

The Old Testament in its Context 6

by

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This paper concludes an appreciation of the Old Testament in the setting of the biblical world, on the same compact basis as its predecessors.¹

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1. Differing perspectives

Hitherto we have been concerned with the individual books and writings of the Old Testament, and with specific epochs and episodes in the history of its people and books. Now, in conclusion, the time has come for an *over-all*, more unified view of that *whole* history in its *total* ancient Near Eastern context. Taken as an organic whole, that history does make sense essentially as presented in those writings as we now have them — and especially is this clear when that multifold history is set within its wider contemporary context.

Until rather more than a century ago, the picture presented by the Old Testament seemingly stood almost alone — a gaunt, curiously-shapen monolith amid the swirling mists of distant times, its configurations in detail not always directly meaningful to later, querying Western eyes. The histories and cultures of neighbouring peoples were barely beginning to appear in their true shapes — thanks to initial decipherments of hieroglyphs and cuneiform — so as to replace in due time the mists of former ignorance, hearsay and legend with clearer, increasingly well-defined, tangible structures that offered comparison with the Old Testament and, for those with eyes to see, removed seeming anomalies while leaving the Old Testament in its essential qualities, spiritually, as the gem within a splendid setting — in it, but not totally of it.

But while the Old Testament yet stood alone, before the relevant background came into clear view, it had become fashionable for biblical scholars to grapple with the Old Testament in isolation. They sought by the late nineteenth century to re-shape its (for them) refractory phenomena to a new pattern more satisfying to their particular outlook. Notably through the efforts of such as de Wette, Graf, Wellhausen, it became axiomatic that the history of Israel, with its writings and institutions, was 'the gradual development',² 'a gradual product',³ from the most primitive beginnings to a stilted, hierarchical religious community. After misty beginnings (the judges, on to Solomon, *etc.*), the prophets were the first great men; the Babylonian Exile and after saw the emergence of the 'Law' and priestly predominance. Outwardly, a progression from primi-

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tivism, via prophets to a priestly code; inwardly, from the 'fresh naturalism' of tribesfolk to the formalism of legalistic institutions.

However, this entire position has always remained a purely theoretical exercise, within a padded cell as it were — Hebrew history was treated as a self-contained capsule, without any serious attempt at comparison with any independent yardstick or objective standard of measurement; so then, and too often still.⁴ Treated in wholly unnatural isolation, the Old Testament readily appeared outwardly anomalous to later viewers from alien cultures. But when it is restored to its true and original context, the ancient Near East where it was written, then the perspective suddenly changes and the situation is basically transformed. In what follows, an impossibly brief intimation of this vital matter is at least attempted.

AN OVER-ALL HISTORICAL PROFILE IN DEPTH

2. Basic analysis

a. Hebrew history. If one takes an over-all view of the entire Hebrew history from Abraham and his ancestors (Gn. 11) to the Jewish communities of the Persian Empire, one may set out a full-length basic profile of that history, with its three fundamental stages of the emergence, crystallizing, and ongoing life of the Hebrew people and culture, as with other cultures. These three steps — the formative period, the crystallization of forms, and ongoing stream of tradition, as elsewhere termed⁵ — may be briefly set out as follows.



Fig. 1

i. The formative period. For the Hebrews, this phase began with Abraham's ancestors (real Hebrew 'prehistory'), developed with the patriarchs themselves, and continued (unseen by us) through the Egyptian sojourn to the time of the Exodus (say, from the twentieth to thirteenth centuries BC). For us, Abraham's predecessors are but names, some linked with places;⁶ but the fuller narratives from Abraham to Jacob's sons (Gn. 12-50) portray a group of people having definite social usages, *etc.*, moving amid others also so endowed.⁷ These usages do not always correspond with later ages; continuity and change are both observable.

ii. Crystallization of forms. At Sinai, a group of tribes became an embryo nation. They were set under a divine Sovereign in a covenant that embodied fundamental norms (the 'Ten Commandments') and detailed stipulations for obedience (*e.g.* Ex. 21ff., *etc.*), including also provision for the service (worship) of that Sovereign (Ex. 30-40, Leviticus). Unlike contemporary treaties with outwardly-related literary form, this covenant did not merely enjoin material contributions of gems, money and troops as tribute and military aid to a human overlord, but it sought to regulate the full life of a people to be in obedience, mercy and justice, the people of God.⁸ Thus, by the covenant at Sinai (and its renewals, Ex. 32-34; Deuteronomy; Jos. 24), were set the basic forms and emphases of Hebrew religion and culture. As may be perceived from outward affinities between pentateuchal laws and those of the ancient Near East,⁹ Moses was led to set out and endorse laws, or forms of laws, as fitting and true, but not necessarily in every aspect brand new. Besides having continuity with the patriarchal past, the crystallization of norms and forms of Moses' time (*c.* thirteenth century BC) was the source and foundation for all following Hebrew history.

iii. Ongoing stream of tradition. To that foundation (substantially the content of the Pentateuch) much was to be added in the course of time. The tabernacle was replaced by the temple. The great prophets arose to further speak God's message to Israel, and time and again to recall the people to their norm of obedience on God's given terms — renovators, far more than innovators. However, new dimensions were added: messianic prophecy, the Servant figure, day of the Lord, among others. Further enrichment came with the emergence of psalmody and wisdom literature — but building on, and consistent with, the foundations already established. It was thus a wide spectrum of literature that, emerging as the Old Testament in due time, was the spiritual inheritance of the Judaeen community from the late Persian Empire onwards. Later centuries produced further works, but not belonging within the Old Testament itself.

b. The Near-Eastern context. The fundamental threefold perspective here applied to Hebrew history is neither anomalous nor unparalleled. In the biblical Near East, one may see this with other cultures wherever the evidence by its clarity and abundance

