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The Study and Interpretation of the Old Testament

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The subtitle of this study might well be: "Prisoners of Hope: New Perspectives for the Study of Old Testament History and Theology." The single Biblical occurrence of the phrase, "prisoners of hope" is located in a "messenger speech" (*Botenspruch*) in Zechariah 9:11-13:

As for you also, because of the blood of
My covenant with you,

I will set your captives free from the
waterless pit.

Return to your stronghold, O *prisoners
of hope*;

today I declare that I will restore to
you double.

For I have bent Judah as My bow;

I have made Ephraim its arrow.

I will brandish your sons, O Zion,

over your sons, O Greece,

and wield you like a warrior's sword.

Yahweh has a word of hope for His prisoners. The promise of deliverance from exile (reminiscent of the "pit" of Joseph, Gen. 37:24) is soon to reach fruition, because another era is dawning. The discipline of exile has prepared Israel for yet another task. She will serve in Yahweh's army, much as in the days of Joshua, now to conquer Hellenistic forces. We believe

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that most of the Old Testament may be included within the borders of "prisoner" and "hope."

Israel was a "prisoner" of the ancient Near East. Caught in the time and space of the second and first millennia B. C. in western Asia, Israel forged the significance of her special past—vouched through prophetic oracles—into meaningful shapes. When Israel enters the full light of history we see that essential elements in her new society are adaptations of structures already in existence. The twelve-tribe league was a federation of large social units around a central sanctuary. This is the *amphictyony*, a social pattern which may be traced back to third-millennium Nippur in Mesopotamia. The basic theological structure in Israel was the covenant which, as available evidence suggests, was apparently adopted from Hittite vassal treaties. Israel borrowed the structure of Hebrew poetry as well as a large stock of literary conventions from her Canaanite neighbors.

The confessional and apologetic needs of her hour required of Israel a ministry bound to the particularities of her world. Canaanite deification of forces in nature in a basically agrarian society resulted in orgiastic fertility rites. Israel officially responded with a renewed commitment to Yahweh, who ruled all history, including the cycles of rain and drought and all reproduction of life. As a result of her observations of patterns of kingship in the ancient Near East—from Egypt where

the king was the deity himself to Mesopotamia where the ruler served as a vicegerent of a divine patron—Israel could not but be thoroughly skeptical of virtue in monarchy. In a world that lavished great national resources on an artistic tradition and employed human genius to incarnate one deity after another in human form or animal form, Israel heard the word of Yahweh: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image." (Ex. 20:4)

In yet a more important way Israel was a "prisoner." Originally a disinherited social group, some Hebrews were called by Yahweh into a relationship with Himself. The formal instrument establishing the new society was the covenant. The creative energy required to fashion adequate literary and social forms of communication was born of the need to teach the faith to generations yet unborn. Freeborn Hebrews became slaves of Yahweh. That the figure of a servant should describe the burden of Israel was the reflection of one of her most authentic traditions. Precisely because she was committed to Yahweh, Israel was a "prisoner with hope."

It is not unnatural that on the level of "hope" we should find Israel less dependent on her world than on her own theological resources. Israel could hope in Yahweh because He came to her in her history. Because the past was real, the future contained hope. Where other people remembered their ancestors as semidivine beings, Israel recalled, "Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite" (Ezek. 16:3). This unparalleled sense of history Israel had learned from the form of the covenant which taught her to remember Yahweh's acts of

grace as the proper prolog to His requirements. When days were evil, Israel was liberated from futility by the memory of Yahweh's unilateral action at the Red Sea and the Jordan crossing. Salvation is of Yahweh.

Israel was indeed a people of hope. Rooted in the experience of her election to servanthood, Israel expressed her hope in the form of a new exodus, a new covenant, a new David, a new Zion, a new spirit. The future was a time of Yahweh's presence, often announced by the prophets to be the Day of Yahweh. They spoke of it as a day of battle filled with terror in heaven and on earth. The total destruction of the enemy would issue in complete victory for Yahweh (Is. 13 and 34). The literary form of this hope is often designated as "apocalyptic." The prophet Ezekiel uses several of its most characteristic images (Chs. 38—39). These esoteric descriptions of cosmic battles and unnatural events are often viewed as a flight from reality and as marking the dissolution of the Old Testament. Rather, they seem to offer testimony, in a new form, to Yahweh's continued rule. The wars of Israel described in Joshua-Judges may be seen as the true source for the Day-of-Yahweh pictures. With the many lines of fulfillment open, no one in the Old Testament knew the full and final answer to the question of how Yahweh would bring all things to their meaningful climax. Some, to be sure, were satisfied that Israel was itself the realization of all that Yahweh had intended.

The following paragraphs will attempt to illumine this perspective from which to consider the important questions being raised today regarding Old Testament his-

tory and theology. Every effort is made to avoid *imposing* the pattern of "prisoners of hope" on the material.

I. THE STUDY OF ANCIENT LITERATURE: MOLDS, MODELS, AND MANNERS

The literary critic serves a useful purpose, especially when he is dealing with the Old Testament. His task is to discern the inner units and unities that elude the average reader. Inevitably he confronts the problem of the meaning of the texts of the Old Testament. He is forced on the one hand to learn what is known about the social context of a pericope, and on the other hand he considers the unique thrust of that segment of literature in its special setting. He tries, of course, to distinguish the context out of which the literature comes from that to which it speaks. His tracing of the history of a given document or literary form may often be tentative. But even tentative outlines of the development of the literature may say much about its ancient significance. There is a natural progress from social mold to literary model and ultimately to religious manner.

A. *Social Mold*

It has been extremely difficult to identify individuals and groups that function as the social matrices of literary forms. As the new material for ancient history is better understood, we can expect that the broad outlines of Near Eastern society will begin to emerge. We may assume that various types of literature, such as wisdom, "laws," historical records like chronicles, and also a wide variety of poetical material, are all developed and perpetuated by special interest groups. We can consider three such groups.

