B. THE FAITH OF EARLY ISRAEL

1. *Israel the People of Yahweh: The Covenant Society.* Israel's God from the begin-
ning of her history was Yahweh (in our English Bibles Jehovah or the LORD).
That she brought the worship of Yahweh with her from the desert seems certain,
for, as we have said, no trace of it can be found in Palestine prior to her appear-
ance there. No reason exists to doubt that Israel's faith was communicated to her
in the desert by some great religious personality, namely, Moses. Though Israel's
notion of God was unique in the ancient world, and a phenomenon that defies
rational explanation, to attempt to understand her faith in terms of an idea of
God would be a fundamental error. Israel's religion did not consist in certain
religious ideas or ethical principles, but rested in the memory of historical
experience as interpreted by faith, and responded to in faith. She believed that
Yahweh, her God, had by his mighty acts rescued her from Egypt and, in coven-
ant, had made her his people.

a. *Yahweh's Favor and Israel's Response: Election and Covenant.* It is true that the
notions of election and covenant were not given formal statement in early Israel.
But both were fundamental to her understanding of herself and her God from
the beginning.

As for election, we can find no period in Israel's history when she did not
believe that she was the chosen people of Yahweh,[17] and that her calling had
been signaled by his gracious acts toward her in the exodus deliverance. For later
periods the statement is so obvious as to require no reinforcement. One has only
to recall how the prophets and the Deuteronomic writers, to say nothing of the
virtual unanimity of later Biblical literature, continually hark back to the exodus
as the unforgettable example of the power and grace of Yahweh calling a people
to himself. But, though given its clearest expression and characteristic vocab-
ulary in literature of the seventh and sixth centuries,[18] the notion of election was
fixed in Israelite belief from the beginning. It is central in the theology of the
Yahwist (tenth century) who, having told of the call of Abraham, finds the
promises to him fulfilled in the events of exodus and conquest. The Elohist
likewise tells of the calling of the patriarchs, and he speaks of Israel (Ex. 19:3–6)

[Potchefstroom: Pro Rege-Pers Beperk, 1963], pp.84–99).

[16] Cf. Albright, "A Catalogue of Early Hebrew Lyric Poems" (*HUCA*, XXIII [1950/51]
Part I, pp.1–39), who regards the psalm as a collection of *incipits* of thirteenth- to tenth-
century date made about the time of Solomon. Cf. also S. Iwry, *JBL*, LXXI (1952),
pp.161–165. S. Mowinckel (*Der achtundsechzigste Psalm* [Oslo: J. Dybwad, 1953]) gives an
entirely different interpretation, but dates the piece in its original form to the time of Saul.

[17] On the notion of election, see H. H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London:
Lutterworth Press, 1950); G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (London:
SCM Press, 1950); also G. E. Mendenhall, *IDB*, II, pp.76–82.

[18] Th. C. Vriezen, *Die Erwählung Israels nach dem Alten Testament* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag,
1953); also K. Koch, *ZAW*, 67 (1955) pp.205–226, on the same terminology in the Psalms.

as God's "own possession" among the peoples.[19] Both Yahwist and Elohist, as we
have said, found these themes already present in the traditions with which they
worked. And, beyond this, what is perhaps the oldest poem that we have in the
Bible (Ex. 15:1–18) does not refer to Israel by that name, but speaks simply of
her as Yahweh's people, the people that ·he has "redeemed" (v.13) and
"acquired" (or perhaps better, "created"; v.16). Similar themes recur in this and
other ancient poems. Israel was rescued from Egypt by God's gracious favor and
guided to his "holy encampment" (15:13); she is a people set apart, claimed by
Yahweh as his very own (Num. 23:9; Deut. 33:28f.; cf. 32:8ff.), secure in the
continuing protection of his mighty acts (Judg. 5:11; Ps. 68:19ff.). From all this
it is clear that from earliest times Israel saw herself as a people chosen by Yahweh
and the object of his special favor. It should be added that in none of this
literature (note how the oldest narrative traditions consistently portray Israel as
cowardly, ungrateful, and rebellious) is election attributed to any merit on
Israel's part, but only to the unmerited favor of Yahweh.

According to the Bible, Israel responded to Yahweh's favor by entering into
covenant with him to be his people and to live in accordance with his command-
ments. In other words, it was through covenant that Israel was constituted as
Yahweh's people. To be sure, there are those who would deny this, arguing that
the very notion of covenant entered Israel at a relatively late date; we shall
return to this below. But this judgment is, on the surface of it, difficult to accept.
Not only is the covenant too prominent even in the earliest strata of the Penta-
teuch to be removed by critical surgery, but too much in the Old Testament is
inexplicable without it. In particular, there is the fact that the tribal order of
Israel's earliest period is best understood as a covenant order (again a disputed
subject to which we shall return). Israel, as we have seen, was made up of
elements of exceedingly heterogeneous origin, and she was held together by no
central government or machinery of state, yet for some two hundred years, with
incredible toughness and under the most adverse of circumstances, she managed
to survive and maintain her identity as a people. It is hard to see how this could
ever have been the case had not her various components been bound to one
another by the cohesive power of a solemn pact, or treaty (i.e., a covenant),
entered into before her God. We have the story of such a covenant in Josh.
24:1–28. Here Joshua, speaking in Yahweh's name, recites before the assembled
tribesmen the *magnalia Dei* from the call of Abraham down through the giving of
the land and, on the basis of this, challenges the people to choose whether they
will serve Yahweh or some other god, announcing as he does so that his own

[19] On this passage, and similar covenant formulations, cf. J. Muilenburg, *VT*, IX (1959),
pp.347–365. The word translated "own possession" (*s^egullah*) appears in a Ugaritic letter
where it is apparently used by the Hittite suzerain to describe the king of Ugarit as his
"private property"; cf. D. R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: The
Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), p.151.

