MY WAYS ARE NOT YOUR WAYS:

THE RELIGION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

By DENNIS J. McCARTHY

IT WOULD HAVE been easier to discuss Old Testament religion not so long ago. The critical study of the Old Testament, with its discovery of sources behind our present biblical books, its late datings, its denials of traditional authorships, and the rest, was not simply negative. It also provided a positive and relatively simple view of a developing religion. Beginning with a primitive totemism or the like, the israelites were called to higher things. This call was the work of the remarkable flowering of the prophetic genius. This produced a series of spiritual giants who achieved a great insight, summed up in the rather unfortunate phrase, 'ethical monotheism', which they preached in season and out. The experience of an Isaiah, rejected by his king, or a Jeremiah, imprisoned and almost killed, was an indication not merely that their message was difficult but that it was entirely new. Men clung to the old ways.

However, the perseverance of the prophets worked something. Their 'ethical monotheism' finally received a sort of acceptance, but only into a framework not their own. The cult they had condemned unconditionally was ostensibly turned into the service of Yahweh, and their ethical demands were codified (and watered down) in the law. The trouble was that men still counted on the cult as an automatic means for gaining divine goodwill, a sort of grace machine. Worse, if anything, was the law, which quickly became a mass of interpretation, a guide not to the higher ethics but to the proper method for tithing mint and carrots.

Such was the panorama of Old Testament religion which would have been presented as the modern view not so long ago. Today a view like this is as quaint as and more uncommon than a rigid, literalist fundamentalism. It would be foolish in the face of this experience to substitute another 'scientific' dogmatism as *the* modern view. Rather, we must face the fact that we are dealing with a complex, developing phenomenon which is never going to be understood entirely. Revelation, after all, is a mystery, and it were pre-

sumptuous to claim such understanding of a mystery.

However, we can grow in understanding; and most views, however partial, will help to some degree. For instance, if we must reject the reconstruction of israelite religion made by the great critics of the recent past, they still teach us that the scriptures grew and that they are not a single, simple whole. We must always consider this factor of evolution if we are to understand them, or any significant part of them. It might even be that within the whole some part represents a regression from a particular point of view.

We must, then, consider Old Testament religion as it is laid before us in the bible as an evolving thing, but not in terms of the simplistic evolutionary ideas of the past. Many and complex factors went into its development. Recent study has shown that cult was an important, positive influence: indeed the preserver of many or most traditions. Again, while it is an exaggeration to make all prophets officers of the cult, they certainly had a more than accidental connection with it. And, of course, israelite law is, in much of its substance, older than earlier critics could believe. These are some of the ideas which present-day study has brought to the fore, and there are others.

For instance, there is the tradition of the god of the fathers, historically based and opening the way to rejection of other claimants to divinity.[1] Still, the world is full of mysterious forces. How did one explain them? One way was to make them cashiered gods, so to speak; superior beings who had bungled their assigned tasks:

> God has taken his place in the divine council;
> in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
> 'How long will you judge unjustly
> and show partiality to the wicked? . . .'
> I say, 'You are gods,
> sons of the Most High, all of you;
> nevertheless, you shall die like men,
> and fall like any prince'.[2]

[1] See the basic study, 'The God of the Fathers', in Alt, A., *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford, 1966), pp 1–86, and its indispensable companion piece, Cross, F. M., Jr., 'Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs', in *Harvard Thelogical Review*, 55 (1962), pp 225–259, which show that a promise for 'the god of the father' was likely in the circumstances of a nomad group aiming at settlement, and that the god *(el)* could absorb the worship and especially the characteristics, eternity, creative power, and so on, of other *els*. In other words, the way was open to an expanded knowledge of God while dismissing other gods who lost separate place and identity to the God of the father(s).

[2] Ps 82, 1–2, 6–7; compare Deut 32, 8–9 in the Septuagint reading, which is surely correct and is followed in the Revised Standard Version, where the 'sons of God' have guardianship over the nations and have not yet been 'cashiered' as in the psalm.

This is not monotheism as we understand it, nor do the psalm and the hymn represent the oldest view of the god of the fathers, the god of Israel; but they represent an early and logical enough development of that view. And the development is toward monotheism.

