PURPOSE, PLAN AND PRINCIPLES

The aim of this book is to help restore the OT to the reading list of the general educated public. For a century now it has been the case that the Bible is 'the world's least read best-seller'. What is true of the Bible is even more true of the OT: few except scholars and believers read it for pleasure.

And there are good reasons for this state of affairs. Chief of them is that about half the OT is not *worth* reading by any but scholars or believers. Much of the other half is superb; but a reader has to know the way about the whole field before being able to unearth the pearls buried in it. As things stand, the best suffers from the presence of the rest.

Secondly, the text of the OT as traditionally presented is far from easy on the eye. True, some more recent translations are more attractively set out. But even then the *full* text is so long as to leave no adequate room on the page for the notes needed to explain it. The *New Jerusalem Bible* makes a gallant attempt to solve the problem but is defeated by sheer bulk.

In any case, thirdly, the notes provided rarely tell the general reader what he or she wants to know. Many of them are historical. Since the OT is a useful source for the ancient history of the Near East, such a concern is entirely valid; but it is of little general interest. Many others are theological. Again this is perfectly proper in itself. But unfortunately the theological standpoint (Jewish, Catholic or Protestant) is often too narrow to be of general appeal. Christians here are the worst offenders: how Jews must resent having their Bible patronized as a failed approximation to subsequently revealed truth!

Not that the Hebrew Bible is identical in coverage with the Old Testament – which is why this edition uses the latter title rather than the former. The OT includes all the books in the Hebrew Bible, but also some others. Christians call these other books apocryphal or deuterocanonical. Most of them were originally written in Hebrew, but hardly anything survives of that Hebrew text beyond fragments: the only complete text of them is preserved in the Greek translation of the OT, the Septuagint*. Christians treat these other books with a greater respect than Jews do, if less than they accord to the canon* of the OT.

From this analysis derive the principles governing this edition. First, it offers selections – approximately 30% of the OT and 15% of the Apocrypha. And the chief criterion of selection is readability: whether such and such a passage is capable of holding the attention of the general educated reader. This is primarily a literary criterion, and I explain below what I mean by it. But the OT is of interest also to many people for non-literary reasons. Therefore some passages have been included for their importance to specialists of one kind and another: students of history, theology, anthropology, law, Jewish traditions, etc.

Within passages I have also cut: sometimes in order to clarify, where the text offered by the mss is either incoherent or so obscure as to need a tedious explanation; sometimes to abbreviate where it is piously repetitive. Where the text can be confidently ascribed to different written sources, I have usually followed the sources in making the cuts; and I confess to a predilection for the oldest or 'original' text where it is recoverable. I have however resisted the temptation to transpose: the order of the excerpts is virtually always that of the King James Version.

I am aware that this selective approach will seem misguided or even offensive to some. I believe I can rebut such special criticisms, and I do so in Appendix C. But I must draw the general reader's attention

to one point. This selection does not seek to preserve the *balance* of the OT. Certain kinds of content are under-represented here, especially lists (genealogies and dynasties) and ritual provisions. The same goes for certain attitudes, especially the complaining (which soon becomes monotonous, even in the psalms), the condemnatory (especially frequent in the prophets) and the vindictive.

The passages chosen have been taken from a variety of different translations. Translations fall into two groups. First there is the King James or *Authorized Version* (1611) and its relatives the *Revised Version* (1886), the *Revised Standard Version* (1952) and the *New Revised Standard Version* (1989). For verbal fidelity to the Hebrew and for literary quality – especially in its diction and rhythm – the KJV/AV remains unsurpassed. Coleridge said of it that 'intense study of the Bible will keep any writer from being *vulgar* in point of style'. But its archaisms can be an obstacle to a modern reader, and its scholarship has inevitably been superseded in many places. Hence the popularity of NRSV, which 'revises' AV somewhat in both respects.

I wish I could have used AV more. But time and again when I have sought to do so I have been defeated. Sometimes it misses a nuance, often it mistranslates. There is, I know, a sophisticated argument by which the accuracy of a translation is irrelevant. If the AV has printed, in a famous passage of Job (19.26), 'yet in my flesh shall I see God', then that is a text in its own right, irrespective of any connection with a Hebrew original. Against that I can only declare the principle, that the text I am concerned with is a Hebrew and/or Greek text of the first millennium BC, not an English one of the second millennium AD.

Recently however we have had a spate of new translations of the Bible. Three of these stand out as generally reliable: the RC (French) *New Jerusalem Bible* (1985), already referred to, and two Protestant versions, the *Revised English Bible* (1989) and the American *New Revised Standard Version* (1989). The translations given by these versions are often a clear improvement, for various reasons. One reason is that the translators have been able to supplement or correct the text of the medieval Hebrew mss (MT*) not only by that of the C4th-6th AD mss of the Greek translation (LXX*) but also by the recently discovered Hebrew Dead Sea Scrolls of C2nd BC - 1st AD. All three of these translations have however their occasional weaknesses – a flatness of rhythm, a banality of tone, or a loss of sinew by paraphrase. REB is also liable to obscure a cross-reference or echo by varying its translation of a Hebrew word, even within brief compass.

Moreover all of them have created literary problems for themselves by a resolve to avoid linguistic sexism, including the use of the word 'man' in its generic sense of 'human being'. The resolve is virtuous but the English language is recalcitrant. This is particularly awkward in contexts where the central theme is the relation between God and man/men. Modern translators who are determined not to use generic 'man' have to choose between two unhappy alternatives. The formulation 'God and mortals' is theologically inept: 'mortals' belong with 'immortals', a pagan concept alien to the Bible. Locutions like 'human beings' or 'humankind' are shapeless abstractions unsuited to the concrete language of the OT. It is NRSV which carries this principle furthest. Take for example the highly evocative picture of universal peace in Micah 4.4, where AV gave a literal rendering: 'they shall sit every man under his own vine and under his own fig tree'. REB and NJB both swallowed hard and kept 'each man' (though they lost the overtones of 'Everyman'). NRSV however stickles – 'they shall all

sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees' – and thus blurs the sharp pictorial focus of the Hebrew.

Had it not been for this, I should have been tempted to use NRSV throughout. As it is I have chosen for each passage that translation which on balance seems most appropriate. For the Psalms see also p.415.

The actual excerpts from these translations form the main part of this book. If the object of the selection is to render the text readable, that of the commentary is to make it *more* readable. Specifically it aims (i) to provide necessary background information and (ii) 'to observe those excellences which should delight a reasonable reader' (Dryden). In pursuit of those aims I have drawn on the work of very many scholars. When quoting, I have normally given the author's name but not the specific reference, so as to avoid cluttering the commentary. By the same token, no space is devoted to scholarly controversy nor to lists of alternative interpretations.

The standpoint of the commentary is thus again primarily that of literary criticism. An English critic has written that in looking at a work of literature we need to consider 'what it says, how it says it, and why what it says is important to us' – though 'it is only for purposes of analysis that we separate what is [there] not separate'. Since about 1970 the insights of literary criticism have been increasingly applied to the Bible, particularly by scholars like Luis Alonso-Schökel, Northrop Frye, Robert Alter and John Barton. Literary terms used in the commentary are explained in the Glossary.

I must here warn that I am not using the term literary criticism in the private sense in which biblical scholars have traditionally used it, i.e. as equivalent to what general critics call 'source criticism'. Nor however am I using it in the academic sense appropriate to modern literary analysis at university level. Any reader who wants to be up to date at that level should perhaps get Alter and Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987), with the warning that its contributory essays are of uneven quality. Both these are legitimate senses of 'literary' and necessary forms of scholarship. I hope to have acquired from them that which will illuminate the general reader. In structuralism, however, and in some later critical approaches, I have found little or no illumination.

Each age has its own preferred literary patterns. My own experience in teaching the OT leads me to think that the pattern currently preferred, at any rate by the young, is the dramatic, particularly the tragic, doubtless because it best reflects the ambiguity of contemporary life and thought. Such a preference is particularly suited to the OT, which contains a great deal of drama. Adam is only the first of the dramatis personae – 'un homme, une femme, une pomme, un drame'. Not only he but Moses, Saul, David and Job can be seen as tragic heroes in the classical sense. The books of Jonah, Esther, Ruth and Susanna are all nearer to the drama than to the novel. Most dramatic of all perhaps is the book of Jeremiah, whose agonised poetry is interwoven with the account of his own suffering and that of his country.

One could indeed go further and see the whole history of the Jews down to the deportation to Babylon as one long tragic drama – or perhaps, in the light of subsequent history, one should say rather the first of a series of tragic dramas in which that nation has played the central role. If one considers the whole history of civilization, ancient and modern, no people has contributed more than the Jews; yet few if any have suffered more. Many of these sufferings have been at the hands of Christians. This book is a drop in the ocean of due redress.

THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

Compared with modern European languages, biblical Hebrew has four main distinguishing features.

