

CHANGES IN THE CONCEPTION OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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ABSTRACT

If it is indeed true that God reveals himself in history, 'changes in the conception of God belong to the very essence of the biblical faith'. Throughout the Old Testament we find that the faith of historical figures provided answers to problems of the historical conditions under which they lived. Later generations actualized the traditions for their own time, adding their own experiences of God to the text, so contributing to the growth of books. The three main changes regarding the view of God during Old Testament times are discussed:

- a) from faith in the God of the Fathers to faith in Yahweh;
- b) from the faith of the nomadic tribes to the faith during the monarchy;
- c) from the latter to the faith during the exile.

The particular strength of the Old Testament lies in the fact that it reveals a faith in God which grows dynamically, how a living faith can arise by the actualization of traditional words about God in a new situation, and that the basic confessions about God remained the norm for the formation of every new concept of God.

Let me begin by delimiting the range of problems I am trying to deal with. For that purpose I shall consider four aspects:

1. Old Testament scholarship in our century has stressed the fact that God reveals himself in history. If this is true, changes in the conception of God belong to the very essence of the biblical faith. The faith of the historical Abraham was born out of nomadic conditions of life; it proved true for these conditions. If Abraham had lived as a king like David, the concrete form of his faith would have had to change to fit his different conditions of life.

The faith of the historical David or of the historical Hezekiah was a faith for the conditions of a state and it proved true for these conditions. If David had lived as Israel in exile did after the destruction of the temple and of the state, the concrete forms of his faith would have had to change to fit the new conditions of life. For the thought of the Bible this means: its faith is meaningful only in so far as it gives answers to the questions of the historical conditions under which people live.

2. What I have just tried to say in respect of the Old Testament is true for the New Testament and for church history as well. For the early church it was not enough just to repeat the words of the historical Jesus. Rather, these words had to be actualized for the changing situation of the congregation after the destruction of the temple and especially after the beginning of the mission to the gentiles; and on the other hand, the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus as the new experience of God had to be included. In view of the teaching and of the fate of Jesus the problem of the changes in the concepts of God can be shown more precisely. There are two problems: a) how to transfer an earlier experience of God or a tradition into a changing historical situation; b) how to integrate the new experiences of God into the traditional conception of God.

3. Taking into consideration both sides of the problem, the Old Testament shows one advantage over the New Testament: it reflects the changes in the conception of God over more than a thousand years as against only about a hundred years in the New Testament. The rise of sayings about God, their growth, and their changing can be viewed more easily during such a long time than during a rather short one. Let me take as an example the book of the prophet Isaiah which grew over a long period of more than five hundred years. The observation of such a growth is of high theological importance. Old Testament scholarship in the 19th century and at the beginning of our own century tended to eliminate all the later additions in order to reconstruct the message of Isaiah as exactly as possible. But that means a great loss. The growth of the tradition shows that later generations used it. These generations were not interested in the tradition as a historical one; they didn't ask the question, what did the historical Isaiah teach, nor were they interested in these traditions because of a dogmatic desire for an unchangeable

truth. Both interests would have afforded a tradition without the slightest change. Rather, these later generations read the tradition with an eye to their own time actualizing it for their own time; this was the reason for their adding their own experiences of God to the texts they read. In fact what they did with these texts was what we today do in the sermon. Because of that the voices of generations of more than five centuries are a sign of the liveliness of this faith and the necessity of its change in a changing historical condition.

4. But if we stress the necessity of the change in biblical concepts of God because of the liveliness of its faith for the actual time, it becomes essential to determine the criteria for such changes. Of course it cannot be a change of any kind; this would mean that every new generation would define its own belief because of its own experiences of God. Whoever stresses the necessity of the changes in the biblical conception of God during history has to say what is the essence of biblical faith, its center which can't be abandoned. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to speak about the biblical faith, but would only be able so speak about a total of very different beliefs of very different times. In short, we have to answer the question of the relationship of tradition and situation, the problem how, on the one hand, the biblical faith is related to different times and, on the other hand, clings to its peculiarity which stays essentially the same. We could call it also the question of how the biblical faith can be the truth in changing historical conditions.

In answering these questions we could choose a lot of different subjects and texts, since nearly every text, especially in the Pentateuch, shows a growth over centuries as a sign of its liveliness in handling the tradition. I have made my choice in line with the three great changes in the experience of God during Old Testament times:

- a) the change of the faith in the God of the Fathers to the faith in Yahweh;
- b) the change of the nomadic faith of the tribes of Israel to the faith in the time of the monarchy;

- c) the change of the faith during the time of the monarchy to the faith after the destruction of the state during the exile.