1. One significant group of writings which presupposes a particular social provenance may be termed "wisdom literature." This deals with an evaluation of life and nature based on experience and insight. Piety was the theme in Israel; "skill in cult and magic lore" was the motif in Mesopotamia. Early in the second millennium "wisdom" is found in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. It appears not to have been accepted or patronized in Israel until Solomon, or early in the first millennium. It is in Egypt that the social mold seems most clear. The teaching of the Egyptian "wise man" (often presented in the form of a father's instructions to his son) is intended to insure success in the royal court. "Wisdom" is based on observation of life and nature. Personal integration with this observed world is the goal of teaching "wisdom." The royal court seems also to be the setting for this material in Mesopotamia. Essentially the picture is similar in Israel.

2. The several collections of "laws" in the Old Testament suggest the existence of a group in Israelite society responsible for the recording and study of legal precedents. In all nations of the Near East except Israel, the king was the chief legal administrator, the *fons justitiae*. Most rulers were content to empower lieutenants to enforce statutory law, but customary law was a concern of village elders, who often, in Mesopotamia at least, sat as a "college" or "bench" (*Code of Hammurabi*, 5). In Israel it is apparent that the king was not the source of law. The single exception is an "ordinance" on the distribution of war booty (1 Sam. 30:23-25; but see Num. 31:27). In Syria-Palestine the king served

as chief judge. We have as yet little knowledge of the detailed administration of an ordered Canaanite society. We know even less about the process that resulted in the formulations we possess in the Scriptures.

3. A third matrix for Old Testament literature is the social group of the priests and the cult. The economic significance of the temple in ancient life secured for its functionaries a leading role in society. This can be demonstrated more clearly in Sumerian Mesopotamia than in later Palestine. A close examination of the new sources available from Ugarit shows that cultic organization included a "chief priest" who appears also as "chief shepherd," which may indicate his supervision of movable property attached to the temple. One of the richest sources of literary tablets at Ugarit appeared to be a library located midway between two temples, one dedicated to Baal, one to Dagon. These tablets contain for the most part religious epic poetry which some have interpreted as serving in part as the libretto for ritual pantomime in the temples.

The literature that has survived from these three social groups is probably official and does not actually represent, even as today, the day-to-day experiences of the large mass of the population. Many significant groups have not been mentioned for lack of space; among them are the prophetic guilds and various units serving a military function. It is not easy to specify the particular kind of written materials deriving from each of these groups. A canvass of the evidence in all centers in the ancient Near East will inevitably contribute to an enrichment of our knowledge of literary production in Israel.

B. *Literary Model*

Literary conventions no more limit the possibilities of expression than do conventions in group relations. The rigid nature of the form of the sonnet has not seriously hampered the creative efforts of either a Shakespeare or a Jesse Stuart. Not all ancient literary material can be analyzed into consistent forms. In part this may be due to the fragmentary remains we possess. It is possible, however, in broad outlines to indicate types of material developed and transmitted by the kinds of groups identified above. Further, these materials for the most part conform to patterns. Since the literary age in Israel was also a time of internationalism, we may look to her cultural context for analogies to Israel's literary models.

1. The eleven genres in which Mesopotamian "wisdom" is transmitted are: proverbs, fables and parables, folk tales, miniature "essays," riddles, "*edubba*" (school) compositions, disputations, satirical dialogs, practical instructions, precepts, and "righteous sufferer" poems. The Old Testament compares "wisdom" in Israel with foreign models (1 Kings 4:29-34). One Egyptian model, the *Wisdom of Amenemope*, is so similar to Proverbs 22:17-24:22 that most scholars argue that the latter depends on the former. Forms of "wisdom" in the Old Testament are represented in two broad attitudes: the one is reflected in the conservative, didactic sayings in Proverbs; the other is found in the critical, individualistic reflections of Job and Ecclesiastes. Somewhere between these two poles is a group of psalms (for example, Pss. 34, 37, 49, 73). We should not fail to note that Joseph (Gen. 37-49) and Daniel (1-6) are clearly paragons

of "wisdom" and both live in the great centers of ancient "wisdom."

2. No collection of Canaanite laws has yet been discovered. Nor are Egyptian laws recorded. But we have an increasing corpus of Mesopotamian and Hittite law. Case law dealing with slaves, homicide, personal injury, damage to cattle and fields, misappropriation of deposits, and marriage appears to be both in form and content so similar to what we have in the Old Testament that we may assume common heritage (rather than direct literary borrowing). Within the collections of "law" in the Old Testament, two sources are apparent: priestly and legal. The Old Testament seems to indicate this by distinguishing between *torah* (usually translated "law," but better "teaching," "directive") and *mishpat* (usually translated "judgment," in the sense of a decision or sentence of a judge). The literary form of casuistic legal statements (e. g., Ex. 21: 2-22) is not unique to Israel.

3. Another very large group of materials in the Old Testament appears to have derived in its present form from the priests serving as cult officials. Religious songs can be classified according to both inner structure and theme. This situation is similar in the more elaborate religious installations of the Egyptians and Mesopotamians. From the former we know that priests were responsible not only for epics or myths but also for hymns, prayers, incantations, exorcisms, omens, ritual directions, lists of god names, and so forth. Thus the cult tended to foster the production of literature that was highly functional. The myth entitled *Enuma elish* ("When above"), the Babylonian creation story, was incorporated into a New

Year's ritual. Be it noted, however, that such a datum does not say who fashioned the materials into a myth. It is clear that the priests transmitted the text to us. Authorship, however, is clouded in anonymity. There is evidence in the Old Testament suggesting that Israelite sanctuary priests were similarly concerned with the preservation of religious texts. (Deut. 31:9-13; Josh. 24:25f.; 1 Sam. 10:25)

In each of the categories of wisdom, law, and religious poetry, there are literary conventions discoverable in ancient Near Eastern literature and paralleled in Old Testament literature. There is so much similarity that it is clear that Israel did not grow up isolated from her neighbors or insulated from the problems created by their religiously oriented cultures.