First, it is very **highly inflected**. What in English is a whole clause or sentence may in Hebrew be expressed in a single word, e.g. 'When I saw them' or 'I caused him to hate me'. In these cases the main verbal ideas – 'see' and 'hate' respectively – have prefixes and suffixes added to them which play the part of the other words present in the English. Students of classical languages are familiar with the process, but it is carried much further in Hebrew. The result is that Hebrew is built up of few but substantial words. If one takes a passage of Hebrew poetry together with its English translation, there will be roughly the same number of syllables in each language but two or three times as many words in English.

Secondly, the root idea of the verb is expressed in three consonants. (This **triliteral root** is the key feature of *all* Semitic languages, whether dead, like Akkadian*, Phoenician, Ugaritic* and Aramaic, or living like Hebrew and Arabic.) These consonants normally remain unchanged except for an occasional doubling. The inflexions are expressed either by the prefixes and suffixes already mentioned or by variations in the vowels between the consonants. To some extent we are familiar with this in English. The vowel change is seen e.g. in 'sit', 'sat', 'set'. 'Set' is an example of a vowel change used to make the verb 'sit' into a causative: 'set' = make to sit. This is much commoner in Hebrew, where most verbs have a causative mood of that kind. Another English example is 'begin', 'began', 'begun'. Here the 'be' is a prefix, and we could add a suffix also, to make 'beginning'. In that case one of the root consonants is doubled, though we do not pronounce it as double in English.

Because these vowel changes followed a regular pattern, written Hebrew could omit the vowels without risk of serious misunderstanding. (The same can actually be done in English, though less safely because so many English words have only one or two consonants.) And indeed the main Hebrew text of the OT was handed down for many centuries without special signs for the vowels: the modern vowel 'pointing' was not added until well into the Christian era.

One result of this is that, though we have a fair idea how the consonants were pronounced in ancient Hebrew, we are altogether less sure of the vowels. This uncertainty is particularly damaging to our appreciation of Hebrew poetry. For example, the commonest vowel in Hebrew, as in Sanskrit, is one which we traditionally pronounce as a long 'a', as in French 'âme', English 'calm'. But in ancient times it was probably sounded like the 'a' in 'fall'. At any rate it does not appear to have any particular associations with grief, such as we would expect of a long 'a', e.g. it is no more frequent in the speeches of Job than in those of his 'comforters'.

But if we do not know for certain how the language was pronounced at any one time, that does not prevent us from recognising assonance; and assonance is much commoner in an inflected language, particularly one which employs parallelism* of clauses. Thus the four lines which compose Isaiah 14.11 are, literally translated, as follows:

> Brought down to the grave is this *pomp of-yours*,
> the sound of these *harps-of-yours*;
> *beneath-you* strewn are maggots,
> *and-covering-you* worms.

The words in italics all end in *-–kah* because that is the suffix meaning 'your'. In the first two lines those words come at the end, in the last two at the beginning. So the structure of the sound is

plain to see, even if we cannot be sure how the '–' in the suffix was pronounced.

That instance shows up a difference of taste between us and the Hebrews. We follow Vergil, whose ear never allowed him to juxtapose e.g. a noun and an adjective agreeing with each other and both ending in *-orum*. But the Hebrews showed no such reluctance, doubtless because the assonance served to underline the parallelism which was the basis of their high style.

The third difference between biblical Hebrew and modern tongues lies in its **vocabulary**. The classical Hebrew vocabulary is small. Only about 5,000 words are used in the OT, probably nearer to 4,000 if you exclude the book of Job. This is so few that it would have been hard to get by on it in everyday life. It seems that the OT was written in an artificially limited high style, like the French of Racine. One result of this limitation was to offer ancient writers great scope for word-echoes within or between passages, a scope which however can lead to over-interpretation by modern critics.

The vocabulary of Hebrew is also differently distributed from modern languages. The force of the sentence is usually conveyed in the verb – and a transitive verb at that. Moreover the Hebrew verb is very flexible, as has been suggested, with a wide range of moods and tenses. Second to verbs in importance and frequency are nouns, again usually concrete nouns. Abstract concepts are represented, where possible, by parts of the body e.g. 'power' by 'hand', 'speed' by 'legs', 'anger' by 'nose', 'thoughts' by 'heart'. A very poor third come adjectives and modal adverbs. The relative lack of adjectives is not such a handicap as it would appear. For example, although there is no adjective in Hebrew meaning 'good', there is a verb (*ṭ b*) meaning 'to good', a verb which existed in English until the C17th. And a language which says 'God goods' may be worse at listing God's qualities but better at expressing his activity.

Adjectives and adverbs are also used for emphasis in English. In Hebrew that emphasis is obtained by repetitions, especially in parallel. Thus, the English sentence 'A mighty wind will carry you off irresistibly' might be expressed in Hebrew by saying: 'a wind will carry you off, a storm will scatter you'. Or conversely we might find in Hebrew:

> that men may see and know
> that the hand of the LORD has done this,
> the Holy One of Israel has created it.
> (Is 41.20)

An English rendering of those lines might take this form:

> that you may be utterly convinced that it is God himself who has brought this about with irresistible power.

The fourth distinguishing feature of biblical Hebrew is its **syntax**. This is chiefly a matter of the build-up of sentences. In OT Hebrew, as in Homeric Greek, there are relatively few subordinate clauses: most clauses are coordinate, linked by the undifferentiated conjunction *waw* which, like the Homeric *de*, can vary its meaning according to context between 'and', 'but', 'for' and 'therefore'. The language, like that of Homer, had not developed far enough for conjunctions to have emerged with fixed and specialised meanings corresponding to those English words. It is consequently rare in OT Hebrew to find a long and intricate sentence like that of Genesis 24.14 or 28.6. The usual sentence is built up of short units loosely joined together, a structure which is clearly better suited to some kinds of writing than to others.

A subsidiary feature of the syntax is the omission of words. Thus the definite article (i.e. 'the'; Hebrew has no indefinite article) is often omitted. So is the relative pronoun 'which', e.g. in [Ps 118.22], where the Hebrew reads 'the stone the builders rejected'. For this we have an excellent parallel in English,

where we readily omit 'which' as object, though no longer as subject. More interestingly Hebrew, like Ugaritic, boasts a compressed noun-clause, which adds great vividness to descriptions in prose or poetry. So in 2 Sam 18.14, where Abner 'picked up three stout sticks and drove them against Absalom's chest while he was held fast in the tree and still alive', the Hebrew sentence ends '. . . against Absalom's chest – he still alive in the midst of the tree'. Other forms of compression include a straight asyndeton (absence of connecting particles), used for speed e.g. in Judges 5.27 and throughout Ps 93. Finally Ezra [10.13] may be quoted as containing a phrase which is typically Hebrew in its concreteness: 'the time is rain', where we should say 'it is the rainy season'.

These features all point in one direction. Biblical Hebrew is a language ideally suited for saying relatively simple things concretely, succinctly and above all forcefully. That is to say that it is suited to narrative, to poetry and to aphorisms.

When it comes to translation into English, the problems are those which arise wherever an inflected language is being translated into an uninflected one. The latter finds it hard to match the concision or the weight of the original, but it has the advantage of flexibility in everything except word-order.

A special case is the translation of Hebrew *poetry*. The free rhythm of the Hebrew and (except for the problem of word-order) its parallelism are easily enough preserved in English – more easily, in fact, than either the strict rhythms of Greek and Latin poetry or the typical modern European end-rhymes. It is Barr's view that 'there is rather less lost . . . in translating Hebrew poetry into English than in translating Greek or Latin poetry'. But that judgement must be suspended until other features of Hebrew poetry have been considered.

Note on the transliteration of Hebrew

There are many competing methods of transliterating Hebrew into English. The method used here does not correspond to any of them. It is designed *ad hoc* to be intelligible to the general English reader. The following signs are the only ones that need explanation:

ch to be pronounced as in Scottish 'loch'
q is a harder 'k'
' between vowels is a glottal stop, to be pronounced like tt in Cockney 'butter' or t in American 'Clinton'
– over a vowel marks it as long, i.e.
ā as in English 'fall'
ē as in English 'fail'
ī as in English 'ravine'
ō as in English 'pole'
ū as in English 'true'

HEBREW STORY-TELLING

1. Kinds of Story

The stories of the OT are among the great stories of world literature. The word 'story' is used here rather than anything more technical. For critical purposes different kinds of story can be distinguished, but there is no hard and fast line between them. All of them were originally oral. All of them lose a little of their nature when they come to be written down.

The **basic story-units** in the OT are quite unlike those in the better-known literatures of Europe. The closest parallels to them are to be found in the medieval Icelandic sagas which, though written down, still seem close to their oral origins. An Icelandic scholar describes their features – shared with many OT stories: 'their economy of phrasing, the brevity with which the incidents and speeches are conveyed, the restriction of all commentary to the least available compass' (Ker). That principle of economy excludes ornamental adjectives, descriptions of nature and psychological comment: 'thoughts are practically never revealed, except in speeches – and not always then.'