A. THE GOD OF THE FATHERS AND YAHWEH

Israel of Old Testament times never forgot that the period of her fathers belonged to her prehistory and also to the prehistory of her own faith. While single persons and their families are the actors in the patriarchal stories, it is always "Israel" who acts from the book of Exodus onwards.¹ The change in Israel's faith is expressed by the fact that - at least according to two sources, E and P - the revelation of the divine name Yahweh is given to Moses, while the patriarchs worship God without knowing his name. This fact implies continuity and discontinuity. While it is the same God who is worshipped - in Exodus 3:6 he introduces himself as the God of the Fathers - he is on the other hand worshipped under different names and that means according to a different way of revelation. Since the famous work of A Alt ([1929]1953:1-78) we know that behind this information lies the fact that the patriarchs - if we use the terminology of the history of religion - worshipped a different type of god from that of the later Israel. This type of god we also know elsewhere in the Ancient Near East; it related specifically to semi-nomadic shepherds and goatherds².

Though many details are controversial today (we are no longer as certain as Alt was, whether the fathers were pure semi-nomads and not peasants as well, or whether they were worshipping El as the God of the Fathers only after settlement and not from the very beginning)³ the general traits of the faith of the patriarchs are very well known. The worship of the God of the Fathers is not exclusively bound to a sanctuary unlike the gods of the peasants; while the sanctuary of the latter is a place of pilgrimage, the God of the Fathers moves with his group; he is the shelter of the group while it is on the move, looking after their clothing and their water. Already in his name the basic difference from the deities of the peasants is expressed. While they are called according to their sanctuary, for instance El Bethel, his name relates to the group to which he has bound himself for example God of Abraham, the Fear of Isaak (or the Kinsman of Isaak). Unlike El Bethel he is not represented by a priest but by the head of the king group. He cares for the fate of the group and protects them from dangers on the way. E. Lehmann (1917) has expressed this difference by naming the two

types "god of the place" and "god of the way", respectively. The basic trait of the faith of the fathers is trust in the leading hand of the God who moves with the group and is its protector. The typical word of the God of the Fathers is essentially the word of promise: the promise of descendants and the promise of land. Descendants and good pastures for the animals in fact were the main problems of semi-nomadic groups. The belief in the God of the Fathers was remarkably connected to the conditions under which these nomads lived.

But the fact has rarely been reflected that we know this religion of the patriarchs not by the biblical texts themselves, but only by analogy and by a difficult process of reconstruction. This reconstruction is by no means certain, as we saw. The stories of the patriarchs in Genesis did in fact arise (for a large part) in the realm of the historical fathers but in their present form they do not reflect it. The promises are no longer the ones we mentioned before. No longer does God care only for descendants in order that the group can survive⁴ but God cares for a much larger number of descendants who are like the sand on the shore and the stars in heaven (Gn 15:4f.): that is, he cares for the growth of a nation. And no longer does he care only for the land in terms of good pasture but he cares for the land in the much larger dimension of the possession of Palestine, a promise which was realized during the emergence of the state. In short: the stories of the patriarchs in their present state no longer tell of the God of the Fathers but they tell of Yahweh; they are no longer concerned with the world of family or kinship but with the world of the people of Israel. This is possible because the stories of the patriarchs have been handed down over generations, and these later generations were not interested in historical matters; on the contrary, what they themselves experienced living under different historical conditions, they interpreted in terms of the old stories and this interpretation entered the stories themselves. The conquest of the land and the emergence of the state were understood as the fulfilment of the word of God to the fathers. In other words: The word of God grew together with the new historical experiences of Israel. These new experiences were interpreted as ever new fulfilments of the old promise of God.

Later on another kind of new interpretation appeared. When Israel had experienced the punishment of God and had been scattered through Babylonia, her prophets promised her a new exodus, a new conquest, a new growth of a nation. Again the same thing happened: The true fulfilment of the old promise was still expected; it would

come about in exile, and still more gloriously than under Moses and David. In this approach to the tradition lie the roots of eschatology. Israel remained true to the promise of God so constantly and handed it down over many generations - a procedure which has no analogy whatsoever in the context of the Ancient Near East - because it expected ever new, ever greater works of God on the basis of the promise. The promise was not handed down because of interest in the past but because of interest in the present: What these words said was felt to be decisive in relation to the present generation. This means that the world of God changed together with the new experiences which Israel made under the word. It changed because it was the living word, a word from which every generation took new hope.

But not just the promises of God underwent changes when the faith in Yahweh took over. The same is true for the stories of the patriarchs as a whole. I take one short example:

1. Genesis 18

Three men mysteriously equated with God visit Abraham and they promise him a son. This apparently is a very old story and one feels its joy in its vivid presentation. Abraham's exemplary care for his guests is described in detail; politely he obliges them to stay; he invites them only for a draught of water and a piece of bread, but instead he hurries to slaughter the most precious calf and mixes the best dough for baking bread. But then follows another episode: Sarah listens in the tent and Sarah laughs; and then Yahweh asks - and now the mention is no longer of three men - why has she laughed; and she denies her laughing but Yahweh insists on the fact that she has laughed. Why does Sarah laugh? Because she is far too old and cannot expect to bear a child. Everything in this final dialogue leads to the reaction of God at v14: "Is there anything beyond the capability of Yahweh?" In this deeply reflective dialogue there are three traits which are understandable only in terms of the faith in Yahweh, not in terms of the historical faith of the patriarchs:

a. The promise of a son has been enhanced: it is directed to the aged Sarah, which means that it concerns a situation in which no hope whatsoever exists any longer according to human measure. Here the story stresses that God's actions are not limited to situations where men themselves expect possibilities of divine action. What this story tells about God is in accord with many hymns of the psalms where God is praised: "You are a God who fulfils miracles."