The next problem we wish to deal with is Israel's religious manner. Identical forms do not require identical meanings. There is abundant evidence that Israel borrowed generously from the stock of standardized literary expressions and formulations attached to ancient myth. Consider, for example, the numerous references to the battle between chaos and the deity. (Job 40:15—41:26; Is. 51:9f.; Ps. 74:13ff.; 89:10 ff.; 114)

C. Religious Manner

We seek now to observe what was distinctive about Israel's participation in the cultural heritage of the ancient East. Before the discovery of material and literary remains of this great past such a discussion would have been impossible. Thus a dramatic new dimension to the study of Israel's literature is available. Research is making us aware of the shapes of contact and conflict in Israel's struggle to apply a

theological perspective to a process of cultural adaptation. One can successfully abstract a viable theological system from her ancient problems of education, justice, and worship.

1. To return to "wisdom" literature once more, we must attempt to describe the shift from purely courtly training to religious counsel. The verbal reminiscences in Prov.22:17ff. paralleling the *Wisdom of Amenemope* have been used to correct a misunderstood word in the Hebrew text from "excellent things" (KJV; *sholishim*) to "thirty sayings" (RSV; *shlōshim*), v.20. The purpose of the Egyptian piece is to insure success to a pupil who is being trained to be a future "scribe of Egypt." By contrast, note how the "words of the wise" in Prov.22:19 teach as their objective "that your trust may be in Yahweh." The latest chapters of this book are thought to be 1—9, the work of a postexilic editor who in 1:7a set down the guidelines for understanding the entire collection: "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge." Chapters 8—9 contain many Canaanite words and expressions. While much of Proverbs can be traced to other sources, the content has been thoroughly baptized into the name of Yahweh.

2. "Law" at the time of the Judges was very different from what it became later under the royal monopoly of power and in the postexilic age. When considering origins it is necessary to confine ourselves to the earliest period. The thorough study that has gone into comparisons of Old Testament "law" with the five known collections from the ancient world indicate that Israel borrowed very little of substance while adopting the general form of casuistic statement. However, the sub-

stratum of continuity with all known laws makes it clear that points of similarity are due to common Semitic heritage. It is of great religious importance that the unique aspects of Israelite "law" find more in common with vassal treaties than with other legal collections. Law in Israel is religious obligation motivated by the covenant with Yahweh. The Ten Commandments are stipulations of the covenant by which the interests of Yahweh, the great King, are served by his "vassals."

3. We readily acknowledge something special about Genesis 1. The solemn, majestic simplicity of its language covers well the fierce inner polemic it wishes to express. After the sixth repetition of "And there was evening and there was morning" we recognize the possibility of a liturgical form and of a priestly hand. The systematic reduction of chaos to order is purposefully set within the limits of a workman's week. The content and structure of this chapter suggest that it may be the work of one who was both priest and teacher. The approach represented by the Babylonian *Enuma elish* could not go unanswered. Genesis 1 contains the counterstatement. The refined theological technique of Genesis 1 and its polemical thrust have suggested to most scholars that in its present form it comes from the Exile or shortly after.

Since 1930 we have learned how indebted Hebrew poets and priests were to Canaanite literary models. Psalm 29 has been identified as a possible Canaanite song adapted to Israelite use by substituting Yahweh for Ba'al wherever the latter name occurred. The quantity of common material in the two literatures points to the

existence of an impressively unified poetic tradition in Palestine-Syria in this time.

The literary study of the Old Testament is no longer limited to internal analysis. Without external controls, detailed literary analysis of the Old Testament has always been vulnerable to the criticism of subjectivity. Methods developed in the study of European literature were transferred to Biblical studies. The suggestion that literary analysis of Homer has been imported into Old Testament in toto seems indisputable. Only in the last few years have scholars begun to establish criteria for literary analysis based on sources from the second and first millennia B.C. These new studies are invaluable as controls for Old Testament literary studies. Many cherished views of the literature held by critical and uncritical scholars alike will be upset. Willingness to adapt to new information and better views is essential for those who wish to hear the word of God in the Old Testament with ever growing comprehension.

II. THE ACTS OF YAHWEH AS RECORD AND REVELATION

Today we assume that history consists of event plus interpretation. Written histories are interpretations of selected events. An economic contract or a king list may be a reasonably precise record of an event. This is history only in the limited sense of *chronicle*. It becomes *history* when it is incorporated into the interpretative framework of a written history. Literary analysis of the Old Testament has shown that it contains at least three histories of major proportions. Each offers a sustained theological evaluation of units of tradition in Israel's report on past events. The traditions are remarkably faithful as records

of their times where they can be tested by independent controls. Illustrative details will be offered below.

It is convenient to separate a description of the sources of history from an analysis of the historical record these sources contain. The following three histories have been isolated in the Old Testament: (1) The Priestly History (Genesis through Numbers); (2) The Deuteronomic History (Deuteronomy through 2 Kings); (3) The Chronicler's History (1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah). Each of these histories appears to be based on a number of sources. The Priestly History, for example, is thought to be a wedding of an original Yahwist and Elohist source plus special priestly material edited into the present literary form probably no earlier than the 6th century B.C. Each of these three sources may in turn be analyzed into smaller units. It is essentially to this last group that Part I of this essay ("Literary Models") referred. This theory of documents has come to be known as the Documentary Hypothesis and is assumed by a majority of Old Testament students. Among critical scholars, including the Scandinavians who have rebelled most against this view, all deal with basically the same blocks of material, arguing only that the traditions existed longer in oral form. Most scholars believe, for example, that the Yahwist created the first real "history of Israel" during a national and literary flowering of the 10th century B.C. The Scandinavians believe the same material existed in oral form until the Exile of the 6th century before being reduced to written form. One cannot raise valid theological objections to either view of the formation of historical literature in the

Old Testament. One may, however, raise other questions. For example: the Yahwist has written a history from Creation to the Conquest. He presumably lived in the 10th century, the reign of Solomon, and was motivated by a consuming interest in the acts of Yahweh as constitutive for Israel's history. It is difficult, therefore, to attribute such dispassionate sophistication to his historical interests that we must assume he did not intend to explain his own great time in history by bringing the record up to his own day.