A typical story in the OT shares not only content but also form with those in the Icelandic sagas. It falls into three parts. First (i) is a fairly brief introduction, setting the scene, identifying the characters and explaining or hinting at the tension whose resolution will constitute the main action of the story. Sometimes the opening summary will reveal so much that to our ears it seems to spoil the suspense e.g. the first 'he blessed him' in the story of Jacob and Esau (Gen 27.23; another example is Jon 3.5). But where the audience knew the end of the story already, such an anticipatory mention could actually increase the pleasure of listening. And when the audience did not know the story, the warning helped them to follow it and gave the author scope for dramatic irony.

The main scene (ii) is told more fully and slowly: indeed 'telling time' may here be almost as long as 'action time'. It centres round very few people – preferably not more than three – of whom only two are 'on stage' at any given time (though a third may be listening e.g. Gen 18.10; 27.5). One of them is the main character, the other(s) subordinate, and the main character often has a contrasting foil in one of the others. The narrative sequence is straightforward, though the author is at pains to introduce suspense, often by the pattern of two (or three) unsuccessful attempts before the hero is 'third (or fourth) time lucky'. Speeches play an important part, and may form the climax of the narrative.

Finally (iii) there is a brief conclusion. The tension is now resolved and e.g. the characters go their separate ways. Often the conclusion will frame* the story by echoing the introduction. At its simplest the echo consists of a repeated key-word e.g. the name of a person or place. Sometimes it extends to a whole sentence repeated almost word for word.

But that very spare treatment – 'concentrate of story' as one might term it – was not the only style at the disposal of Hebrew writers. A more elaborate treatment is often found, with more characters, fuller detail and longer speeches. The narrator may begin to obtrude himself, offering psychological, and sometimes also theological, comments (e.g. Gen 24.21).

Gradually, with the passage of time, single stories came to be grouped round some notable person. Such a **story-cycle**, as it is known, is a loose string, with little articulation of incident (i.e. plot) or development of character. There are many such cycles in the OT e.g. those of

Abraham, Isaac, Lot, Samson, Elijah and Elisha.

In this process a single story may be found in two different versions known as doublets. A doublet may occur twice within a single cycle (e.g. 1 Sam 24 and 26) or once in each of two cycles (e.g. a healing story told both of Elijah, more simply, in 1 K 17 and of Elisha, more elaborately, in 2 K 4) or even twice in one cycle and once in another (see Gen 12). There is also a curious phenomenon whereby the two versions are knitted together, as in Gen 37 or Ex 14.

Doublets are in fact only one form of the basic structural principle of all OT writing, both prose and poetry, viz. repetition-with-variation. The principle is most clearly visible in the parallelism* of the Hebrew poetic couplet. But for narrative the OT, unlike other ANE literatures, hardly ever uses parallelism. Instead it uses various forms in which sometimes the repetition dominates, sometimes the variation.

Repetition dominates where e.g. one character relays another's speech (as in Gen 24) or a written narrative is followed by an oral report of it (as in Gen 41) – though even in such cases an experienced reader will discern subtle variations. Conversely where variation predominates a reader may discern a basic similarity, as between the punishments awarded by God to Adam and Eve in Gen 3 and to Cain in Gen 4. The variation may even go so far as to create a contrast or reversal (as in Gen 27.39f.). In one particularly sophisticated form, the details in the first half of the story, i.e. up to the climax in the central scene, are answered in reverse order in the second half. This structure, sometimes called pedimental*, is used e.g. for both the healing stories referred to above, being especially suited to the rise and fall of an illness. It is also much used in poetry e.g. Is 14.4-21.

This principle of repetition-with-variation clearly made a deep appeal to the OT writers. In poetry it satisfied their aesthetic sense. In prose narrative it also reflected their sense of a pattern in events. And when the scale of those events becomes large enough, the literary principle comes to express a theology of history.

But in reading the OT it is helpful to distinguish three specialised kinds of story in addition to the basic kind so far described. They are **myth, legend and folk-tale**, of which the most interesting is myth. The simplest definition of a **myth** is 'a story of the gods'; but that will not do for the OT, if only because no other gods are recognised in it. A more comprehensive definition is that of Malinowski: 'These stories . . . are the assertion of an original, greater and more important reality, through which the present life and work of mankind are governed.' A structuralist definition by Leach says much the same thing in more formal terms: a myth is 'a logical model by means of which the human mind can evade unwelcome contradictions' of certain pairs of opposites e.g. death and immortality. In that broad sense, it is obvious that the story of the Garden of Eden is a myth; and so, a little less obviously, is the Flood. In fact these two are the only complete myths which the OT contains; but it contains many references to, and motifs from, other myths, especially those from Ugarit*.

A **legend**, as the term is normally used of the OT, is a story about religious (i.e. cultic) people or places or activities. Though it may have a historical basis, it often contains fantastic or miraculous elements: there is a good deal of such legendary matter in the stories of the prophets, running from Moses through Elijah and Elisha to Isaiah and Jonah. Sometimes, as in stories about the origins of religious names, the legend may be the work of pure fantasy.

Most people know what a **folk-tale** is from their childhood reading. Like a

myth, it is a story not limited by everyday reality; unlike a myth, it does not aspire to say anything profound about the world. Its favourite themes are love and adventure, the test and the quest, ingenious devices and evasions. The only pure folk-tale identified in the OT is the story of Solomon and the two mothers, which seems to come from India. But there are countless folk-tale motifs* in other stories, e.g. those of Jacob, Samson, David, Esther, Tobit, Jonah.

2. Larger Compositions

So far we have considered short stories of various kinds, and also the collections of stories known as cycles. Such material lasts until there comes the creative mind which weaves it into a larger **composition** i.e. a coherent design linked by a system of ideas. In the case of early Greece, we know that creative mind as Homer's. For the OT we have no corresponding name: we can but speak of the 'author'* or the 'editor'* (see Glossary for the use of these terms and also for the 'narrator'*) of e.g. Genesis or the Pentateuch.

But of what kind is the resultant composition? In particular, should we read it as history or fiction? Once again, modern categories are too stark. If pressed, one might take refuge in a hybrid term like 'historical fiction', which can convey a whole range of writing according to whether the emphasis is on the adjective or the noun. Sometimes in the OT a concern for fact predominates, as in the lists of names or laws or cult-objects. More often the story-teller's concern predominates, as in 'reports' of conversations which cannot possibly have been recorded or even overheard. Such 'privileged' conversations are a feature of the most highly developed stories such as the Court History of David (2 Sam 9-1 K 2). Without them the author of that work could not have achieved what he has viz. a sequential development not only of incident but of character. With them, however, he must forfeit, at least in the eyes of an austere critic, the title sometimes claimed for him of being the world's first historian. Only at the very end of the OT do we come across a book (1 Maccabees) which could be called historical in a more austere sense.

The OT also contains many excellent narratives which make no serious historical claims at all: history, though present as a setting for the plot, is more or less cavalierly treated. But there is a plot in these narratives, such that the component stories will not stand on their own; and there is often some psychological development on the part of the main character. The term for such a narrative is **romance** or **novella**. Examples in the OT are the romances of Joseph (Gen 37-45), Ruth, Esther, Tobit, Judith. More is said about them on p349.

This classification of OT stories must not be taken to imply that 'historical' writing represents a higher stage in a linear process. 'A view of the world in terms of the family or as a stage for heroes has as much to say for it as the chronicling of historical fact' (Koch). What matters is that the story should, at its deepest level, be true to life. With that proviso, 'a simple tale, told at the right moment, transforms a person's life with the order which its pattern brings to incoherent energies' (Ted Hughes).

And OT stories are in general outstandingly true to life. There is no love of the fabulous for its own sake, as in e.g. Egyptian stories. The legendary and the miraculous play a minor role. There is less of the supernatural (ghosts, omens, dreams) in the OT than in Herodotus' histories or Shakespeare's tragedies. The predominant tone is matter-of-fact – sometimes deliciously used to set off the violence which is never far below the surface. Outside the romances the heroes

are a richly realistic mixture of strength and weakness, virtue and vice.

But finally, we misjudge the stories of the OT if we read them simply as good stories well told. In fact the stories are inextricably bound up with the **theology**: each is essential to the other.

One way round, this is obvious. Whatever the origin of the stories, they have now been edited and placed within an intricate theological setting. True, we can sometimes prise them out of their setting, but in doing so we risk damaging them. Providence in the OT is like the red thread which Goethe said was 'woven into all the ropes of the [English] royal fleet in such a way that it cannot be taken out without unravelling the rope'. And the hand of providence is visible not only in the content but in the structure of the stories.

In the romances the movement of the plot follows the axis of comedy, from (virtuous) unhappiness to (merited) happiness. In the main body of OT narrative it is otherwise. If happiness is achieved, it may well be undeserved. The commoner movement is along the axis of tragedy, from ignorance to knowledge. In either case the preferred OT method of pointing the moral is the use of structural irony, particularly the irony of pretensions exposed. This is seen at its delicate best in the stories of Adam and Eve, Nathan and David, Naaman and Elijah, more crudely in the fates of Haman and Holophernes. And the reversal is often underscored by the stylistic devices of chiasmus* and pedimental* structure.