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permits.¹⁰ Thus, in Egypt, one may apply the same basic analysis. In this case, the formative phase was the end-part of the prehistoric ('predynastic') era before *c.* 3100 BC, and especially the Archaic Period of the first pharaohs (Ist-IIInd Dynasties, *c.* 3100-2700 BC).¹¹ Then, within the IIIrd and IVth Dynasties of the early Old Kingdom (*c.* 2700-2600/2500), the basic forms and attitudes of Egyptian culture crystallized along their most characteristic lines. Thereafter, Egypt had an ongoing stream of tradition that ran for virtually 3000 years, well into the Christian era. During that vast span, much was added in all aspects (as with the Hebrews), but for the most part well integrated with, and built upon, the basic forms and norms of the Egyptian outlook. As with the Hebrews, we have a whole tapestry of interwoven continuity, change and enrichment. The difference (humanly speaking) is in the vastly longer span of Egyptian civilization, from *c.* 3100 BC or before — over a millennium before Abraham, let alone Moses. This fact has its value: it warns us against viewing an Abraham or a Moses as merely primitive figures lost in the (supposed) night of 'prehistoric' time. Quite the contrary; they were each born into a cultured world already old.

Nor is Egypt by any means the sole item of background. Following on the fully-developed Hattian civilization of the third millennium BC and drawing much from it, the Hittites (already in Asia Minor by 2000 BC) had what may be termed a formative period from the early city-state kings Pitkhanas and Anittas (nineteenth/eighteenth centuries BC) to the full establishment of a large, unified realm, with crystallization of the Hittite outlook and culture, the 'Old Kingdom' of Labarnas, Hattusil I and Mursil I (seventeenth century BC). Thereafter, they had an ongoing tradition with progressive assimilation of various linguistic and cultural groups — Hattian, Hittite, Luvian, Human — into the Hittite Empire, until suddenly cut off by catastrophe *c.* 1200 BC; even then, in South-east Anatolia and North Syria, the Neo-Hittite 'afterglow' lasted until at least *c.* 700 BC. In Mesopotamia, Sumerians and Akkadians offer a history as long as that of Egypt, but complicated by the two components, marked by the totally dissimilar Sumerian and Akkadian (latter, becoming Babylonian and Assyrian) languages. The essential phases of Sumerian culture are seen in the third millennium BC and began before it; the Akkadians first properly emerge in the Empire of Akkad, *c.* 2300 BC. Certainly from the IIIrd Dynasty of Ur and the Old-Babylonian period onward (roughly *c.* 2000 BC on), the ongoing Mesopotamian tradition lasted for over 2000 years into the beginnings of the Christian era. For Syria-Palestine, the picture is greatly complicated by (1)

lack of literate data before the mid-second millennium BC and (2) much greater fragmentation and fusion of different peoples and cultural traditions. But certainly from the early second millennium BC, one may speak of a complex culture with (linguistically) a predominant component speaking North-west Semitic, with much continuity of tradition as well as novelty and change stimulated by recurrent entry of foreign elements.

THE TIME-SPAN OF TRADITION IN HISTORY

3. On the basis of a total historical span¹² from Abraham and his immediate ancestors (*c.* 2000 BC) to the Persian Empire (ended, *c.* 330 BC), Hebrew history from family clan through nation to religious community extended through up to seventeen centuries before Alexander and the Hellenistic period: perhaps six or seven centuries' formative period, crystallization in the thirteenth century and soon after, and some ten centuries of ongoing and developing tradition. This, as hinted above, is not in any way an undue extension, but fully in keeping with the equal and longer spans of cultural tradition in the rest of the biblical Near East. Egypt offers not seventeen but twenty-eight centuries of literate history before Alexander (*c.* 3100-330 BC): four or more centuries' formative period, a century or so crystallization, and up to twenty-three centuries' ongoing stream of tradition until Alexander. Likewise in Mesopotamia, millennia of non-literate high culture gave place to Sumerian and Akkadian brilliance in the third millennium, with fusion of culture from 2000 BC parallel with the entire span of Hebrew history. From its discernible beginnings before *c.* 2000 BC to the sudden fall of *c.* 1200 BC, the Hittites proper had only 800 years — but the five centuries thereafter of the Neo-Hittite states sets the minimum span at thirteen centuries, which takes no account of several centuries more of religious, linguistic and cultural survival after political independence was totally lost. In Syria-Palestine, the predominant north-west Semitic element is evident from *c.* 2000 BC and earlier¹³ down to the Hellenistic age, as with the Hebrews. In short, the seventeen centuries of essential Hebrew history offered by the Old Testament picture of that history is *not* a period of artificial or inordinate length: it fits well with the rest of the Near East with equal and longer spans.

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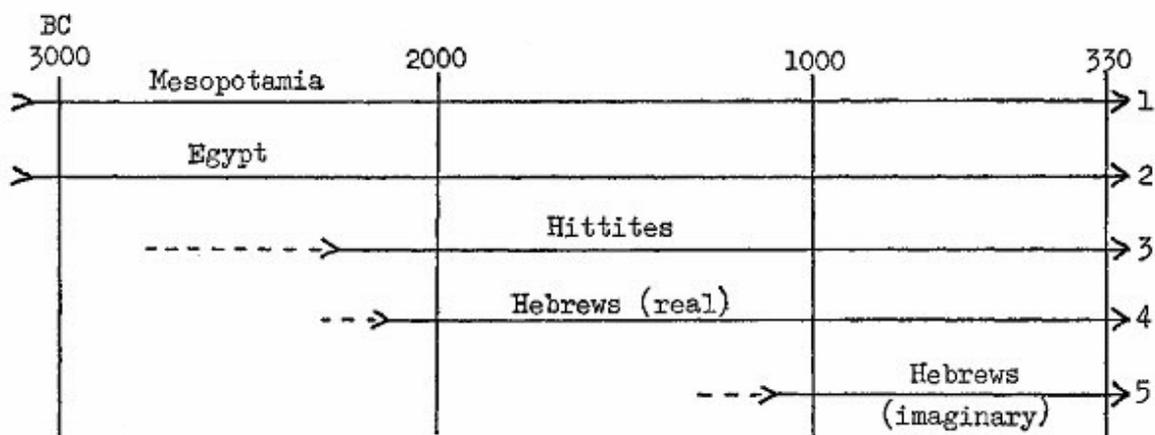