The hope of ever discovering any part of the Yahwist or any other sources in their independent form seems remote. It now seems a possibility, however, that analysis of the vast library of cuneiform literature (estimated at half a million documents) may provide verifiable data by which to test the Documentary Hypothesis, at least by the comparative method. We cannot settle the problem now. We are compelled to work with the best available hypothesis. We should then examine each of the three histories of Israel to determine some distinctive features and especially the theological perspective, the Spirit-given insight that makes the record both history and revelation.

Priestly History

This is an umbrella term for three kinds of material: Yahwist, Elohist, and Priestly. Only the first appears to have been an original history. The Elohist and Priestly materials appear to be supplements to an original Yahwist core. Nevertheless, the cover term, Priestly History, may be justified on the grounds that the variety of three theological confessions only served to invigorate the essential unity of The Tetrateuch (Genesis—Numbers).

A discussion of the literary criteria that distinguish J, E, and P would take us into myriad details. It is sufficient to note that J uses the divine name Yahweh (the Lord) and is oriented to the South, that E uses Elohim (God) and reflects Northern interests. P traces a prehistory of the divine name Yahweh revealed in Ex. 3:14 back through El Shaddai (Gen. 17) to Elohim (Gen. 9 and 1). Numerous lexical peculiarities separate the documents. The spirit and subject matter of each is distinctive. J is bold, vivid, earthy, and profoundly impressed by Yahweh's presence. E, on the other hand, is pious and kindly and tends to note the separation between creature and Creator. J begins with a profound statement of the human predicament in Gen. 2—3; E begins with God's appearing to Abraham in a dream (Gen. 15). The J material shows close acquaintance with very old Canaanite traditions. It contains numerous aetiologies, reflected in a special interest in names and places. Popular etymologies abound, for example, the suggestion that Babel is derived from a Hebrew root *bālal* ("confuse"; see Gen. 11:9) though it is quite clear that the name means "gate of god." In summary, J makes three central contributions as a historian: (1) history writing is a confession of faith. The pattern J uses to explain the meaning of event is the rhythm of judgment and salvation in the acts of Yahweh. (2) J employs theological criteria to evaluate the world in which he lives; for example, Mesopotamian urban life and religious architecture are unmasked as acts of pride against Yahweh (Gen. 11). (3) The interpretative insight for history is provided in Gen. 2—3, where conflict and evil are explained as

resulting from the rupture in the relationship between Yahweh and man.

The JE historical core is taken up in the final stage of the formation of the Tetrateuch by P. The end result is the Priestly History. The ritual and cultic interests of P, together with a pedantic style filled with repetitions and formulas, have made it easy to recognize the traces of this source. Thanks to P we possess the great treasure in J supplemented by E. Living in the 6th century, making the ancient material relevant for the Old Testament people of that era, P not only provides a commentary on JE, but also represents a significant theological system. Israel is viewed as a worshiping congregation, a church. The life of the community is a liturgy, a service to God. From this perspective the whole of Israel's history is visible, although it is not surveyed. The earliest period, when there was no nation or government or king, was of special interest to P. After an interval of about 600 years, Israel seemed to return to that early shape—in exile in Mesopotamia. For P, four covenants are an important way to view the prehistory of Sinai, each covenant containing a promise—the first two for all men, the second two for elected Israel: Adam, the Sabbath; Noah, the rainbow; Abraham, the circumcision; Moses, the Law. J spoke of Yahweh visiting men in the form of a man (Gen. 18), but P reported only that God was in the camp of Israel, “tabernacling among His people” (Ex. 29:43-46) as “glory” (Hebrew *kā-bōd*). God is thus separated from the common eye of man. This, and much more, may be said about the new spirit P infused into the ancient traditions of Israel.

Deuteronomistic History

It appears that Deuteronomy forms the theological base for a history extending over 700 years from Moses to the Exile. The fact that there are apparent departures from Deuteronomistic views within the larger historical work probably means no more than that more than one “Deuteronomist” worked on the great project. Despite the variety of material in the work and the employment of a great deal more raw event and chronicle than in the P history, D also employs essential theological views as criteria to evaluate events. The proclamation of a pure Yahweh cult in Deuteronomy (Ch. 12) is the basis for one central criterion. All the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel are *a priori* unfaithful because by definition they do not support the Jerusalem cultus. Of the kings of Judah, only two receive unqualified approval (Hezekiah and Josiah). Thus obedience to the word of Yahweh brought blessing, but disobedience brought judgment. A second theological key in the Deuteronomistic History is the careful notation of the fulfillment of prophetic utterances (see 2 Sam. 7:13 and 1 Kings 8:20; Joshua 6:26 and 1 Kings 16:34). This correspondence between the word of Yahweh and event provides the writer with a historical thesis: The history of Israel is the relentless word of Yahweh finding expression in judgment and salvation, searching for an ultimate fulfillment.

