

# The Old Testament As Word Of God:

## Canon And Identity

Timothy Radcliffe O P

How can we read the Old Testament as the Word of God for us? What enlightenment can come to us from this curious collection of stories of the peccadillos of the petty monarchs of an obscure Ancient Near Eastern State, of bizarre dietary laws and odd taboos, of advice on good table manners and anguished calls for revenge and so on?

In recent years it has been fashionable to see the relationship between this ragbag of the fragments of the ancient civilization of Israel and our Christianity in terms of an historical continuity. The Old Testament is the Word of God for us because it recounts a history of salvation that points to and culminates in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The God of Israel is not a God who whispers timeless truths into the ears of His servants; He is the God who acts in history, who brought His people out of exile in Egypt, who gave them the Promised Land, who brought them out of exile in Babylon and who, finally, raised Jesus from the dead. He is the God who shows Himself in what He *does*, Westermann sums up this approach when he says, "Basic to all approaches is the insight that the Old Testament reports history or story or events that happened".<sup>1</sup> So the stories of the Exodus, the Conquest and the Kingdom are the Word of God for us since they recount the salvific acts of the God who was to be recognised as the Father of Jesus Christ. Furthermore it is generally claimed that Israel was unique in having this theology of an historical relationship with its God and so its religion was uniquely open to the disclosure of the God who intervened in history in the resurrection.

I do not wish to devote much space to an examination of this theology of "Salvation History" but it is worth making a brief critique so as to clear the way for an alternative interpretation of the Old Testament as Word of God.

First of all one must ask what is meant by "History" in this context. If one means no more than that Yahweh intervened to bless his people when they were obedient and punish them when they were wicked, that He won battles for them, and that He promised to safeguard the dynasty of David then, as Albrektson<sup>2</sup> and Saggs<sup>3</sup> have shown, the Israelites can hardly be said to have

had a distinctive conception of their relationship to their national god. The Babylonian and Assyrian gods were constantly intervening in just the same way. Most scholars, though, claim that more is implied by the term "Salvation History" than that. Gunneweg, who criticizes the concept, defines it as "a historical continuum in which salvation gradually becomes possible in one way or another or in which God guides history towards some form of salvation".<sup>4</sup> So the relationship of Israel to its God is claimed to be historical not just in the sense that He may be said to be behind particular historical events but because the sequence of these events was believed to be leading towards some specific goal. God was at work in history guiding it towards some conclusion of His own. I believe that one could argue that for a brief period, during the exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C. some Israelite authors such as the Yahwist and the prophet Deutero-Isaiah did believe that God was at work in history in this sort of way but that this understanding of history was short-lived in Israel. Before the Exile it was certainly believed that God intervened in the events of Israel's life but it would be to claim too much to say that He was guiding the history of His people towards a specific goal. After the return from exile, with the failure of the restoration of the State, it would be largely true to say that the people believed that God had withdrawn from interfering in history and had handed it over to the powers of the world and was just waiting for it to finish so that He could reveal His glory to the world. So one can hardly claim that this theology of "Salvation History" is particularly characteristic of the Old Testament.

This brings us to a second ambiguity of the word "history". With which history or histories are we concerned, the successive interpretations that Israel made of her past, or the account of that past that might be given by a modern historian such as De Vaux or Bright? If we opt for the former then, as I have already suggested, Israel did not usually understand her relationship to her God in this way, and, anyway, we would be professing a belief in a belief in Salvation History even if she did. Pannenberg and many other theologians have been suspicious of any theory of "Salvation History" that demands that one accepts the Old Testament as an inspired Word since one would have to believe in the Old Testament interpretation of Israel's history before it could be seen to be revelatory of the God who discloses Himself in history. In other words one would have to believe in order to discover the grounds of one's belief. So most theologians claim that Salvation History is to be discerned in what really happened (i.e. in what a Bright or a De Vaux could claim happened). The events in question must, in some sense, belong to the public realm if they are to invite one to come to belief in the first place. Pannenberg insists time and time

again that "God has proved His deity in this language of facts".<sup>5</sup> Or again, "The history of Israel all the way to the resurrection is a series of very special events. Thus they communicate something that could not be gotten out of other events. The special aspect is the event itself, not the attitude with which one confronts the event".<sup>6</sup> Finally, "The events in which God demonstrates His deity are self-evident as they stand within their own history. It does not require any kind of inspired revelation to make these events recognisable as revelation".<sup>7</sup> The Old Testament, that is to say, is the Word of God because it recounts the events of Israel's history and not because it is itself an inspired interpretation of that history.