choice has already been made. When the people declare that they choose Yahweh, Joshua, after solemnly reminding them of the gravity of the step they are taking and warning them to put aside all other gods, enters into covenant with them to serve Yahweh, and him alone. As in all similar covenant formulations, covenant is here entered into in response to gracious favor already received. Although this passage has been transmitted to us within the so-called Deuteronomic historical corpus (Joshua through II Kings), it is not to be regarded as a free creation of the Deuteronomists, but may be assumed to rest upon an ancient tradition. It is possible, as a number of scholars have believed, that it preserves the memory of the formation of the Israelite tribal league on the soil of Palestine. It must in any event reach back to some occasion when elements that had not previously been worshippers of Yahweh were drawn into Israel's tribal structure through solemn covenant.

The existence of Israel as a people thus rested in the memory of a common experience as handed down ultimately by those who participated in it, who were the nucleus of Israel. Although we cannot control the details of the Biblical narrative, it is unquestionably based in history. There is no reason whatever to doubt that Hebrew slaves had escaped in a remarkable manner from Egypt (and under the leadership of Moses!) and that they interpreted their deliverance as the gracious intervention of Yahweh, the "new" God in whose name Moses had come to them. There is also no objective reason to doubt that these same people then moved to Sinai, where they entered into covenant with Yahweh to be his people. With that, a new society was founded where none had been before, a society based not in blood, but in historical experience and moral decision. As memory of these events was brought to Palestine by the group experiencing them, and as the tribal league was formed about Yahwistic faith—again in covenant—exodus and Sinai became the normative tradition of all Israel: the ancestors of all of us were led by Yahweh through the sea and at Sinai in solemn covenant became his people; in the Promised Land we reaffirmed that covenant, and continually reaffirm it.

b. *The Covenant Form.* Remarkable similarities have been shown to exist between the covenant form as we see it in the Sinai pericope, in Josh. ch.24, in Deuteronomy, and elsewhere in the Bible, and certain suzerainty treaties (i.e., treaties between the Great King and his vassals) of the Hittite Empire.[20] To be sure, the Israelite covenant can hardly have been adapted directly from Hittite models, for the Hittite Empire had vanished before Israel appeared upon the scene. But it is probable that treaties of this type were not specifically Hittite in

[20] These were pointed out twenty-five years ago by G. E. Mendenhall, "Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law" and "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition" (BA, XVII [1954], pp.26–46, 49–76; repr., *Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, 3, E. F. Campbell and D. N. Freedman, eds. [New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970] pp.3–53). The similarities were observed independently by K. Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary* (Eng. tr. of the 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1971). For a useful popular presentation, cf. Hillers, *op. cit.*

origin, but rather represent a treaty form which was widely used in the ancient Orient in the second millennium B.C., but which happens to be known to us at that period only through texts of the Hittite Empire.[21] Moreover, there is abundant evidence that as the Late Bronze Age ended, Palestine and the surrounding lands were profoundly affected by elements moving down from the north (Anatolia and other lands once a part of the Hittite Empire),[22] so that even if the treaty form just mentioned was specifically Hittite in origin (which it probably was not), there is no reason a priori why it may not have been known to the founders of Israel.

The treaties in question typically begin with a preamble in which the Great King identifies himself ("These are the words of—"), giving his name and titles and the name of his father. Then follows a prologue, often quite long, in which the king reviews prior relationships between himself and the vassal, with stress upon his benevolent acts which obligate the latter to perpetual gratitude. This is typically cast in the "I-Thou" form of address, as the Great King speaks to his vassal directly. Next come the stipulations, which state in detail the obligations imposed upon, and to be accepted by, the vassal. Typically, these forbid foreign relations outside the Hittite Empire, as well as enmity with others of its vassals. The vassal must respond to the call to arms, and must do so wholeheartedly (lit., "with all your heart"); failure in this regard is breach of treaty. The vassal is to repose unlimited trust in the Great King, and is on no account to utter or tolerate unfriendly words about him. He is to appear before the Great King with the stipulated annual tribute, and must submit all controversies with other vassals to him for judgment. Following the stipulations it is sometimes directed that a copy of the treaty be deposited in the vassal's shrine and at regular intervals read publicly—presumably to remind the vassal of the obligations he has assumed, and of the solemn oath of loyalty he has taken. Various gods, both of the Hittite lands and of the vassal's own country, as well as others (mountains, rivers, heaven, earth, etc.), are invoked as witnesses to the treaty; and these are listed. Sanctions are supplied in the form of a series of blessings and curses which the gods are summoned to bring upon the vassal in the event of obedience or disobedience, as the case might be.

Parallels with the covenant form as we know it from the Bible leap to the eye; we cannot discuss them all here. The preamble identifying the Lord of the covenant is present (cf., "I am Yahweh your God," Ex. 20:2; or, "Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel," Josh. 24:2). The historical prologue is likewise a standard feature, and it can be very brief (cf., "who brought you out of the land

[21] For example, though we have no treaty texts from Egypt, the Amarna letters suggest that some such formal commitment between the Pharaoh and his vassals existed; cf. E. F. Campbell, "Two Amarna Notes" (*Mag. Dei*, ch.2, esp. pp.45–52).