The Chronicler's History

One of the most interesting histories in the Old Testament is the work of the Chronicler who fashioned an epic of Israel extending from Adam to the second temple (about 400 B. C.). Many of the traditions

are parallel to the D history, but none of the spirit is. How could this history be written with no reference to the Exodus and with no more than the mere mention of Moses? This is especially striking when we observe that the Chronicler is profoundly indebted to the priestly tradition, that Moses was himself a Levite, and that the prestige group of functionaries in this history are Levites. David seems to have replaced Moses as founder of Israel's enduring central institution. The temple has not replaced the Law but has absorbed it so that the important laws become cultic prescriptions. This is the unfolding of a dream described in Ezek. 40—48 (but see 2 Chron. 30:18-20). There is a quiet confidence in the present realization of the rule of God by grace in Jerusalem. The Chronicler has no expectation of special developments in the future. God's purpose for Israel was actualized in the postexilic community. The "future" meant more of the same. By means of genealogies, the Chronicler formally legitimized leaders in the community. The kinship terminology has a juridical rather than biological significance (see 1 Chron. 2—4, which traces Caleb and kin). More noteworthy is the lack of concern for non-Jews. Isolated in Jerusalem and its environs, insulated from neighbors and Persian administrators, the Chronicler wrote a history designed to support the status quo as he interpreted it.

These three major histories in the Old Testament with their differing theological interpretations of selected events in Israel's past are in a way similar to the four different theological views of our Lord's work in the four gospels. One of the crucial critical tasks is the identification (separation) of event and interpretation. Do

not interpretative criteria, if consistently employed, tend to distort the event? Do not historical data become material for proving a thesis? Yes, of course! In modern terms we have then "intellectual histories" rather than the carefully tested and scrutinized data of the economic, political, social, and even religious experience of a society. These latter data are now being amplified by the torrents of information resulting from archaeological research in the Near East. Events, even entire nations, are being resurrected. The map is showing more people and places. Increasingly the new discoveries are providing comparative material that provides a broader background for our study of the raw data in the Biblical histories. This new material, however, comes to us in a literary form that must be examined for its ability to convey precise information. Once we recognize the characteristics and the limitations of the media, it should be easier to appreciate the role of new resources to supplement our knowledge of the theologically oriented Biblical record.

Some German and Scandinavian scholars continue to designate the basic forms of tradition in J and E as "saga" and "legend." "Saga" is a story-telling unit that has been embellished by details more important for human interest than for historical consequences. "Legend" extends "saga" to sacred persons, places, times, customs, and institutions. The absence in the ancient Near East of adequate parallels to these definitions of "saga" and "legend" should make us careful, however, in the use of these terms. At the moment, any use of this terminology must take this limitation into account. The strong theological slant, coupled with the use of media

of communication apparently designed more for oral tradition than for carefully written history, suggests that we may never be able to recover the primary events "as they actually happened" in a modern, scientifically accurate, and comprehensive sense. While this may be true, there is nevertheless reason to believe that the traditions are accurate reflections of their times. Given this, the modern historian has in the Old Testament a mine of valuable historical information.

It is not for theological reasons that scholars are taking the factual data of the Old Testament more seriously today than before. Rather, a flood of new knowledge contemporary with all major periods of Biblical history has compelled a reconsideration of the Old Testament as a source for authentic information. As a case in point we may consider the period between the patriarchs and the conquest with the independent testimony of one extra-Biblical source, the 20,000-tablet archive from Mari on the upper Euphrates. The Mari material is limited to a 70-year period contemporary with the earliest patriarchs. The site is in North Syria, near Haran, the family home of Terah, father of Abraham. The language of the tablets is Akkadian, which is clearly different from the West Semitic languages of which Canaanite and Hebrew are representative. Thus, for example, one may observe that Akkadian has no special term for "tribe" or any of its subdivisions. But Mari is on the edge of the desert, and its kings were frequently in contact with mobile tribes. It is thus of no little interest to learn that the terminology employed in the Mari archive referring to tribal units is borrowed from West Semitic and, in

fact, corresponds to that in the Old Testament. Illustrations of this are Gen. 25:16 and Num. 25:15, where "people(s)" is in reality a technical term denoting a tribal unit, a datum the latter text itself acknowledges and explains by the addition "father's house," a synonym for clan. (*Archives Royales de Mari*, VIII, No. 11, line 21)

A detailed study of the parallels between the Mari tablets and the Old Testament remains to be done. It is important to note that the Mari records offer the first evidence of prophecy as an independent religious institution in the ancient world outside of the Old Testament. The military census with accompanying expiatory rites (Ex. 30:11-16; 2 Sam. 24) is much like the administrative order in Mari known as the *tēbibtum*. The personal names in the earliest strata of the Old Testament are parallel to Amorite names from Mari. These and numerous other independently attested social, political, and religious data could not have been invented. Their meaning for history requires evaluation. The ancient historian was primarily a theologian. The modern historian has great difficulty when he refuses to be a theologian in his study of the Old Testament.

III. FROM HUMAN BOOK TO DIVINE WORD

The practice of the twin disciplines, the literary and historical analysis of Old Testament literature, has produced a religious problem. The heart of this issue appears to be the conclusion that if one accepts the assumptions and even some of the positions of contemporary Biblical scholars, he is forced to acknowledge that he possesses in the Bible a human book. One

may hear a thoughtful but alarmed observation: "So, it is no longer God who is speaking but often unnamed prophets of Hebrew communities notable for the vigor of their leadership and the zeal of their conscience but, for all that, human and not divine."

An analysis of this religious problem must preface any effort to provide a solution. It may be that the issue derives from a false synthesis at a higher level of abstraction. We can begin with undisputed data, the implications of which are not always clear.

First, the Old Testament is written in human language. Most of the Old Testament is written in a dialect of Canaanite called Hebrew. Ten chapters are in an Aramaic dialect most closely related to "Official Aramaic" (*Reichsaramäisch*), the language of the Persian court. There was a time when both Old Testament and New Testament stood almost alone as linguistic monuments of a forgotten past. Their languages came to be regarded as "sacred" languages; and in the mind of some, this may have been equated with "nonhuman." The comparison of the language of the New Testament with that of the papyri letters and dockets from Egypt discovered toward the end of the 19th century showed clearly that New Testament writers spoke and wrote a *Volkssprache*, a popular vernacular form of Greek. The Bible was now on the road to becoming "human." The discovery of the Amarna letters, the Ugaritic tablets, and the hoard of 20,000 letters and administrative files from Mari makes it abundantly clear that the language of the Old Testament participates in the history of Western Asia. Language is a sensitive index to the culture and experi-

ence of a community. But for modern scholars adequately to grasp and control its raw significance, especially when the infinite nuances of poetry are involved, requires a special effort. The social character of language demands the recovery of an adequate cultural context before the lexical symbols can possess meaning for us. One of the most important tasks facing the modern scholar is linking the epigraphic with the nonepigraphic remains of the ancient world. Yet even after linguistic labels have been correctly affixed, the function of the item and the label must be investigated. One must be deeply involved in the human world of the Bible if one wishes even to begin a proper study. As this surrounding material becomes available in histories and commentaries at the scholarly and popular levels, Christians in all walks of life will be able to profit from them. The Reformation principle of Scriptural perspicuity and clarity will be more fully confirmed.