The trouble with this approach is that if one looks at the history of Israel with the cool eye of the Ancient Near Eastern historian then nothing very remarkable does seem to have happened. The great saving events, the Exodus, Conquest and the election of David, do not appear to have been especially dramatic or unusual. A few marginal and disaffected people slip across the border of Egypt and take refuge in the desert; a rotten and decaying urban civilization falls before aggressive tribesmen; a petty tribal chieftain sets himself up as king of a minor state. All are commonplace events in the Ancient Near East. Nor does it seem to me that we can see in the later history of Israel any obvious signs of a people being led to salvation. Pannenberg says, "Israel experienced the self-vindication of Yahweh in the given events of its history largely as confirmation of words of promise or threat that are still in the future".<sup>8</sup> It is true that the threats of the prophets Amos and Hosea against the Northern Kingdom and of Jeremiah against the Southern Kingdom were fulfilled. Israel and Judah both went into exile as had been foretold. But what promises of salvation were ever fulfilled? Deutero-Isaiah did foretell a return from exile, it is true, but the reality of the restoration of the Kingdom was most disillusioning; the nations of the world did not flock to Zion, the highest of all the mountains. Israel became and remained until her destruction in A.D. 70 an unimportant little province in the empires of the successive world powers.

So it is hard to see what foundation there is for a Salvation History. It was not a concept that Israel generally used to interpret her relationship with her God and in the history that we can reconstitute there are very few signs of any glorious salvific events in which God might be revealed as the one who acts in history. Shortly after the Empire was established by David things started to go badly and they went on getting worse.

I would like to sketch out an alternative perspective for the interpretation of the history of Israel that might help us to understand the relationship of the Old and New Testaments a little bet-

ter. It can be seen, I would suggest, as a series of traumatic moments in which Israel was deprived of the successive identities that she succeeded in forging for herself. In each case Israel responded by creating a new identity for herself through the genesis of a Word of God in which God was disclosed ever more deeply as the one who is transcendently free and gracious, and the one whose Word could become, ultimately, the identity and community of the people of God beyond every loss of self-identity. Obviously, to establish such an interpretation one would have to write a solid book and not just a solitary article. I only have the space to suggest what might be some of the more crucial moments in this history and shall pause to focus on only one, the Exile of Judah.

1 About 1000 B.C. a bandit chieftain, David, captured the Jebusite city of Jerusalem. This was the beginning of a process through which the tribal people of the central Palestinian hill country became transformed into a State. Centuries later the Israelites would look back to this period as the moment in which Israel turned away from her true identity as the people of God. They were no longer happy to have Yahweh as their king. They wished to be a nation like all the other nations of the world. The relatively unstructured and classless society of the tribes became divided and stratified. The State was administered by a bureaucracy of civil servants; it depended on a professional standing army for its security; free men found themselves enrolled in forced labour gangs; worship and sacrifice became the preserve of a priestly class. But the establishment of the State brought with it an extremely important development, writing. Words could be withdrawn from the flux and flow of the oral tradition and become flesh in tablets of stone and clay; they could be decontextualized. One can see how the use of writing was born of a need to control and administer a complex and fragmented society and yet it was an important moment in the emergence of the Old Testament. For the first time it was possible for there to be a Word which confronted one, which stood over against one as other. There could never have been an Old Testament if the traditions of Israel had not been written down, although the introduction of writing was intimately associated with the breakdown of the community, the fracturing of its coherence in the emergence of a State founded on class divisions and the conflict of interests.

