

# THE GOD OF ISRAEL

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SOMETIME during the thirteenth century before Christ a new thing began to emerge on palestinian soil. This new thing was Israel, a phenomenon that was at one and the same time people, nation, way of life, religion, land. So new was this combination, or rather, so new was the principle on which it was combined, that it is quite certain its unique and novel character was imperfectly understood even by most of those who helped bring it into being. Proofs for this statement are not wanting in Israel's own literature and in the no less eloquent testimony of biblical archaeology, both of which give consistent witness to the persistent effort made to assimilate Israel to the indigenous culture of Canaan. 'By origin and birth you are of the land of Canaan', said Ezekiel to Jerusalem. 'Your father was an amorite and your mother a hittite'. And he proceeds in a discourse that lends additional meaning to words he intended in a somewhat different sense: 'On the day you were born your navel cord was not cut'.<sup>1</sup> The excavators of biblical Hazor in northern Israel discovered that the children or grandchildren of those israelites who sacked and burnt Hazor, 'the chief of all those kingdoms',<sup>2</sup> and destroyed its canaanite sanctuary, themselves raised there a place of idolatrous cult sometime within the two hundred year period before Solomon made Hazor one of his fortified cities.<sup>3</sup>

We say that Israel emerged on palestinian soil, and this is, as we shall see, a very important fact. Israel must be called palestinian for various reasons. For one thing, if by Israel we understand, as we generally do, the completed historical phenomenon of a people identified with a religion, we must acknowledge that the site of this historical process was the Palestine of the early iron age. On any accounting, the loose association of tribes that we encounter midway during this period in, for example, the contemporary epic that we know as the song of Deborah<sup>4</sup> was not yet a people; but it was a people becoming. If by Israel we understand further the nation,

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<sup>1</sup> Ezek 16, 3 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Jos 11, 10 ff.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kg 9, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Jg 5: probably the most ancient example of sustained poetry in the bible.

which began with the monarchy, and identification with the land, which was consolidated only under David and Solomon, then the case becomes even more obvious.

But even (or especially) when Israel is taken in an 'ethnic' sense, we have no option but to call it *palestinian*. Critical study of the biblical records has reached the agreed conclusion that most, though certainly not all, of the elements that went to make up the people Israel – a people which the bible more than once acknowledges not to have been ethnically homogeneous – were indigenous to Palestine. The pentateuchal history of Israel, which actually does not conflict with this view, has, it is true, traced the tribes of Israel back to the sons and grandsons of a single scion of Abraham, to whom it sometimes even gives the name Israel. But though the pentateuchal history contains real facts and deals with real people, it is the history of an uncritical age. To this age it was as natural to ascribe geographical names to eponymous ancestors as, in a later uncritical age, the Church fathers unhesitatingly sought the origins of the *ebionites* (from hebrew *ebyon*, the poor) in an eponymous heresiarch *Ebion*. There is more to the pentateuchal story than this, of course, and we shall have to return to this point.

If, in any case, the historical Israel derives from the soil of Palestine, it was not the creation of Palestine. This, indeed, is the first respect in which we must regard Israel as a quite new thing in its contemporary world. Religion, as men then knew religion, and as more often than not they know it to this day, was the creation of the community, whether tribe or people or nation or city, the complex of beliefs and practice by which it identified itself with its god, who was almost invariably the idealized community itself writ with a divine name. Israel broke completely with this pattern. Israel's religion was the creation of no people; rather, it was a religion that created Israel, painfully but inexorably, through the religious structure which modern scholars call an *amphictyony*, in the Palestine of the Judges. And on this point all the biblical traditions agree, that Israel's religion came from outside Palestine. It is noteworthy that in the song of Deborah Yahweh is represented coming forth to do battle for Israel's tribes not from the mountains of Ephraim where the battle was fought, but from the mountains of Seir, the land of Edom, Sinai.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jg 5, 4 ff.

As Rudolf Smend<sup>1</sup> has shown in a penetrating study, despite – or because of – all that several generations of higher criticism have done to condition our acceptance of biblical history, the mosaic tradition of the origin of israelite religion remains the immovable cornerstone of the Old Testament. If there were no Moses he would have to be invented, to account for Israel. The mosaic tradition is as indispensable to Israel's earliest prophets as it is to the pentateuchal history.<sup>2</sup> And at the heart of the mosaic tradition is the conviction that Yahweh was no god of the land, as Chemosh was the god of Moab, no god of a people, as Melkart was god of the aramaeans. The god of Canaan was Baal, not Yahweh. The Yahweh who appeared to Moses in Midian, and who was with the tribes – the 'before-Israel' – in the wilderness, 'invaded' Canaan. The beginning of Israel was the introduction of the cult of Yahweh, which, as biblical history makes quite plain, inevitably came into radical opposition to every native canaanite institution, political as well as religious. The cult of Yahweh was the magnet which drew all those who aspired to what Canaan could not produce; from the disenchanted with Canaan grew the people Israel.

