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PRIESTHOOD, PROPHECY, WISDOM, AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD*

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WHY does the study of the Bible matter so much to so many? Questions about the nature and authority of the Bible, its rôle in the religious life, and its authority within the religious community, are perennial. These questions are raised because they go to the heart of the religious tradition to which, in varying degrees, all of us are related. I myself approach them as a Protestant Christian of conservative background and trained in liberal schools. In what I have to say I shall confine myself to the OT, partly because it is common ground for our Society, and partly for the obvious reason that it has been my own principal area of study.

To begin with, we are concerned with the Bible as *the sacred book of the Hebrew-Christian tradition*. It lies before us as a historical document in objective form, the product of a particular ancient religious culture, to be studied by methods of literary, historical, and form-historical criticism.

Our concern with the Bible would be much more limited if it were no more than this. To those of us, at least, who are related in varying degrees of intimacy to the Christian and Jewish religious communities, the Bible, though we delimit and define it differently, is a canonical scripture. It is *the Book of the People of God*. It is our national heritage as a peculiar people, our family archives, the source book of our spiritual history. It has unique meaning and authority within the community of belief which cherishes it and which has transmitted it to us from the beginnings. In this aspect we cannot be wholly detached in our study of it, for the Bible is part of us, and speaks to us as to a congregation assembled before the Lord.

There is still a third way of viewing the Bible, which really is an extension of the second. To the believing Jew or Christian the Bible in a real sense is his *Book of the Knowledge of God*.¹ It provides its own

* The Presidential Address delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis on December 29, 1960, at the Union Theological Seminary, New York City.

¹ Cf. N. W. Porteous: [The] "intimate response of man's whole being to God is what the Bible means by knowledge of God, and the classic record of such knowledge . . . is contained in the Bible" — *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, ed. by H. H. Rowley, p. 343.

distinctive answers to basic questions of religion: What is the meaning of the paradoxical nature of man — part spirit and part beast? What is the nature of the world in which man finds himself, and why is he here? What is the all-encompassing spiritual reality with which he has to do? Who and what is God? How can man enter into relationship with God? What, if any, is the way to the knowledge of God? Has God revealed himself, and if so, to whom? how? when? where, and with what objective result?

However one may conceive the process, the faith of the Bible postulates an actual divine self-disclosure to man. Many who cannot accept this nevertheless find in the Bible much material of interest and value for research into the history of religion as an objective phenomenon. But if ancient Israel, Judaism, and the Christian church had not believed it, they would never have come into existence, nor have preserved these writings for literary and historical study. If we would take the Bible seriously, we cannot evade the question: how and why did these ancient people reach the conviction that God had made himself known to them? That they did so is beyond doubt. If their faith was an illusion, what is the truth to be put in its place? If their faith was not an illusion, this is the most important fact with which mankind must come to terms.

The answers to such questions doubtless belong primarily to the realm of faith and confessional affirmation rather than to biblical scholarship as such, and this is not the occasion to pursue them further. But I must here affirm my conviction that biblical scholars have a responsibility to face ultimate questions raised in our field of study. We expect our colleagues, the natural scientists, to accept some moral responsibility with respect to the consequences for humanity of their professional conclusions. Are we biblical scholars to be so absorbed in the *minutiae* of scholarship and in our private provinces of special interest, that we — of all people — have nothing significant to say on what the Bible is all about? (Speaking for myself, I confess to a haunting doubt that the precise length of the Hebrew cubit is knowledge necessary for eternal salvation.)

In this paper I want to raise a question which lies back of the religious and theological problem of biblical revelation but which is basic to its exploration. It is this. What is the nature of the knowledge of God as the biblical writers themselves understood it, and how did they come by this knowledge? It is a large area of enquiry, and in this galaxy of learning I am only too well aware of the perils of attempting a synoptic view. In looking for an answer I confine myself to the OT, though for me as a Christian the final and irrefutable evidence is the appearance within Judaism of Jesus Christ.

In a well-known verse (Jer 18 18) Jeremiah's opponents declare resentfully that they will not allow him to undermine the authority of the

priestly *tôrāh*, of the sage's counsel, and the prophet's word. The same three authorities appear to be named in Ezek 7 26: "(In vain) they seek a vision-oracle (*hāzôn*) from the prophet, but *tôrāh* fails from the priest, and '*ēšāh* from the elders." That priest and prophet were regarded as speaking with divine authority is clear. It is less certain that the same can be said of the "counsel" of the wise man and of the elders. '*ēšāh* is "advice," a proposal for decision or action by a divine or human ruler which, if adopted, becomes his "decision," "policy," "purpose."² Though sometimes used of a prophet's word,³ it never means advice or a proposal for which a wise man claims divine authority.⁴ We are told that the counsel of Ahithophel, so great was his prestige, was esteemed like an oracle,⁵ which means that it was something less than an oracle. The reference in Jer 18 18 may be simply to the political advice of royal counselors. On the other hand, the wise man is here correlated with two religious authorities, and the wise whom Jeremiah actually attacks are the scribes who handle "the Law of the Lord," presumably the Deuteronomic covenant lawbook.⁶