2 The next moment that we would have to look at in the genesis of a free and transcendent Word is the emergence of the prophetic movement. I would like to suggest that this too was closely associated with a loss of identity. In the ninth century in the Northern Kingdom, under the Omri dynasty, faith in Yahweh became effectively marginalized, excluded from its central position in the life of the State. The state religion became, for all practical purposes, the

worship of the fertility god Baal. It was this marginalization of the religion of Yahweh that led to the emergence of a prophetic movement outside and over against the structures of the State, which addressed a Word of God to the society as a whole. Throughout the Ancient Near East we come across prophets who address words of blessing or threat to kings and their courtiers but it is only in Israel that we find a Word of God addressed to the people as a whole and which judges the whole society. And this unique religious phenomenon was directly related to the social fact of the marginalization of groups of people within that society. Curiously enough the words that Elijah and Elisha and then, in rather different circumstances, Amos and Hosea addressed to the people were not especially revolutionary in content. In many ways the prophetic movement was conservative, harking back to an Israel that preceded the establishment of the State, and an Israel of the Holy War rather than the professional army, of the communal justice of the village rather than the corrupt class law of the king's courts. The traditions that they appealed to reflected social conditions that no longer existed but, being detached from their function within a particular society, their memory could become in the words of the prophets the invitation to radical transformation.

It was these two betrayals, the emergence of the class society with its introduction of writing and the failure of the Northern Kingdom to be true to Yahweh which led to the growth of the prophetic movement, that together enabled the collection of the written words of the prophets. And it was precisely the possession of this collection, the first canon that Israel ever had, that enabled the people to survive the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in the eighth century and then of Judah in the sixth. It was because these prophetic words came from outside the State that the exiles could make sense of its destruction. As in every instance, Israel reinterpreted her identity through the canonization of a memory.

3 The Exile of the Judeans in 587 B.C. was the most traumatic moment of loss of identity in the history of Israel and the most fruitful in the genesis of a Word of God in which God was disclosed as free and gracious. The exiles carried with them to Babylon a variety of religious traditions, priestly, royal, scribal and prophetic. While the State had existed these traditions could never come into fruitful interaction with each other since they represented the interests of different groups within society competing for power and influence. It would be on the whole true to say that the religious traditions of pre-exilic Judah had, with the exception of the prophetic, the function of legitimating the social structures of a class society. And because that State was not so very different from other contemporary Near Eastern states then its religious traditions were not especially distinctive, with the exception of its

monolatry and we would need a lot more space than we have to consider the consequences of that! The point I wish to stress is that these religious traditions can best be understood as reflecting a social and political situation. They were, as the sociologists would say, dependent variables. It was only the collapse of structures of the State that could free them into a creative interplay that could suggest a God who was free and gracious. To put it rather inelegantly, it was only the Exile that enabled the Word of God to become an independent variable, or, as the theologian would prefer to say, living and active.

Piaget's theory of development psychology might be useful in helping one to understand just what happened at this point. Piaget has shown that a child only acquires some sense of there being objects which exist independently of himself when he finds that he can relate to them simultaneously through two independent powers. When he finds that he can see the rattle that he shakes and shake the rattle that he sees then he becomes aware that there is a rattle that is independent of himself with its own existence. In a similar way the destruction of the social conditions that gave rise to Israel's religious traditions enabled them to come into play with each other and so suggest a Word of God that was transcendent. One can sense this emergence of a free and independent Word in the following quotation from an exilic passage in the Book of Deuteronomy.

And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deut. 6: 6-9.

Scholars have never been able to agree who could have written the Deuteronomistic History, which stretches from the Book of Deuteronomy to the end of the Second Book of Kings, since it employs prophetic, royal, priestly and scribal traditions. I think that it can best be understood as the attempt to create a new identity beyond the collapse of the States that had generated these diverse and opposing traditions. For example, God is seen to be a gracious God; a God of mercy and fidelity, since His covenantal relationship with His people is explored through the use of two quite different and opposing models, the conditional covenant with Moses, with the promise of blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience, which largely comes from the northern prophetic tradition, and the Davidic covenant of unconditional blessing which comes from Judah. The Mosaic covenant by itself might

suggest a God who is just but unbending; the Davidic covenant alone gives a God who simply legitimates a dynasty, like so many other gods of the Ancient Near East. By bringing them together in mutual qualification, for example in Solomon's prayer at the Dedication of the Temple (I Kgs. 8f), the historian is able to suggest a God is just and merciful, even beyond Israel's failure. But this fruitful counterbalancing of the two traditions was only possible because the political situations which each tradition reflected had been swept away.