b. The word of God which transcends human expectation is responded by man not with raised trust but in contrast with doubt. That is what Sarah's laughing means. By reason of his doubt man stays in opposition to God because he does not even suspect what God is able to do. In the original stories of the patriarchs human reaction to the promises of God were never made a special treatment; they were thought of as self-evident. But now, when the God who fulfils miracles acts, at once doubt appears - a special problem of the faith in Yahweh. Moreover, doubt is reckoned as the normal human reaction.⁵

c. The third trait which is only understandable in terms of the faith in Yahweh is the fact that Sarah denies her laughing. Man is not even able to confess his unbelief. This is a biblical motif occurring earlier in the story of the emergence of sin in Gen 3 of the murder of the brother in Gen 4. The conscious repetition of this motif is to show that this is a human trait which lasts throughout history.

The dialogue in Genesis 18 shows what kind of experience of God was necessary before Israel was able to narrate so differently from the historical period of the patriarchs: God acts beyond human understanding and expectation, and man meets God in his actions with doubt, a kind of doubt which he does not even dare to confess.

B. EXPERIENCES OF GOD WITHIN THE FAITH IN YAHWEH

What is the basis then of the differences between the faith in the God of the Fathers and the faith in Yahweh which we observed and which led to the fact that none of the stories of Genesis is a story of the God of the Fathers any longer but all the stories are stories of Yahweh? If one poses this question, necessarily the experience of the traditions of Exodus and Sinai come into view.

1. The experience of the Exodus tradition

Biblical Israel's confession to Yahweh was that it was he who saved his people from the hand of Egypt. This confession formed the nucleus out of which the huge building of the Pentateuch developed step by step (Noth 1948). The oldest record for this confession, possibly even a

contemporary record, is the song of Miriam in Exodus 15:21: "Sing to Yahweh for he is highly exalted. Horse and driver he has thrown into the sea". During this event for the first time groups of Israelites came into contact with the most dangerous weapon of that time: horse and war-chariot. Historically speaking this encounter was absurd: at one end an army of a world power with weapons of the most modern kind, at the other a group of semi-nomads who were not experienced in war of that kind at all. In this situation when there was no hope for the Israelite groups whatsoever, they experienced that God is greater than all human power, that he can save where men do not see any possibility for salvation. The biblical concept of miracle comes into view which we already touch in Genesis 18 - a concept which basically has nothing to do with a breaking through the laws of nature but which fixes the experience that God is able to act beyond human expectation and human understanding. The joy with which biblical authors tell stories results from this basic experience. They added new miracles to the first one (the miracle of supplying food in the desert, the miracle of the present of the land), and all these miracles were understood as confirmation of the basic miracle of the Reed Sea.

There was a second theological subject besides the concept of miracle which originated in the experience of the Reed Sea: the subject of trust in Yahweh. In our oldest literary source (J) Moses says before the event (Ex 14:13f): "Do not be afraid; stand by and see the deliverance which Yahweh will work for you today ... Yahweh will fight for you. You only have to keep still!" And at the end of the story (14:31) the narrator says: "When Israel saw the great act which Yahweh had performed against the Egyptians, the people feared Yahweh and had faith in Yahweh and in his servant Moses". Both verses I cited amount to the perception: Israel herself could do nothing for her salvation; it remained passive, a kind of spectator and kept still. The salvation was exclusively an act of God. The concept of faith in the Old Testament belongs strictly to this perception: Yahweh fights and acts for Israel.⁶

A third theological subject which belongs with the experience of the Reed Sea is the subject of election. The salvation out of the hands of a world power could not be understood by Israel as an arbitrary act of God, but it meant the fundamental commitment of God to this group of men. Whenever single texts of the Old Testament recall the origin of

the election of Israel they recall the experience of the Exodus tradition. Israel never traced back her relation to God into mythical primeval times but always to a definite historical time; that means this relation has a historical beginning and it means at the same time basically that God can revoke it, as the prophets proclaimed. In Hs 13:4 Yahweh introduces himself: "I am Yahweh, your God from the land of Egypt, you don't know a God except me and a saviour without me doesn't exist". This nearly sounds like a definition of God, comparable to the New Testament belief in God's Salvation by cross and resurrection. The close relationship to the first commandment is evident ("I am Yahweh, your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; you shall have no other gods before me"). The difference is that with Hosea the first commandment occurs in the form of a statement, and not of a prohibition, and by that one thing becomes even more evident: The exclusivity of the faith in Yahweh - which is unconceivable in terms of the faith in the God of the Fathers - is a consequence of the exclusive commitment of Yahweh to Israel (cf Schmidt 1982:75ff; Jeremias 1983:163). The first commandment is often misunderstood as a statement about the existence of only one God - in contrast to this a plurality of gods is prerequisite to the commandment; if they did not exist, the commandment would not be necessary. Rather, the sentence "You don't know a God except me" aims at the most intimate relation to God because of the word "to know" which is otherwise used for the relation between husband and wife (eg Gn 4:1); the other sentence "A saviour without me doesn't exist" shows that the problem is not the existence of other gods but their ability to help. The worshipping of these gods would mean that Yahweh is denied to be the only saviou

