

# The Biblical Concept of God

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Is there a God? What is his relevance for us today? These are questions frequently raised by people among whom we live. Since God is invisible and beyond the reach of human experiments, to many the term conveys no meaning and therefore he is pronounced dead. Whether the death of God is a theological or pragmatic pronouncement, still awaits a decisive verdict from those who uphold it. To the apostate as well as to the believer God is a mystery. The hidden reality of God becomes meaningful to men and women when faith extends towards the mystery in confidence. The veil of mystery is removed as one comprehends the meaning of revelation and one's life is illumined thereby.

Today as the belief in God has many challenges to face, it is necessary that we should make a fresh study of the biblical concept of God. In this paper an attempt has been made to reassess the cardinal theistic concept of the Bible. But the writer makes no claim that the paper is an exhaustive survey of all the materials available in this field. The chief concern of the paper is to submit the salient aspects of the biblical idea of God.

## *The Knowledge of God*

To 'know' in the biblical sense is to 'have experience of'. 'Knowledge for the Hebrews was not knowledge of abstract principles or of a reality conceived of as beyond phenomena. Reality was what happens, and knowledge meant apprehension of that.'<sup>1</sup> Therefore the knowledge of God is derived from what happens in the world of experience. The reality of God is not conceived as a 'Being', and the knowledge about him is not arrived at as a result of intellectual speculation. 'The proof of God's existence is not in man's reasoning but in God's own activity', says Rowley.<sup>2</sup> The Bible does not attempt to prove the existence of God. The concept is *a priori* and has priority over everything else. It is taken for granted. God's reality is

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. E. C. Blackman, 'Know ; Knowledge', in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, pp. 121 ff.

<sup>2</sup> H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel*, p. 50.

perceived through inner experience of individuals who share the conviction along with other members of the community. The knowledge of God through revelation is affirmed mainly in three channels of human experience.

(a) *In the Experience of Liberation*

The story of a slave people in the biblical account is very significant in our search for the knowledge of God. They are the people of Israel in Egypt. About the second half of the second millennium B.C. these people were abject slaves to the imperial power, Egypt. It was unthinkable for them to escape or to hope for liberation from the might of Egypt. Agony both within and without was their life situation. All of a sudden Moses, the son of a slave, at the same time paradoxically enough an Egyptian citizen thoroughly bred by Egyptian manners and customs, appears on the scene. He meets the people in the name of a living God. He makes no claim except that he is being sent by the God of their fathers. He proclaimed the *kerygma* of liberation in the name of Yahweh who appointed him as his envoy. The name of the God of their fathers was the only effective means to revive hope and confidence in the hearts of the people in despair. God was no stranger among the people because he was the one who called forth their ancestor from the land of Mesopotamia, from among strange gods. 'To make the people aware of the presence of Yahweh in their midst was exactly the task committed to Moses.'<sup>3</sup> The priority was given here to the presence, over the existence, of God.

The proclamation of liberation was followed by 'signs and wonders' in the name of Yahweh. Miracles at Exodus had not taken place by human valour, but by the activity of God. Here was laid the foundation-stone of Israelite faith in God's deed in history.<sup>4</sup> The first theologian of the Old Testament, the Yahwist, points out three aims of the 'signs and wonders' that were wrought in Egypt:<sup>5</sup>

- (i) to show that the God of Israel is the true Lord (Exod. 7:17).
- (ii) to show the power of the Lord that His name be declared throughout all the earth (Exod. 9:16).
- (iii) to show that the earth belongs to the Lord (Exod. 9:29).