The liberating effect of the Exile in the genesis of a new Word of God can be seen most clearly, I believe, in the Yahwist History which, following Van Seters<sup>9</sup> among others, I firmly believe to be exilic. It starts with Adam being placed in the Garden of Eden to till the soil. The Mesopotamian myths also maintained that man was created to perform a similar task, but, unlike for the Yahwist, this was because he was made to be the slave of the gods. The Epic of Atrahasis tells us that originally the junior gods had had the boring task of tilling the ground and digging the irrigation canals and keeping the whole economy going for the sake of the more venerable gods who spent their time mainly eating and drinking. Eventually the junior gods became fed up and went on strike, holding a demonstration outside the palace where the more senior gods were resting on their couches. So these gods decided that something must be done immediately if society were not to collapse and so Ea asks Mami, the birth goddess, to make some human beings who could do all the work in the future so that all the gods could rest and be at ease.

Now, as Saggs has shown,<sup>10</sup> this theology is a legitimation of the social structures of Mesopotamia in which the vast majority of the population were, in fact, the slaves of the gods, working on the enormous temple estates, digging the canals and offering sacrifices. The mythology is a projection of the State. Of course, this meant that the gods were also dependent on the human beings for their livelihood. They would be lost without their slaves and their sacrifices. They discovered this when they made the mistake of flooding the earth in protest at the excessive noise that mankind was making. When Utnapishtim, the Mesopotamian Noah, offered a sacrifice after the flood all the gods clustered around like flies, eager for a sniff. So if man was the slave of the gods it was also the case that the gods were at the beck and call of man. As a rather cynical Babylonian scribe said:

Don't perform sacrifice ... don't perform sacrifice!

If you train a god, he'll trot behind you like a dog.<sup>11</sup>

Any religion which is the legitimation of a political structure must bind man and God together in a mutually unfree relationship. And so it was, once again, the destruction of her identity as

a state that liberated Israel into a free relationship with a God for whom man was neither a slave nor a rival but a covenant partner.

It was at this stage in her history that the Israelites did, I believe, arrive at some conception of a Salvation History, of being in relationship with a God who would lead history towards a new fulfilment; Deutero-Isaiah proclaimed that there would be a new Exodus, that Israel would be restored to a new and splendid glory. Israel was able to forge for herself a new identity as the people for whom God would create a new State and she expressed this new hope not so much through the writing of totally new documents as through the gathering together and editing and annotation of her ancient traditions, by the preservation of a memory. She rewrote her history. It was through this process of canonization that she expressed her new identity as the people for whom God guided history.

4 The fourth traumatic moment in which Israel lost, yet again, her identity was the result, I would suggest, of the failure of the restoration. Once again she had a land, a Temple, sacrifices and even, for a while, a king, but this reconstitution of the community as a political structure within the Persian Empire utterly failed to achieve what had been promised. Israel was never again to be more than an insignificant little province of other people's empires. It was this failure that brought about the final transformation of her identity, the birth of Judaism. And this new identity was achieved, yet again, through the gathering together, the canonization, of ancient traditions. When Ezra came to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. or 398 B.C. he brought with him the Torah, the Law, the first five books of the Old Testament. But these books were read no longer as the story of a Salvation History but as the will of God for His people expressed in Law. It was this Law that was to give to Judaism its new identity. As James A. Sanders said, "Through the Torah, Israel passed from a nation in destitution to a religious community in dispersion which could never be destroyed".<sup>12</sup> It became a community that was given its identity not through a set of political or social structures but through conformity to the Word of God and as such was beyond destruction. As Sanders said, "Sinai, which we never possessed, was that which we would never lose".<sup>13</sup>

I have suggested that the pre-exilic religious traditions could, with the exception of the prophetic, be described as the legitimation of social and political structures. In Judaism the situation is reversed. The community exists only through conforming itself to the freely given and transcendent Word of God. It was the community of the Word and a Word made flesh in a book.