What I tried to show in respect of these theological subjects: miracle, faith, and election could easily be shown in respect of other subjects like for instance redemption. I have not aimed at completeness but I just wanted to stress what kind of consequences for Israel resulted from this experience, and experience which was basically on a different level from all experiences within the faith of the God of the Fathers.

2. The experience of the Sinai tradition

This experience was completely different from the one at the Reed Sea, but it was not less decisive for Israel's faith in Yahweh. In the oldest accounts of the Sinai events the terrifying traits of God are

dominant. God comes in the burning fire, he is the dangerous holy God: whoever touches his mountain, dies. The Israelites are frightened by the encounter and they ask Moses for his future mediation; being the elected one, he is to get close to the dangerous realm near God. The aim of the encounter with God is called "fear of God" in Exodus 20:20 (E) which does not mean fright but the knowledge of the huge distance between God and man and consequently respect, obedience, and even trust. These are traits which we also know from narratives in Genesis, especially from the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. It is not fortuitous that in this story God tests the obedience of his elected one as he does in the account of Sinai. Both stories, the one on the events on Sinai like the one on the sacrifice of Isaac, culminate in the sentence: God, though being dangerous and incomprehensible, though apparently revoking his own promise, spares his people in spite of his holiness - and that means election again. He lets them come close in spite of the danger which is around him, and in the case of Isaac he himself saves the son in spite of commanding to sacrifice him.

The most precise explanation of the consequences of these experiences is shown in the second commandment (Ex 20:4). The formulation "You shall not make yourself an image" does not imply a negation of a material conception of God in favour of a spiritual one. If the second commandment were to be explained in such a rationalistic way, we would not perceive the passionate conflicts around this commandment - compare only the story of the "Golden Calf" (Ex 32). Moreover, we would stress that the Ancient Near East by no means identified God and image.⁷ For the Ancient Near East the image was the decisive way in which the divinity was present. The key to the interpretation of the second commandment which alienated Israel from her surroundings even more than the first commandment is shown by the continuation: "... no likeness of what is in heaven above or on earth below or in the water under the earth". Here the typical oriental cosmogony is recalled which means: Nothing - nothing even in heaven - corresponds to Yahweh. The strict separation between creator and creation which is a subject also of many stories of the Sinai tradition determines the thought of the commandment. By this Israel excitingly cleared the world of demons (Von Rad 1965:311-311, 137) at the same time denying that the world is full of divine powers. Nothing except Yahweh is creator, everything except him in the universe is creation: this is the central nerve of the second commandment. This

sentence was by no means a theoretical perception; it was full of practical consequences. I shall give just two examples:

- a. the cult of the dead
In the Ancient Near East men lived in fear of the dead because they were threatening powers who could take revenge on the living. With impressive clearness the Old Testament puts it contrarily: the dead ones are dead. There is only one supernatural power who is God
- b. omina
As in Mesopotamia in Canaan there was a large number of specialists in omina who observed either the liver of sheep or the way birds were flying. Such omina were gathered during happy and unhappy events and whenever an omen occurred again it was expected that the same event would also occur. The basic principle behind this idea was that nature would reflect the world of God immediately. Israel could not agree because for her nature was just creation and not full of divine revelation. Moreover, faith in stars, sorcery and the custom of the holy marriage were impossible for Israel as long as it clung to the second commandment.

Yet for her gain Israel had to pay a high price. Baal was the type of close god who could be experienced everywhere: in the coming storm, in the growth of the seed, in the thunder, in omina, etc., Yahweh stayed far, could not be contemplated, bound only to his word. A book like Job, in which man accused God even to blasphemy because he feels God to be unjust, could only occur in this extreme form in Israel. It remains astonishing that biblical Israel dared to stay with this conception of God during her whole history.

There is one text which expresses directly that the second commandment is nothing else but the consequence of the experience of the encounter at Sinai. It is Deuteronomy 4:12 in which experience of Sinai is taken as a proof of the second commandment: "Yahweh spoke to you from the fire. You heard a voice speaking but you saw no figure; there was only a voice". In this text the second commandment leads to a sharp contrast between seeing and hearing, between word and figure. God has given the word to Israel, just the word. Israel is to base her conception of God just in the word. And in the book of Deuteronomy the consequence is that in the temple of Jerusalem the name of God is living. The name of God takes the function of the image: Man can reach it by prayer, and it answers prayer; this must be enough for Israel. Again the huge distance between God and world, between creator and creation is the basis. And even if Israel speaks at times of angels - which she does rather rarely - these angels are counted in the realm of creation as for instance

Isaiah 6:2 shows. The seraphim surrounding God need one pair of wings to cover their shame, one pair of wings to be prevented from seeing God which would mean their death.