Second, the process of "book" formation in the Old Testament corresponds to "book" writing techniques known from the ancient world. To "correspond" does not mean to "be identical with," for the term must allow for a creative use of whatever means and purposes are available to a particular age. The people of the ancient world wrote on stone, metal, clay, potsherds, linen, wood, bark, and papyrus. Writing appears to have been invented before the beginning of the third millennium B.C. to meet the administrative needs of the Sumerians. Religious "books" were not at first reduced to writing. As the property of the community, they existed to support political and cult life. An example of a religious "book" is the

Babylonian "creation story." Though its present form certainly dates to the first half of the second millennium B.C. (and in a Sumerian form still earlier), no *copies* exist which predate 1000 B.C. Scholars are agreed that the purpose of writing religious texts was to "freeze" the tradition. The scribe was one of society's most respected specialists. Education and resulting literacy was a prerogative of ruling elements in society. This appears to have been as true of Palestine-Syria as it was for Egypt and Mesopotamia and Anatolia. As far as we know, to "write" a book did not mean to create its contents. Rather, the writer was essentially a copyist. The creative processes of "composition" are understandably less clear to us than the techniques of "writing."

With this in mind we may turn to the Old Testament for a fresh examination of all the occurrences of the root *KTB* ("write") and of the root *SPR*, a nominal morph meaning "document," "letter," "book." First it can be said that the numerous references to chronicles, royal decrees, census lists, letters, and collections of legal precedents are well-known phenomena in the ancient East. The Old Testament describes writing on stone, on (clay) tablets, and on (papyrus) scrolls. The use of such materials makes it evident that the long document we assume by the term "book" would be most unusual. Second, it is clear that a professional scribe was employed, though he is not commonly referred to. The best-known example is Baruch, scribe for Jeremiah. The minor role of the instrumental cause of writing is clear from Ex. 34, which begins with Yahweh saying He will write the covenant and ends with His commanding Moses to

do so. No book of the Old Testament is said to be written or even composed by any whose name it may bear, though in the case of some prophets much may come from their own hand. One frequently confronts the expression "written in the book of the law of Moses." We may understand this to mean: (1) Yahweh's covenant with Israel and especially the stipulations of the covenant; this is the Torah which Yahweh had written (Ex. 24:4, 12; 31:18; 34:1, 27f.); and (2) the later collections of legal judgments that were attributed to Moses because they were essentially a development or application of the "teaching" (Torah) that he mediated.

If we now return to our original problem, whether the Bible is human or divine, we must conclude that the Bible itself seems to have no difficulty being both human *and* divine. The prophets offer the best illustration of the Old Testament conviction that it bears a word of God to men in a form both human and ancient. The typical prophetic oracle begins with the formula: "Thus says the Lord" (see especially Is. 40-66). Frequently the prophet is "sent" to a king or to the people (2 Sam. 7:4f.; Ezek. 2:4; etc.). We now have ancient letters which predate the prophets by hundreds of years but contain precisely the same formula. The first four or five lines of all letters seem to follow the following example: "To my lord say: thus says Kibri-Dagan your servant" (*Archives Royales de Mari*, III, 40, lines 1-4). The messenger of the governor of Terqa, near Mari, bears a message to the king of Mari, Zimri-Lim. The messenger delivers the message orally. The authority of the message is that of the sender. There can be no doubt that the formal style of the proph-

ets of Israel fits into this ancient pattern. Old Testament scholars have not yet sufficiently appreciated the fact that Moses is cast into the same prophetic role. God gives the message to Moses at the beginning of the covenant-making ceremony, introduced in the following words: "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel" (Ex. 19:3b). Moses predates Amos by at least 500 years. Thus in early Israel the prophetic formula is employed to express the conviction that the community of the faithful had the leadership of Yahweh, who communicated with them through prophets. This vital historical reality can be reflected only imperfectly in the written record. What we do possess can be investigated only on the assumption that as a collective record it is thoroughly human. If, as a Christian, I believe that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is also the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then the voice of God reaches me through the human record. The Old Testament scholar's first task is not to proclaim this message (even if he regards it as true) but to clear away whatever barriers exist so that the Old Testament may speak for itself, that is, may be properly interpreted. We will turn to the problem of interpretation later.

If we have in effect declared that the question of whether the Bible is human or divine presents false alternatives, why are we burdened with the issue? Who continues to keep the problem alive? Two answers appear to be significant. First, we have in Western thought and education made a sharp distinction between secular and sacred, natural and supernatural. We have split the world for purposes of classification and are only today beginning to

discover on a large scale that we must also live in the world. Soul and body, church and state, and other favorite antinomies, parallel the separation of human and divine. We have learned to make distinctions in these areas, but separations are fatal.

Second, the problem of a divine *or* a human Bible continues to vex the people of God where the church fails to listen to the Biblical scholar (in other words, fails to employ historical-critical scholarship) and continues to depend on once useful but now inadequate categories borrowed from a world of long ago. To sacralize the thought forms of a past age for the present task of responsible communication can be done only by those fearful of the Holy Spirit's leading through creative and historical scholarship. Where theology is alive, it begins by listening to the Bible and Biblical scholars. Biblical scholarship at its best today is making use of all the resources a very fruitful age is making available. If the Old Testament is fundamentally a historical document, it can be studied best by disciplined historical scholarship. Today there is no other valid method than a thoroughly critical investigation. The serious results of continued resistance to historical-critical study of the Old Testament may be seen in the increasing gap that exists between Biblical studies generally and theology.