The Jewish canon was finally closed at the Council of Jamnia after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. The last institu-



tional sign of the presence of God was taken away; there could be no more sacrifices; it was book alone that could define the community. As Christians, though, we would surely wish to claim that the history of this people's constant attempts to discover a new identity beyond its negation, as they passed from being a tribal people to being a State, dispersed exiles, a minor province and finally a people of the Book, found its culmination and ultimate negation in the person of Christ, the one who both fulfilled and abolished the Law. For the paradox of Israel's identity was that she could only be true to it in dying to it, in transcending the identity that she had achieved. So the ultimate fulfilment of her history was to become the people of God in the one who broke the Law and died condemned by it. She was called to be herself in negating her identity as a particular people, a people set apart and defined by Law, for in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female" (Gal. 3:28). The vocation of Israel was to become truly the people of God in ceasing to be a people at all. I believe that it is only in this perspective that we can understand the continuity and discontinuity between the Old and the New Testaments.

In what sense, then, can we say that the Old Testament is the Word of God for us, that it belongs to our canon? We have seen that the evolution of the canon was always associated with the assertion of a new identity in the face of its loss. After each catastrophe the community defined itself by gathering together the traditions of its past. And so for the Church to claim the Old Testament as its own, to regard it as the Word of God, is for it to make an assertion about its own identity, that it is, in some sense, the New Israel. But this is a very curious claim for we have seen that Israel was always only itself in being prepared to transcend and negate its own identity. As Christians we believe that it only became truly itself in that negation of its own identity which was the death and resurrection of Christ. So for the Church to claim to be the new *Israel* is to recognize itself as the community which must also, in the Kingdom, lose its own discreet identity. As the Body of Christ it must be a sign of the Kingdom in which all will be one in Christ; it must be, as *Lumen Gentium* says, a sign and sacrament of "the unity of all mankind" (1.1). Yet this sacramental identity of the Church is always, to a certain extent, contradicted by its cultural and political identity as a particular group of people which may be a sign of, for example, Western culture or male domination or capitalism. If the Church is to be true to its deepest identity as the Body of Christ then it always has to negate any identity that it has succeeded in achieving. The most dramatic instance of this self-transcendence was surely its transformation in the first century from being a sect of Judaism to being a universal church of

the Roman Empire. But even this new identity had to be transcended if the Church were to survive the collapse of the Empire. The Church has had to be loyal to its deepest self in living beyond its identity as Jewish, as Roman and, now, as Western. So one might say that the Church and the people of the Old Testament have a common identity which is the extinction of all particular identity in the Kingdom of God. But this common identity is not just given in a convergence of destinies. There is a sense in which we are *that* people, awaiting the coming of the Kingdom and Redemption, for in so far as the Resurrection of Christ did not bring in the fullness of the Kingdom of God in this world, then we stand before the Resurrection. We are the new Israel because we are still called to the negation and fulfilment of our identity in Christ. So when the Church claims the Old Testament canon as its own it is saying more than that it is the chronological successor of the kingdom of David; and more than that one can only understand the New Testament in the light of the Old. One might perhaps say that the history of Israel is sacramental of the life of the Church in its pilgrimage towards the Kingdom. If a canon is always an assertion of identity then one can say that it is the single canon of the Old and New Testaments that articulates the identity of the Church as the community that is and is not yet the Body of Christ and the Kingdom of God.

- 1 *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. C. Westermann, 1963, p 44.
- 2 *History and the Gods*, B. Albrektson, 1967.
- 3 *Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel*, H. W. F. Saggs, 1977.
- 4 *Understanding the Old Testament*, A. H. J. Gunneweg, 1978, p 202.
- 5 *Revelation as History*, ed. W. Pannenberg, 1969, p 137.
- 6 *Ibid.* p 137.
- 7 *Ibid.* p 155.
- 8 *Ibid.* p 153.
- 9 *Abraham in History and Tradition*, J. van Seters, 1975.
- 10 *Op. cit.*
- 11 *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, W. Lambert, 1975, pp 146, 147, lines 59-60.
- 12 *Torah and Canon*, James A. Sanders, 1972, p 51.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p 53.