[22] Cf. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), Ch.VI.

of Egypt, out of the house of bondage," Ex. 20:2) or quite lengthy (cf. the long recital of Yahweh's gracious acts in Josh. 24:2b–13). The stipulations of the Hittite treaties also have parallels in those of the Israelite covenant. Just as vassals of the Great King are forbidden to conclude alliances outside the Hittite Empire, so Israelites are forbidden to have dealings with any divine suzerain but Yahweh. As Hittite vassals are to refrain from enmity with other vassals and submit all controversies to the Great King for adjustment, so the stipulations of the Decalogue forbid such actions as would encroach upon the rights of fellow Israelites and destroy the peace of the community. Response to the call to arms was clearly recognized as obligatory in the Israelite tribal league (cf. Judg. 5:14–18, 23; 21:8–12). As the vassal was required to appear before the Great King with the stipulated tribute, so the Israelite was expected to appear regularly before Yahweh—and he was not to do so "empty-handed" (Ex. 23:14–17; 34:18–20). The provision that a copy of the treaty be desposited in the shrine and periodically read in public also has its parallel in Israel (e.g. Deut. 10:5, 31:9–13).[23] The invoking of various gods as witnesses could, of course, have no place in the Biblical covenant (but see Josh. 24:22, 27, where first the people themselves, then the sacred stone, are called to witness). Yet reminiscences even of this feature may be seen in certain "lawsuit speeches" in the prophetic books (e.g. Isa. 1:2f.; Micah 6:1f.), and also in the ancient Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1), where heaven and earth, mountains and hills, are called upon to bear witness to the people's derelictions.[24] As for the blessings and curses, they occupy a prominent place especially in Deuteronomy (cf. chs.27 to 28), but they were certainly known much earlier, as is evidenced by reminiscences of this feature in the preaching of even the earliest of the prophets.[25] Indeed, Judg. 5:23 would indicate that to call down curses on those who had defaulted on covenant obligation was the accepted practice in the earliest period.

c. *The Antiquity of the Covenant Form in Israel.* Parallels such as the above are striking, and they would seem to argue powerfully both for the extreme antiquity of the Israelite covenant and its central importance in her corporate life. But it must be said that a number of scholars are not convinced of this, but rather argue that Israel adapted the treaty form as a means of expressing her relationship to her God at a relatively late period in her history.[26] They do not take this

[23] The fact that Joshua is said to have written the words of the covenant in a book (Josh. 24:26) suggests a tradition that a covenant document was kept in the shrine at Shechem; cf. Hillers, *Covenant*, p.64.

[24] There is a considerable literature on these speeches; cf. J. Harvey, *Le Plaidoyer prophétique contre Israël après la rupture de l'alliance* (Bruges and Paris; Desclée de Brouwer; Montreal: Les Éditions Bellarmin, 1967); further works listed in bibliography here.

[25] This feature is more prominent in Hosea than in any other prophet, except perhaps Jeremiah; cf. D. R. Hillers, *Treaty Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964).

[26] The literature is extensive. For a survey of the discussion with further literature see various works of D. J. McCarthy; most recently, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the*

position without reason, and their arguments are not to be brushed aside as entirely without merit. First of all, it is certainly true that the treaty form we have described did not disappear with the fall of the Hittite Empire in the thirteenth century B.C., for many of its essential features continue to be seen in Aramean and Assyrian treaties as late as the eighth and seventh centuries, so that it cannot be excluded that Israel might have learned of the form, and adapted it for her purposes, well on in the period of the divided monarchy, rather than at the beginning of her history. In addition to this, it is the fact that in the Bible the covenant receives by far its clearest formal expression in the Book of Deuteronomy (which is commonly dated to the seventh century)—much clearer than in those portions of Exodus that tell of the events at Sinai, where the covenant form has to be pieced together from isolated fragments. And finally, it is also the fact that the word "covenant" (*b'rît*) occurs with relative rarity in literature that is uncontestably earlier than the seventh century. (Of prophets prior to that time only Hosea uses the word in its theological sense, and he no more than twice or thrice.) Considerations such as these have led many to the belief that Israel took over the treaty form and adapted it to her purposes at a relatively late date. Some have even argued that the very notion of covenant played little part in Israel's thinking before the Deuteronomic writers of the seventh century.[27]

But weighty as these considerations are, one may doubt that they are as compelling as they may seem on the surface to be. For one thing, though the treaty form under discussion did survive down into the Assyrian period, it did so only with significant modifications which ought not to be overlooked.[28] Most important of these is that the historical prologue outlining past relationships between suzerain and vassal, which is a standard feature both in the Hittite treaties and in all of the classical covenant formulations of the Bible (e.g., Ex. 19:3–6; Josh. ch.24; cf. I Sam. ch.12), is lacking in the first-millennium treaties known to us,[29]

Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978). Though McCarthy believes that the Sinai experience was always understood covenantally, he doubts that it was originally conceived according to the treaty form.

[27] E.g. L. Perlitt, *Bundestheologie im Alten Testament* (WMANT, 36, 1969); E. Kutsch, *Verheissung und Gesetz: Untersuchungen zum sogennanten "Bund" im Alten Testament* (BZAW, 131, 1973).

[28] Cf. H. B. Huffmon, "The Exodus, Sinai and the Credo" (*CBQ*, XXVII [1965] pp.101–113); K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1966), pp.90–102. For a selection of these treaties, cf. Pritchard, *ANET*, pp.203–206; *ANE Suppl.*, pp.529–541. On the eighth-century Aramean treaties, cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967).