Not only the 'signs and wonders' revealed the reality of God but the Exodus event itself was a great sign of the living power of God. 'The first result of the deliverance was that the Israel-

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<sup>3</sup> E. Jacob, *Theology of the O.T.*, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> H. H. Rowley, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Mathew, V. Kuzhuvellil, *God and Nature in the Book of Psalms*, an unpublished dissertation submitted to the University of Edinburgh for the Ph.D. degree, 1970, p. 47.

ites gained a conviction of Yahweh's power, and of Moses' authority' (Exod. 14:31).<sup>6</sup> The salvation-experience of the people led them to acknowledge and confess the living reality of a redeeming God. Since then 'recitals of the saving acts of God has become the moving force of the religion of Israel' (cf. Deut. 26:5-11).<sup>7</sup>

(b) *Through the Visible Phenomena of Nature*

The experience of the Psalmist was not different from that of the reaction of Immanuel Kant when he saw the 'starry heavens above'. To the Psalmist the heavens cause no dilemma. He sings,

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
The vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork ;  
Day discourses of it to day,  
Night to night hands on the knowledge. (JB, Ps. 19:1-2)

The phenomena of Nature convey the knowledge of God. The Wise Men in the inter-testamental period said, 'Yes, naturally stupid are all men who have not known God and who from the good things that are seen, have not been able to discover Him-who-is' (Wisd, 13:1 ff). St. Paul finds no excuse for those who question and reject the reality of God. He says, 'Ever since God created the world his everlasting power and deity—however invisible—have been there for the mind to see in the things he has made' (Rom. 1:20). The witness of the anonymous prophet of the exile is relevant in this context. He raises his rhetoric, 'Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?' (Isa. 40:21 ff; 45:18 ff). The revelation of God in Nature affirms him as the God of power. It is by the power of God that he brought forth existence into a reality. According to Speiser, 'the creation saga must have entered the stream of biblical tradition sometime in the latter half of the second millennium B.C.'<sup>8</sup>. The Patriarch who entered Palestine from lower Mesopotamia must have brought with him the conviction that God was the creator and controller of the natural phenomena. When he came to the land he was confronted with the belief in *El* who was *bny bnwt*—creator of the creatures<sup>9</sup> (cf. Gen. 14:19, 22). The early Hebrew religion was rooted and found nourishment in this ancient Ugaritic background where people acknowledged God as the creator of creatures. The

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<sup>6</sup> D. M. G. Stalker, 'Exodus' in Peake's *Commentary on the Bible*, p. 187e.

<sup>7</sup> G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts*, pp. 70 ff.

<sup>8</sup> E. A. Speiser, *Genesis 1*, pp. 10 ff.

<sup>9</sup> J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 150, col. 1.

knowledge of God through Nature has been recognized throughout the biblical revelation (cf. Matt. 6:25-34).

(c) *In the Expression of Moral Values*

The prophets of the O.T. declared God as a moral being. The source of 'moral law within' was traced to the creator who was believed to be the embodiment of all moral virtues. Since God is a moral being, the religion of Israel has been ethical in its very essence and not merely in its demands.<sup>10</sup> When we say that God is a moral being, it does not mean that he is governed by moral laws which are above him. He is the very source of all moral concepts.

In the book of Jeremiah, 'to do justice and righteousness, judge the cause of the poor and needy' is what is meant by the knowledge of God (Jer. 22:15 ff). The moral degradation of society in the eighth century B.C., according to Hosea, is due to lack of divine knowledge in the land (Hos. 4:1 ff). Isaiah of Jerusalem makes the same allegation for the moral crisis of society (Isa. 1:3 ff).

The witness of the N.T. also supports the O.T. view in this regard. St. John says, 'He who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love God does not know God; for God is love' (1 John 4:7-8). The demand for moral values proceeds from God (cf. Lev. 19:2). Wherever moral values are upheld, God is at work. All good comes from him (cf. Pss. 34:8; 145:9; Matt. 19:17). 'The N.T., generally speaking, carries on the O.T. conception of goodness, particularly in the theocentric character of its ethic, as contrasted with the anthropocentric or humanist ethic of ancient Greece and most moderns.'<sup>11</sup> The N.T. clearly states, 'For I know that nothing good dwells within me' (Rom. 7:18). Man cannot be just before the holy God. If he does good it will bring glory to God (Matt. 5:16). Man is created that he might reflect the nature of God in doing good works (cf. Eph. 2:10).