But the converse is equally true: the theology needs the stories. Biblical theology is centred not upon timeless abstractions but upon the relationship between God and human beings, specifically between YHWH* and the people of Israel. That relationship is seen as a developing one: it has its own grand story. But the grand story is made up of countless little stories. The subjects of these are a cross-section of humanity, warts and all, and the most fully realised of the characters also develop in the course of their story. Change over time is the essence of a good story and the hallmark of *biblical* theology.

HEBREW POETRY

1. Poetry and Prose

Our distinction between poetry and prose was unknown to the Old Testament, as it was to the whole of the ANE. The nearest Hebrew equivalent to our word 'poetry' was 'songs' (*tehillim*), which was the Hebrew title of the Psalter. Modern readers recognise a number of other Old Testament books as poetry, but they would be wrong to classify the rest automatically as prose. It is not just that prose and poetry are found juxtaposed within a single book, as in Shakespeare, nor even that there is a single intermediate category of 'poetic prose'. Rather what we have is a continuum. The characteristics of what it is still convenient to call poetry are highly marked in certain places and not marked at all in others; and there is every shade in between. What are those characteristics?

It is easiest to begin by saying what they are *not*. First, there is no systematic use of rhyme (end-rhyme) in Hebrew. Of course any highly inflected language will have natural rhymes in the word endings, especially of its verbs, e.g. in French if *we* do something the verb usually ends in *-ons*; if *you*, in *-ez*. But Hebrew poets made only occasional use of this, as in Jg 16.24. Assonances of other kinds however they exploited to the full.

Next there is metre. That too, in the classical sense of a fixed number of syllables and a fixed relationship between the stressed and the unstressed (or the 'long' and the 'short'), has not been found in Hebrew poetry. In its place is a looser, more flexible rhythm, based on the stressed syllables only. A line had anything from two to five such stressed syllables, each usually accompanied by some unstressed ones. A line of three stresses, which was the commonest, might then consist of three words but ten syllables; but, since Hebrew words were often long, and long words tended to have a subsidiary stress, such a line could end up sounding like a line of Shakespearean blank verse, with all and more of Shakespeare's flexibility of rhythm.

2. Parallelism

Assonance and rhythm are essential features of all poetry. But the most characteristic mark of Hebrew poetry is something which at first sight is alien to us, namely parallelism. The basic principle of parallelism is that 'lines' come not singly but in pairs (or sometimes threes), of which the second (or third) takes up the thought expressed in the first and completes it. The completion may take a variety of forms, of which the most basic is a re-statement in syntactically parallel words – hence the term 'parallelism' or, as it is sometimes called, 'thought-rhyme'. For example:

> Can-you-bind the-clusters-of the-Pleiades
> or-loose the-belt-of Orion? (Job 38.31)

Each line here consists of three Hebrew words, and each Hebrew word has one stressed syllable (as in the English translation) plus some unstressed. We therefore say the couplet is in 3:3 rhythm.

Parallelism of this kind is found in literatures from all over the world, and it was the essential basis of poetic structure throughout the ANE. It marked the high style both in Egypt and Babylon, and dominated Ugaritic* as it later dominated Hebrew poetry. This for example is an extract from the Ugaritic *Keret* epic (c.1400 BC):

> In a bowl of silver he poured wine,
> honey in a bowl of gold.
> He went up to the top of a tower,
> bestrode the top of the wall. (ANET 144)

Even this short extract illustrates the difficulty of using parallelism in narrative.

The first couplet is successful, because the two parallel actions help to build up atmosphere. The second couplet however is a failure: the two actions blur each other and retard the movement of the story. Wisely therefore the OT writers tended to avoid parallelism for simple narrative. Almost all the great Hebrew poetry is speech, and heightened speech at that. In the psalms man speaks to God, in the prophets God to man, in Job man and God to each other, in the Song of Songs two lovers.

But even in speech parallelism can become monotonous. This happens in the OT, not just in the Wisdom literature but also sometimes in the psalms and prophecy. The greater poets however had various ways of avoiding monotony, some of them inherited from their Ugaritic predecessors.

One prime source of monotony is the end-stopping of lines, as in the *Keret* passage. To avoid this, the first line of the couplet can be left incomplete in sense or syntax and then picked up and carried on by the second. It may be picked up either by a repetition of an original word or, less dramatically, by a synonym. The device is familiar to us from Yeats: 'I will arise and go now / and go to Innisfree.' It is used to magnificent effect in the Song of Deborah, which is as near as the OT ever gets to narrative poetry (Judges 5 esp. vv.19 and 27).

Ugaritic and Hebrew poets both favoured a form of this device where the same word was repeated twice or even three times on either side of a parenthesis e.g. a vocative. For an Ugaritic example see the last three lines of the longer extract from *Keret* quoted on p. 772. Modern scholars have given this pattern the name of 'stairlike parallelism' and noted that it was especially used for dramatic openings e.g. Ps 29:

> Ascribe to the LORD, you sons of heaven,
> ascribe to the LORD glory and might.

In fact Ps 29, like the Song of Deborah, contains many other variations of this pattern and, partly for that reason, they are thought to be among the oldest poems in the Bible. But the pattern crops up also in unexpected places, e.g. the famous opening of Ecclesiastes.

Ugaritic poets also realised the advantage of the triplet in place of the couplet, especially to round off a poem, like the Alexandrine at the end of a sequence of heroic couplets. This device was much favoured by Isaiah and Job: see most notably Job 39.25. Second Isaiah also used what might be called 'a triplet within the couplet' e.g.:

> Scarcely are they planted,scarcely sown,
> scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth. (40.24; cp. 41.10; 42.2 etc.)

These and other formal devices help the Hebrew poets to avoid monotony in their use of parallelism. But what really ensures the liveliness and variety of their verse is a matter not of form but of thought. In their hands the thought of the second line rarely just repeats that of the first: rather it heightens, sharpens, strengthens it in a whole host of ways. For example:

> With their faces to the ground they will bow to you
> and lick the dust of your feet. (Is 49.23)

> They waited for me as for the rain,
> and they opened their mouths as for the spring rain. (Job 29.23)

> Therefore will we not fear though the earth be moved
> and though the mountains are shaken in the midst of the sea. (Ps 46.2)

Sometimes indeed the poet abandons all formal parallelism. To take two well-known examples:

> Man is born to trouble
> as the sparks fly upward. (Job 5.7 AV)

> The LORD is my shepherd;
> I shall lack nothing. (Ps 23.1)

What can be said of couplets like these? It would not be enough to say that the second line answers or balances the first. We must go further and say that it rounds it off or completes it. If we follow the usual convention and call this a form of parallelism, then it is clear that the fundamental ingredient in it is not that which gave it its name but its roundedness or completion. It must be in that broader sense that Hopkins said that 'the artifice of poetry reduces itself to the principle of parallelism'.

Such are some of the more frequent variations of basic parallelism. All except the last of these involve – and many depend upon – pairs of words which are more or less synonymous. Many of these word-pairs are also to be found in Ugaritic, including some of the commonest e.g. cup/goblet, tent/dwelling, wine/beer, mountain/hill, hear/understand.

These stock word-pairs point to a literary tradition which goes back not only behind Hebrew to Ugaritic but also behind written to oral composition, to the days when poets improvised upon a theme. The word-pairs then fulfilled the same function as the metrical formulae in Homer, like 'Agamemnon king of men' or 'rosy-fingered dawn appeared'. An oral poet needs to have at his disposal a stock of words which help him to compose and his audience to follow. In Homeric poetry the formula must fit exactly into the hexameter line. In Hebrew poetry the poet needs a repertoire of word-pairs which can answer each other within the couplet.

And just as the word-pairs point backwards in time, to the days of oral improvisation, so they also point forward, to the later development of prose. Hebrew prose-writers made much use of them. Sometimes they lent emotional colour, e.g. 'the poor and needy', sometimes dignity, e.g. 'he lifted up his voice/eyes and wept/saw'. Sometimes, as in 'ox and ass', they stand for a whole class of objects for which the language may not even possess a word. (The extreme case of this is the usage known as merismus*.)

Parallelism too had a lasting influence upon certain kinds of Hebrew prose – not so much in straight narrative as in legal or ritual contexts, where it lends solemnity e.g. Num 5.12-13:

> When a married woman goes astray
> and is unfaithful to her husband
> by having sexual intercourse with another man,
> and this happens without the husband's knowledge,
> and without the woman being detected,
> because, though she has been defiled,
> there is no direct evidence against her
> and she was not caught in the act. . . .