[29] A damaged fragment of a treaty between Asshurbanapal and the people of Qedar seems to contain a brief allusion to past relationships and may constitute an exception; cf. K. Deller and S. Parpola, *Orientalia*, 37 (1968), pp.464–466. But the lengthy prologue reviewing the suzerain's past favor is certainly not a feature of the Assyrian treaties as we know them.

while the curses enforcing the treaty become much more elaborate and lurid, and the blessings tend to disappear. A different conception of the suzerain-vassal relationship has emerged, one based on threats and naked force rather than gracious favor and persuasion, and as different in spirit from the Biblical covenant as possible. It is difficult to believe that Israel's conception of covenant could have been drawn from treaties like these. No doubt the Assyrian treaties did influence Israel's thinking in the seventh century, but it is unlikely that this would have been the case had not Israel already conceived of herself as the vassal people of an Overlord far kinder than the Assyrian kings. This is, of course, far from proof that Israel knew of the treaty form at an early date. But at least it can be said that the Biblical covenant is far closer in form and in spirit to the Hittite treaties of the first millennium than to any later treaties presently known to us.

The fact that the covenant form is given its clearest expression in Deuteronomy, while presented in broken fashion in the Sinai pericope and elsewhere, is likewise not decisive, nor is it surprising. Nowhere in the Bible do we have a covenant-treaty document in its original form. We have only narrative accounts of the making of covenants and, perhaps, of their ritual reenactment. This, together with the new content that Israel's faith injected into it, would in itself necessitate that the form to some degree be broken. One must also remember that the Sinai pericope as it stands in our Bibles is the end product of an exceedingly long and complex process of transmission and reworking, in the course of which material has been displaced from its original context and the ritual pattern of the material thereby dissolved. Under such circumstances unbroken forms are hardly to be expected. Nevertheless, even in the Sinai peri-cope most of the standard features of the treaty form may be detected, as all may be, either explicitly or by inference, in the account of the covenant in Josh. ch.24, an account which assuredly rests upon a very ancient tradition.[30] The fact that the covenant receives its clearest expression in Deuteronomy cannot be taken as evidence that the concept was unknown in much earlier times.

The relatively limited occurrence of the word for "covenant" (*bᵉrît*) prior to the seventh century is even less decisive. In the first place, unless one declares certain key passages that speak of a covenant between God and people (e.g. Gen. 15:8; Ex. 19:3–6; 24:7f.; 34:10, 27f.; Josh., ch.24; also II Sam. 23:5; Ps. 89, etc.) as Deuteronomic or later (a step that seems unwarranted), then such occurrences are by no means so very limited. Moreover, a concept may well be present long before a fixed terminology has been developed to express it. For example, as we saw above, the standard terminology for expressing the concept of election appears to have become fixed in the seventh century and after, although it seems certain that Israel had regarded herself as Yahweh's own people, singled out by him for special favor, from the very beginning. It may well

[30] On this point, and others made in this section, cf. E. F. Campbell, *Interpretation* XXIX (1975), pp.148–151.

have been the same with the concept of covenant. In any event, it is certain that a mass of terminology associated in the Bible, both early and late, with the God-people relationship is widely attested in texts of the ancient Orient back to the Late Bronze Age which deal with the relationship of overlord and vassal. Since some of these texts stem from Palestine itself (the Amarna letters), there is no reason to believe that Israelites did not know of this terminology, and the treaty relationship that it implies, from the beginning.[31]

It must be admitted that the antiquity of the covenant form in Israel cannot be proved. The evidence at our disposal is not such that it allows us to speak of proof. Yet that same evidence gives us every reason to believe that from earliest times there existed in Israel the awareness of a bond with Yahweh which in its essential features is at least reminiscent of a treaty between suzerain and vassal. It was a bond that rested in the divine Overlord's gracious favor in rescuing his people from bondage and giving them their land, and it obligated the people in perpetual gratitude to serve him alone and to live in obedience to his stipulations under threat of his extreme displeasure. It will be noted that this conception of covenant is markedly different in emphasis from that found in the patriarchal narratives. There covenant consists in unconditional promises for the future, in which the recipient was obligated only to trust. Here, on the contrary, covenant is based in gracious actions already performed, and issues in binding obligation. The two conceptions would later be in a certain tension, as we shall see.

d. *Covenant: The Kingship of Yahweh.* If, as we have argued, Israel from the beginning of her existence as a people conceived of her relationship to her God after the analogy of the suzerainty treaty form, as that of vassal to overlord, this has profound theological significance. It was just here that the notion of the rule of God over his people, the Kingdom of God, so central to the thought of both Testaments, had its start.[32] Though this went through many mutations in the course of the centuries, it is no late notion presupposing the existence of the monarchy, for early Israel's tribal organization was itself a theocracy under the kingship of Yahweh.[33] The symbols of the early cult were symbols of that king-ship: the Ark was Yahweh's throne (cf. Num. 10:35f.),[34] the rod of Moses was his

[31] Included are such terms as "to hear (i.e. obey) the words", "to love", "to hate", "to fear", "to know (i.e. recognize)", "to bow down", "to show favor", etc. Literature on the subject is widely scattered; cf. Campbell, *ibid.*, for a brief summary. On this kind of term-inology in the Amarna letters, cf. Campbell, *Mag. Dei*, pp.45–52.

[32] This was correctly sensed years ago by W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. I (Eng. tr., of 6th ed., OTL, 1961), pp.39–41.

[33] Because the title "king" is rarely applied to Yahweh in the earliest literature, it was long assumed that the concept arose under the monarchy. But recognition that the coven-ant follows a *political* form places the discussion in a different light. Perhaps the fact that the word *melek* connoted in contemporary Palestine a petty city king caused Israelites to feel that it was not a proper one to use for Yahweh, the divine Suzerain. On the subject, cf. G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* (Harper & Row, 1969), Ch.4; and especially G. E. Mendenhall, "Early Israel as the Kingdom of Yahweh" (*The Tenth Generation*, Ch.I).