*Revelation and History*

We have seen that the knowledge of God comes to man through revelation which is made in the realm of history, nature and moral consciousness. The emphasis of biblical revelation is found in the realm of history. Therefore, the biblical account is often referred to as *Heilsgeschichte*—salvation-history—in which the events in the historical realm have been interpreted as the saving acts of God. The events in history in themselves do not communicate to us the knowledge of God or his revelation. To

<sup>10</sup> Cf. H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel*, p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> E. C. Blackman, 'Good' in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, p. 99.

say that history is revelation, is a misleading statement in the biblical context.<sup>12</sup> Events in Nature or history do not become revelatory by virtue of their place in human relation. One has to take into account the fact of faith in connection with revelation. Where there is no faith in God, historical events remain meaningless.<sup>13</sup>

The prophets of the O.T. who claimed a special relation to God interpreted the events in history as purposeful acts of God. It is true to say that the full development of the biblical understanding of God is due to the prophetic realization that he is the Lord of history, the controller of the rise and fall of nations and empires.<sup>14</sup> They maintained that the God of history is the same God who revealed himself through theophanies of natural phenomena and through verbal communication.

Since God is the supreme actor in Nature and history, he has the absolute power over creation. He does everything by himself and for his name's sake (cf. Gen. 22:16; Isa. 48:11; Amos 4:2, 6:8, etc.). In the book of Jeremiah we read, 'It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me' (Jer. 27:5; cf. Ps. 136:4 ff, 10 ff).

The interpreters of history, viz. the prophets, were men who stood in the council of God—*sod*, and received the counsels from him. They knew the mysteries of divine reality. The word *Sod* used in this connection is significant. It means council, counsel and secret.<sup>15</sup> The counsel which the prophets receive is the secret revealed in the private assembly of God. This is communicated usually through a vision—an intuitive insight, *Hazuth* (Isa. 28:2; 29:11) or *Hizaion* (Jon. 3:1; 2 Sam. 7:17). The open utterance of the word of God comes as a result of this inner personal experience of the prophet (cf. Isa. 1:1; Amos 1:1; Mic. 1:1; Ezek. 7:26). Prior to the revelation through Nature or history, the personal confrontation with the Deity is a condition which prepares the way for understanding the events in history and Nature as the acts of God. History is not a means of revelation to those who refuse to acknowledge this personal encounter with the living reality of God. It is the inner personal conviction and faith in God which leads one to understand revelation through history.

### *God of the Fathers*

God who is revealed to Moses was the God of the Fathers (Exod. 3:13, 15). The revelation to Moses was not a new

<sup>12</sup> Vid. W. Pannenberg, *Offenbarung als Geschichte*.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretations*, pp. 75 ff.

<sup>14</sup> A. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the O.T.*, by Brown, Driver and Briggs.

revelation but it was part of the cumulative effect of a story in temporal sequence.<sup>16</sup> *Theos Patros*—God of the Fathers—was a title applied to Yahweh in the pre-Mosaic period. Alt, in the light of Gen. 31:53, argues that the gods of the Fathers are all distinctive deities.<sup>17</sup> He holds the view 'that the part played by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the tradition of the Israelite sagas is principally due to their receiving a revelation from a god and founding his cult.'<sup>18</sup> The term need not be regarded as suggesting various gods. It represents the total divine experience of the Fathers. Here one should remember the oriental custom of designating titles to deities in the light of one's own personal experience. The Shield of Abraham, the Fear of Isaac and the Mighty one of Jacob are titles applied to the same God who has revealed himself in many ways.<sup>19</sup> To each one of them God revealed different aspects of his nature, to Abraham as protector, (Gen. 15:1) to Isaac the object of fear (Gen. 31:42) and to Jacob the might of God (Gen. 49:24). In all these epithets the power of God is strongly emphasized. This is a genuine Semitic concept. The Semitic root *El*—God—indicates the idea of might or power of God involving that of pre-eminence.<sup>20</sup> The other titles used in the time of the Patriarchs, viz. *El Shaddai*, *El Eleyon*, *El Olam*, *El Bethel*, etc., also convey the eternal majesty and might of the God of the Fathers. The Fathers shared the common Semitic belief in a God who is 'Übermächtig'.<sup>21</sup> The concept of God as *El Olam* has its parallel in the Ugaritic tablet. In the Ugaritic Pantheon we read of a god who is *mlk ab snm*—the king and eternal father.<sup>22</sup> The allusions suggest that the God of the Fathers was the same God who appeared to the Semites in the land of Canaan, Babylonia, and the Arab regions. 'What is of primary importance in this concept is not the feeling of kinship with the deity, but fear and trembling in the face of his overwhelming majesty.'<sup>23</sup>