C. EXPERIENCES OF GOD UNDER CONDITIONS OF THE MONARCHY

Another turning point of similar importance to that between the time of the patriarchs and the time of Moses was the emergence of a state; and this again is true not only historically but also in terms of the faith of Israel and of her conception of God. The changes in her conception of God now occurred on two different levels:

- a) Israel had to take over many concepts of God, which were typical of the Canaanite peasantry.
- b) On the other hand, she became more and more conscious of the peculiarities of her own faith and developed them in confrontation with the religious concepts of the Canaanite peasantry.

For the historian of religion the first fact is not astonishing at all, because semi-nomads who became sedentary needed necessarily a new law, especially a law for towns, for trade, for slaves, etc. They needed a new economic order for peasants, for traders, for artisans, etc. They needed new feasts related to everyday life of a farmer and together with all that they needed new concepts of God, if faith and everyday life were not to be separated completely. It was only natural that the tribes of Israel took over customs of Canaanite farmers, their feasts, and also their concepts of God. What is astonishing is Israel's strict reserve towards some of the religious concepts of the peasantry of Canaan. Scholarship knows quite a number of nomadic waves into Palestine, since Palestine was open to the desert on its east and on its south. What happened normally was always the same: the nomads merged with the farming population taking over their customs and faith. Surprisingly enough biblical Israel rejected strictly some of the ideas about God which the Canaanite farmers knew to be a help to themselves: especially those about a plurality of gods, about marriage among gods, about death and resurrection of gods, etc. Why did the Israelites act so differently: taking over customs of the farmers and also their concepts of God in order to keep their own faith in connection with their everyday life but at the same time clinging to the traditional nomadic

customs and feasts (e.g. passover and sabbatical year)? If these tribes didn't live under nomadic conditions anymore, why did they feel obliged to keep their own identity and the identity of their traditional faith and of their traditional experiences of God?

For Israel the encounter with new concepts of God was an enrichment and a widening of her own horizons, as well as a danger to her traditions. I should like to illustrate both points:

The most important enrichment of Israel's own faith was the praise of Yahweh as king which is especially common in the Psalms. It may be taken as a firm result of recent scholarship that originally "king of gods" or "king of the world" was a Canaanite designation for God which Israel took over when she came into contact with Canaanites. Yet at the same time Israel gave this designation a completely new interpretation (cf Schmidt 1966; Lipinski 1968; Jeremias 1987). One could even say that it was the central divine title in Canaan. For Canaanite thought religion was by no means occupied just with the subject of the fertility of the land (as one might expect from the polemics of the Old Testament), but it was a universal praising the gods as rulers of the world. Canaanite city states were highly civilized states; for this reason in their religious thought the ordering of human relationships in their different levels was a central subject, the order of the state, the order of society, the order among nations, the order of nature. It was no theoretical interest which made the Canaanites speak of an order which was the basis of human relations in the state; rather, it served the aim of interpreting the conditions of life as secure ones, secure against catastrophes of all kinds, be it enemies, inside the state or outside the state, or economic catastrophes. In oriental thought all these single elements of order were felt to be only aspects of one universal cosmic order. This complex cosmic order was guaranteed by a differentiated family of gods whose monarchic head was the creator El or the young fighter Baal. Whenever a revolt of one member of the family of gods threatened to endanger the cosmic order, these gods as kings of the gods had to decide. This kind of religious thinking reflects a much more complex experience of the world than the experience of semi-nomads. When she became a state, Israel had to include the subject of world order in her thinking, the subject of creation and preservation of the world, if she did not want to leave that central subject to Baal. Yet at the same time this Canaanite thinking was essentially polytheistic:

The complexity of experiences of the world was reflected by the complexity of gods building a family. Kings of the world were El and Baal being kings of a pantheon presiding on the mountain of God.

For Israel this was a concept which could not be accepted because of the first commandment. But still Yahweh was praised as king of the world, that means as a god who holds all the single elements of order in the world in his hand (family, kin, state, society, nations, nature). At the same time this praise implies a polemic: It is Yahweh who is king of the world, not El or Baal. But his was more than just substituting one divine name for another. For the kingdom of Yahweh has to be presented differently from the kingdom of Baal and the kingdom of El (Baal was king of the gods because he had fought chaos in primeval times; El was king of the gods as creator of the gods; both were kings of a pantheon). Israel knew only of a historical foundation of her faith and therefore she had to prove the relevance of the universal praise "God is king of the world" historically (compare for instance Ps 47:3-5). This meant that a universal praise of God which originated in a myth had to be founded and presented historically; by this not only a historical praise of God took the place of a mythical one ("historicization myth"), but also historical experiences were enhanced by mythical presentation ("mythicization of history"). In this way historical experiences took the character of primeval events prior to all individual historical experience, therefore valid universally and irreversible, and so the reason for universal praise. In other words: The salvation of Israel in the Reed Sea and the present of the land to Israel became definitions of God; and because of them nations were called to accept Yahweh as their God. By their encounter with the Canaanites and by their interpretation of the order of the world the Israelite conception of God has been enriched and widened: not by changing the received praise of God, but by widening their own traditional concepts of God; more exactly, by their mythical interpretation.

