

Dead Prey or Living Oracles?

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A study of some of the issues raised by G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, volume II* (Oliver and Boyd, 470pp., 45s.); *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Oliver and Boyd, 340pp., 47. 6d.); by W. Beyerlin in *Origin and History of the Oldest Sinaitic Traditions* (Blackwell, 191pp., 37s. 6d.); by O. Eissfeldt in *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 861pp., 70s.); by A. S. Kapelrud in *Israel from the Earliest Times to the Birth of Christ* (Blackwell, 152pp., 15s.); by W. F. Albright in *History, Archaeology, and Christian Humanism* (Mcgraw-Hill, 342 pp., 56s.); by J. Wood in *Job and the Human Situation* (Bles, 158pp., 15s.); by Murray Newman in *The People of the Covenant: Israel from Moses to the Monarchy* (Carey Kinggate, 207pp., 25s.), and by M. Noth in *The Old Testament World* (A. and C. Black, 404pp., 48s.).

It was Adam Smith who, in his book *The Preaching of the Old Testament*, coined the striking phrase that the patriarchs were to be approached 'not as our dead prey, but as our masters and brothers'. The application of the idea is wider than its original setting, and it undoubtedly offers possibilities as a useful classification of publications on the Old Testament.

CONTRAST

Take the following contrast: Eissfeldt, dealing with the Servant Songs, treads both painstakingly and painfully along the well-trodden path of previous studies, branches out to a personal assessment of the situation, concludes without argument or proof that Isaiah 40-45 consists of 50 poetical pieces, notes that in many passages, outside the standard list of Servant Songs, Israel is the Servant and is addressed as the singular 'thou', plumps for a general identification of Servant and nation — full stop. Von Rad, on the other hand (*Old Testament Theology*), taking brief note of earlier and other opinion, dwells exegetically on the rooted differences between the Servant and the nation, examines literary categories so as to show that an individual Servant is required — and a predicted or future one at that — sparkles forth into a brilliant 'type and anti-type' study of Moses and the Servant, closes 'the uneasy gap which makes itself felt between the Servant Songs and the rest of the message of Deutero-Isaiah', and finally issues out into New Testament application.

This contrast is not explained by saying that one is writing Theology and the other Introduction.

Each surveys, assesses, and concludes. Rather, the question for the man writing Introduction is, Introduction to what? A heap of literary bones surviving from the Ancient Near East? Or an integrated, vibrant, dynamic entity — a word from God? For all that their books are monuments of learning and industry, Eissfeldt's mammoth (predictable, and standard-type) *Introduction*, and Noth's (ditto) *Old Testament World* never get off the ground. Is there no more to the first five books than L plus J plus E plus B plus D plus H plus P equals Pentateuch as Eissfeldt would have us believe? And is this any better than 'Ye Ancient Near East Antique Shoppe' (prop. M. Noth)? Noth covers geography, natural and political history, religion, text and transmission, but all is summed up when we read that the religions of the ancient Near East 'provide background for the Old Testament' but are *not* told that the Old Testament stands in brilliant *contrast* to its setting in that farrago of mother goddesses, astral deities, and the like, and that it would class them as dead and profitless. A skeleton, must go back to Moses; contrary to the assertions of the German scholars who coherent if dry?

WHAT IS THE OLD TESTAMENT?

In other words, what is the Old Testament? Von Rad is in no doubt. The Old Testament is the living and absorbingly interesting Oracles of God, 'saving history ... a divine revelation ... the precursor of Christ's advent' (p. 329), not to be 'emptied of its content and filled with New Testament material' but something which itself 'contained pointers' and was 'hermeneutically adapted to such a merger' (p. 333). Von Rad develops this view of the relation of the Testaments in the last hundred pages of his *Theology*, but the earlier sections lead up to it. The Old Testament is a series of 'reinterpretations': patriarchal tradition is reinterpreted and adapted to Mosaic Yahwism, and Moses is reinterpreted and adapted by the prophets in such a way that the old schemes of salvation are brought into tension with the new truth that Yahweh is bringing final judgment on His people, and that their hope is not a backward-looking faith resting on the Exodus, but a forward-looking faith, expectant of a new act of salvation. Von Rad points out this contrast as he shows the development of prophecy from Elijah and Elisha through the great sequences of writing prophets taken in turn. But, from the evidence he provides, reinterpretation is a more exact description than disjunction. The balance of truth lies with Albright who, in a book of very forthright essays (*History, Archaeology and Christian Humanism*),

asserts that 'the religion of Israel did not change in essentials from Moses to Hillel', and that 'only the most extreme criticism can see any appreciable difference between the God of Moses in JE and the God of Jeremiah, or between the God of Elijah and the God of Deutero-Isaiah' (p. 154).