We should remember that the settlement in Canaan which has a strong cultural and religious background, is one of the enriching factors that hastened the indigenous process of the faith of Israel. By taking over some of the Canaanite epithets, Yahweh has been declared as the mighty one, the creator of the heaven and earth (Gen. 14:19, 22).<sup>24</sup> The early religious tradition of Jerusalem has made its impact on the religion of the Fathers. 'Jerusalem cult in particular, with its own distinctive

<sup>16</sup> Cf. J. Barr, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>17</sup> Vid. Alt, in: *Essays on O.T. History and Religion*, 'God of the Fathers', pp. 1 ff.

<sup>18</sup> A. Alt, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. L. Kohler, *O.T. Theology*, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> E. Jacob, *Theology of the O.T.*, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Graffen Baudissin, W. E., *Studien Zur Semitischen Religionsgeschichte*, Heft 1, p. 292.

<sup>22</sup> O. Eissfeldt, *El im Ugaritischen Pantheon*, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the O.T.*, vol. 1, p. 179.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. G. Ostborn, *Yahweh and Baal*, pp. 11 ff.

heritage, placed a quite exceptional emphasis upon the cosmic and supernatural power of Yahweh, as the king of the universe.<sup>25</sup> Now, therefore, it has been widely acknowledged that Moses' revelation of God was not entirely a new revelation but was in continuation of the revelation given to the Fathers. They have really laid the foundation of the belief in God, the Lord of Israel.

### *Monotheism—Belief in One God*

The distinctive contribution of the Bible, one might categorically affirm, is the belief in one God. When did the Hebrews begin to acknowledge one God? Different answers have been suggested. According to von Rad, 'there is no question of it (monotheism) being due to a philosophic reduction of the multiplicity of numinous phenomena to the view of them as one. Monotheism as such was not a thing in which Israel of herself would have taken any particular interest.'<sup>26</sup> Von Rad does not suggest any specific period for the origin of a monotheistic concept in Israel. However, he finds the clearest expression for monotheism in Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. 41:1; 42:10; 43:9; 45:5 f.). What the anonymous prophet of the exile emphasized was a speculative monotheism, while practical monotheism was accepted from the period of Moses. In the light of the history of Hebrew religion one may trace the origin of belief in one God to the Yahwist-Elohists theologians of Israel. The Yahwist believed in the universal sovereign power of Yahweh.<sup>27</sup> Albright traces the origin of monotheistic belief to the times of Moses. He says, 'if monotheism connotes the existence of one God only, the creator of everything, the source of justice and mercy, who can travel at will to any part of his universe, who is without sexual relations and consequently without mythology, who is human in form but cannot be seen by human eye or represented in any form—then official religion of early Israel was certainly monotheistic.'<sup>28</sup> Rowley also agrees with Albright. Monotheism 'is the gift of revelation, begun in Moses and continued in the prophets, whereby God was making himself known, first to the people of his choice and then through them to all his creatures.'<sup>29</sup> Yahweh the God of Moses was identified with *El* by the Fathers. The plural form *Elohim* need not be regarded as a term which suggests plurality of gods. The term has been used signifying 'a totality of all manifestations of God, the totality of the Lords, so that it could be used for a great God or a great king'.<sup>30</sup> The

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<sup>25</sup> R. E. Clements, *Prophecy and Covenant*, p. 20; cf. Mathew V. Kuzhuvellil, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> von Rad, *O.T. Theology*, vol. 1, p. 211.