Fig. 2

OSCILLATION IN DEVELOPMENT

4a, Hebrews

Moreover, Hebrew and contemporary Near-Eastern history show not only comparable basic phases and comparable extent in time, but also — like all history — oscillations in the qualities and achievements of a given culture or civilization at different periods in its history.¹⁴

Resting on the basic structure of Hebrew history seen in the Old Testament and analysed above (section 2), the detailed profile of that history is *not* an upward, unilinear evolution from the most primitive savagery to a state of refined monotheism and an effete sacerdotal formalism. Rather, it shows a series of very definite 'ups and downs' along its course. Among the patriarchs, Abraham stands greatest; and after Jacob and Joseph, no major figures emerge from the four 'silent centuries' between them and Moses. The climax of Sinai and initial successes of a Joshua are separated and followed by episodes and even whole periods (*cf.* Judges) of disunity and declension. A new peak in the United Monarchy is followed by a switchback decline into the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, and then a spiritual new beginning from the Persian Empire onwards. This undulating course applies severally to all aspects of Hebrew history and experience; the Old Testament is primarily concerned with the varying relations of God and man, particularly through His dealings with the Hebrews — not (*e.g.*) so much as with, say, architecture or warfare. Here, the archaeological record for Palestine covers the material plane.

b. Near East

The ups and downs in Hebrew history and culture are well matched by those elsewhere in the biblical world. In Egypt, the formative Archaic Period was followed by three periods of greatness alternating with three epochs of declension — the Old Kingdom (Pyramid Age), Middle Kingdom (a 'classical' period), and New Kingdom (or Empire), followed respectively by the First and Second Intermediate Periods and the final 'switchback' decline of the Late Period. With the Hittites, the achievements of their 'Old Kingdom' were lost after the murder of Mursil I and successive regicides, with defeat and collapse for most of their 'Middle Kingdom' until Suppiluliuma I restored national power and unity, ushering in the Hittite Empire; the Neo-Hittite states knew very mixed fortunes until their subjugation by the Assyrians.

In Mesopotamia, third-millennium Sumerian city-states and the Akkad Empire gave way before the Gutians, and they to the IIIrd Dynasty of Ur, whose hegemony was then shared by various Amorite dynasts of the Old-Babylonian period. From the age of Hammurabi of Babylon, there duly emerged the twin realms of Babylon and Assyria, rivals in the late second and early first millennium, culminating in the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the Neo-Babylonian Empire. In Syria-Palestine (besides the Old Testament), the archaeological record shows a series of periods of considerable achievement in material culture, with innovations, peaks of excellence and decline, and sometimes intermediate periods of poverty and even desolation.

Thus, oscillation is endemic to civilization in the biblical world, as to human history generally on this planet. The bald facts of the matter should, of course, have been so obvious as to require no special statement of them. But even such basic phenomena as these have been so consistently ignored by Old Testament scholars hell-bent on producing¹⁵ or in still defending¹⁶ drastic remodellings of Hebrew his-

tory on the scheme of an essentially unilinear evolution, that it seems indispensable even now to restate these elementary facts. In no facet of life is 'progress'¹⁷ inevitable or automatic; progress and regress ebb and flow, on changing combinations of factors. Moreover, the oscillation in human affairs is complex, not simple. Such different 'achievements' as (*e.g.*) political power, national unity, artistic brilliance (graphic, literary or musical) or moral excellence, *etc.*, do not always coincide with each other.¹⁸ The over-all effect is that the whole pageant of history in its multiple aspects, biblical and extra-biblical, is of an extraordinary richness of detail and texture.