D. PROPHETIC EXPERIENCES OF GOD

But the widening of the concepts of God was only one aspect of the faith in God under the new conditions of the monarchy. There were also dangers. Under the impression of new historical experiences, the Israelites tended to give up their own tradition and to take over the Canaanite faith together with the Canaanite explanation of the world.

There were two phenomena of decisive help for biblical Israel: on the one hand the early experiences of God as they were condensed in the first and second commandments, on the other hand the prophetic movement which actualized these early experiences of God for the present.

Certainly the first and second commandments drew a borderline between Israelite and Canaanite customs and praise of God; but where exactly this borderline ran could not be stated once and for all. Every generation in Israel had to decide with the help of the two commandments (cf Von Rad 1958: 200-201; 209-210). Some older practices in connection with oracles, for instance, seemed to pose no problems to older generations, while for younger generations who had listened to the prophets, they were unacceptable.

Under the influence of the prophets one could describe the history of the Israelite faith in God during the time of the monarchy as a history of an ever stricter interpretation of the first and second commandments. The dangers which Israel had to meet because of her existence as a state were seen more and more sharply through the prophets. At the same time these prophets sharpened the traditional commandments in a formerly unknown way by applying them to questions which older generations had never thought of when they spoke of the commandments. To give an example I want to limit myself to the first commandment and take two subjects which were affected by these new interpretations: worship and politics.

1. Worship

Some of the sharpest words of Amos as well as Isaiah concern the worship of Israel. Am 5,21ff: "I have, I spurn your pilgrim feasts; I will not delight in your sacred ceremonies; I will not look on the buffalos of your shared-offerings". These words have been very often misunderstood as if intended to teach that God wants ethics instead of cult. But it has long been observed that this interpretation is impossible. For the language which the prophets use is originally the language of the priests (Jeremias 1970:156-162). "I spurn", "I do not look on" in priestly language means the denial of a sacrificial animal by Yahweh because of certain defects. One should observe the difference: the priests used the same formula in the passive not as form of address delivered by God.) The prophets in God's name do not deny one sacrificial animal, one prayer, but worship as a whole; moreover, with the characterization "your pilgrim feasts", "your shared-offerings" the feasts and sacrifices are viewed as Israel's own activities, not as

"sacrifices for Yahweh", feasts for Yahweh" as in the tradition. That means that according to the proclamation of the prophets Yahweh has nothing to do whatsoever with the present worship of Israel. This implies that Yahweh breaks with the election of Israel; Israel's worship no longer reaches him. The reason for this sharp proclamation is peculiar. It is not that Israel doesn't worship Yahweh enough - the worship in itself has not changed basically, it has remained the usual worship of Yahweh - but: "Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Am 5:24). By this reasoning Amos states that there is a total break between festive service and everyday life. The rejection of Yahweh has not happened in worship but in everyday life, when poor people were suppressed and rich people corrupted justice. Israel hopes to heal the breaking asunder of society by worship. For the prophets the consequence is necessary: this worship does not even reach Yahweh.

According to the opinion of the prophets the truth of Israel's faith has to be proved in everyday life; where Israel neglects the poor she rejects Yahweh. By this the first commandment is used as a measure for a situation for which originally it was not spoken. No longer is it Baal who holds Israel from unlimited trust in God but it is Israel herself in her treatment of the weak. By the judgement of worship through the first commandment this commandment gets an interpretation which was not anticipated in it itself; this interpretation is understandable only through the fact that the prophets sharpened the idea of vivid trust in God. Under the conditions of life in a state with their more complicated social inter-relationships and their larger dangers the prophets used a much higher measure for an ideal relationship between God and nation than any generation before.

2. Politics

It is Isaiah who uses the measure of the first commandment also for the realm of politics. He judges the complex alliances of the Judean kings with foreign nations as a break with the first commandment. Here, too, were no foreign gods who held Israel from trust in Yahweh. Isaiah's sayings culminate in a sentence (31:3) which is uttered in a situation, when Hezekiah sends messengers to Egypt to ask Egypt for help against Assyria: "Egypt is man, not God; his horses are flesh and not spirit". The whole proclamation of Isaiah could be developed from this sentence