<sup>27</sup> B. Gemser, 'God in Genesis', OTS Deel, xii, 1958, pp. 6, 21.

<sup>28</sup> W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, p. 190.

<sup>29</sup> H. H. Rowley, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>30</sup> W. F. Albright, *History, Archaeology and Christian Humanism*, p. 93.

Egyptian Pharaoh was addressed, 'the king, my lord, my pantheon, my sun-god.'<sup>31</sup> Therefore we may conclude that Elohim truly represents the idea contained in the sacred tetragrammaton—*YHWH*.

The prophetic polemic against the idols, and the prohibition of making images emphatically deny the reality of other gods. But the substantial reality of Yahweh was emphasized through the use of anthropomorphic expression. Anthropomorphism has been used not to humanize Yahweh but to make him accessible to humanity. 'It holds open the door for encounter and controversy between God's will and man's will.'<sup>32</sup> God of the Bible, thus we see, is the One who reveals himself in history, nature and in the will of man, a God who is above and beyond man and at the same time with him and within him.

### *The Nature of God*

To understand the biblical notion of God one has to examine the attributes which the people ascribe to him. They address God using titles and epithets which have been given to them by way of revelation. Here we do not attempt to examine all the attributes of God but only the principal ones.

#### (a) *The Living God*

'The O.T. does not bring us ideas about God, but acts of God—a God who leaves his transcendence to link his own destiny with the destiny of a people and through that people with the whole humanity.'<sup>33</sup> In the revelation given to Moses through the name *YHWH*—the Lord—what is emphasized was not the existence of God, but the active presence of a Saviour. *EHEH ASHER EHEH*—I will be that I will be—has been revealed as the name of God. The older translation, 'I am that I am' conveys the mistaken notion that the God of Moses is a Being who exists. In the strict sense, the God of the O.T. does not 'exist' but only lives. The sacred Name insists that He is indeed what He is and that He truly accomplishes what He says.<sup>34</sup> His trustworthiness and dependability have been revealed to Moses (cf. Ezek. 12:25; Exod. 33:19) along with the living reality.<sup>35</sup>

The living God continued to act for the sake of His people (cf. Phil. 2:7 ff). As living God his essential character is life, and that is what differentiates him from the idols. As life, he gives life (Jer. 38:16; Isa. 42:5; Ps. 104:30). E. Jacob says, 'He is not living because he is eternal, but he is eternal because

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 483-490.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. L. Köhler, *O.T. Theology*, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> E. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. E. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 51; W. Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-190.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. L. Köhler, *op. cit.*, p. 24.



he is living' (Hos. 1:10).<sup>36</sup> God lives by his action in the realm of his creation, in history and in the lives of his people. But nowhere does he appear in a visible form. The means of revelation, man, matter and history, reveal three things:

- (i) God is invisible and therefore essentially spiritual,
- (ii) God is present in the midst of his people,
- (iii) God is unique, there is none like him.<sup>37</sup>

As living but invisible, God is Spirit. This definition may not be found in the O.T. But allusions suggesting this view are not a few in the O.T. (cf. Isa. 31:3; Hos. 11:9; Mic. 3:8; Num. 23:19). The N.T. brings out this definition—God is a Spirit, in John 4:24. The expression suggests that God is invisible, that he is real and that he is powerful. So the term *Ruah* adequately conveys the idea of power, invisibility and reality of God. The prohibition of making idols implies that it is impossible to make the image of a living God. They will represent only lifeless images of no-gods (cf. Ps. 115:4 ff.; Isa. 44:18 ff.).

It is the *Ruah* of God that strengthens the weak by imparting the life of God for righteous purposes. In the N.T. the Spirit stands for the living presence of God with men who have accepted the divine programme in Christ. The living God continues to be real to his believers through the Spirit. He is the life-giving, life-illuminating reality of God. He is the God of human experience.