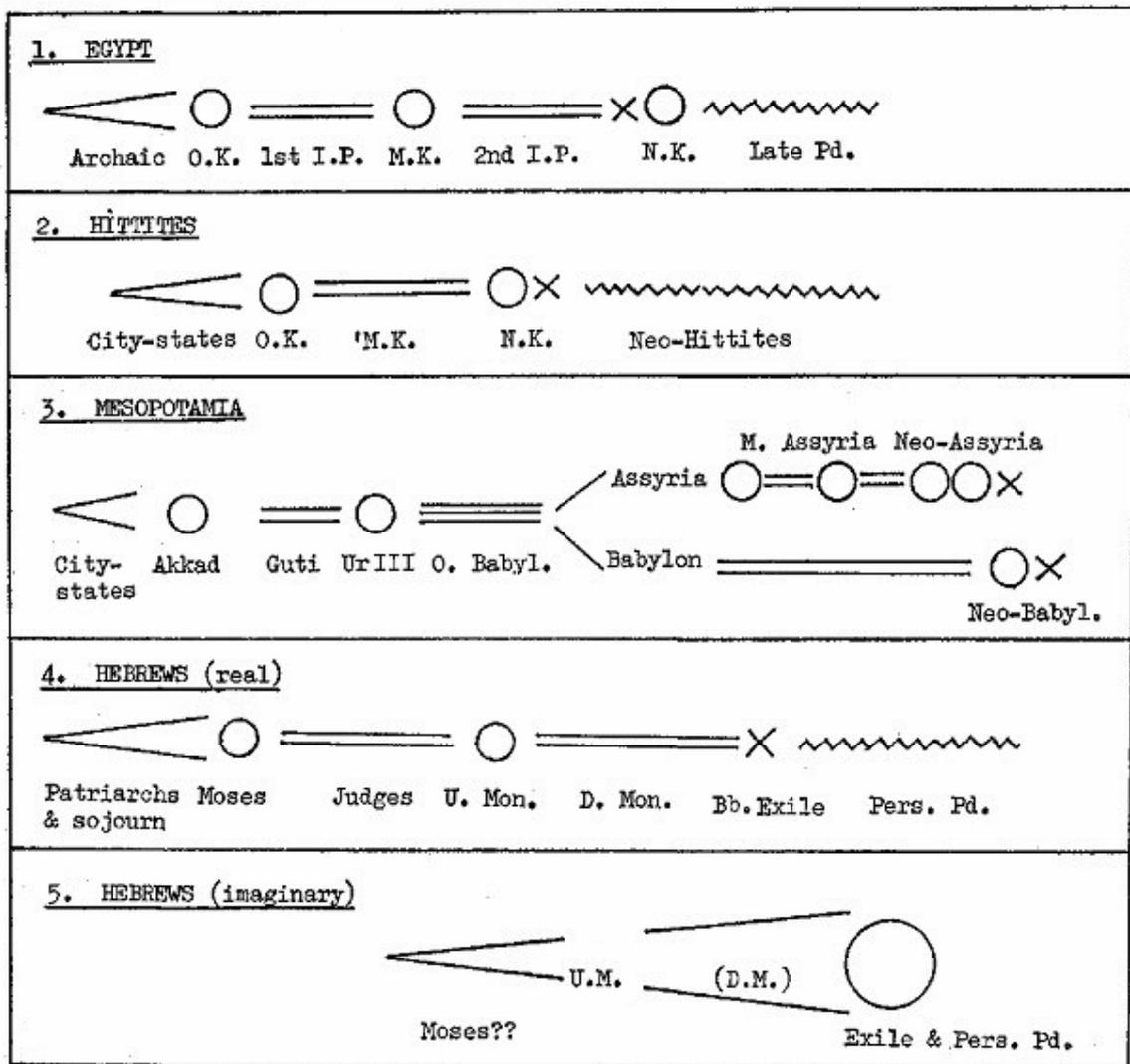


Fig 3

5. Thus the over-all picture of Hebrew history as presented by the Old Testament, and Near Eastern history (of which it is a part), go well enough with each other, in their rise, time-span and oscillatory nature. But what of the drastic reconstructions so glibly applied or retained?

On every count, the long-fashionable schema seems to fail. First, it pays no heed to basic structure. It posits a 'gradual development', on an upward-inclined plane, ignoring such realities as formative periods, relatively rapid 'crystallizations', and the relatively very long continuities of basic traditions once constituted, with their additions. Secondly, it so heavily foreshortens Hebrew history — from seventeen to eight or nine pre-Hellenistic centuries¹⁹ — that gross distortion of that history occurs. Israel as a people is definitely attested in the thirteenth century BC by the external evidence of Merenptah's 'Israel-Stela', sundry evasions and casuistry notwithstanding;²⁰ ten centuries of historical time follow till Alexander. And, given the fidelity of the relevant narratives to their early-second-millennium background plus the tenacity of tradition, there is every reason to treat the Patriarchs as historical precursors of later Israel.²¹ Foreshortening has no adequate basis here. Thirdly, the commonly-assumed unilinear 'gradual development' from 'natural' primitives to refined, frigid ritualists fails on multiple counts. It ignores the multi-millennial tradition of ritual throughout the Near East from long before Abraham was born, and the corresponding lack of true 'natural primitives', extant only in the imaginations of a Wellhausen, a Herder or a Rousseau. It ignores early sophistication of thought plus the oscillations of culture-quality, and religious performance as of other aspects of ancient life. Fourthly, the flagrant contradiction between Hebrew history as profiled by the extant Old Testament and as remodelled to suit a Wellhausen, a Noth or Eissfeldt, or even an R. J. Thompson, is not only unique, it is wholly anomalous when viewed against the full vista of ancient Near-Eastern history and history-writing.²² Definite, ordered sequences of history are moved up or down as dates BC are modified, but orientalists never have cause to invert the sequence of entire eras of ancient history,²³ or to shift the date of huge blocks of material across almost a millennium,²⁴ as was proposed in Old Testament studies. Theology apart, such a tension can only arouse scepticism, on historical and methodological grounds. Fifthly, anyone obsessed with the fetish of 'cumulative evidence' is invited to consider the total effect of (1) the multifold direct comparisons between the extant OT and its world by periods and in details,²⁵ (2) the over-all match in form and nature of extant Hebrew history and its Near-Eastern history-context as sketched in this paper, above, and (3) conversely the fourfold failure of the conventional reconstruction just set forth.²⁶

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SPECIFIC THEMES

6. Introductory

Just as Hebrew and Old Testament history may be viewed over-all for basic structure, outline profile, and on the broadest historical front, so one must look at the profile-history of the various constituent aspects that make up the total historical picture: development of literature, of religious beliefs, usages and institutions, of law and society, the organs of political rule and administration, and the whole material culture. This encyclopaedic wealth of aspects cannot be tackled here; instead, a barest handful of indications must suffice.

7. Political organization

The earliest-attested unit was family and clan with head or heads; as with the patriarchs, so this appears (*e.g.*) of semi-nomads in the Mari archives,²⁷ and of Palestinian regions in the

Egyptian execration-texts.²⁸ Beyond this stage, most communities (especially settled ones) eventuated to the rule of kings and hereditary dynasties.²⁹ So much so, that for the whole

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period from Moses until accession of Saul, Israel's first proper king, Israel as a non-monarchy was somewhat of an exception among settled (or, settling) peoples in the thirteenth-eleventh centuries BC. This fact is worth remembering when considering passages such as Deuteronomy 17: 14-20 (Moses envisaging a possible king in Israel) or even Genesis 36: 31b (kings in Edom, before yet any in Israel) — kings were the rule, the expected thing, and the Hebrews were exceptional without one.