IV. UNITY IN DIVERSITY — INTERPRETATION THEN AND NOW

Any review of diverse interpretations of any portion of the Old Testament belongs to church history as presently conceived and not to Old Testament study. We do give a priority to the New Testament understanding of the Old Testament pri-

marily because our Lord Himself opened the flower of the Old Testament in a very special way and we are by faith committed to this understanding. But before we briefly examine one aspect of "newness" in the New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament a further statement on interpretation may be helpful. We must not confuse methods of interpretation with the content of the Old Testament. Interpretation is of today; the content is of long ago. Jesus also interpreted the Old Testament within the limitation of His time. To argue that He must have believed that Jonah was three days in the belly of the fish, that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, that David wrote at least Psalm 110 and Isaiah also Chapters 40—66, and that therefore this must be doctrine for us may involve a failure to distinguish between *methods of interpretation* limited and controlled by the time in which one lives and the *content* of the Old Testament. Historical and literary critical methods are tools of our times and the resulting interpretation is our mid-20th-century perception of Old Testament content. In this writer's opinion, no other contemporary method preserves so much of the Old Testament or is so true to its spirit and honest with its realities as historical criticism. Thus, if in our interpretation of the Old Testament we use a critical method even though the New Testament does not employ the same criticism, we are not departing from the faith.

A brief analysis of "messianism" in the Old Testament and the New Testament may show us how diversity of interpretation within the Bible served only to emphasize its unity as a dynamic organism. The seedbed of "messianism" is 2 Samuel 7, where David wishes to build Yahweh

a house but Yahweh replies, "I will build you a house." Before this there was promise and fulfillment, but it was not technically "messianic." Messiah (anointed) refers to a living servant of Yahweh, usually a king (1 Sam. 10:24). At what time the rule of David was idealized and the hope of a "new David" emerged is not clear, but probably it was not before Isaiah at the end of the 8th century. An abortive effort to make Zerubbabel king in postexilic Jerusalem (Zech. 6:9-15) subjected hopes to reevaluation, and one result may be represented in the work of the Chronicler. A regal tint is visible in the image of the servant in II Isaiah; for example, he will establish justice in the earth (42:4). In the "herald's message" of Zech. 9:9-10 the writer saw a great military victory as preparation for the return of an Israelite king to the long-vacated Davidic throne. The hope for Messiah had become a longing for a national revival.

Two apostolic sermons in Acts, the earliest record of the mind and method of the church, affirm that Jesus is the fulfillment of the hopes and expectations of the Old Testament. Peter interprets a psalm originally intended for a newly-enthroned king as referring to Jesus (Acts 2:34-35, quoting Ps. 110:1). Paul's sermon at Pisidian Antioch begins with a review of Israel's history from Egypt to David (Acts 13:17-22), concluding "of this man's [David's] posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as He promised" (v. 23). Paul, too, quotes an ancient enthronement psalm to document his message (v. 33, quoting Ps. 2:7). A summary of Paul's Gospel is preserved in 1 Cor. 15:3-5. The last words say that Christ died and rose on the third day "in accordance with the

Scriptures." Two conclusions may be drawn: (1) the early church regarded Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament kingship (messianic) oracles and (2) the church found the ground of her history in a continuity with ancient Israel and its record in the Old Testament.

It is not a little strange then that Jesus is never quoted as employing the term "Messiah" as a self-designation. It is noteworthy that Jesus insists that Christ (Messiah) is more than a mere son of David (Mark 12:35-37; Matt. 22:42-45; Luke 20:41-44). Jesus explicitly identifies Himself with the Servant (Luke 22:37, referring to Is. 53:12). The Passion narratives consciously utilize the image of the suffering Servant. Most commonly "Son of Man" is on the lips of Jesus as a title. One small band of apocalyptists linked hope to this transcendent son-of-man figure in Daniel (7:13f.; see Enoch 48:2f.; 62:5-9; 4 Ezra 13). Whatever this image meant to Jesus' hearers, it is clear that He meant to decry status as a means of accomplishing His purposes.

If this is so, how then can we explain the enthusiasm of the Synoptists, and especially of John, for an identification of Jesus with the "new David"? The preaching words of Jesus seem to be preserved with considerable fidelity. There is little evidence that the evangelists harmonized this material for their own churchly purposes. Jesus avoided "messianic" titles, perhaps because of the false hopes they aroused. On the other hand, the Gospels, particularly Matthew, spare no efforts to relate Jesus' life and mission to the Old Testament by means of detailed correlation with a list of references in which one or another group in Israel trusted for ultimate

deliverance. A very profound and discerning theological criticism was at work establishing a continuity with the Old Testament and Old Israel. Already in the Gospels we discover the church at work interpreting the Old Testament as well as the words of Jesus. It is to this tradition that we are faithful when we take up today, in the name of our Lord, the tools of Biblical criticism.

This is an exciting day of opportunity for critical Biblical studies. Repudiating the historical skepticism of a previous generation of Biblical critics on the one hand and maintaining a readiness to grow in our knowledge of the Old Testament and its backgrounds on the other, we rejoice in the fact that we have available new tools for Old Testament study that help us learn to appreciate more and more the unique character of the revelation of God. We need not be fearful of what we shall discover in the Book, because through Jesus Christ we have met God, the traces of whose presence are here recorded. The broadest description of the critical method is that it seeks to preserve the distance between the past and the present, between the text and the interpreter, thus making the special theological interpretation of the past available for the special needs of the present. We want to sit where these ancient people sat and learn to look at the human scene from their unique point of view. This ambition can only be approximated, but present results are already sufficient repayment for the arduous effort.