The Bible does not have a theogony. This is significant. The living God does not have any origin, he has no beginning nor end. Both are in his hands. He is beyond time and space. If he begins in time and in space, then he is limited thereby. So the Bible carefully avoids any reference to God's origin. All that take life take it from him who is before everything else (Gen. 1:1; John 1:2 ff.). As life-giving power, he is Sebaothic, that is one whose power is like that of the summation of all armies.<sup>38</sup> We find the title 'Lord God of Hosts' several times in the Bible. It again and again confirms the power of the living God of heaven and earth.

### (b) *The Holy God*

In the cultic context *Qadosh* means 'that which belongs to God or that which is separated from the profane'.<sup>39</sup> Thus holiness becomes the very nature of God, God himself (Lev. 19:2). He is the separated one, the other, and therefore the transcendent deity. Köhler says, 'holy is at once exalted, supreme and fearful'.<sup>40</sup> The men of Beth-Shemesh say, 'who is able to stand

<sup>36</sup> E. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>38</sup> Vid. E. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 55, note 3.

<sup>39</sup> W. Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, pp. 273 ff.

<sup>40</sup> L. Köhler, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

before the Lord, this holy God?' (1 Sam. 6:20 ; Isa. 1:4, 5, 16, 19). The concept of holiness emphasises Yahweh's power and wholly otherness. Haenel, in *Die Religion der Heiligkeit* brings out five aspects of divine holiness from the points of view of distance: (i) Inaccessible holiness ; (ii) Holiness of majesty ; (iii) Holiness of jealousy ; (iv) Holiness of perfection ; and (v) Holiness of transcendence. Fr. J. Leenhardt's study from the sociological point of view traces three aspects of holiness in its development:

- (i) In popular circles holiness evolved from the simple *tabu* to become the expression of the covenant,
- (ii) The priestly circle regarded holiness as the setting apart of priests for the correct approach to sacred things.
- (iii) To the prophets God is holy towards men and holy in himself.<sup>41</sup>

Scholarly study has brought forth the relational and the powerful aspects of holiness. As a relational concept, it becomes a condition, a personal quality of God.<sup>42</sup> God wants that his people should be holy as he is holy (Lev. 19:2). The Holiness Code also makes the same demand (Lev. 17:26). *Qadosh* 'was experienced as a power, and not something in repose ; it was rather something urgent, and in every case incalculable' (cf. 2 Sam. 6:6 ff. ; Exod. 29:37).<sup>43</sup> The concept of holiness confirms that the God of the Bible is not merely a being inactive in existence, but a powerful living God who dwells in unapproachable holiness.

### (c) *The God of Love*

The living God of the Bible reveals himself through actions of divine love. Although he is transcendent and holy, his love brings him near man and his situation. His act in action and history is consistently in agreement with his nature of love. The *Ahava*—Love of God, for mankind—is revealed in the call of Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:3). It is that love which persisted in the election of the people of Israel (cf. Deut. 7:7 ff.), and continued as the faithful loyalty to the covenant which he made with his people. *Hesed*—the covenant-love, *Emunah*—faithfulness, *Emeth*—truth, are all terms which point out the essential character of God, viz. love. *Ahava* is the elective love and *Hesed* is the covenant love of God.<sup>44</sup> '*Hesed* is the great sacramental word of the O.T. faith', says Torrence.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Vid. E. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 93 n.

<sup>42</sup> W. Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, p. 137 ; cf. N. H. Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the O.T.*, p. 46.

<sup>43</sup> Pedersen, *Israel*, Vol. iii-iv, p. 264.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. N. H. Snaith, *op. cit.*, pp. 94 ff.

<sup>45</sup> T. F. Torrence, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1948, p. 60.