8. Covenant and law

Covenant and treaty in the biblical world are in large measure the religious and political aspects of one basic concept: an agreement which determines and regulates future relations between two parties. In the ancient Near East, treaties abound,³⁰ but not religious covenants other than the Old Testament. But the outward literary forms of both are so closely allied that coincidence seems excluded. In the Old Testament, covenant goes back to the patriarchs³¹ and to the ancestral figure of Noah. In the Near East, treaties occur from the third millennium BC onwards,³² and proliferate in the second and first millennia. Literary affinities between treaties of the late second millennium and the Sinai covenant and renewals are particularly clear, and reinforced by the quite different formulations of the first millennium BC.³³ That covenant of the thirteenth century BC was fundamental for later Hebrew history — when neglected as well as when respected. Its basic stipulations were the 'Ten Commandments' — alongside these, the other 'laws' are matters of detail.

Spread by the Wellhausens, Robertson Smiths and their epigones, the fashionable myth holds that, if the 'law'³⁴ of the Pentateuch were given by Moses, then it supposedly 'remained a dead letter for centuries',³⁵ was 'totally ineffective and unnoticed for a thousand years',³⁶ and that more than two or three unambiguous allusions to the 'law' are hardly to be found in Old Testament literature of the monarchy period.³⁷ However, it must be clearly understood that this position is reached by artificial means, not by heeding the extant evidence and its nature.

First, there *are* sufficient clear references to the 'law'³⁸ of God or 'of Moses' — as in Joshua,³⁹ Kings,⁴⁰ the Psalms (*passim*), a dozen references each to 'God's law' in Isaiah and Jeremiah, besides Amos 2: 4 or Micah 4: 2, before we reach Chronicles.⁴¹ And the covenant⁴² occurs⁴³ in a further series of references of before the Exile — Judges 2: 2, 20; 14: 8, 23; 11: 11; 19: 10, 14; 2 Kings 17: 15; 18: 12; 23, *passim*. It, like 'law', is endemic to the Psalms, even occurs in Proverbs (2: 17), and is persistently proclaimed by the prophets — Isaiah and Jeremiah (again, a dozen or so references each), Ezekiel (esp. 16 and 17) and Daniel (9: 4), besides Hosea (6: 7) before the Exile and Zechariah (9: 11) and Malachi (2) after it. The basic indictments of Israel by the prophets in terms of apostasy, idolatry, *etc.*, match the *basic* stipulations ('Ten Commandments') of the Sinai covenant. Perhaps some 150 references to the 'law' and covenant⁴⁴ for the period *c.* 1250-550 BC (about seven centuries) should not too hastily be written-off as a 'dead letter' for 'a thousand years' — especially when much of the relevant Old Testament books is not concerned with special details of the 'law'.⁴⁵ It is sheer pretence to say that a thir-

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teenth-century Sinai covenant (of Pentateuchal range) left no mark on the other literature for centuries. In the Near East, the situation is far 'worse' for law-collections whose early dates *cannot* be disputed. There can be no gainsaying the fact that the collections of laws of Lipit-Ishtar and Hammurabi were issued in the early second millennium BC ('patriarchal' rather than 'Mosaic' in date) — yet there is *no certain direct mention* of the laws of Lipit-Ishtar or Hammurabi as such⁴⁶ in any of the horde of Old-Babylonian legal texts, or in any texts of any succeeding age. But we *do* know that copies of Hammurabi's work were made on tablets for a thousand years after his death⁴⁷ — so non-mention does not prove that his work was unknown. Nor is it customary for any other ancient law-collection⁴⁸ to be mentioned in other documents. Hence, by comparison with the Near East, the existing references to the Sinai covenant as the 'law of God' or 'of Moses' or 'the covenant' are not only sufficient, they are superabundantly numerous!

Secondly, the fashionable myth is a *tendentious* pretence, in that it depends heavily on subjective emendation of the existing text to coolly eliminate all the inconvenient mentions briefly reviewed above. By referring all mentions of such as 'the law of Moses' in Joshua or Kings to later redactors, and according like treatment to other Old Testament works, the extant evidence can be effectively murdered. 'The law' is very soon a dead letter, if there is no evidence for it — because the evidence has been arbitrarily cut out. But the procedure is pure fantasy, without any objective data to support it — no shred of papyrus, no flake of clay tablet. A dead letter obtained this way is a mental delusion.

Thirdly, 'Deuteronomism'. The 'law' references are often credited to such as 'Deuteronomic' editors. But 'Deuteronomic' theology is essentially little more than orthodox Old Testament monotheism from the Sinai covenant (of which Deuteronomy is but a renewal) onward, and several of its individual concepts⁴⁹ are not even peculiar to Israel or to the Old Testament but are attested in the ancient Near East in the third and second millennia BC.⁵⁰ And on a more realistic date for individual Old Testament books said to show 'Deuteronomic' thought, we have a whole stream of tradition⁵¹ — from Deuteronomy (*c.* 1230 BC) via Judges (*c.* 1000 BC), Solomon's address (1 Kings 8, *c.* 960 BC), *etc.*, down to Jeremiah of seventh/sixth centuries BC and Kings as a book thereafter, with no significant gaps.⁵² In the Near East, such long-lived religious traditions — with or without gaps — are commonplace.⁵³

Fourthly, the supposed sudden prominence of formal religion and 'law of Moses' after the Exile.⁵⁴ Not only is this in good measure illusory,⁵⁵ but one cannot ignore the changed circumstances of the Hebrew people before and after the Babylonian Exile. Before that event, they led the life of a politically-independent nation, in which religion — though vital — was but one component, one aspect among many. In the Exile, they were but groups of displaced persons whose national identity mattered nothing to their captors, and having nothing but their faith and 'family cohesion'. After the Exile, within the Persian Empire, the Jews outside Palestine remained as such enclaves (but no longer captives). Back in Judaea, they were but a minor community in a large satrapy or province, having no political independence, mere Persian subjects like the rest. Again, their sole distinctive marks were the ties of religion and blood. Both ties could be cultivated in Judaea — genealogies became of vital interest (*cf.* Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah), retaining a family continuity with the past, while the rebuilt temple could be a focus, in the light of the inherited body of sacred writings, for spiritual and 'national' activity. Scriptures, temple and family ties apart, the Jews had nought else.