It could indeed be said that parallelism was the dominant influence upon Hebrew writing throughout the great period: directly upon the poetry, indirectly upon the prose. But some time after 300 BC it began to decline. The apocalyptic writers, who are the natural heirs of the prophets, devoted their poetical energies rather to the elaboration of imagery. The later Wisdom writers continued to employ the form of parallelism, but lost the spirit. Where parallelism is still used in the old way, it represents a conscious effect on the part of the author, as in the psalms inserted into the narrative of Judith and Tobit. The last effective use of it in the OT is made by the learned Alexandrian Jew who wrote the Wisdom of Solomon in the first century BC.

But among ordinary Jews by this time the very conventions of it had ceased to be understood, as the text of Matthew 21.6f. suggests. The evangelist quotes the prophecy of Zechariah 9.9: 'See, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey', and then records its fulfilment: 'The disciples . . . brought the donkey *and her foal*; they laid their

cloaks on *them* and Jesus mounted.'

The understanding of parallelism, which was already lost to ordinary people by the end of the first century AD, was soon lost also to scholars, both Jewish and Christian. It was obscured, first, by Greek notions of poetry as essentially based on syllabic quantities, and then subsequently by the spread of rhyme, which came to dominate poetry not only in Europe but among the Arabs too. Only in the C18th was parallelism 'rediscovered' by scholars, of whom the most distinguished was Bishop Lowth – a discovery which had important consequences for the Romantic Movement.

3. The Poem as a Unit

So far we have considered only the couplet or triplet. The couplets however did not stand alone, except for the aphorisms of books like Proverbs. They were organised into poems as in any other language. The most obvious poems are the psalms, which have always been printed as distinct units. But the prophets also wrote many poems, of the same sort of length as the psalms, and they too are distinguished in the layout of this edition.

Within a poem the author felt free to vary his rhythms i.e. the number of stresses to the line. But certain rhythms go better together than others. There are three main groups of rhythms favoured by the Hebrew poets. One is the 3:3 of Job, with its occasional 3:3:3. This fits well with 4:2, 2:4 and 2:2:2, since all the groups add up to six. The second is the 2:2 of the prophets, with its occasional 2:2:2, which obviously goes with 4:4, 4:2 and 2:4. The last of the common rhythms is 3:2, which was used particularly, but not only, in dirges and laments. This fluidity of rhythm is one of many factors which often make it hard to tell where one poem ends and the next begins.

Sometimes a poem can be seen to have a structure additional to its rhythmic structure. Quite a few poems have refrains. Every verse in Ps [136] has the refrain 'for his mercy endureth for ever'. In Pss 42-43 a single refrain is repeated three times, twice in Ps 42 and once in Ps 43; which is why we can be sure they were composed as one psalm. In these and similar cases it is noticeable that the component sections are of unequal length. It is therefore uncertain how far we are justified in speaking of strophes or even of stanzas. Rather a Hebrew poem is like an ode of Keats or Pindar: a whole, which may or may not fall into sections.

A few poems derive a structure from the initial letters of their couplets. These are known as acrostic poems. The best known of them is Ps [119], each of whose twenty sections has every couplet beginning with the same letter. Something similar but less artificial is found in the structure of Job 31.7-40, where fourteen verses begin with an 'if', used by Job to deny a list of possible offences against morality; or (more simply) Jeremiah 4.23-26 where four successive verses begin 'I looked'. Other poems are built round a key-word, e.g. 'the LORD' in Ps 29. This last principle however was also used by the editors who later arranged poems in collections, and it is often difficult to tell whether such a link is the creation of the poet or the editor.

There is however one kind of echo which we can confidently ascribe to the author: that is the echo of a word or group of words between the beginning and the end of a section or a whole poem or indeed a unit of narrative. It is found in all literatures and is known by many names, of which framing* is the least technical. There are countless examples of it in the OT, whether in short passages, e.g. the words 'darkness, not light' in Amos 5.18-20, or in long ones, e.g. 'Bless the LORD, O my soul' in Ps 103. (Similarly in the NT the words 'in heaven' frame the first section of the LORD's prayer.) Often the author uses it to make a theological point,

that the whole action is following God's plan. To a modern reader it gives the further clue that the passage or the poem is now concluded.

The same principle is extended also to cover the whole structure of a section or poem. Thus in Isaiah 23.1-14 we find a sequence of eleven proper names arranged in what might be called a concentric pattern. This pattern is one of the most important principles of arrangement in Hebrew literature. Other good examples of it can be seen in Isaiah 14.4-21 and 60.1-3. The pattern has also been discovered in prose e.g. 2 K 5.18, and the whole book of Ruth has been analysed along these lines. Be that as it may, there is no doubt of its importance in Hebrew poetry. A particular use of it is to throw emphasis upon the central section or unit. In that form it is sometimes called pedimental*.

4. Imagery

The imagery of the OT has in its time received extremes of praise and blame, the one scarcely more convincing than the other. For almost all the usual criteria of imagery are subjective. They vary according to the taste of the individual or the conventions of a culture.

Bishop Lowth in his Oxford lectures claimed that the greatest glory of Hebrew poetry is its use of images which are 'bold without obscurity and familiar without lack of dignity'. That judgement, though substantially fair, was made in terms of Greek poetic conventions. Since the time of Lowth two things have happened. First, our own conventions have changed: we no longer talk as if everyday images were inappropriate to 'the sublime'. Second, we now have some knowledge of the ANE tradition within which OT poetry developed, and can begin to distinguish between what the Hebrew poets inherited and what they created.

In the matter of imagery it is Babylonian poetry which throws most light on the OT. From before 2000 BC we find Babylonian authors delighting in bold, familiar and simple similes, not only in poetry but in unlikely kinds of prose. Their most frequent context is one of defeat and destruction. Thus royal inscriptions typically liken the king to a lion or a wild bull, his armies to locusts, his crushed enemies to rats or butterflies or pots. For some examples of these see commentary on Is 10. The same sets and kinds of images are also used in curses, in prophecies (always of victory) and in laments. Some of the similes are arresting. For example, the gods of the enemy 'roll over like tired donkey foals before him'. In Sumerian laments for Ur we find that 'dead bodies melted away like fat placed in the sun'. There are also more tender images e.g. that of Ur looking for its goddess Ningal 'like a child wandering in the devastated streets'. Such similes are rarely elaborated but often piled up e.g. in a curse:

> May he moan like a dove in a hole,
> may he thrash about like a swallow in its cranny,
> may he scurry about like a dove in terror.
> (*ANET* 650)

Sometimes one finds these similes borrowed. Thus the famous boast of Sennacherib, that he shut up Hezekiah in Jerusalem 'like a bird in a cage', had been used in inscriptions of his predecessor Tiglath-Pileser III. Nor is this at all surprising when such inscriptions – and much of the 'official' literature – were the work of scribes who had been taught in the royal schools. In certain social contexts a conventional image is actually preferred by reader as well as writer.

All this throws much light on the imagery of the OT, whether in prophecy or in psalms or even in historical narrative. We are not surprised when God says 'I will wipe away Jerusalem as when a man wipes his plate and turns it upside down' [2 K 21.13] – though we note already the beginning of elaboration.

Clearly the Hebrew writer did not share the Greek view that certain topics are too low for the high style (see p.783). Nor are we surprised by the piling up of similes [in e.g. Dt 32.2] – though we sit up a bit when Hosea in three successive verses says that Israel is 'a cake half-baked', 'a silly senseless pigeon' and 'unaware [that] his grey hair [has] turned white'. Some poets are evidently more adventurous than others.

It is indeed natural that the psalmists, whose aim is above all to reassure, should on the whole prefer the strong simple simile of the ANE tradition (see p.413). Psalm 23 is unusual in elaborating two images next door to each other: God as shepherd and God as host. But the images there are so reassuring, and their juxtaposition so skilful, that most readers scarcely notice the transition.

Conversely it is natural that the Hebrew prophets, whose aim (unlike that of ANE prophets) was to shock, should use the whole resources of language, and press imagery to its limits. Hosea [10.4] is also master of the single striking simile:

> Litigation spreads like a poisonous weed
> along the furrows of the field

– where what strikes is less the 'weed' than the 'litigation'. Amos [3.12] knows how to use the vivid detail:

> As a shepherd rescues out of the jaws of a lion
> two shinbones or the tip of an ear. . . .

Isaiah however is the first to elaborate his images systematically: a conquest likened to the robbing of a bird's nest (10.14); unreliable support likened to a cracked wall (30.13-14); and the two waters compared (see [8.6-8], quoted in § 5 below). The next logical step in this development is the parable of the vineyard in Is 5.1-6.

Later prophets carried the process still further but without corresponding gain. Ezekiel's lengthy allegories in which nations are compared to birds or trees (Chs [17], [19], 31) mostly collapse under their own verbiage. With the apocalyptists* the imagery luxuriates even further, until it becomes uncertain which is image and which is reality: this is the case even in a powerful passage like Joel 2.