which is a kind of anticipation of the Pauline contrast of spirit and flesh. In a difficult political situation it puts a sharp alternative in front of Israel: In her misery Israel can set her hope either (a) only God and his commitment to Israel, that is on his trustworthy promises, or (b) on her own skill in creating new alliances by her own political activity. There is no third possibility. Actually it is not Egypt that takes the place of God (as in the syntactical structure of the sentence) but human activity. This sentence is spoken into a situation in which the enlightened policies of the kings had split from trust in Yahweh for a long time. For Isaiah this is a break with the first commandment because it means trust in man instead of trust in God or, more exactly, trust in oneself instead of trust in God. The question has often been discussed, whether this viewpoint should be called utopian (cf Weinrich 1932; Dietrich 1976) but the question rests on a misunderstanding. Utopia is not the aim of the prophets, but they try to relate the first commandment to all realms of everyday life in Israel. Essentially the exciting point in their proclamation is that they interpret all realms of human existence from the viewpoint of God, that they try to understand the many relations of human experience as one reality, a reality which is either completely determined by God or not at all. For the contemporaries of Isaiah this reality in a state had to be separated into many single realms - an economic realm, a social realm, a political realm, a religious realm - each one with its own legitimacy. For the prophets this was an unacceptable condition; they took the first commandment to be a measure for their contemporaries which touched all realms of existence. They saw Israel fail according to this measure - but what a high measure! The prophets were by no means only very clever observers of the disasters of their time; the standard by which they measured their own time was a completely different one than the usual one, being determined by a highly sharpened interpretation of the first commandment.

E. EXPERIENCES OF GOD AFTER THE BREAKDOWN OF THE STATE

The most important turning point in the history of Israel, the end of her state, was the strongest challenge to the people of God. On a first view, for biblical Israel all important traditions of her faith, on which she had relied so far, had been destroyed: the kingdom which bore the important David tradition, the temple which was connected with the Zion tradition, and even more the land which had been the subject

already of the promise to the patriarchs. All these supports of her faith had been lost. For a large number of inhabitants in exile we know of their reaction from the words of the prophets Ezekiel and Deutero-isaiah: either people said that Marduk had proved stronger than Yahweh or - apparently more frequently - that Yahweh had rejected Israel. Again, the most important impulse for a new orientation of Israel's faith came from the prophets. It was the prophets who had prepared Israel for such experiences of God; in accordance with their proclamation of punishment they interpreted the exile as the judgement of Yahweh. The consequence of this interpretation is found in all forms of the literature of Israel during this time; completely new ideas arose on the guilt of man in relation to God. These influenced especially the form of worship which in exile became essentially a worship of complaint in which the confession of sin took over a central position. After the exile the idea of expiation moves into the center of worship as we know from the priestly source.

Yet in a situation of that kind how is salvation conceivable or redemption or deliverance? How does the traditional faith prove true in a completely hopeless situation?

1. The first new answer and probably the most important one in biblical faith is a widening of the conception of God. I take two examples:
 - a. The famous letter of Jeremiah to the exiles of Babylon (Jr 29:1-7) calls these exiles to feel at home in the foreign country; that means not to reckon with a sudden change in their conditions. Moreover, it calls on the exiles to pry to God in the foreign country, even to pray for an oppressive foreign government. For biblical Israel this meant a huge demand. Death in a foreign country was viewed as an extreme ignominy because it meant death in separation from God. Yahweh, the God of Israel, had been essentially also the god of the land of Israel, as the famous story of the healing of the Aramaean general Naaman in 2 Kings 5 proves, where this high officer, when he has been healed and wants to worship Yahweh in Damascus, takes with him some earth of Palestine, as much as two donkeys can bear.
 - b. Even more impressive is the new conception of God which is shown to Ezekiel during his call; he sees Yahweh as a king on

his throne - an idea held by Israel since becoming a state. But his throne has wheels, it moves towards the exiles. In this vision by means of pictures the faith in Yahweh looks back to its beginnings. There Yahweh moved with the groups he was committed to, unbound to a certain place, even unbound to the temple; Ezekiel learns that also as king of the world Yahweh stays the same, moving with his people wherever they are, saving them whatever the danger. This conception was a prerequisite for the opening of the promise of salvation to the heathen nations.

2. Moreover, at this time in a new way the saving acts of God are understood essentially as forgiveness. Again I take two examples:

a. Isaiah 43:16-19

In an important sentence Deuteroisaiiah says: "Remember ye not the former things neither consider the things of old. Beheld! I will do a new thing! Now it shall spring forth; do you not know it?" This sharp sentence has often been interpreted as a total break with tradition; but this certainly is a misunderstanding. It is not the past time in general which according to the prophet should be forgotten, but the specific past, that is the experience of judgement which led to the exile of Israel. The new thing which Yahweh creates is also a specific new one: the deliverance out of exile which is anticipated in the prophetic word. This means: Whoever in all his actions orientates himself to the past will lose his life. Meaningful life is possible only in an orientation according to the new future of God, which is redemptive because it delivers from the burden of the past.

b. Jeremiah 31,31ff

Usually this word is characterized as the word of the "new covenant"; but his characterization is not an ideal one. The covenant which Yahweh promises in Jer 31 is not different from the old one; its content is the same as before "I: your God; you: my people"; in terms of the Old Testament this promise can't be surpassed. The new thing is not the content of the covenant but one of its partners. In future God prevents Israel from failing her relationship with him in that he himself cares for her obedience by putting his will into the very heart of

man. In a very similar context Ezekiel uses the image of a transplantation of an organ: men are freed from their heart of stone which made them unable to hear and instead they get as a present a heart of flesh (36,26). The reason both prophets give for the new creation or for the transplantation is: Yahweh forgives the sin of the past. Both words essentially mean nothing less than the creation of a new man. The basic perception which Israel owes to her experience in exile stays for the future: without God's forgiveness Israel would have experienced complete destruction; Israel lives because God forgave her.