9. Religious institutions

Again, the biblical presentation is sensible enough as it stands. The cult of the patriarchs was simple — temporary altars, sacrifice by the head of the clan. Hebrew usage in Egypt is practically unknown, but must have existed in some form, given the ubiquitous religiosity of the ancient Near East; at least Moses could claim time for a feast (Ex. 5: 1, *etc.*).⁵⁶ When Israel became a nation at Sinai, a central focus was required—hence, a central sanctuary,⁵⁷ the tabernacle,

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a tribe being set aside to service it, and a clan to provide its priests (Levites. Aaronids). On entry into Canaan, this sanctuary was established at various places, *eg.* Shiloh, Nob, Gibeon.⁵⁸ Solomon's temple simply replaced the tabernacle, with the same basic personnel and more elaboration. In the judges' period of division and declension, local worship had grown up, with purely local altars and high places. For Yahwistic worship, these were tolerated into Solomon's time. But thereafter, they rapidly became paganized, and drew the condemnation of prophets and would-be reforming kings. The efforts of Hezekiah and Josiah were aimed at purification more than a basically already-extant centralization. After the Exile, a central temple was focus for a limited community and its distant relatives; date of emergence of synagogues remains unsure. For the much-canvassed 'conventional-critical' view that first all Israelites could have priestly functions, then just all Levites, and thereafter only the Aaronids (*cf.* JE, D, Ezekiel, P), there is no justification whatever.⁵⁹ On the general question of organized cult (sanctuary, sacrifices, high priests, incense, *etc.*), as well as of concepts such as sin, *etc.*, it must again be emphasized that all these matters are common ground in the biblical Near East from the third and second millennia BC — to retard any of them to as late as the fifth century BC in Israel is grotesque.⁶⁰

10. Literature

Here, finally, it must suffice to stress *continuity*, *variety* and *periodicity*. The continuity of Old Testament literature can be seen from the general dating set forth in the previous articles in this series; its variety has also been outlined and is visible from the pages of the Old Testament itself. Both variety and continuity are hallmarks also of the other literatures of the biblical Near East: three millennia of narratives, poetry, wisdom, and much else. Likewise periodicity. Masterpieces do not usually appear in any culture with clockwork regularity; there are great periods and 'bare' periods. So in the Near East; Egypt's Old, Middle and New Kingdoms saw abundant production, her anguish in the First Intermediate Period bore special fruit, but the Second Intermediate Period had much less. The same is true elsewhere, but less sharply visible; the full growth of annalistic compositions in the Hittite Empire might be instanced; and the flowerings of Sumerian and Old-Babylonian literature into the 2nd millennium by contrast with less-original 'conservation-work' later on, in Mesopotamia. So with the Old Testament. The epochs of Moses to Joshua, of the United Monarchy, and of the eighth-sixth centuries BC each saw born works of major significance. Apart from a 'depositing' work like Chronicles, the post-exilic age saw much less, whether in narratives (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther), prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi) or others, and probably much more 'conservation' of the older inheritance.

In conclusion

At the end of this series, one can but stress the following points. For a full 'critical' understanding of the Old Testament in the proper sense of 'critical' as a weighing of evidence, it must not be wrenched out of its context. For ordinary purposes, the main messages of the

Old Testament writers are perfectly plain for all to read; the doctrine of perspicuity is by no means a back number. But if one will essay to appreciate not the central all-important spiritual role and message of the Old Testament solely, but further to enter upon study of history, literary forms and usage, laws and covenants, structure of society, religious phenomena and institutions, interconnections and background — then (as in the nineteenth century) study of the Old Testament in encapsulated isolation is a sure recipe for disaster. As an external and thus objective measuring-scale, the ancient Near East (in which the Old Testament itself was written) is indispensable for a properly-informed understanding the the externals of the Old Testament. In that context, the outward phenomena of the Old Testament do make sense, and elaborate theories of origins and drastic reconstructions become superfluous. We do not need new philosophies of history into which the Old Testament is to be forced (nor does this paper in particular aim to provide one). It is much more important to observe and grasp the physiognomy of the history itself. There is no substitute for reality, nor is guesswork a suitable replacement for extant evidence. This present series is but the barest, rather personal outline; vast amounts of productive work in detail remain to be done, some day.

Notes

¹ See *TSFB* 59 (Spring 1971), pp. 2-10; *ibid.* 60 (Summer 1971), pp. 3-11; *ibid.* 61 (Autumn 1971), pp. 5-14; *ibid.* 62 (Spring 1972), pp. 2-10; *ibid.* 63 Summer 1972), pp. 1-5.

² Termed the basic principle of Grafianism by R. J. Thompson, *Moses and the Law* (Brill, 1970), p. 19. Close study of this latter work shows it to be not an objective survey of that subject, but a well-written piece of propaganda for old-time 'Grafianism'; while conservative writers are 'covered' (*TSFB* 61, p. 30), the import of their work is adroitly evaded (so, with Finn) or misrepresented (present writer).

³ So F. W. Newman, cited by Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 36, n. 3.

⁴ Whether it be Wellhausen in his brilliantly-written *Prolegomena* of almost a century ago, or recent apologists such as Thompson in 1970.

⁵ Hinted at in *Christianity Today* 12/no. 19 (21 June 1968), p. 10/922, and set forth in *NPOT*, pp. 13-16.

⁶ E.g. 'city of Nahor' (Gn. 24: 10), *cf.* city Nakhur of the Mari archives (*Archives royales de Mari, trad.*, I, no 107; II, nos 62, 112, 113; IV, 35 rev.; V, 51), among other documents. *Cf.* also *TSFB* 59 (1971), p. 4 and n. 13.