This leads us to a consideration of the main respect in which the religion of Israel was an entirely new thing, a respect which is in reality quite intimately connected with the preceding. It was a religion whose kerygma was not myth but history, whose god was not to be found immanent in nature, however elevated the nature might be, but was revealed in events that cut across the natural course of things.

It is well that we pause a moment to examine this assertion, to see how really revolutionary was the revelation of the God of Israel. We must not, in the first place, think of myth first and foremost as stories about the gods as we find them in the theogony of Hesiod or the comedies of Aristophanes. This is not myth but the elaboration and critical use of myth. Myth was not all dark and bloody rites, orgy, debauch, the fires of Moloch. Myth was – and is – the engagement of man's thought and feeling in a personal response to the realities which are about him and are part of him, whose existence he can no more ignore than he can his own. As the Frankforts<sup>3</sup> have written:

<sup>1</sup> Smend, R., *Das Mosebild von Heinrich Ewald bis Martin Noth* (Tübingen, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Hos 9, 10; 11, 1, 5; Amos 2, 9–11; 3, 1; 4, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Frankfort, H., and Frankfort, H. A., *Before Philosophy* (London, 1949), p 15.

In telling myths the ancients did not intend to provide entertainment. Neither did they seek, in a detached way and without ulterior motives, for intelligible explanations of the natural phenomena. They were recounting events in which they were involved to the extent of their very existence. . . . The images had already become traditional at the time when we meet them in art and literature, but originally they must have been seen in the revelation which the experience entailed. They are products of imagination, but they are not mere fantasy. It is essential that true myth be distinguished from legend, saga, fable, and fairy tale. All these may retain elements of the myth. And it may also happen that a baroque or frivolous imagination elaborates myths until they become mere stories. But true myth presents its images and its imaginary actors, not with the playfulness of fantasy, but with a compelling authority. It perpetuates the revelation of a 'Thou'.

The imagery of myth is therefore by no means allegory. It is nothing less than a carefully chosen cloak for abstract thought. The imagery is inseparable from the thought. It represents the form in which the experience has become conscious.

Though the connection may be thought unlikely, it is a fact that the nature-myth of ancient near eastern religion stands in a line with the cosmological speculations of the pre-socratic Thales on the one hand and the theological abstractions of Aristotle and Plato on the other. At this end of the line we do not have myth, it is true; Thales was, in fact, a conscious de-mythologizer. But we have the same effort to find the meaning of life in a self-contained universe. Essentially, that is all the myth tried to do. And it is within this line that the religion of Israel does not stand at all. Israel's kerygma concerned a God who did not remain immanent in the predictable course of nature but who intervened in it, who changed and overturned it to suit his purposes, whose ways were not to be anticipated *a priori* but had to be made known. 'Who would believe what we have heard? To whom has Yahweh's arm been revealed?'<sup>1</sup> This was the altogether revolutionary conception of the very meaning of what it was to be a god that appeared in Canaan in the thirteenth century before Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Isai 53, 1.

It would be almost impossible for us to appreciate adequately today what a real revolution this was in the way of human life, a revolution which completely transcended the political or cultural changes introduced by the appearance of Israel in Canaan. The externals of israelite cult differed little, if at all, from the ancient canaanite practices which it retained. The same feasts were kept, the same sanctuaries were employed, sometimes including the same priesthood. What was changed, or supposed to be changed, was their entire meaning and direction. Rather than a device to control the deity, Israel's cult celebrated and re-lived the great deeds of Yahweh; the events in which he had assumed and continued to exercise the control of his people. Popular religion, however, then as now found the automatic sureties of paganism far more comforting and congenial than the renunciation and abandonment that are the requisite of faith, just as good men, christians or not, have always preferred the enlightened self-interest of the law of nature to the paradoxes of the sermon on the mount. Albert Vincent<sup>1</sup> has tried to re-create the situation of the ordinary israelite during the period of Israel's formation:

He did not forget Yahweh, this god who dwelt in the heart of the desert on the arid mountain of Sinai, but because it did not pay to invite the anger of the owners of this land who gave it its grain and oil and who guaranteed the fertility of his flock, his praises were also extended to the Baals and Astartes. Along with the canaanite he venerated the spirits which were to be found in springs, in green trees, and on the mountain tops. There were in Canaan ancient cities with such names as Eshtaol,<sup>2</sup> 'the place where one consults an oracle', Eshtemoh,<sup>3</sup> 'the place where prayer is heard', Eltolad,<sup>4</sup> 'the place where one obtains children'. What a temptation for the sterile israelite woman to heed the advice of her canaanite neighbour, who assured her that a pilgrimage to one of these sanctuaries would make her prayer efficacious. . . . This Baal – perhaps he was Yahweh under another name! (*baal* – lord) . . . The attraction of licentious practices, the pleasures of the nature and fertility cult did the rest . . . It would be a mistake to see in this popular religion anything worse than an adulterated Yahwism. True Mosaism still

<sup>1</sup> Cf his edition of Judges for the *Bible de Jérusalem*, second edition (Paris, 1958), pp 20–21.