There remain two poetical works which deserve special mention. The imagery of Job is among the most remarkable in any literature. In the speeches of his friends it is relatively conventional, to suit their views, but Job himself ransacks heaven and earth in his attempt to express his spiritual agony. The poet is consciously seeking special effects (see e.g. the elaborate detail of 6.15-20), and it is astonishing how often he succeeds.

The Song of Songs belongs in quite a different category. It is clearly composed in the tradition of Egyptian secular love poetry, of which enough has now been found to illuminate the Song. No longer do we speak dismissively, as Lowth's critics spoke, of 'oriental extravagance'. It is true that the songs and their images are different in kind from the rest of the OT. In responding to this difference, we may start by remembering the element of competitive playfulness that is present in all exchanges between lovers. We may have to end by admitting that love poetry too is conventional, and that other people's conventions are not always accessible. (See p. 502).

Lowth divided OT images into those derived from nature and those from everyday life. A division which is poetically and theologically more fruitful is that into what might be called 'black' and 'white' images. In opposing black to white I am opposing war to peace, death to life, uncleanness to purity, chaos to order etc. OT images often fall into similar pairs of opposites, e.g. night to day, wolf

to sheep, thistle to fig, salt water to sweet and so on. These pairs can be used to represent all stages in the rise and fall of civilization, which in turn can be correlated with the loyalty or disloyalty of the people to God. Consequently any of these images, especially in pairs, have enormous potential resonance, e.g. 'the wolf will lie down with the lamb'.

The same is true of certain images which are ambivalent. For example, fire both refines and destroys, a rock both protects and causes to stumble. Such images offer much scope for irony. But of all the ambivalent images in the OT the most powerful, and also the most remote from us, is water.

For with a material element like water, history and geography are bound to influence the way in which it is seen by different peoples. Experience of the sea has not changed much over time: anyone who knows it knows its dangers. But sweet water – rain and rivers – is a different matter. To English speakers, rain implies repetition ('the rain it raineth every day') and rivers are symbols of ceaseless movement ('the river of time'). To the Hebrews, the rain could cease and the rivers dry up, in each case with disastrous effect. But the really important difference lies in the annual experience which the Mesopotamian peoples had with the Tigris and Euphrates. Each spring, when the snows melted, a torrent of water came down the valleys, which could flood the land and carry away whole towns built on its banks: 'like a flood-storm it destroys the cities', in the words of a Sumerian lament. Something very similar could happen in Syria (Ugarit) with the Orontes and in Palestine with the Jordan, as well as with lesser 'torrents' (wadis) after a heavy storm. Mesopotamian experience of flood-water was readily intelligible to Canaanites and Jews (see e.g. Job 9.23).

5. Myth and Image

This periodical catastrophe was the subject of very ancient and important ANE myths. Some time after 1750 BC the Babylonian creation myth related how the god Marduk had primevally vanquished Tiamat, who represented the flood-water of chaos, and so created (i.e. established the order of) the world. The myth spread to Hittite and Ugaritic mythology. The Ugaritic myth of the conflict of Baal and the waters tells how Baal, the sky god, fought against an enemy variously described as 'the sea', 'the mighty waters' or the dragon Leviathan and, having defeated it, gained control of fertility.

This myth in its various forms had a deep influence upon Hebrew literature, if not upon Hebrew religion. There are very many references to it in the OT, mostly oblique but some not so oblique, e.g. the mention of Leviathan in Is 27.1 and elsewhere. Later on the myth rose up, as it were, from the national subconscious to form one of the most powerful symbols of apocalyptic* writing.

In the interval the imagery had been demythologised in various ways. The most important way was to transfer it to certain 'historical' events in the nation's past, notably the crossings of the Reed Sea and of the River Jordan. That is why all rationalistic explanations of these two crossings really miss the point. In defeating the 'mighty waters', God was once again bringing order out of chaos. Hence the note of triumph which pervades the Song of Miriam (Exod 15), the story in Joshua 3, and Ps 114 which brings them both together.

As a result of all this, water imagery in Hebrew poetry is deeply ambivalent. It has four aspects which can be analysed as follows:

A Destructive
1. Leviathan (or Tiamat) representing primitive chaos out of which order was brought
2. storm or flood, representing a return from order to chaos

B Benevolent
1. natural flowing water (in Hebrew 'water of life') viz. steady rain or perennial springs or flowing rivers
2. static water, e.g. a cistern.

This pattern can be used in any sequence. For example, B1 could be contrasted by Jeremiah (2.13) with B2 or by Isaiah [8.6-8] with A2:

> Because this nation has rejected
> the waters of Shiloah, which run softly and gently . . . ,
> therefore the LORD will bring up against it
> the strong, the flooding waters of the Euphrates . . .
> it shall sweep through Judah in a flood,
> pouring over it and rising shoulder-high.

Conversely, to the later prophets and apocalyptists (e.g. Is 24.1+) the *present* time is one of chaos; order will be restored with the advent of God's kingdom, an advent symbolised negatively by a second slaying of Leviathan (Is 27.1) or positively by fresh-water springs (Is 35.7) or a mythical River of God (Ps 46.4).

That is why water imagery has the widest scope of any in the OT. Water can symbolise almost anything – except aesthetic beauty, in which the Bible is not interested – and it holds together many of the other great symbols such as the desert in Second Isaiah and the garden in the Song of Songs.

Other so-called nature imagery in the OT likewise contains 'dead' mythology. When the psalmists speak of thunder as the voice of God (29.3) and the clouds as his chariot (104.3), they are drawing on two of the regular epithets of Baal in Ugaritic myth. Again when we find a dramatic exchange between God and the elements, we may descry a mythic background. Not only does God command the sea:

> Thus far may you come but no further;
> here your surging waves must halt.
> (Job 38.11)

He also calls the stars by name (Is 40.26) and speaks to the lightning, which responds obediently 'I am ready' [Job 38.35]. Literary topoi* like this derive from another common ANE myth, in which the stars (like the Greek Titans) once upon a time attempted to rebel but were overthrown and restored to obedience. In the OT there is only one reference to their original rebellion (Is 14.13f.), but many to their subsequent obedience.

Another literary borrowing from Ugaritic myth is the personification of Death in Job 28, where see commentary. But in general Hebrew poetry does not personify abstractions unless they are attributes of God himself. The outstanding example of such personification is Wisdom in Prov 9. Hebrew writers were undeterred by the resemblance of Wisdom to the Egyptian deity Ma'at, for Ma'at (unlike Leviathan) represented the principle of cosmic order. Other attributes of YHWH* such as mercy and righteousness could be semi-personified in Hebrew poetry e.g. Ps 85. But mythical beings from other religions had to be demythologised in one way or another. For the OT could not admit any serious threat to the sovereignty of YHWH.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. The Early History of Israel

Much earth has been dug, and much ink spilled, during the last century or so, in the hope of answering the question: how reliable is the historical information carried by the OT? The question has sometimes been answered by classifying certain books as 'historical' (down to 2 Kings, or even to [2 Chronicles], with 1 and 2 Maccabees), and the rest as something else. But the reality is more complicated, and more interesting, than that.

In establishing the historicity of any ancient text, scholars use various criteria. Of these the 'hardest', i.e. the least subjective, is archaeology. During the twentieth century, and especially during its second half, the soil of Israel has been intensively dug – more so, probably, than any area of equal size in the world. The findings of the archaeologists are impressive. Nevertheless they have limitations.

One is that certain sites – most notably Jerusalem – cannot be dug with any thoroughness, because of modern occupation. Another is that excavation can answer some questions better than others. Suppose, for example, that we can securely identify the modern equivalent of a biblical site (which in practice we cannot always do), and that a dig shows that site to have been destroyed at the end of the Bronze Age, we shall still find it difficult to establish a date more precise than +/- 100 years, and impossible to say who, i.e. what people, destroyed it or even who occupied it before. The evidence of excavations therefore cannot be simply read off: it needs interpretation.

But there are other findings of archaeology which, to those seeking corroboration of the OT, look more promising. They may be stone-cut inscriptions recording Egyptian or Assyrian invasions of Israel, or incised tablets of baked clay carrying literary or historical texts. What light do they throw on the historicity of the OT? Here is a list of 'first' references.

1. The first mention of *Israel* outside the OT, and the only one before c.850 BC, is the tantalizing stele* of Pharaoh Merneptah dated c.1215 BC.
2. The first Hebrew name which is certainly mentioned both in the OT and outside is that of *Omri* king of Israel c.850 BC.
3. The first certain mention of YHWH* outside the OT is in a Moabite inscription, the Mesha stele* c.830 BC.
4. The first person from the kingdom of Judah to be certainly mentioned both in the OT and outside it is *Ahaz* king of Judah c.735 BC.

These four inscriptions provide a very slender scaffolding for the early history of Israel. But we must do the best with what we have, starting with the background to the Merneptah stele.

The land of Canaan* (which in this context can be taken as including Israel) had been part of the Egyptian empire since c.1500 BC. Down to 1350 the control of the Pharaohs was tight. Like the later Assyrians, they moved populations around at will, e.g. they deported some inhabitants of Gezer to Egyptian Thebes c.1400, and in another town they settled some Hapiru in place of those deported. To maintain control they imposed puppet princes, whose sons they took as hostages to be brought up at court.