ALBRIGHT

Albright shows himself a hard hitter on another point also: the evidential value of archaeology. His book contains essays on a great array of topics (for example, 'Toward a Theistic Humanism' and 'Islam and the Religions of the ancient Orient'; and studies of the life and work of Breasted, Gerhard Kittel, Tonybee, Voegelin, and his own autobiographical sketch), but, as is to be expected and desired, he shines brightest in his special field. He explains the cleavage between the Germans (following Alt), and the archaeologists (led by himself). It appears that after 1930 Alt was cut off almost completely from contact with Palestine and non-German research, and he and his school attempted 'to replace the influx of empirical data from Palestine ... by systematic research along a *priori* lines', becoming increasingly out of touch with 'archaeological and empirical fact' (p. 266). If, therefore, Noth appears to feed on his own toenails, this, it seems, is the reason; at all events he will not allow that much direct fruit comes from the archaeology tree. Does archaeology confirm historical tradition? 'As things stand', writes Noth (*op. cit.*, p. 144), 'it is improper to expect such a confirmation. ... In no destruction ... which it is plausible to ascribe to the entry of the Israelites, is any evidence furnished as to who the enemy might have been'. Results for the biblical period are confined to evidence as to how the Israelites built walls, fortified cities, and buried their dead. Kapelrud, in a book which can only be explained by an uncontrollable lust for getting into print (*Israel from the Earliest Times to the Birth of Christ*), would appear gloomily to concur. Moses is 'one to whom the traditions have been linked, whether they originally had any connection with him or not', and as for the period following Moses, 'we are groping in the dark' (p. 24). Albright sings a different song. Thanks to archaeology, he maintains, we can show that the patriarchal narratives are true to their setting in the first half of the second millennium BC; monotheism, 'close their eyes to linguistic arguments', we now possess 'literary evidence for the earliest period of Israelite religious epics'; casuistic law reaches back into Mosaic and pre-Mosaic times; as to the psalms, there is 'evidence of the weightiest

kind for a return to essentially traditional dates'; 'archaeology throws its weight squarely against the aberrations of evolutionary historicism'; and the henotheism beloved of Wellhausen and his school 'sinks below the level attained in the surrounding Ancient Orient where the only alternatives were polytheism or practical monotheism, henotheism in the sense used by most modern Biblical scholars being apparently unknown'; and much more of the same sort.

'HISTORY IN OUR SENSE'?

To return for a moment to Kapelrud: while his book is too brief to be of very much use, it does highlight one really important matter, and that is the necessity of grasping the nature of history and of avoiding superficial handling of the concept of historicity. The Old Testament, he says (pp. 9, 10), is 'not written as pure history' nor is it (pp. 112-15) 'history in our sense'. Whatever does this mean? What is 'history in our sense'? Does the fact that the Old Testament is 'primarily a religious document' necessarily vitiate its historicity? (Cf. Newman's hesitation over the Exodus material on the ground that it was used as a Passover liturgy (p. 28). Incidentally, how does he know that it was so used? Albright provides a very salutary corrective by enquiring into the nature of historical judgments, and his five-fold list — judgment about typical occurrences, particular facts, cause and effect, value, and personal reactions — deserves close study, and repays it (pp. 22-28).

Obviously, if a person is thinking incorrectly about the nature of history, he will reach wrong conclusions in individual decisions. But not only so in history. It is impressive to what extent Old Testament study (as evidenced in these books) proceeds by very shaky logical progressions. 'Who is the Moses' asks von Rad (*Theology*, p. 10), 'who is so insistently given precedence over the *nebi-im*?' Contrast this hesitation over Moses (remembering the gigantic stature of the man portrayed in the Pentateuch) with the following fact and conclusion about Elijah: 'The impression given, . . . in all these stories is of a man of enormous powers. *Such a figure cannot simply have been invented* and can only be explained by saying that the stories reflect a historical figure of well-nigh superhuman stature' (p. 14. I have ventured to add my own italics). How logical is it, then, to evaporate Moses before the faceless ones, JEDHP?

The same applies in a fundamental way to von Rad's whole approach to the Pentateuch. One cannot be thankful enough to Oliver and Boyd for producing *Essays on the Hexateuch*. It is full of richness. There are great theological

essays, touching such subjects as the doctrine of creation, the Old Testament world-view, faith as righteousness, *etc.*, but the palm goes to the opening essay, written in 1938, in which von Rad works out his approach to the Pentateuch. No-one should read the first volume of the *Theology* without this as a *vade mecum*. Here we see a great mind in action, plus the 'workings in the margin'. But is it logically sound? The creed of Deuteronomy 26 and its associated cult-lyrics, such as 1 Samuel 12: 8, Psalm 136, and Exodus 15, all manage, to recite the basic facts of Yahweh's saving action, but all equally omit reference to Sinai and the law-giving. Therefore, von Rad asks us to conclude, the Sinai tradition was independent of the 'canonical pattern'. But is this conclusion valid? Let us put it this way: the Apostles' Creed and its associated cult-lyrics, Philippians 2: 5-11 and 1 Timothy 3: 16, all dwell on the basic truths of God's saving action in Christ, but none of them mentions the Sermon on the Mount or the Lord's Supper. This is undoubtedly true, but does it merit the drawing of any conclusion whatsoever?