Biblical criticism has allowed the vigorous diversity of the Scriptural materials as well as their unity to appear. Literary criticism, especially form criticism (*Gattungsgeschichte*), has demonstrated both

Israel's dependence on the literary heritage of the ancient Near East and the creative and very sophisticated internal reconstruction growing out of the logic of her unique theological thinking. The variegated evaluation of event in the J and P historical complexes or the truly monumental efforts resulting in the Deuteronomic History and the work of the Chronicler have been discovered by means of the critical method. There is no more whitewashing of personalities. Cunning Jacob, astute and wily David, worldly Solomon—all are men of both virtue and vice, to the relief of Christians who have tried to imitate them. The task of historical criticism is to preserve the manifold form of the witness to a single series of the saving acts of God. We discover anew that the Word is both promising and demanding.

An important gain in Biblical studies today is that criticism has gone far to preserve all of the Old Testament for use by the church. It has helped to open doors to the discovery of new and fuller meanings in the laws, the psalms, and the prophets of the Old Testament. New knowledge about the social setting of various classes of material in the Old Testament makes possible more appropriate selection of relevant pericopes for both public and private use of the Scriptures. We can, for example, be helped to avoid reading wedding psalms at funerals by learning how to classify psalms by their *Sitz im Leben* and their form. A deeper evaluation makes the Old Testament more useful to the theologian. He may discover that the so-called "legal" chapters of the Old Testament are in fact very relevant for the contemporary Christian when they are evaluated in the light of the covenant

stipulations and the social problems in ancient Israelite communities. The ambiguities of the human scene are more alive when, for example, we are asked to examine, in the light of the new knowledge of the social scene, what motivated Joshua to slay the entire family of Achan (Joshua 7). Criticism aids the Bible teacher by asking him to listen to the text on its own terms and to discuss its meaning in its ancient Biblical context rather than simply to assert his own 20th-century views, unaware of the distance between text and interpreter.

Not least, but finally, historical criticism has provided us with tools which have shown that the task of Biblical research is ecumenical. Some measure of this is visible in "Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of the Bible" as accepted by the Ecumenical Study Conference held at Oxford, England, in 1949 (see Alan Richardson and Wolfgang Schweitzer [eds.], *Biblical Authority for Today*, [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951], pp. 240—43). It is not without significance to note that this statement was drawn up after careful study of a test passage, Jer. 7:1-15. Rules of interpretation cannot be imposed arbitrarily. In fact, it would be preferable to speak of assumptions about the material rather than rules of interpretation.

V. POSTSCRIPT: BUT IS THE OLD TESTAMENT REALLY IMPORTANT?

It is not valid to assume that the church, whether the church of the present or of the past, has always correctly understood or properly used the Old Testament. Monumental ignorance of the Old Testament, coupled with a continuing theological debate that ignores essential Old Testament

categories may well imply a tacit rejection. Nor can we accept the total rereading of the Old Testament into the form of the New Testament. To destroy the integrity of the Old Testament for the sake of a hopelessly generalized Gospel is to create a theology that has no relation to historical reality. Luther's theology of the Gospel was born of long and detailed historical study of the Old Testament. The Gospel may become a wooden sword in the hands of a church and a theology that do not utilize a persistent critical study of the Old Testament. The following seven statements attempt to affirm the far-reaching significance of the use of the Old Testament in the life of the church today.

1) The study of the Old Testament has restored the category of history to its rightful eminence in the Christian witness. The Old Testament confession of faith describes who God is by what He does in history. That the Old Testament is chiefly interpretation of event does not mean the event is no longer important. On the contrary, we must be in continual pursuit of the event if we wish to make real contact with its interpretation.

2) An extensive literature in a magnificent language produced over more than a millennium of tumultuous history unfolds a vast panorama of human problems and needs in which God and His Word become involved in human issues, situations, and individuals. In the depersonalized society of the 20th century the church can be helpfully guided by adequate study of the Old Testament in its involvement in and its ministry to the needs of "all sorts and conditions of men."

3) A central issue in the church always is the conflict between a specific theology

and "the whole fabric of a people's standards and beliefs" or culture. If we permit the full weight of the authority of the Old Testament as the Word of God to arouse us in the battle (Joshua), to illustrate the depths of the problem (Judges), and to provide examples of creative and victorious response to the call of conflict (2 Samuel), we will take fuller advantage of our heritage.

4) The Old Testament is not about a general God but about Yahweh, who is One. The Old Testament prevents us from taking "monotheism" for granted and awakens us to a necessary nagging awareness of idolatry that we are fond of consigning to a foreign country. The Old Testament will help the church continue to confess all that Trinitarians want to say—but often say with noticeable difficulty—today.

5) The Old Testament helps the teaching church to move from a "world of words" into the colorful and dramatic portrayal of God purposefully at work in people and places.

6) "Involvement" is a true point of contact between the Old Testament and young church leaders of today. Guided by Old Testament study, the church may be helped to learn the urgency of and the shapes for always being involved in the world. We cannot rightly teach a theology of action and ethical concern and neglect the intense interest in living out the relationship with God that is evident in Old Testament demands for "obedience."

7) The Old Testament can teach the church the vulnerability of institutionalized religion and the repulsiveness of the publicists of peace who prefer the slick front

to the prophets of doom who preach the sick facts.

Modern critical study of the Old Testament combined with a Lutheran theology that takes the Lutheran Symbolical Books seriously make a strong team on any field. As diverse systems they exist in tension, but ideally each is always correcting the other in the interest of a common purpose: a new life for man. In a world where the

content of what anyone has learned is not likely to remain unchanged for more than ten years, this writer can only view with dismay the resistance of those who do not wish to retool for the mission. Prisoners of God possess hope. Prisoners of tradition and fear are hopeless. Prisoners of hope must be willing to change, for God has for them yet another task.

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