3. The new understanding of salvation leads to the inclusion of all nations instead of the expectation of their subjection. Again two examples:

a. Isaiah 2:2-4

This sentence anticipates the pilgrimage of all nations to Mount Zion in order to learn the ways of Yahweh, to hear his word, and to experience his just decision; this will lead to the beating of their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. That this is an unusual text becomes evident if it is read in contrast to tradition which it takes up in its terminology. Subject of the tradition is the defense of Mount Zion against which all the nations are struggling (Ps 48); it amounts to the sentence that the nations cannot do anything against Yahweh's shelter of Zion. The nations are seen as threatening powers who are overcome by Yahweh. In contrast to tradition, in Isaiah 2 the nations are no longer conquered, but they are won by the word of Yahweh.

b. Isaiah 45,23

Here Yahweh says: "Unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear. Surely shall one say: Only in Yahweh have I salvation and strength". This promise can be understood only if one has observed that it aims at the expectation that all the nations take over the first commandment and relate it to themselves. With the conscious stressing of the "only", with the stressing of the term "salvation", peculiarities are mentioned which are characteristic of the first commandment.

F. CONCLUSION

What I have primarily tried to show is: Biblical Israel knew very well what it meant that her God moves with her through history; Israel remained capable of learning about new deeds of God in history. It is inconceivable that the sentences about the nations which I cited last would have been uttered already during the time of the monarchy; it is quite inconceivable that, for instance, the expectation of the suffering servant of God would have grown up at the time of the state. In respect to this form of increasing knowledge of God in biblical Israel I want to stress three things:

1. The special strength of the Old Testament is that it shows a faith in God which grows. This growth of Israel's faith cannot be without importance for us today. The New Testament already presupposes the faith of the Old Testament in its final form. In the different stages of its growth the stages of the growth of our own faith are reflected.
2. The Old Testament proves its strength in that it shows what it means to actualize traditional words about God in a new situation and by that to give rise to a vivid faith. For the Old Testament it is characteristic that traditional concepts of God were not a holy and unchangeable tradition, but a tradition which could only be accepted by all, after it has proved its truth and its help for the generation that used it.
3. Finally the Old Testament proves its strength in that it shows that new historical experiences (like, for instance, the emergence of the state) did not lead to changes of any kind in Israel's speaking about God. Rather, biblical Israel for all times clung to her basic experiences of God and to her basic confessions of God. The praise of God as saviour out of Egypt, as the only helper never changed. Such basic confessions of God have stayed like a norm for the formation of all new concepts of God. They are condensed, for instance, in the first and second commandments. Yet we have to state that this also was a kind of norm the exact interpretation of which each new generation had to view as its own task. For this task of actualizing interpretation during Old Testament times the prophets were of decisive help, comparable in New Testament times with Paul and John.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cf. the short artificial bridge between both traditions in Ex 1,7: Joseph and his brothers die, and Israel multiplies and increases in numbers and becomes so powerful that the whole country is filled by her people.
2. While Alt could offer only material from Nabatean and Palmyrenian inscriptions much later than the youngest texts of the Old Testament, soon after the publication of his book contemporary and even earlier parallels to the historical fathers were discovered in Assyrian inscriptions from Cappadocia; cf. J Lewy (1934: 29-65).
3. Cf. especially the questions put to Alt's view by F M Cross (1962; 1973: 3-5). On the other hand, Alt's approach has been extended by, for instance, V Maag (1958).
4. There are some relics of this earlier promise like Gn 15:2 where Abraham expresses his sorrow that not his son but his slave might be his heir.
5. The contrast to laughing Sarah is given at Gn 15:6: 'Abraham puts his trust in Yahweh and Yahweh reckons this to him as justice'. But also this sentence doesn't expect this kind of trust as a typical human answer to the promise of Yahweh.
6. Compare the famous challenge of Isaiah to Ahas in Is 7,4: Ahas has 'to keep still', i.e. he has to expect nothing of his own capability but to give way to God's actions alone.
7. We know of Egyptian prayers saying: 'Come into your body!', thus implying that the divinity is not always present in its image; and we know of complaints of the Sumerians which culminate in the sentence that the gods left their images. Cf. Papyrus Chester Beatty No. IX and K-H Bernhardt (1956: 28). For the Sumerian complaints, cf. Falkenstein & Von Soden 1953: 189, 192-194.
8. Cf. for instance the gsm-oracle and the references in J Jeremias, nabī', Prophet, THAT II (1976) 7-26;9.

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