⁷ Patriarchal customs, background, *etc.*, *cf. ibid.*, pp. 4-7 and refs.

⁸ Hence, as already noted (*AO/OT*, 1966, p. 97/8, n. 41), this covenant has formal affinities also with law-collections of the ancient Near East.

⁹ Most of which collections (as known) are closer in date to the patriarchs than to Moses; *cf. TSFB* 60 (1971), p. 10 and n. 48.

¹⁰ In other cases, lack of adequate data precludes judgment.

¹¹ Marked by an evolving growth of achievement in architecture, art-forms, and use of hieroglyphic script towards what became definitive norms.

¹² All dates BC used here and elsewhere in this paper are deliberately given as approximations, in round figures, so as to keep clear the salient picture. Comparisons could, of course, be carried down after Alexander, but the changes consequent upon Hellenistic dominance in the Near East make his advent a convenient base-line here.

¹³ And probably much earlier; a Semitic place-name in Palestine is noted in the third-millennium Egyptian tomb of Inti at Deshasheh (*ndi*), *cf.* Albright, *Journal, Palestine Oriental Society* 8 (1928), p. 255, n. 1).

¹⁴ A warning on this aspect has already been sounded in *AO/OT*, pp. 113-114.

¹⁵ E.g. Graf, Wellhausen, *etc.*

¹⁶ E.g. R. J. Thompson among others.

¹⁷ *I.e.* real improvement in quality and means of achievement in any aspect of life.

¹⁸ Thus, political power, artistic excellence and some moral values do come together in Egypt's 'great' periods (Old, Middle, New Kingdoms), for example; but reflective literature also sprang from the epoch of stress and distress termed the First Intermediate Period. In Israel, outward power in the United Monarchy did coincide with important literary performance (Psalms; Pr. 1-24, proto 25-29, *etc.*) and spiritual awareness evidenced therein; but later, the superficial material prosperity of some in Jeroboam II's time contrasted with the spiritual disloyalty and moral bankruptcy that stirred such as an Amos.

¹⁹ By dismissing the patriarchs and reducing Moses to a shadow (*cf.* such viewpoints as that of Noth), writing off Joshua and considering the judges as half-legendary, 'real' history is then made to begin (still very selectively) from the eleventh century BC with the monarchy — only seven or eight centuries down to Alexander.

²⁰ On this point and on eccentric attempts to dispose of the evidence of this text, *cf.* *AO/OT*, pp. 59/60, n. 12, and *TB* 17 (1966), pp. 90-92.

²¹ *Cf.* (*e.g.*) discussions and documentation, F. D. Kidner. *TFSB* 57 (1970), pp. 3-12; Kitchen, *AO/OT*, pp. 41-56, and *TFSB* 59 (1971), pp. 6-7.

²² A tension whose reality is already pointed out in *AO/OT*, pp. 19-20, and n. 12.

²³ *E.g.* like setting the 'law' after the prophets instead of before them (*AO/OT*, p. 20 and n. 11).

²⁴ *E.g.* much of the 'law' ('P', 'H') from the thirteenth century BC to about 450/300 BC, or Pr. 1-9 from the tenth to the fourth or third century BC.

²⁵ *Cf.* the previous papers in this series.

²⁶ On 'cumulative evidence' in other respects, *cf.* my *Pentateuchal Criticism and Interpretation*, 1965 (and repr.), Lecture I, sect. C, II, 8, and *AO/OT*, p. 125, n. 51.

²⁷ On the semi-nomadic peoples in those archives, *cf.* J. R. Kupper, *Les nomades en Mésopotamie au temps des rois de Mari*, 1957.

²⁸ The Egyptian Sinuhe (twentieth century BC) joined a chief of Retenu in Syria, whose sons had their own clans and territories, being assigned a district as son-in-law himself (*cf.* transl. *ANET*). The execration-texts (early eighteenth century BC) name cities and tribes in Palestine, sometimes with two or three chiefs to each (*ANET*; Albright, *Bulletin, Amer. Schools Or. Research* 81 (1941), p. 19). *Cf.* 'dukes of Edom', Gn. 36.

²⁹ A fact true of even quite modest-sized city-states; so, Byblos with a line of rulers known (in large segments) from Ib-dati (*c.* 2050 BC, 'middle date') right down to the Persian age — a span itself as long as Old Testament history (earlier Byblite kings, *cf.* Kitchen, *Orientalia* 36 (1967), pp. 39-54, esp. 53-54; later kings (*e.g.*) Albright, *Journal, American Oriental Society* 67 (1947), p. 160).

³⁰ See references, *AO/OT*, p. 91, n. 16, and p. 94, nn. 27-29.

³¹ Mentioned as late as 2 Ki. 13: 23.

³² *E.g.* that between the Sumerian city-states of Lagash and Umma, on Stela of the Vultures by Eannatum of Lagash (S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 1963, pp. 310-313).

³³ *Cf.* already *AO/OT*, pp. 90-102; *NPOT*, pp. 3-5; *TFSB* 60 (1971), pp. 9-10.

³⁴ In our modern sense of 'law-code', the term 'law' applied to the Pentateuchal covenant I regard as an anachronism (of modern invention) when used of the pre-exilic period; *torah* did not originally function as a term for something like 'code Napoleon' or British Rail bye-laws.

³⁵ So J. Wellhausen, article 'Israel' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*) in form appended to his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, ed. by W. Robertson Smith, p. 438 (*e.g.* Meridian repr., 1957).

³⁶ So Robertson Smith, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, 1881, p. 315, in words of R. J. Thompson, *Moses & the Law*, 1970, p. 66.

³⁷ *Cf.* Wellhausen, *Prolegomena...*, p. 5, and there dismissed as non-significant.

³⁸ Or 'instruction'; I retain the rendering 'law' simply for brevity.

