, he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. And the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valour, seven thousand, and the craftsmen and the smiths, one thousand, all of them strong and fit for war,

while the previous verse tells us that

He carried away all Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty men of valour, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths; none remained, except the poorest people of the land.

This judgement on those who so frequently sought to enrich themselves materially at the expense of God's desire for his people as a whole furnishes a clear illustration in Old Testament terms of the saying that 'whoever would save his life shall lose it'.

Nor have we time today to do more than remind ourselves of that development in Jewish piety which can be traced during the latest periods of Old Testament times and beyond. By now, the land was owned without regard to the ancient rights of inheritance, and poverty comes to be contrasted more with violence than with riches. So, one writer tells us, 'through the self-identification, generation after generation, of those who prayed with the poor in psalms of individual lamentation and thanksgiving — there gradually developed the specific connotation of "poor" as meaning all those who turn to God in great need and seek his help.'¹¹ This gradual, partial alignment of poverty and piety is, of course, relevant to the understanding of several New Testament passages, and it has often been fully studied from that angle.

Rather than tracing such a narrowing of concepts, I prefer to move towards a conclusion by just glancing at the wider implication of what Israel was taught through her national life. These, we may suggest, are to be found as one element in the Old Testament's reflections on creation, which we purposely left on one side at the beginning of our study. On the one hand, we have the emphatic and repeated emphasis in Genesis 1 that, parallel with Israel's experience of her land, the whole creation of the material world was 'good . . . good' and 'very good'. Man is told in consequence that he 'may freely eat of every tree of the garden' (Gen. 2:16), and these trees are described earlier in positive terms as 'pleasant to the sight, and good for food' (Gen. 2:19), suggestive of aesthetic as well as physical enjoyment.

On the other hand, man holds a unique place in this created order. Made in the image and likeness of God, he is to have

¹¹ H. -H. Esser, *NIDNTT* II, 823.

dominion over all other creatures. This juxtaposition is clearly intended to define the quality of man's dominion over the material world; it should approximate to the concerned control of the creator over his handiwork rather than being twisted to justify its despotic exploitation. It is not difficult to see behind this an expansion of the principles which should have been exemplified in the microcosm of Israelite society. Noteworthy too is the role the misuse of material provision plays in the account of the fall in Genesis 3.

Rather than dwell on the story of failure, it will do no harm to remind ourselves in concluding of the brilliant example of benign dominion with which the book of Genesis ends. Through his close relationship with God, Joseph was privy to the fact that the seven years of plenty in Egypt were to be followed by seven years of famine. Now what would today's business world make of such knowledge? One can just imagine the highly secretive investment in long-dated stock with the certainty of a real killing in prospect!

But what, in fact, do we find? Without waiting to be asked, Joseph follows his interpretation of the dream with advice as to how Pharaoh may plan ahead 'that the land (not just the court) perish not through the famine' (Gen. 41:36). Appointed to direct operations (he is described as 'ruler over all the land of Egypt'), Joseph is so successful that he is able to make provision not just for Egypt, but for the neighbouring peoples as well.¹² Finally, even in such adverse conditions, his rule is of such quality that both he is 'made fruitful', calling his second son 'Ephraim: For God hath made me fruitful in the land of my affliction' (Gen. 41:52), and also when his family come to join him in Goshen it is said that 'they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly in it' (Gen. 47:27). Surely we are intended to see here an echo of God's first words to mankind, where again these two themes are closely juxtaposed: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over . . .' (Gen. 1:28).

Perhaps here, I would like to suggest, we receive a possible

¹² It is true that according to Gen. 47:18-26 Joseph eventually agrees to the Egyptians' own suggestion that he should accept their land in exchange for food. Here it must be remembered, however, that the guidelines of specifically Israelite law would not have been applicable, and that even in these circumstances Joseph's administration is acknowledged by the people concerned as just and benign (verse 25), that he provides seed for the next harvest (verse 23) and that the people are allowed to retain 80% of the produce for their own use (verse 24).

suggestion as to why it was precisely to a rich ruler, according to Luke 18, that Jesus gave the command to sell all and give to the poor; perhaps too we learn something of what lies behind Paul's guidelines for the behaviour of the masters of servants, and of why the New Testament can with one breath apparently take an innocent delight in this material world while at the same time it warns against the dangers of riches and the love of money. In sum, we have had underlined from the Old Testament side that in the material world, as in any other, increased privilege carries increased responsibility, so that with the apostle we might learn how to be abased and how to abound, 'the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want' (Phil. 4:12).