These Hapiru were destined to play quite a part, over the next two or three centuries, in loosening Egyptian control of the Levant. They comprised a wide range of stateless people who scraped a semi-nomadic living on the fringes of settled society: brigands and runaway slaves, landless peasants and refugees. They were a permanent nuisance to the puppet princes. A prince of Jerusalem c.1350 BC even wrote to the Pharaoh that 'all the lands of the king are lost to the Hapiru'.

But a century or so later Egypt had to face a much more serious threat. This was a revolt of her Libyan subjects, supported by bands of sea-raiders from elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Pharaoh Merneptah hit back. In his fifth year (1220 or 1209 – the date is uncertain) he claimed a victory over all his enemies. Later he celebrated it in a long inscription, ending with a hymn of which this is the relevant extract:

> The princes are prostrate, saying 'Mercy!'
> Plundered is the Canaan with every evil,
> Carried off is Ashkelon, seized upon is Gezer . . .
> Israel is laid waste, his seed is not . . .
> Everyone who was restless [e.g. the Hapiru], he has been bound.
> (*ANET* 378)

Now the inscription has a sign before the word Israel which shows that it is not a town like Ashkelon or Gezer but a land or people; and the full sequence of placenames shows further that 'Israel' is somewhere near its later historical location. Merneptah therefore claimed to have reasserted his authority over Canaan, including the region known as Israel, though we need not take literally such a phrase as 'laid waste'.

The late C13th BC saw many other crises than those which befell Egypt: it was a 'time of troubles' for the whole ANE. About 1200 BC two long-lasting empires, those of the Mycenaeans in Greece and the Hittites in what is now Turkey, came to an abrupt end, as did a number of smaller kingdoms including Ugarit*. Historians seeking a cause for all those catastrophes look to some widespread natural calamity, most likely a prolonged drought leading to famine.

One response to famine is to bring new land under cultivation, and that is what happened in Canaan. Excavations show that round about 1200 BC a substantial number of farmers moved up into the previously unoccupied central highlands of Israel, i.e. the line of hills running down west of the Jordan from Jezreel to Beersheba. With the aid of two inventions known before but not exploited, water cisterns and terracing, these farmers settled successfully in the highlands. There they were probably joined by other groups: on the one hand some Hapiru; on the other their fellow-Canaanites evicted from the coastal strip to the west.

For c.1190 BC a new nation appears on that coast, the Philistines. They were originally Cretans (the tradition preserved in Amos [9.7] is entirely plausible), probably mercenaries who had helped Egypt in her wars and were now rewarded with land on the coast of Canaan. Although Indo-Europeans by race, they soon adopted Canaanite culture; but their superior technology gave them an advantage over the locals, and in the long run over the Egyptians too. By 1150 the writ of the Pharaohs had ceased to run in Canaan.

We are now nearly in a position to consider the historicity of two traditions which play such a large part in the OT, the exodus from Egypt under Moses and the conquest of the holy land under Joshua. But there is one more set of archaeological findings to be fed in first. Sad to say, it shows conclusively that the 'conquest' cannot be historical.

For according to the OT the Israelites in the course of the conquest destroyed some twenty Canaanite cities. But most of those have now been identified and excavated, and it is clear that only two of them (Bethel and Hazor) have any archaeological claims to destruction between say 1300 and 1100 BC. The rest were either continuously occupied or continuously unoccupied. The walls of Jericho in particular had 'come tumbling down' before 1500 BC.

The same point can be put more positively. Archaeologists who have studied the material culture of that highland region are confident that throughout those

two centuries it remained one and the same. There was no outside invasion, and no distinction can be made between Israelite culture and the Canaanite culture all round it. In other words the Israelites were there all the time. Historians therefore now talk not of the conquest of Canaan but of the emergence of Israel.

Where then does that leave the story of the exodus? There are plenty of parallels to its general setting viz. deportees put to work on public buildings in Egypt (see p.115f.). If REB's translation of Exod 1.11 is accepted, the Hebrews could have been taken there by Merneptah after his campaign c.1210 BC, together perhaps with Moses to be brought up at the court. Their subsequent escape c.1180 would then fall in a time of Egyptian weakness, and their return c.1150 to the highland villages of Israel would not show up as an alien intrusion in the archaeological record.

But there is still one piece to be fitted into the jigsaw – the master piece – YHWH* himself. As far as can be seen, YHWH was originally a Midianite deity. The Midianites were early Arabic speakers, with a settled civilization just east of Sinai (see map 1), but also with a nomadic fringe which extended into the peninsula. The close connection of Moses with the Midianites is clear from Exod Chs 2 and 18. Jethro, the Midianite whose daughter he married, is presented as a priest of YHWH, whose worship the Moses group adopted at Mount Sinai and took with them on their journey.

It was that fierce worship which then gave to the emergent Israelites the cohesion which their subsequent history attests and the distinctiveness upon which the biblical authors insist. Archaeology has revealed the steady growth of those highland villages in the period 1200-1000 BC. Their population and prosperity increased, and their social organization became more complex. Anthropological parallels tell us what to expect next: first small-scale leaders, then a chieftain, finally a hereditary kingship. The OT adds the names: first the Judges, then Saul, finally David and Solomon. None of these names is corroborated outside the Bible (with the possible exception of David – see commnetary on 2 K 9) but we may accept them as historical, without necessarily accepting everything the OT says about them.

Curiously, it appears that four neighbouring states were 'emerging' at the same time along similar lines. Reading from north to south, they were: Aram, Ammon, Moab and Edom. In this way the political map of the ANE came to settle down in its new shape after the 'time of troubles'.

According to the OT, all these four states were conquered by David and paid tribute to him (2 Sam 8), though Solomon lost Aram and Edom (1 K 11), if not the others. Actually no trace has been found of Israelite influence in any of them at this time, so the whole notion of a Davidic 'empire' is questionable.

David and Solomon are also presented in the OT as ruling a united kingdom of Israel and Judah. (Confusingly, the term Israel is used in two senses in the OT. Sometimes its denotes the *whole* of the central highlands, sometimes only the northern *part*, viz. the territory of Saul and, later, Jeroboam.) But some scholars question the historicity of this too: even the text of 2 Sam suggests that David's hold over the northern part was weak. Archaeology also throws doubt on the ability of Jerusalem to function at that time as capital of any such 'united kingdom'. No buildings have yet been found in it which can safely be attributed to David or Solomon, and the city itself seems to have been too small to be of consequence until after the fall of Israel in 721 BC. On this hypothesis, the chroniclers of Judah rewrote history in order to claim for Judah the primacy which properly belonged to Israel. There

may be echoes of that claim in the predilection of Genesis for the theme of the younger brother preferred.

Be that as it may, it was certainly Israel which first came to the notice of the outside world. Assyrian inscriptions c.850 onwards speak with respect of 'the house of Omri' (see 1 K 16), and excavations of his capital Samaria confirm the wealth of Israel at that time. Not until a century later does Jerusalem come into similar prominence – and by then there were only 150 years to run before the exile in Babylon.

2. Religion and Nationhood

There is one other field in which archaeology has illuminated Hebrew history. That is religion. In this field however the spade has not so much corrected the book as supplemented it, by drawing attention to a feature which the OT has played down. This feature is the persistent syncretism between Yahwism and the older Canaanite religion.

By syncretism is meant not just that e.g. El was worshipped alongside YHWH, but that the two deities were treated as identical. Such syncretism was the normal practice in the ancient world, and it had one great advantage. When two religions met, instead of fighting, they could agree on an equivalence between their various deities, and say e.g. that Jupiter is simply the Latin name of the Greek Zeus.

This kind of hospitable syncretism was bound to occur between Yahwism and Canaanite religion. After all, Israel had sprung from Canaan, so it was natural that, when YHWH arrived, he should be identified with the supreme deity of the Canaanite pantheon, El. Nowhere does the OT raise any objection to the use of El as a designation of YHWH, or as a component of names like Eli and Ezekiel – or, for that matter, Israel. Perhaps El was seen as a philosophical concept rather than a person, and therefore no threat to YHWH. The acceptability of El extended to two other Canaanite deities, Elyon and Shaddai, who came to be treated in the OT as titles of El and thus equivalents of YHWH.

But when it came to YHWH and Baal, the OT took a different line. It may have been all right at the time for Saul's son to be named Ishbaal and his grandson Mephibaal, but the later copyists of the OT text tried to avoid the offending name. In its place they inserted an expletive meaning 'abomination', creating Ishbosheth and Mephibosheth. A century after Saul, Jeroboam set up the 'golden calf', a symbol of Baal, for his people to worship. The text of 1 K 12 hints, and the excavations of Tell Dan confirm, that he was not trying to *replace* the worship of YHWH by that of Baal but rather to *identify* YHWH with Baal. But the distinction would not have averted the wrath of the OT, which regularly refers to him as the king 'who made Israel to sin'.