Nevertheless von Rad, in the two books covered so inadequately in this review, has put every student of the Old Testament lastingly in his debt. Equally so have his opponents, Newman and Beyerlin. From two different points of view, the former historical and the latter literary, they have reached exactly the opposite conclusion about Sinai, namely, that it is integral to the Mosaic deposit. Newman's fascinating study (*The People of the Covenant: Israel from Moses to the Monarchy*), rests on the observation that J and E contain two different covenant theologies: that in J it is dynastic, and stresses the unbreakable nature of the covenant; while E's covenant theology is democratic, stressing the 'kingdom of priests' and the contingent nature of a covenant which looks for a response of faith and obedience. This same tension is evident throughout the monarchic period — the dynastic Judah is devoted to David's house while Ephraim becomes excited about charismatic hot-heads like Absalom and Ahijah of Shiloh. It was the genius of Moses to fuse traditional Kenite Yahwism (cf. Kapelrud: could the introduction of a foreign cultus have proved so decisive to Israel? p. 20). Exodus 18 is the covenant ceremony uniting the two streams of Yahwism, (this union was extended (Jos. 24) at Shechem to the tribes who were not in Egypt and a twelve-tribe amphictyony then came into being). During the sojourn at Kadesh, however, the tension became too great, and the six-tribe amphictyony then in being was shattered. Apart from the brief golden age of David, the breach was never mended.

Beyerlin's approach (*Origin and History of the Oldest Sinaitic Traditions*), is via the close analysis of documentary sources. He starts by re-defining J and E and shows that it is impossible to separate the traditions of the Exodus and Conquest from those of Sinai and the Covenant. He then elaborates this conclusion by examining the Hittite covenant forms, concluding that 'the parallels . . . are so numerous and so striking that one can hardly avoid the view that the Ten Commandments are — formally — modelled on the covenant-forms . . . in general use in the Near East of the second millennium BC' (pp. 54, 55); that Hittite treaties were not valid till written down and that we must therefore posit an originally written decalogue (p. 147); that the decalogue 'originated somewhere where we can count on the presence of those who experienced *both* the Exodus *and* the meeting with God on Sinai' (p. 145); and that such a cultic deposit requires a covenant-mediator, and 'since the Yahwistic-Elohistic tradition of Sinai ascribes this role to *Moses* . . . throughout, there is no need to doubt the correctness of this view, and certainly no proof that the oldest stratum did not mention Moses' (p. 150).

IMPORTANCE OF EXEGESIS

The problem raised by Newman's and Beyerlin's studies is a basic one: what is the importance of exegesis? It would take very little effort, for example, to show exegetically, from the Pentateuch as it stands, that everything which Newman holds dear can be explained on the basis of a full-blooded ascription of the Exodus-Deuteronomy corpus to Moses himself. Is exegesis subordinate to analysis, or the reverse? Again, Beyerlin analyses Exodus 19 into its sources, giving eight reasons for doing so. But each one of these eight, and all of them together, can be explained exegetically, leaving the passage as a unity. In fact, it is easier to do this than to accept the pleas and arguments entered by Beyerlin. This is a matter of the profoundest importance, not only in the Pentateuch but throughout the Bible, and not least in the prophets. Would we have Eissfeldt's interminable lists of passages interpolated in the prophets; or would we have von Rad's excision of 'Israel' from Isaiah 49:3, if Old Testament study had been dominated by exegetes instead of analysts and if an earlier generation had been humble enough to say 'I cannot see the connection between verses x and y' rather than so proud as to say 'There is no connection; y is the work of a glossator'?

Wood is not guiltless of this procedure in his masterly study of Job. Amongst other passages,

he concludes that chapter 28, the Elihu speeches, and Leviathan are late additions. But throughout his book he has provided an exegetical feast which none ought to miss. Nothing more than an appetiser can be given here, but these samples of delicate characterization are typical of a graceful and perceptive handling of the material. Here is Eliphaz 'gathering his straw from too narrow a field' (p. 53); Bildad 'a traditionalist (who) where-ever he looks back on the past, . . . sees only the best in it' and for whom 'there was nothing opaque in God' (p. 57); and Zophar, who, teaching that 'no man can find out the deep things of God' accepts this truth, and 'applies it to Job, but not to himself' (p. 63). Job's problem is correctly discerned: 'How man should behave in a situation in which there seems to be no meaning'; and so is the solution: 'An awareness that God is the Almighty . . . beyond and above any rebuke' to Whom 'the destiny of mankind can be safely and confidently left.'

It would be invidious to end by attempting a 'top-twenty'; it would also be needless, for the reviewer has made his preferences and antipathies plain enough! But for those who want to know which to choose for their sojourn on a desert island — for foundation, Albright; for stimulus, von Rad; and for an object lesson in what to try to do with the Bible, Wood.

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