[34] Albright (*JBL*, LXVII [1948], pp.378f. suggests that the name of the Ark was "[name

scepter, the sacred lots his tablets of destiny. The earliest poems occasionally hail him as king (Ex. 15:18; Num. 23:21; Deut. 33:5; Ps. 29:10f.; 68:24). Such a belief, be it noted, could hardly have evolved *within* the tribal confederacy; it was rather, constitutive of the confederacy! Its origins, therefore, must be sought in the desert and, we may believe, in the work of Moses himself.

The covenant was thus in no sense a bargain between equals, but a vassal's acceptance of the Overlord's terms. It therefore laid conditions on election and injected into Israel's notion of herself as a chosen people a moral note, which she would never be allowed to forget, try though she might. She was no superior people, favored because she deserved it, but a helpless people who had been the recipient of unmerited grace. Her God-King was no national genius, bound to her by ties of blood and cult, but a cosmic God who had chosen her in her dire need, and whom she in a free moral act had chosen. Her society was thus grounded not in nature but in covenant. Religious obligation being based in Yahweh's prevenient favor, the covenant provided Israel no means of placing Yahweh in debt for the future. Covenant could be maintained only so long as the divine Overlord's stipulations were met; its maintenance required obedience and continual renewal by the free moral choice of each generation. The stipulations of covenant were primarily that Israel accept the rule of her God-King and have no dealing with any other god-king, and that she obey his law in all dealings with other subjects of his domain (i.e., the covenant brother). These stipulations explain the direction of the later prophetic attack on the national sin, and also the paramount importance of law in Israel at all periods of her history.

e. *Covenant and Promise*. Early Israel's faith was likewise characterized by a confidence in the divine promises and an exuberant expectation of good things in the future. It would, to be sure, be misleading to speak of this as an eschatology. One can find no doctrine of "last things" in early Israelite religion, nor even, indeed, the anticipation of some terminus of events within history that might qualify as eschatology in a limited sense. Nevertheless, the seeds of Israel's future hope, one day to issue in a fully developed eschatology, lie in the soil of her primitive covenant faith. However much it may have borrowed of language and form, it is impossible to regard Old Testament eschatology itself as a borrowing from Israel's pagan neighbors; since they lacked any real sense of a divine purpose in history, the pagan religions developed nothing remotely resembling an eschatology. Nor did it originate in the later royal cult, still less from a mere projection of frustrated national ambitions into the future—though these things certainly shaped its development profoundly. Its beginnings lie farther back in the structure of Israel's primitive faith itself.[35]

---

of] Yahweh of Hosts, Enthroned on the Cherubim" (cf. I Sam. 4:4). On this symbolism, cf. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. I, pp.107ff.

[35] See further Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. I, pp.472–501; also, F. C. Fensham, "Covenant, Promise and Expectation in the Bible" *ThZ*, 23 [1967], pp.305–322).

This is scarcely surprising. An element of promise was, as we have seen, an original feature in the patriarchal religion. Since the nucleus of Israel had come from this background, one would expect that, as the patriarchal deities were identified with Yahweh, this element would have been carried over into Israel's normative faith. Moreover, Yahweh did not come to Israel in Egypt as a maintainer of *status quo*, but as a God who called his people from nothingness into a new future and into hope. And the covenant, though demanding strictest obedience to its stipulations on pain of rejection, carried also the explicit assurance that, its obligations met, the Overlord's favor would be endlessly continued.

In any event, one may see reflected in Israel's earliest literature an exuberant confidence in the future. Ancient poems tell how Yahweh delivered his people that he might lead them to his "holy encampment," and then victoriously to the Promised Land (Ex. 15:13–17). They describe Israel as a people blessed of God (Num. 23:7–10, 18–24), the recipient of promise (v.19), against whom no curse or enchantment avails. She will be given material plenty (Num. 24:3–9; Gen. 49:22–26; Deut. 33:13–17) and victory over all her foes (Deut. 33:26–29); who blesses her will be blessed, who curses her will be cursed (Num. 24:9; cf. Judg. 5:31; Gen. 12:3). So, no doubt, from earliest times her bards and seers encouraged her, promising her continued possession of her land and the blessing of her God. Though this hope partook of an earthy flavor, it nevertheless concealed the germs of yet greater things.

These features—election and covenant, the stipulations of covenant, its threats and its promises—were of the structure of Israel's faith from the beginning, and so remained throughout all her history. Though the passing years brought many developments, Israel's faith never essentially changed character.

2. *The God of the Covenant*. We must once again make it clear that Israel's faith did not center in an idea of God. Nevertheless, her conception of God was from the beginning so remarkable, and so without parallel in the ancient world, that it is impossible to appreciate the uniqueness of her faith without some discussion of it.

a. *The Name "Yahweh."* The name of Israel's God was, as we have said, "Yahweh." Discussion of the meaning of this name, regarding which there is little agreement among scholars, is out of the question here. It is likely, however, that Yahweh is a causative form of the verb "to be,"[36] as in certain Amorite personal names from Mari and elsewhere (Yahwi-'Il, and the like: i.e., "The god creates/produces," or "May the god—"). We may suppose that Yahweh was a

---

[36] This explanation, first proposed by P. Haupt, has been repeatedly defended by Albright: e.g., *JBL*, XLIII (1924), pp.370–378; *ibid.*, LXVII (1948), pp.377–381; *FSAC*, pp.259–261; *YGC*, pp.168–172. Cf. also D. N. Freedman, *JBL*, LXXIX (1960), pp.151–156; and especially F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, pp.60–75 (further literature listed here). It has recently been argued that the verb "he causes to be" may often have the force of "he makes things happen" (with stress upon Yahweh's activity in events), rather than "he creates"; cf. W. H. Brownlee, *BASOR*, 226 (1977), pp.39–45.