The essential nature of God has taken flesh in the form of the covenant. Karl Barth says, 'it is the goal of creation and creation is the way to the covenant'.<sup>46</sup> 'The covenant is the natural basis of creation, and creation the external basis of the covenant.'<sup>47</sup> The biblical revelation makes it apparent that the act of creation, election and preservation are all acts of divine love. The self-giving and self-revealing love present before us the objective reality of the world and the redemptive actions in history. The created order is provided for those who were brought near through the covenant-love. God created everything good and then he created man to subdue it and have dominion over it (cf. Gen. 1:28 ff.). He created the garden and then the man (Gen. 2:15 ff.). God called Abraham and provided him with the land of promise; he saved Israel from Egypt and provided them with their own land of heritage. He creates man anew in Christ and he creates a new earth and a new heaven (Rev. 21:1, 5; 2 Cor. 5:17).

Although we do not find in the O.T. a definition that God is love (1 John 4:8), we have a number of allusions which support this view (cf. Hos. 11:1, 8; Jer. 31:20; Isa. 63:15, etc.). The love of God continued in the N.T. with the new covenant in Christ (Mark 14:24). In Christ his contemporaries saw the divine love in action, in the realm of nature and history (cf. Luke 8:22 ff.). The holy God condescends, makes his presence available in the midst of his people as God with us—Emmanuel.

God-with-us in love opened for mankind opportunity for salvation. This was a positive response to the manifestation of love. It also brought condemnation for mankind—a negative response to the revelation of divine love. 'Jesus is certain that he is acquainted with the unswerving will of God, who sternly demands the good from man, through the message by which he is preached, thrusts man into the alternative of salvation or condemnation', says Bultmann.<sup>48</sup> The love of God does not exclude the wrath and judgement of God. Judgement is the other side of the coin. The loving God is the punishing God. But both experiences can be had as a result of human response to the love of God. Although God makes them available for man, it is for man to choose. Salvation and damnation are experiences ensued in consequence of the positive or negative responses to the love of God.

The concept of the fatherhood of God proceeds from the concept of the love of God. In the O.T. fatherhood of God is mainly a concept of authority and tenderness of God. This idea is a convenient terminology to express the loving nature of God. God is essentially without sex distinctions. What is significant is not his being as a father but his attitude as a father. The con-

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. iii/i, pp. 41 ff, 94 ff.

<sup>47</sup> E. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>48</sup> R. Bultmann, *Theology of the N.T.*, p. 23.

cept occurs at least 15 times in the O.T. (Deut. 32:6; Mal. 2:10; Isa. 64:8 ff.; Ps. 103:13 ff.). The term is seldom found in the Apocrypha, except four times (Wisd. 2:16; 11:10; 14:3; Sir, 51:10). Targum on the prophets hesitates to use the term. But the terminology is found very frequently in the N.T. Not less than 170 times it comes on the lips of our Lord, mostly in John and almost synonymous to God.<sup>49</sup> 'My father' is a term of revelation to Jesus.<sup>50</sup> God has revealed himself to Jesus like a father to his son. *Abba*, according to most scholars undoubtedly is *ipsissima vox Jesu*.<sup>51</sup> Jesus' filial relation to God rightly emphasizes the fatherhood of God which is expressed in the O.T.

#### (d) *The God of Righteousness*

'The fundamental idea of *sedek*—righteousness—which is available to us in the state corresponding to a norm, a norm which remains to be defined in each particular case', says Kautzsch.<sup>52</sup> 'In origin it is neither punitive, nor distributive, nor justificatory, but in a general way fidelity to a state or to a way of acting or thinking.'<sup>53</sup> It is an action, much more than a state.

The righteousness of God does not mainly connote a moral aspect. It is a term of relationship with man, God and animals.<sup>54</sup> It does denote what a relation should be. When *sedek* occurs with the proposition *Be* it has spatial and material connotations (cf. Ps. 89:17). The term qualifies the state of God's actions. It also states the nature of divine relation to the order of creation. '*Sedek* is the norm by which all must be judged—what this norm is, depends entirely upon the nature of God.'<sup>55</sup> God reveals his *Sedakah*—righteousness in actions of judgement and salvation. The paradoxical aspect of *Sedakah* has to be understood. It is in the suffering, death and the resurrection of Christ that God revealed his righteousness (Rom. 3:25–26). Sometimes the righteousness of God has been stressed in human social relationships. The eighth century prophets are champions of God's justice. Prior to eighth century B.C., Elijah championed the cause of the oppressed. This was not upholding the human rights but the cause of Yahweh's righteousness.