How did this development take place? Not through philosophical or theological speculation, but through experience. Once again, this was very complex, and we cannot cover very much of it. It is best to examine the more important cases. There was the exodus with its apparently brutal treatment of the egyptians. Brutal it may have been, though the story has grown much in the telling. In fact, one of the objects of the plagues was to convert the egyptians as well as Israel; they were all to confess the superior divinity of Yahweh even in Egypt, a fact well seen by the final compiler of the plagues narrative.[1] Even Israel 'believed in Yahweh'[2] only after the ruin of Pharaoh's army before its eyes. Until then it had wavered.[3]

This puts us face to face with a concept which is difficult, even repugnant, for us, but all-important in Israel's growing knowledge of God: the holy war. This was, incidentally, a cultic exercise; one is never far from worship and its values in the Old Testament. In the holy war proper, Yahweh crushed Israel's opponents himself and so proved himself superior to the 'godlets' of the nations. The classic example of this aspect of the war is Gideon in Judges 7. Under divine guidance he cuts his force to nothing; then Yahweh routs the enemy host by a panic. Clearly it is he and not the miserably inadequate israelite force to whom the victory is due. There was much to be learned from things like this. Yahweh was God indeed and no other could compare with him. Then, man must trust in this God alone, not in his own power or wisdom or anything else. One may begin to glimpse here the Totally Other whose ways are not man's ways, and what this means for man. God is absolute and deals with man as he will. If this can appear as indifference to human life on one side, on the other it drives home the lesson that salvation depends on this God alone. It is given, not earned. Here is a step towards a doctrine of grace.

Well and good; but the holy war concept raises problems. There is war itself, accepted without question even when it was pure

[1] Cf McCarthy, D. J., S.J., 'Moses' Dealings with Pharaoh: Exod 7, 8–10, 27' in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 27 (1965), pp 336–347.

[2] Exod 14, 31. [3] Exod 14, 11.

invasion. Worse, the holy war involved the ban, meaning that man, woman, and child, the very animals of the enemy, must all be slaughtered.[1] To be sure, the creator is lord of all life, but this is still a terrible demand, and, if within the rights of the supreme lord, not something that can be safely put into the hands of mere men, who can usually be trusted to go astray, be they a chosen people.

There was a counter-balance from another quarter. This God will have justice among men. He is not simply ruthless power; he demands that a man receive his due. This may not fit easily into the concept of the ban, but it is a counterweight. As so often in religion, and especially in the Old Testament, we are simply presented with various aspects of a matter without any attempt at a reconciling explanation. In any event, this God demanded justice, and not vindictive justice, mere punishment. He will punish, but more important is the positive demand, a demand for fair-dealing and more, a demand that everyone have what is needed for a truly human life. We can see this in the earliest prophets whose names have been attached to canonical books. The oldest of them, Amos, is preoccupied with the attack on the abuse of power to enhance itself at the cost of the poor.[2] Isaiah takes up the theme a few years later.[3] Neither prophet pretends to be announcing something new. He proclaims judgment in the name of principles which are or should be known. This is not merely a conclusion based on the principle that one cannot justly condemn men for breaking a law they do not know. In fact, the ancient world, of which Israel was thoroughly a part, had a very old and solid tradition demanding that the strong, the government, the rich, and so on, have a special concern for the well-being of the poor and the weak. This tradition appears in Israel, long before the prophets just cited, in the beautiful parable of the ewe-lamb where Nathan the prophet leads David to condemn himself for violating this very principle.[4] This is old material, authentically reflecting attitudes of David's time. Ethics, in other words, did not begin with Amos.

Still, the very example reveals the curious duality we so often find in Old Testament religion. We applaud the condemnation of the rich man's maltreatment of the poor, but what of the violence of David's reaction: 'He is liable to death'? Did the crime really deserve capital punishment, and, if it did, would the punishment

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[1] Eg 1 Sam 15, 3.
[2] Amos 2, 6; 3, 10; 3, 13–15; 4, 1–3; 5, 11 etc.
[3] Isai 1, 17, 23; 3, 14–15; 3, 16 – 4, 1 etc.
[4] 2 Sam 12, 1–6.

have redressed the situation? But then David was a violent man, a warrior and a successful guerilla leader, a type we have come to know well in our time, and not one characterized by nicety of feeling in matters ethical.

What of the prophets? They were men of religion and Amos was a simple countryman to boot.[1] Jeremiah was of priestly family and a man who could weep at the sufferings he called down on his people.[2] Yet it is not easy to see much that is different here, for the basic attitude is that of David. True, the prophet thundered against those who systematically enriched themselves at the hands of the defenceless, and it is hard to feel much sympathy for this sort. Who has not felt that the profiteer in shoddy housing, to take a modern example, deserves an eternity (or close to it) in one of his own miserable creations, forever waiting for maintenance men who are forever delayed? Still, standing back from such emotions as much as we can, the description of the slavery to be imposed on the upper classes in Amos, for instance, is starkly cruel:

> The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness
> that, behold, the days are coming upon you
> when they shall take you away with hooks,
> even the last of you with fishhooks.[3]

Need it be quite so fierce? Could the denunciation not be tempered just a little? Would not the oppressed in Israel suffer with the oppressors? Perhaps; but, for one thing, this is simply realistic, if forceful, description. It is exactly what the enemies of the hebrew kingdoms would do to their inhabitants when they conquered them.