liturgical appellation of the deity, probably of El, known among the Hebrews in pre-Mosaic times, which was adopted by Moses as the official name of Israel's God. Thus the enigmatic formula of Ex. 3:14, in its original third-person form, may have been *yahweh asher yahweh* ("Yahweh who creates/brings into being"), with the name Yahweh substituted for El (the formula "El who creates"—with a different verb—is known from the Ras Shamra texts).[37] Or, the original form may have been *yahweh asher yihweh* ("It is he who causes to be what comes into existence"), which has parallels in Egyptian texts of the Empire period, where similar formulas are applied to Amun-Re' and to Aten[38]—which might suggest that, in the context of Ex., ch.3, and the succeeding chapters, Moses claims for his God no less than the titles and prerogatives of the chief god of the Egyptian pantheon. In any event, we are warned that Israel from the beginning worshiped no local nature deity, but a high God of cosmic domain.

b. *Yahweh Alone Is God.* From the beginning, Israel's faith forbade the worship of any god but Yahweh. This prohibition, classically expressed in the First Commandment (where the words "before me" have the sense of "aside from me": cf. RSV, marg.; also Ex. 22:20; 34:14), is thoroughly consonant with the nature of the covenant: the vassal may have but one Overlord. Though Israelites did repeatedly worship other gods, as the Old Testament makes abundantly clear, never was this excused or condoned: Yahweh is a jealous God who brooks no rivals (Ex. 20:5). Nor was he thought of as having any rival. Creator of all things without intermediary or assistance (Gen. 2:4b–25 [J]), he had no pantheon, no consort (the Hebrew even lacks a word for "goddess"), and no progeny. Consequently Israel developed no myth, and borrowed none save to devitalize it.[39] This emancipation from mythopoeic thought is quite primitive, and may be seen in Israel's earliest literature. Thus, for example, in Ex. 15:1–18, the sea is no Chaos Monster, Yam or Tiamat, but only the sea; the foe with whom Yahweh does battle is the Egyptian Pharaoh, not some cosmic power. As for the gods of Egypt, they are not deemed worthy of mention.

To be sure, Yahweh was thought of as surrounded by a heavenly host, or assembly—his angels or "holy ones" (Deut. 33:2; Ps. 29:1; Gen. 3:22; 11:7; etc.). In one place (Ps. 82) the gods of the nations are depicted as members of this assembly who, for their misconduct, had been degraded to the status of mortals. The notion of the heavenly court was one shared by Israel with her pagan neighbors. But, although there was repeatedly the temptation to accord these beings worship, this was a thing that was always censured (e.g., Deut. 4:19; II

[37] This explanation is suggested by Cross, *ibid.*

[38] So Albright; cf. the works listed in note 36.

[39] This is by no means to deny that there were elements in Israel's cultus and thinking that had their background in myth. But Israel's understanding of reality was not mythopoeic. On the subject, cf. B. S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1960); F. M. Cross, "The Divine Warrior" (*Biblical Motifs*, A. Altmann, ed. [Harvard University Press, 1966], pp.11–30); also *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*.

Kings 23:4; Jer. 8:2). Moreover, the heavenly court plays, if possible, a larger role in later than in earlier periods (e.g., I Kings 22:19–23; Isa., ch.6; Job, chs.1; 2; Isa., chs.40 to 48, *passim*; Neh. 9:6). It is, in itself, no more evidence of polytheism than are angels, demons, and saints in the theology of Judaism or Christianity. In Israel's normative faith, Yahweh was never surrounded by, or ranked in, a pantheon. Indeed, the fact that he is called "Elohim" (God, in the plural) probably constitutes a claim that he is the totality of the manifestations of the deity.[40] In any event, the patriarchal deities survived only in identification with Yahweh, not as rival or subordinate gods.

c. *Was the Mosaic Religion a Monotheism?* The question is frequently asked, as it is probably inevitable that it should be.[41] But it is a fruitless question until terms have been defined. One must remember that in asking it one is framing a question in categories proper to our mode of thought and putting it to an ancient people who did not think in our categories. If one intends monotheism in an ontological sense, and understands by it the explicit affirmation that only one God exists, one may question whether early Israel's faith deserves the designation. Although she was forbidden to worship other gods than Yahweh, her early literature affords no explicit denial that other gods exist. Indeed, there are passages where the existence of other gods seems to be naively assumed (e.g., Ex. 18:11; Judg. 11:24; I Sam. 26:19)—though it must be noted that these are quite as common in later periods when Israel was undoubtedly monotheistic (e.g., Deut. 4:19; Ps. 95:3; 97:9; II Chron. 2:5) as in earlier ones and may represent in good part an accommodation of language (as when we speak of the gods of the Congo). On the other hand, were we to eschew the term "monotheism." it would be difficult to find another any more satisfactory. Certainly Israel's faith was no polytheism. Nor will henotheism or monolatry do, for though the existence of other gods was not expressly denied, neither was their status as gods tolerantly granted. Because of these difficulties, many scholars seek some compromise word: incipient monotheism, implicit monotheism, practical monotheism, or the like.

As we have said, the problem is one of definition.[42] Though early Israel's faith

[40] Possibly of El (cf. El Shaddai, El 'Olam, etc.) and other patriarchal deities. In the Amarna letters (cf. Pritchard, *ANET*, pp.483–490) the vassal frequently addresses the Pharaoh as "my gods, my sun god": i.e., he says that the Pharaoh is his pantheon. Cf. Albright, *FSAC*, pp.213f.; M. H. Pope, "El in the Ugaritic Texts" (*VT*, Suppl., Vol.II [1955]), pp.20f.