In the hope of Israel and of the Church God has a plan to execute his righteousness. And that is through the government of his servant, the Messiah. In the coming of Jesus, God inaugurated his kingdom. Jesus came preaching the good news of the kingdom to the poor, proclaiming liberation to the captives, sight to the blind, liberty to those who are oppressed. Thus the

<sup>49</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Prayer of Jesus*, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Quoted by E. Jacob in *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Cf. von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

<sup>55</sup> N. H. Snaith, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

year of Jubilee was proclaimed (cf. Isa. 61:1-2; Luke 5:18 ff.). Here we find the social dimensions of the righteousness of God in action.

As righteous king God is judge, shepherd, lord, and father of his people.<sup>56</sup> He establishes his rule, *Dharma-Mishpat* on earth (cf. Isa. 42:4). The chosen servant was called in righteousness—*beseдек*, to carry on the programme of God's righteousness. In Christ, the whole church has been called to fulfil this task. Christ is king and 'the discipleship begins and continues in the context of the experience of the activity of God as king.'<sup>57</sup> Loyalty to this king through actions in righteousness is the pragmatic responsibility of those who believe in the righteous purpose of God.

### Conclusion

The Bible affirms the absolute priority of God (cf. Gen. 1:1; John 1:1 ff.; 1 Cor. 8:6, 10:4; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:16). There is no account of his beginning, because he has no beginning. Since he has no beginning he has no end. He is beyond time-space dimensions. But he is known to man through revelation—in experience of liberation, of the objective reality, Nature and in the silent voice of the consciousness.

God is not a being who 'exists' in the philosophical sense. He lives and therefore he exists. His living nature has been revealed in action. But the actions in the realm of nature and history are not revelatory in themselves. It is personal confrontation of a personal deity that leads one to understand these acts as the acts of a living God. The result of this encounter in human experience comes out in the form of a declaration of faith. Such declaration does not merely state the ontological existence of a God, but the reality of a personal God who exercises his power for the redemption of man from his predicament in history. Here again faith is not an intellectual assent or affirmation of a proposition, but a trust and obedience to a personal God who saves man in his existential state. So God in the Bible is the redeeming reality in man's existential situation. God's reality is an existential awareness of salvation.

The significant characteristics of God, viz. his living nature, holiness, love and righteousness bring before us certain fundamental concepts. He is different from the idols who have no life. All life proceed from him. He alone is the true God, in the sense that he is dependable and trustworthy. He is transcendent but not far away from man because he is love. He is the Other, in the sense that there is no one like him and he is the only one, unique and incomparable. He is transcendent, that is, he is unapproachable and holy. The concept of transcendence

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. G. E. Wright and R. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God*, p. 27.

<sup>57</sup> N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 152.

and holiness are the result of the human sense of guilt and sin. God demands holiness from man.

The loving God bridges the gulf that is brought about as a result of human sin. That is through his love, *Ahaba* expressed in the covenant love. The covenant is the bridge that God made for man to be near him. The covenant found its fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth. The whole Bible deals with this relation of God to mankind. So the Bible is the Book of the Covenant.

The covenant-God demands righteousness in human relationships. The covenant is made that God's righteousness may be an actuality in the world. The covenant-responsibility is entrusted to the covenant-community. They are not alone in fulfilling the righteous purposes of the covenant-God. It is with Christ in whom God has sealed the covenant relation, that man has to work for the execution of God's righteousness.

Therefore, faith in God means acceptance of God's plan in Christ, and giving one's consent to God to work along with him for the fulfilment of that purpose. Belief in God makes life meaningful, history purposeful, and leads the creation towards its goal appointed by God, that is, to sum up everything in Christ.