Nonetheless, there is more to it than this. The principle that the privileged had special duties may have been generally recognized in the ancient world; but Israel was a special case:

> You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth;
> therefore I will punish you for iniquities.[4]

Those who receive special care deserve worse, if they fail in their duties, and naturally the leaders were the most guilty of all.[5] Israel was especially close to Yahweh. It was therefore holy – notice the reference to holiness in the passage just cited from Amos – and what might have been overlooked in others could not be overlooked

[1] Amos 7, 14. [2] Jer 8, 18 – 9, 2. [3] Amos 4, 2. [4] Amos 3, 2.
[5] Hos 4, a condemnation of those who have misled the people whom they should have led, is the classic statement of this truth.

here. Israel's failures were more than mere human frailties; they were profanations of holiness itself, for God's holiness was righteousness: '. . . the holy God shows himself holy in righteousness'.[1]

This brings in a dimension never to be forgotten when dealing with Old Testament religion. It was ever conscious of the holy. It knew that the divine and all that approached it was and must be immaculate. Anything that would stain this holiness must be held at arm's length. Hence the people which were God's own must at all costs be holy. Here was at once its glory and its burden. It faced demands beyond the merely human.

Here is part of the reason why Old Testament religion is so often seen as one of fear. To a considerable extent it was. We have noted the violence of the prophetic denunciations in their beginnings, and this continues throughout the prophetic books. Their vocabulary, their imagery is inexhaustible when they turn to condemnations of the sins of Israel. So true is this that it served as a rule of thumb for critics: any positive teaching in the prophetic books had to be inauthentic. Like most rules of thumb, it did not work very well, and today the study of the prophets is more nuanced and more difficult. Still, 'jeremiad' did not come into the language as a name for prolonged denunciation without some reason. The prophets are heavily weighted with the proclamation of the judgment of an angry god whose holiness has been offended. Reading them carefully and completely might well inspire fear (better rendered 'awe', it is true, but still fear).

Of course, there is more. Even if we never looked at the prophets, there is always the deuteronomic statement of the covenant. Deuteronomy has fifty-three long verses, curses detailing what failure to keep God's commands would mean.[2] They are designed to be terrifying. Moreover, if, as is commonly proposed, they were part of the law-book found under king Josiah,[3] the believer knew that these terrible things were actually going to come to pass.[4] As though this were not enough, a school of historians was inspired to review the history of the people in the light of its understanding of the deuteronomic theology. The resulting deuteronomistic history (Joshua to Kings) makes gloomy reading. Starting with high hopes under leaders who were true servants of Yahweh, Moses and later David, the people acquired a land and a way of life. But they failed God and themselves.

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[1] Isai 5, 16. [2] Deut 28. [3] 2 Kgs 22, 8. [4] 2 Kgs 22, 16–20.

First, in this view, there was the era of the judges, a period of regular backsliding redeemed only when Yahweh raised up extraordinary leaders who restored the situation for a time. With David, a really new era when the people would have a place of their own undisturbed[1] was to begin. If the kings kept the faith, that is, essentially, assured, undefiled worship of Yahweh, all would be well. Naturally they failed; apart from David, only Hezekiah and Josiah were what they should be. Others allowed at least shrines apart from the Jerusalem Temple, and so must receive rebuke from the deuteronomistic writer. In fact, there is no reason to believe that the liturgical worship of Yahweh was confined to the temple by law under the monarchy. We seem to have zealous condemnation of kings and people for not keeping a law that did not exist! But this is not quite so harsh as it seems at first glance. If the kings could plead not guilty in the face of an *ex post facto* law, it would have been hard to acquit them because of invincible ignorance. A moderately alert Yahwist must have known what was going on 'under every green tree and on every high place'; and, if some of this worship was faithfully Yahwist, much was not. He might wink at this for good political or economic reasons, but the inspired historian will have none of it. A holy people and a holy land must be just that, totally undefiled, and leaders who settled for less for any reason at all would, with their people, eventually pay for it. No-one tampers with the holy unscathed.