[41] The classic defense of Mosaic monotheism is that of Albright: *FSAC*, pp.257–272. For a strong disagreement, see T. J. Meek, *JBL*, LXI (1942), pp.21–43; *idem, JNES*, II (1943), pp.122f. Others seek mediating positions: e.g., H. H. Rowley, ET, LXI (1950), pp.333–338; *ZAW*, 69 (1957), pp.1–21; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol.I, pp.220–227.

[42] Cf. G. E. Mendenhall, *BANE*, pp.40–42; Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology*, pp.107f.; also, C. J. Labuschagne, *The Incomparability of Yahweh in the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), pp.142–149.

was not a monotheism in any philosophical sense, it was probably such in the only way that would have been meaningful in the existing situation. Israel did not deny the existence of other gods (gods were realities in the ancient world, their images to be seen in every temple), but she effectively denied them status as *gods*. Since she was bound in covenant to serve Yahweh alone, and accorded all power and authority to him, she was forbidden to approach them as gods (cf. Deut. 32:37f.). The vassal may have but one suzerain! The gods were thus rendered irrelevant, driven from the field; no place was allowed them in a pantheon. To Israel only one God was *God*: Yahweh, whose grace had called her into being, and under whose sovereign overlordship she had engaged to live. The other gods, allowed neither part in creation, nor function in the cosmos, nor power over events, nor cult, were robbed of all that made them gods and rendered nonentities, in short, were "undeified." Though the full implications of monotheism were centuries in being drawn, in this functional sense Israel believed in but one God from the beginning.

What influence, if any, the Aten cult had on the Mosaic religion is an unanswered question. Since it flourished not long before Moses, and since certain of its traits survived in the official religion of Egypt, some influence is possible. But, if so, it was indirect and not fundamental. In its essential structure Yahwism was as little like the Egyptian religion as possible.

d. *The Prohibition of Images*. In sharp contrast to the pagan religions, in which the image of the god represented his visible presence, Yahwism was aniconic; representations of the Deity were strictly forbidden. This is classically stated in the Second Commandment and was certainly a primitive feature in Israel's faith. It chimes in with the entire witness of the Old Testament, which, though it repeatedly charges Israel with making idols of pagan gods, affords no clear reference anywhere to an image of Yahweh.[43] Although we cannot assert that none was ever made, such a thing must at least have been rare. Figurines of the mother-goddess, to be sure, are regularly found in Israelite towns (though the earliest ones in central Palestine have yielded none), and these, though probably little more than charms used by superstitious people to assist in childbirth, are clear evidence of the syncretism that continually threatened Israel. But it is striking that excavations have thus far brought to light no certain example of an image of Yahweh.[44] This certainly argues for the antiquity and tenacity of the aniconic tradition in Yahwism. If this rendered Israel's faith uncreative in the realm of art, it also lifted it above sensuous conceptions of the Deity and

[43] As we shall see later, the golden bulls erected by Jeroboam (I Kings 12:28f.) were not images of Yahweh. On the aniconic nature of Israel's religion, cf. Albright, *ARI*, pp.110-112; more recently, *YGC*, pp.168-180.

[44] Male images of any kind are all but unknown. A figurine of a male deity found in what appears to be a cultic complex in eleventh-century Hazor may provide us with our first example of an idolatrous Israelite shrine; cf. Y. Yadin, *Hazor* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp.132-134 and Pl.XXIV.

safeguarded it from the pagan notion that the divine powers could, through the visible image, be manipulated for personal ends.

Early Israel did not, of course, spiritualize her God or conceive of him abstractly. On the contrary, she thought of him in intensely personal terms, at times employing anthropomorphisms to describe him that are to our taste naive, if not crude. Though this feature is more prominent in earlier than in later literature, it is instanced at all periods. It is probable that no religion could conceive of the Deity so personally as did Israel's and avoid anthropomorphisms. But Israel's faith did not, for all that, obscure the distance between man and God, who was at all times the holy and sovereign Lord, on no account to be approached familiarly or lightly.

e. *The Nature of Israel's God*. Aside from all the above, Yahweh differed from the pagan gods in his essential nature. The ancient paganisms were nature religions, the gods being for the most part identified with the heavenly bodies, or the forces and functions of nature, and, like nature, without particular moral character. Their doings, as described in the myth, reflected the rhythmic yearly unchanging pattern of nature upon which the life of earthly society depended. Through reenactment of the myth, and the performance of ritual acts designed for the renewal of the cosmic powers, they were appealed to as maintainers of *status quo*. Though conceived of as acting in events, and doing so for a reason, such action was regarded neither as the basis of the community's obligation, nor as part of a long-range purpose announced in advance. The ancient paganism lacked any sense of a divine guidance of history toward a goal.[45]

Yahweh, on the contrary, was a God of wholly different type. He was identified with no natural force, nor was he localized at any point in heaven or on earth. Though controlling the elements (Judg. 5:4f., 21) and the heavenly bodies (Josh. 10:12f.), and riding the wings of the storm (Ps. 29), he was neither sun-god, nor a moon-god, nor a storm-god. And though conferring the blessing of fertility (Gen. 49:25f.; Deut. 33:13-16), he was in no sense a fertility-god. Yahweh was powerful over all of nature, but no one aspect of it was more characteristic of him than was another. In Israel's faith nature, though not thought of as lifeless, was robbed of personality and "demythed."