What archaeology has done is to show that 'Yahwism in ancient [i.e. pre-exilic] Israel was *far* more syncretistic than the idealized portrait in the Hebrew Bible would have us believe' (Dever). It is probable even (though not all scholars agree about this) that YHWH was sometimes worshipped together with a consort. One excavated shrine of c.800 BC contained offerings inscribed ' for YHWH and his Asherah'. Asherah was the wife of El in the Canaanite pantheon.

The extent of this syncretism goes some way to explain the vehement denunciations it attracts in the pages of the OT, particularly in 'the law and the prophets'. But it goes only *some* way: it does not explain the thinking behind the denunciations. For that, archaeology cannot help; but perhaps anthropology can.

For the issue here is that of national identity or self-definition. Part of the identity of any nation is expressed nega-

tively: thus the ancient Greeks defined themselves by religion and language, but also by *not* being what they called barbarians. In nations which are much smaller than their neighbours, the negative may even preponderate (e.g. modern Cuba). Anthropologists will then speak of a counter-identity.

And that is the concept which best explains the mind-set of OT orthodoxy. The national identity, on that interpretation, depended above all on the *differences* between the Jews and their neighbours. There are over 400 explicit references in the OT to these differences. Two notable ones are put into the mouths of foreigners. The Jews are 'a people that dwells apart, that has not made itself one with the nations' (the friendly Balaam in Num 23.9), and 'a people whose laws are different from those of every other people' (the hostile Haman in Est 3.8). The book which lays greatest stress on this distinctiveness is Deuteronomy with 50 references to it. And it is the deuteronomic tradition which is most insistent upon the central symbol of it viz. the opposition between YHWH and Baal.

Other symbols reinforce that one, and vary somewhat according to circumstance. Endogamy i.e. not marrying foreigners was usually important (but not always – see e.g. Gen 41.50+). Circumcision rose to prominence in the exile, because the Babylonians and Persians did not practise it, whereas Canaanites did. Later still, when the Greeks ruled the ANE, Jews must not participate in Greek activities like the gymnasium and the theatre, and they must not eat with gentiles.

But this separatism did not go unchallenged, even though we have to wait until the very end of the OT to hear the story of a challenge and its repercussions. 'We should go and make an agreement with the gentiles round about', said certain leading Jews c.200 BC; 'nothing but disaster has been our lot since we cut ourselves off from them' (1 Macc 1.11). The upshot was epoch-making. Those who shared that view, branded by 1 Macc as 'renegades', told the Greek King Antiochus of their desire to join the mainstream. He was delighted: his empire could do without that sore thumb. So he let them build their gymnasium in Jerusalem, and the young Jews flocked to it, even 'removing their marks of circumcision'. So far, it might seem, so good.

But then Antiochus went too far. He erected in the Temple of Jerusalem a syncretistic cult-object. It was meant to unify all his subjects, who could worship it under any name they wished, as Zeus or Baal or YHWH. The others were content, but to the Jewish people it was anathema. They rose up, drove out the 'renegades', destroyed the cult-object and achieved independence for the first time in four centuries. And when their scribes came to record the events, they once again replaced the name of Baal with an expletive, the one which AV translated 'the abomination of desolation' (Dan 11.31).

The story throws much light on the whole history of Israel – right down to the present day. (See also commentary on Est 3 and Ecclus 24.)

NAMES OF GOD AND OF MEN

1. Names and Titles of God

In the ancient world it was widely believed that any personal name carried both meaning and power. For someone else to know the name gave power over its owner, and to utter it could exercise that power.

To the Jews the personal name of God, YHWH, was so fraught with this power that to utter it gradually became taboo. Strictly, it might be spoken only once a year, by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. To avoid the blasphemy of speaking it on any other occasion, resort was had to numerous devices. They ranged from titles like 'the LORD' or 'the Almighty' to circumlocutions like 'the Holy Name' or even just 'He'. The same principle is at work among Christians who feel more comfortable using the *title* Christ (i.e. the Messiah) than the *name* Jesus. Even secular idiom says 'heaven only knows'.

Consequently one of the most numinous moments in the whole OT is when God reveals his personal name to Moses (Ex 3.15). Unfortunately its effect is obscured by a convention of printing the text of the Bible which was begun in the Hebrew mss and then carried through to most Christian translations. In early Hebrew mss words were written without vowels, and the name of God in Ex 3.15 and elsewhere was given as YHWH – shortened to YH in many psalms. But when such passages came to be read aloud in synagogues the reverent reader would utter, in place of the personal name of God, one of two alternatives: usually *ad¸nay*, meaning 'lord', but sometimes *el¸him*, meaning 'god'. And to prompt him in the appropriate direction, Hebrew scribes employed a curious convention. To the four consonants YHWH they added the three vowels of either *ad¸nay* or (less commonly) *el¸him*. The former created what is strictly a non-word Yahowah. That non-word went through various forms until it emerged in Tyndale's Bible of 1530 as Jehovah. Until recently, English bibles have used Jehovah in that verse and in a few others, but elsewhere have rendered the Holy Name by LORD or GOD in small capitals. This book uses such capitals in all excerpts from the text of the OT.

The commentary however often uses YHWH, especially where God takes part in the action as a *dramatis persona*. The name is probably to be pronounced Yahweh, and that is how the NJB and other modern scholarly translations print it. Here YHWH is preferred, as a mark of respect for Jewish tradition. For the meaning of the name see on Ex Ch.3.

The name YHWH then was regularly used in the earlier books of the OT – histories, psalms and prophecy. But alongside it, often in the same context, are four other words for God. First and commonest is Elohim. Elohim is not a name but a plural noun meaning simply 'god' with a small 'g'. The plural form is the 'plural of majesty' (cp. our 'royal we'), and the word can be variously used. It may designate gods (pagan) in general, or a specific god (whether pagan or not), or (the) god of Israel. In the OT generally, Elohim is more objective and remote, YHWH more subjective and personal; see e.g. Exod 19.3, where both are used in the same verse, and contrast Jg 13.3 with 13.6.

Next commonest is El. El had been the name of the senior deity of the Ugaritic pantheon, with whom it was evidently unobjectionable to identify YHWH. Some ancient critics took El as the singular of Elohim, and linguistically it is related to 'Allah'. In English bibles it is generally translated 'God'.

Alongside El is Elyon. This is another Canaanite word, a title of El taken over from the earlier inhabitants of Jerusalem

[Gen 14.18+]. It is found particularly in the psalms, either on its own or joined with El. The usual English translation of it is 'Most High'.

Finally there is Shaddai. This seems to be another title, since it is sometimes joined with El, and so it is translated 'The Almighty'. It is most frequent in Job, who uses Shaddai as often as El, but never both together. Ps 91.1 however uses Elyon, Shaddai, YHWH and Elohim all in the one verse.

A rabbinic commentary on the book of Jonah suggests that the Hebrew Bible uses the different names and titles for God to denote different aspects of the divine activity. Thus:

> When I judge the creation I am called Elohim,
> When I wage war against the wicked I am called Sabaoth [Engl. 'of hosts'],
> When I suspend judgement for sins I am called El Shaddai,
> When I show mercy to my world I am called YHWH.

The generalization is not infallible, but in places it is illuminating e.g. Gen 22.

2. Names of Men and Women

Throughout history human parents have given their children theophoric names i.e. those which included the name, and thus secured the protection, of a god. In the OT such names typically end in -yah (English -iah) or -el or begin Yo- (English Jo-, as in Joshua, Jonathan). Other Semitic peoples might incorporate their own form of Baal e.g. the Phoenician Hannibal or the Babylonian Belshazzar. The Jews accepted Bel, as in Zerubbabel, but came to be uncomfortable with Baal; see Introd. to Deuteronomy.

More rarely, a father would give his children names chosen to signify his own policy. Hosea [1] and Isaiah [8] both did this. Similarly adults would be given new names to signify a change of policy, as Jacob-Israel (Gen 32).

One cannot however really suppose that any parents would actually give their children names meaning 'twister' (Jacob) or 'fool' (Nabal). In such a case, the name just suits the story, as the narrator makes clear of Nabal: 'As his name is, so he is' (1 Sam 25.25).

Biblical narrators are also careful in the locutions they use for their characters. Women are often referred to only by their relationship to a man. 'Jepthah's daughter' is never given a name, and Samson's mother is just 'wife' to Manoah (Jg 11 and 13). Michal does have a name, but it makes a great difference whether she is also referred to as 'Saul's daughter' (1 Sam 18 and 2 Sam 6) or 'David's wife' (1 Sam 19). Similarly it is a bad omen when Saul refers to David as 'the son of Jesse' (1 Sam 20.27).

It should not be thought that any of these beliefs and practices were peculiar to the Jews or other Semitic peoples. There are parallels to them all in many places, including ancient Greece. Most of them also have an attenuated afterlife even in our own day and place.