<sup>2</sup> Jos 15, 33.

<sup>3</sup> Jos 15, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Jos 15, 30.

existed, but it was shared by only a select few. To convince ourselves of these things, it will suffice to read attentively the text of Judges.

Considerations of this kind help us to understand better a great deal of biblical history – a point to which, we again remind ourselves, we must return. They help us to understand, too, among other things, the singular lack of enthusiasm with which many of the prophets of Israel more often than not approached its cultic life, despite the fact that they were not impervious to cultic influence.

Israel's primitive kerygma, which inspired the great histories gathered into the pentateuch, is preserved in the bible under various forms. 'My father was a wandering aramaean who went down to Egypt . . . When the egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labour on us, we cried to Yahweh, the God of our fathers . . . He brought us out of Egypt with his strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs and wonders; and bringing us into this country, he gave us this land flowing with milk and honey'.<sup>1</sup> 'We were once slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with his strong hand and wrought before our eyes signs and wonders, great and dire, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and his whole house . . . Therefore Yahweh commanded us to observe all these statutes in fear of Yahweh, our God . . .'<sup>2</sup> These recitals, which modern scholarship has compared convincingly with the forms of near eastern suzerainty treaties current in the mosaic age, were doubtless the credo of the israelite assemblies, as indeed they have been called by Gerhard von Rad.<sup>3</sup> If we would imagine the type of ceremonial by which Israel celebrated the deeds of Yahweh and grew by gathering to itself all who would accept Israel's history for their own, we doubtless can look for no better model than the cultic assembly described in the book of Joshua,<sup>4</sup> where a covenant with Yahweh is proffered and accepted.

The great exodus events, Sinai, the wilderness, the land, the resultant sequence of the kerygma: these were the acts in which Yahweh had revealed himself to Israel. Because Israel was obviously undeserving of such attention, they were acts of gratuitous love, as even the earliest of israelite theologians knew.<sup>5</sup> The revelation of

<sup>1</sup> Deut 26, 5-9.

<sup>2</sup> Deut 6, 21-24.

<sup>3</sup> *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol 1 (Edinburgh, 1962), p 122.

<sup>4</sup> Jos 24.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Hos 11, 1.

a god of love called forth a reciprocal duty of love as the norm of the law that flowed from the covenant, a love that extended alike to the Author of the covenant and to all the covenant-brothers.<sup>1</sup> Only an historical revelation of Yahweh as father of a covenant family<sup>2</sup> could produce such an association of religion, law, and morality, unique for all time.

By covenanting with Israel, Yahweh revealed himself as king of his people: the form critical study already mentioned above indicates that through the covenant the idea of Yahweh's kingship was an affirmation of Israel's faith from the beginning and was not therefore the later elaboration of its theologians. In the ancient near east kingship meant much more than mere government. The king was at once lord, justicier, protector of the oppressed, and saviour. Because he was all of these things, he was also almost invariably a divine person; he was, in any event, a person surrounded by a mystique, possessed of an aura in which god and people merged and became identified. Though Israel did eventually adopt kingship as a political institution, not even its most enthusiastic royalists could ever completely enter into the near eastern ethos of kingship. They could not, because of the king who had made their history and had not been made by it, beside whom no earthly king could truly be a lord or saviour, but who was as subject as any other man to covenant law and as much in need of Yahweh's saving grace.

The transforming power of this historical revelation was felt in many other areas besides law, morality, and polity. Prophecy itself, which we think of as distinctively israelite, became such because of the use made of it by a God of history. The contemporary prophecy of the gentiles was a voice given to national and popular hopes and aspirations – the kind of prophecy which sometimes appeared in Israel itself and was consistently condemned by those whom we know as its true prophets. The prophets of Yahweh intervened, as he did, in human affairs and judged them, people, king and institutions. The wisdom tradition which was likewise not native to Israel was transformed into something quite unlike its counterparts in Egypt and Babylonia. Wisdom, which began as the innocent, and sometimes not so innocent, observation of nature and its ways, in Israel could not long remain aloof from the contemplation of the ways of God. There is much in the book of Proverbs, say, that resembles the wisdom of the gentiles. But there is nothing in extra-

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<sup>1</sup> Deut 6, 5; Lev 19, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Amos 3, 1; Hos 11, 1; Jer 3, 19; Deut 32, 6.

israelite wisdom that really corresponds to the book of Job.