Yahweh's power was not, in fact, primarily associated with the repeatable events of nature, but with unrepeatable historical events. And in these events he acted purposively. In bringing his people out of Egypt he exhibited his saving

[45] The uniqueness of Israel's faith in this regard has been disputed, notably by Albrektson, *History and the Gods* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1967). The issue cannot be debated here; but reaction against stating the contrast too sharply must not lead to the obliteration of the manifest differences that exist. The fact remains that none of the ancient paganisms had an understanding of the divine action in history remotely comparable to that of the Bible; cf. the review of B. S. Childs in *JSS*, XIV (1969), pp.114-116. F. Gese, "Geschichtliches Denken im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament" (*ZThK*, [1958], pp.127-145), has not so much denied the contrast as more clearly defined it.

might, commanding all the powers of nature—plagues, sea water and wind, earthquake and storm—to serve his purpose. Moreover, he comes ever and again to his people in their distress with his saving acts (Judg., ch.5). And these mighty acts of Yahweh, recollected and cultically recited, were the basis of Israel's obligation to him.[46] However much importance her cult might assume, and however mechanically it might be practiced, Israel could never properly regard the cult as a technique for coercing the divine will. Nor could she, though it survived in popular practice, make place for magic (e.g., Ex. 20:7; 22:18). Yahweh was no benign maintainer of *status quo* to be ritually appeased, but a God who had called his people from the *status quo* of dire bondage into a new future, and who demanded of them obedience to his righteous law. Israel's faith, thus grounded in historical events, alone in the ancient world had a keen sense of the divine purpose and calling in history.

C. THE CONSTITUTION OF EARLY ISRAEL: THE TRIBAL LEAGUE AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

1. *The Israelite Tribal League.* From the beginning of her life in Palestine down to the rise of the monarchy, a period of some two hundred years, Israel existed as a loosely organized system of (traditionally twelve) tribes. Through all this period she had no central government or machinery of state. Yet, in spite of this, with incredible toughness and under the most adverse of circumstances, she managed to survive as a self-conscious entity, clearly set apart from her neighbors round about. Since Israel's tribal system persisted for so long, and since it provided the framework within which her sacred traditions and characteristic institutions achieved normative form, it is important that we give it some discussion at this point.

a. *The Nature of the Tribal System.* This is a subject that has occasioned much debate. Some fifty years ago, Martin Noth advanced the hypothesis that early Israel is to be understood as an amphictyony, a sacral confederation of twelve tribes united about the worship of Yahweh, analogous to similar organizations that existed in Greece, Asia Minor, and Italy some centuries later.[47] So ably and so persuasively were Noth's views presented that they gained widespread acceptance and became for a time wellnigh the consensus. But recently they have been subjected to sweeping criticisms, from various scholars and from various points of view, which make it evident that the analogy has been pressed too far.[48] To

[46] On this fundamental feature in Israel's theology, see G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM Press, 1952).

[47] M. Noth, *Das System der zwölf Stämme Israels* (BWANT, IV:1 [1930]; reprinted, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966).

[48] Among those who have expressed criticism are: H. M. Orlinsky, "The Tribal System of Israel and Related Groups in the Period of the Judges" (*Oriens Antiquus*, I [1962], pp.11–20); G. Fohrer, "Altes Testament—'Amphiktyonie' und 'Bund'?" (*ThLZ*, 91 [1966],

avoid confusion, it would be best not to use the word "amphictyony" in conn tion with early Israel; the parallels, while illuminating, are not exact and a moreover, drawn from another culture at a later period. Yet even though Not thesis requires modification, we should do well not too hastily to discard altogether.[49] Early Israel seems in fact to have existed as a sacral league of tri founded in covenant with Yahweh. Although this is contested, and doubtless continue to be, one feels strongly that no satisfying alternative explanation early Israel has yet been advanced.

Certainly, we are not to suppose that the entity we call Israel was formed a held together in the face of adversity exclusively, or even primarily, through of blood kinship.[50] True, the Bible traces the descent of all the tribes to ancestor Jacob (Israel), and this might lead one to suppose that Israel was in a kinship unit. But kinship terminology is often employed in the Bible to expr a social solidarity, a feeling of closeness, that actually arose from other facto Seldom in all of history has blood kinship, or common racial stock or langua been the determinative factor in the formation and preservation of larger so and political units. What is more to the point, there is abundant evidence that all Israelites were in fact related one to another by blood. As we saw in preceding chapter and as the Bible itself makes clear, Israel—both those part it that had come from the desert and those parts already present in Palestine entered into its structure—included elements of the most heterogeneous ori who could not possibly have descended from a single family tree. Even various tribes doubtless represented territorial units, rather than familial o (though, naturally, through intermarriage, ties of real kinship were doubt strong within the tribes). And, on the other hand, it was never her bloodstre her racial stock or her language, that set Israel off from her immediate nei bors (Canaanites, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, etc.), but rather the tradi (or, if one prefers, the ideology) to which she was committed. Speaking theo cally, one might with justice call Israel a family; but from a historical poin view neither her first appearance nor her continued existence can be accoun for in terms of blood kinship.

Still less can we believe that the people Israel came into being gradually, ov

cols. 801–816, 893–904); G. W. Anderson, "Israel: Amphictyony: 'am; kâhâl; 'êdâh: T. Frank and W. L. Reed, eds., *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essa Honor of Herbert G. May* [Abingdon Press, 1970]; pp.135–151); R. de Vaux, *EHI*, Ch. X (Vol. II, pp.695–715); A. D. H. Mayes, *Israel in the Period of the Judges* (London: SCM I 1974); C. H. J. de Geus, *The Tribes of Israel* (Assen/Amsterdam: van Gorcum, 1976).

[49] Cf. O. Bächli, *Amphiktyonie im Alten Testament* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Ve 1977), who sounds a warning against discarding a fruitful hypothesis without fir something better to take its place (cf. p.181).

[50] On this and the ensuing paragraphs, see various writings of G. E. Mendenhall, "Social Organization in Early Israel" (*Mag. Dei*, Ch.6); "Tribe and State in the An World: The Nature of the Biblical Community" (*The Tenth Generation*, Ch.VII).