All of this is pointed up in developments in cultic practice. Israel always had various kinds of sacrifice. There were holocausts and communion offerings, there were sin-offerings and guilt-offerings. In earlier days the first kinds predominated. They were used to celebrate feasts and great occasions. The other offerings may have been used when it was necessary to wipe out a specific uncleanness, but it is even difficult to show clearly that they existed in pre-exilic times. In any case, they became important when the returned community built the second temple, and the Day of Expiation became the high point of the liturgical year.[2] Is this an unhealthy dwelling on guilt? Hardly. This was a people which had learned through a punishing history. Man approached the holy God only in fear and trembling, as befits a creature, and he needed to be

[1] 2 Sam 7, 10.

[2] For the development and expansion of expiatory offerings, see De Vaux, R., *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice* (Cardiff, 1964), ch IV. He uses the term 'expiatory offering' for what the text here calls 'guilt-offering', but exactly the same thing is meant.

purified. This is true in general; it is especially so of a chosen people which had been taught by prophet and by history that it too was sinful.

The later attitude towards the law had grown up under much the same influences. Earlier, law was flexible, religious like all ancient law, but still an instrument of changing society. It could and did change: a simple example is the change from the demand for the nomad's altar of undressed stones[1] to the affair of wood and bronze suited to a permanent temple.[2] However, the experience of the exile changed this. Without a land, without a temple, without a king, how were the people to maintain an identity? By setting themselves apart through the observance of a special divine law. It could still be a guide to everyday living, but it acquired a special religious value of its own. It was holy in its own right, because in and through it God himself was with his people.[3]

One result of this was a real rejoicing in the law as a precious possession such as is reflected in some psalms.[4] The law, properly regarded, was like the worship of the temple, not a burden but a joy.[5] On the other hand, this had its reverse side; a law so holy might be a way to God, but what were the dangers if one failed to keep it? 'You must be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy . . .'; and one was holy if he kept Yahweh's commands: 'Revere your mother and your father, observe my sabbaths . . . turn not to idols . . .'[6] Such observance meant life,[7] and failure meant death literally, because it was a direct affront to the holy.

This demand for obedience is not new. It resounded in the prophets. It was the basis of a whole view of Israel's history. Both of these we have seen, and they reflect a concern with the holy; but these last references regarding the law are the clearest (and probably latest) references to the problem of relating to the holy. God is holy; so, then, is his law. But the holy is an absolute, something to be set apart from the profane at all costs.

It is not easy for us to grasp all or even much of what this means. It obviously had its moral aspects: the holy One of Israel was guardian of justice and so on. He thus made human relationships, the subject of morality, something holy. But there is more than this·

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[1] Exod 20, 25. [2] 1 Kgs 8, 64. [3] Deut 4, 7–8.

[4] Cf Pss 19 (18), 7–14; 119 (118) etc.

[5] Cf psalms like 73 (72) and 84 (83) for the joy which should characterize worship; Ps 128 (127) even combines joy in worship and law. [6] Lev 19, 1–3.

[7] Cf Lev 18, 6.

The holy is more than the merely moral, and this is what we find hard to grasp. Profanation of the holy might be morally innocent; but it remained profanation and carried judgment with it. The simplest example, perhaps, is the sectioning of the temple area even in Jesus' time. There was a Court of the gentiles open to just about anyone. But let a gentile wander into a holier area, perhaps out of simple curiosity, perhaps even because he was confused and had lost his way. At once he had committed a profanation and he must die, innocent or not.[1]

This seems harsh and alien. What does a holy war which condemned innocents to death, overwhelming punishments of whole populations some of whom were certainly guiltless, all reflecting somehow a concept of a God so holy that holiness hardly allowed for degrees of guilt, or even concerned itself with guilt as such: what do all these have to do with us? What can they teach us? The ideas drawn from them have, in fact, been much abused among christians – witness the wars of religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But they still preserve a constant, an element which is important and which may need special emphasis today. They reflect an experience of the holy. They speak to us of an absolute to be approached only in fear and trembling, yet One who is to be approached; for, if he is awesome, he is also the ultimate good and the source and guarantee of all goodness. The Old Testament struggles to express both elements of the mystery, that which inspires fear, and that which inspires devoted love. It cannot succeed perfectly, but its emphasis on a God who is beyond us, whose actions and whose demands will not and cannot submit to human judgment, are not to be dismissed. There is a mystery at the heart of things beyond our ordinary understanding, let alone our desires and ambitions, or personalities. The Old Testament means exactly what it says: God is no respecter of created persons. The Old Testament teaches that living up to his demands can be terribly difficult, almost as difficult as rewarding. And it surely implies that man alone, or even with its instruments of cult and law and punishments, cannot so live.

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[1] Cf Barrett, C. K., *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (London, 1958), p 50, for a translation and some explanation of the text from the temple warning the gentile of this.