The word of Yahweh, we have noted, could not be anticipated but was made known in history. It depended upon the absolutely free will of the lord of history. This fact lent to israelite religion both its sense of divine judgment and basis for hope. The God who had made Israel, Jeremiah knew as he watched the potter at work,<sup>1</sup> could as easily unmake it again. He who ordered the universe could permit the return of chaos. The covenant was a revocable instrument. Yet Yahweh's unexpected intervention had not been aimless; it was the beginning of a continued intervention in which there could be discerned the pattern of a divine consistency. On this rested the hope of the future, the fulfilment of a living word.

Unexpected though the revelation of God had been and would continue to be, it was never arbitrary. Amos, and after him a succession of prophets, insisted on the consistency of divine revelation with the realities otherwise known to man: the insistence which we must ever maintain if religion is not to be an irrelevancy to life. Jeremiah and Deuteronomy could discern the truth of the prophetic word in its conformity to the known word. This consistency, the prerequisite for a theology, could permit later generations of israelites to see history repeat itself, as when the return from exile could be seen as a new exodus. It was not historical coincidence, but the consistency of the lord of history. It could permit the yahwist to construct his great salvation history of man, envisaging ages and peoples of whom he had no historical knowledge. He could write on conviction, because of the God of history whom he did know.

This introduces us to our final consideration: the kind of history of which we are speaking when we call Israel's religion and Israel's God historical. This we must understand very well, for it is of vital concern to us if, we believe, the God of Israel is our God as well. If the God of Israel is our God, then Israel's history is our own. It cannot remain simply a chapter in the interesting study of the history of religions.

We have suggested more than once that a critical reconstruction of the statistical facts of israelite history would be something somewhat different from the outline and structure of the kerygmatic history that served as Israel's creed. The same could be said, with proper allowances made, for the kerygmatic history of the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Jer 18, 1-10.

This is certainly a problem that cannot be ignored, not if by history we understand the very fabric of our faith, which is the response of a believer to the presentation of a reality that we know as the revelation or word of God. Whether for good or for bad – and, all things considered, it is for good – we are children of a world that has passed through the Enlightenment and has accepted critical and scientific method. We cannot, as biblical man more or less could, ignore the critical problem. We cannot take refuge, as some to-day seem to be suggesting we can, in a conception of salvation history that bypasses the data of critical history. Salvation history that does not correspond to historical fact is merely a pretty story, in its own way a myth.

In many, perhaps most of its details, the history of our religious kerygma can doubtless never be critically established. This does not, however, absolve us from the critical task or leave us without its resources. We can, and indeed we must, establish the authentic history within which, and in which only, the kerygma has meaning. Biblical theology, in other words, which derives from a critical study of the bible, must be continually controlled by a critical study of the bible, from which alone we draw our 'salvation history'. If it is not, it runs the risk of propagating a religious philosophy rather than the theology of an historical revelation.<sup>1</sup>

There can be no doubt that a very great deal of what we cannot fail to recognize as renewed vitality in contemporary Catholic life must be traced to the popularization of the biblical concept of 'salvation history'. If the sacraments tend to be regarded nowadays less as the magic, mana-filled rites that popular piety sometimes made them appear to be, it is because they are regarded more as the saving acts of the historical Christ living in his Church. If the liturgy has become less and less a matter of pageantry and ceremonial sought for its own sake and developed for its own sake, it is because of a new awareness of its genuine meaning, the re-enactment by the people of God of historical experience and event; it is this awareness which more than anything else has been guiding the Church in its recent and continuing process of liturgical reform, discarding meaningless accretions and extravagances and restoring and re-emphasizing old essentials. Nowhere have the effects of this historical sense been more sensibly felt or with greater consequence than in the deliberations which resulted in the *Constitution on the*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Eichrodt, Walter, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol 1 (London, 1961).

*Church* promulgated by the third session of the second Vatican Council.

And it is this development that points the way to the further justification of salvation history that must accompany the critical. The theologians of Israel who wrote its history, its laws, and its prophecy were not, and did not need to be, critical historians. The history which they accepted uncritically they nevertheless believed to be true, and with reason. One reason was the historical experience of Israel itself, which was a continuing experience shared by every true israelite. The God who has made himself known in history continued to speak his word as a present event in law, in liturgy, and every aspect of israelite life. This continuity of history and of word we, too, should experience if salvation history is to mean for us what it meant to the men of the bible. To this extent is the God of Israel an historical God for us, when we know him as the God who has formed us his people.