³⁹ Jos. 1: 7, 8; 8: 31 ff.; 22: 5; 23: 6, *cf.* 24: 26.

⁴⁰ 1 Ki. 2: 3; *cf.* 2 Ki. 10: 31; 14: 6; 17: 13, 34-39 (incl. covenant at 38); 21: 8; *cf.* 22: 8 ff.; 23: 2 ff.; 24-25.

⁴¹ Which has only about a dozen separate references to the 'law of God' or 'of Moses', *etc.* — a proportion not so inconsistent with Kings, or the Psalms or the prophets. In their own period, Ezra has only four references, and those in Nehemiah refer to the one major occasion — hardly a preponderance of post-exilic references to 'law'! The observations on frequency of Moses in Hebrew tradition offered by R. J. Thompson, *Moses & the Law*, pp. 1-4, are thoroughly misleading — he silently drops (on *a priori* grounds of his own position) all pentateuchal references to Moses, suppresses the fifty-six references in Joshua, and sees significance in sixteen allowed refs. in Judges — Samuel — Kings as opposed to a not-so-different twenty-one refs. parallel in Chronicles. On Ezra and Nehemiah, see just above, adding Nehemiah 1: 7, 8 in Nehemiah's own prayer.

⁴² Usually *berith* — but '*eduth*', '*edoth*', also belongs here.

⁴³ Using references other than the phrase 'ark of the covenant' (which itself is additional evidence). The separate covenants of God with David (2 Sa. 23: 5), that of Jehoiada (2 Ki. 11: 17), *etc.*, are here also left aside.

⁴⁴ Adding together the essential references cited or alluded to *en bloc*, but excluding the items set aside above.

⁴⁵ Many particular details in the Sinai laws (sheep-stealing, enticement, cultic purity, and what not) — however ancient — just do not belong in the mouths of such preachers as the prophets who challenged the people on fundamentals (apostasy, idolatry; over-all social injustice); or would Old Testament scholars have them parrot off unwieldy chunks of Pentateuchal matter just for their personal satisfaction?

⁴⁶ Two very dubious suggested references for Hammurabi's laws are discussed by F. R. Kraus, *Genava* 8 (1960), p. 290; they are very uncertain.

⁴⁷ Into the Neo-Babylonian period; on non-mention of Hammurabi's laws in legal documents and their long literary career (plus a comparison with the fate suffered also by Justinian's work), *cf.* R. Haase, *Ein-führung in das Studium keilschriftlicher Rechtsquellen*, 1965, pp. 19-26.

⁴⁸ Such as those of Ur-Nammu, Lipit-Ishtar, the Hit-tites or Middle Assyrian epoch.

⁴⁹ See already *NPOT*, pp. 16-19.

⁵⁰ So, on sinfulness of all men; concept of sin; rule of obedience/disobedience to deity; predestination, *etc.* (*ibid.*, pp. 17, 18).

⁵¹ *NPOT*, pp. 9-13; *TSTB* 61 (1971), pp. 7-8.

⁵² Not that gaps, even of centuries, in our knowledge are necessarily significant (except of our ignorance), as Near Eastern data show, *NPOT*, p. 8.

⁵³ Examples, *NPOT*, p. 8, which could be multiplied.

⁵⁴ Alleged (*e.g.*) by Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, p. 5.

⁵⁵ *Cf.* already note 41, above, *contra* misrepresentation of the data.

⁵⁶ Time off for religious feasts, *etc.*, is attested for work-people in Egypt, as at Deir el-Medineh in W. Thebes (*AO/OT*, pp. 156-157).

⁵⁷ Perhaps an initial altar at Sinai; thereafter, wherever in their travels the Hebrews should stop (Ex. 20: 24-26). 'Every place' of God's name is not to be taken as a plurality of contemporaneously used altars, but as a succession, the sites on which the tabernacle, *etc.*, were successively erected (made perfectly clear by Finn, *UP*, pp. 155-163).

⁵⁸ Shiloh, a centre under Joshua (18; 19: 51; 21: 2; 22: 9, 12) and the judges (Jdg. 18: 31; 21: 12, 19; 1 Sa. 1-4; 14: 3; 1 Ki. 2: 27); then destroyed (Ps. 78: 60; Je. 7: 12-14, *cf.* 26: 6, 9). On the archaeology of Shiloh, note most recently Y. Shiloh, *Israel Exploration Journal* 21 (1971), pp. 67-69. On Nob, *cf.* 1 Sa. 21-22. Gibeon, 1 Ch. 16: 39; 21: 29; 2 Ch. 1: 3, 5, 13. Total centralization in the later monarchy is probably more a modern myth than an ancient reality; *cf.* the sanctuary excavated at Arad, besides other indications, Josiah notwithstanding.

⁵⁹ Despite numerous assertions to the contrary, from (*e.g.*) Wellhausen (*Prolegomena*) and Driver (*Literature...*) to (*e.g.*) Emerton (*Vetus Testamentum* 12 (1962), pp. 129-138). The same old arguments are trotted out every time, in blissful disregard of contrary facts, repeated refutations, and grotesque consequences if allowed; *cf.* (*e.g.*) Finn, *UP*, pp. 187-207, and also 309-328.

⁶⁰ *Cf.* (*e.g.*) references, *etc.*, *TSTB* 60 (1971), pp. 10-11.

Abbreviations

<i>AO/OT</i>	K. A. Kitchen, <i>Ancient Orient and Old Testament</i> (Tyndale Press, 1966).
<i>Finn, UP</i>	A. H. Finn, <i>Unity of the Pentateuch</i> (Marshall Bros, n.d.).
<i>NPOT</i>	J. B. Payne (ed.), <i>New Perspectives on the Old Testament</i> (Word Books, 1970).
<i>T(H)B</i>	<i>Tyndale (House) Bulletin</i> .
<i>TSFB</i>	<i>Theological Students' Fellowship Bulletin</i> .

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