In any case there is evidence for a certain mingling of the functions of prophet, priest, and sage, and of a common element in their teachings.⁷ This is so in spite of the fact that the classical prophets appear fundamentally critical of both priests⁸ and wise men,⁹ that the priests were unhappy about the intrusion of prophets like Amos and Jeremiah,¹⁰ and that the wise — at least as they are represented in the books of Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth — stand aloof from both. Prophets as well as priests gave *tôrāh*,¹¹ and they delivered many of their public oracles in the court of the temple, whether or not while formally participating in the cult.¹² Samuel and Elijah offered sacrifice. Jeremiah (possibly) and Ezekiel (certainly) were priests. Haggai and Malachi concerned themselves with the proper operation of the temple cult. The priests in turn (particularly if they are recognized as authors of Deuteronomy and the Holiness code), shared responsibility with the prophets for "turning many from iniquity."¹³ They proclaimed in formal decalogues the covenant obliga-

² Cf. I Kings 22 19-23; Isa 6 8-9; 14 24, 26; II Sam 16 20-23; I Kings 12 6-11.

³ Isa 44 26; II Chron 25 15-18; Ps. 107 11.

⁴ Cf. E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Eng. tr., p. 253.

⁵ II Sam 16 23.

⁶ Cf. Jer 2 8; 8 8-9. Cf. W. Rudolph, *Jeremia* (H.A.T.), p. 52.

⁷ Cf. S. Mowinckel, *Religion und Kultus*, p. 54.

⁸ Hos 4 4-6; 5 1; Amos 7 10-17; Isa 28 7; Mic 3 11; Jer 1 18; 2 8; Mal. 1 6-13; 2 1-17, etc.

⁹ Isa 5 21; 29 14; Jer 8 8-9; 9 22.

¹⁰ Amos 7 10-17; Jer. 20 1-2; 26 8; 29 24-28.

¹¹ Isa 1 10; 8 16, 20; 30 9; Zech 7 2-14. Cf. H. W. Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament*, p. 202; G. Östborn, *Törā in the Old Testament*, p. 52.

¹² Amos 7 13; Jer 7 2; 26 2; 36 5-6; Hos 4 4; Hag 1 3-12.

¹³ Mal 2 5-7; Hos 5 1; Isa 28 7; Jer 2 8; 23 11.

tions¹⁴ and in threshold “*tôrāh* liturgies.”¹⁵ They echoed the prophets’ demand for exclusive devotion to Israel’s God¹⁶ by their very insistence on the safeguarding of his holiness.¹⁷

Isaiah and Jeremiah scorn the wise men of their time,¹⁸ yet they themselves adopt some of the language, forms, and ideas of the wisdom teachers.¹⁹ The priests (again, if Deuteronomy represents their teaching) are concerned with the wisdom embodied in the traditional *tôrāh*; the keeping of the statutes and ordinances of Yahweh would give Israel a reputation among the nations as “a wise and understanding people.”²⁰ Scribes undoubtedly were attached to the temple. On the other hand, in Proverbs and Job the ethical obligations of individual worshipers of Yahweh correspond broadly to those enjoined by covenant law, and there are echoes of prophetic teachings.²¹

Yet for all their interaction, the ways to the knowledge of God represented by prophet, priest, and sage remain distinct. Each appears to claim priority, and they are held together in creative tension. We tend to think of OT religion as circulating about two poles, the prophetic and the priestly, with the former as the more significant. But the wisdom teachers may have played a larger rôle even in the earlier period than is suggested by the surviving literature and the present structure of the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, there is a strong tendency among modern exegetes to credit to prophetic influence whatever religious teaching in the laws and narratives is not directly concerned with cultic interests. Here again, it may well be that our view of the Hebrew priesthood is unduly influenced by the prophets’ disparagement of mere cultic observance, and by the pictures of such unlovely characters as the sons of Eli and Amaziah the priest of Bethel. In fact it was the corruption of such priests, and their failure to convey to the people the knowledge of God which it was their duty to teach, which is the chief point of prophetic criticism. The covenant with Levi, said Malachi, was a covenant of life and peace; when the priest stood in awe of Yahweh’s name, true *tôrāh*

¹⁴ Mowinckel, *op. cit.*, p. 124; G. von Rad, *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, p. 32.

¹⁵ Pss. 15 and 24. Cf. A. Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed., vol. i, p. 189.

¹⁶ As in the decalogues, whose variety may stem from the “uses” of different sanctuaries. Cf. also Exod 19 6; Deut 7 6; 26 16–19; 28 9.

¹⁷ Lev 19 1–4; 20 26; Zech 14 20.

¹⁸ Isa 5 21; 19 11–12; 29 14; Jer 9 12, 23.

¹⁹ Isa 28 23–29; Jer 4 22; 10 12. Cf. J. Lindblom, “Wisdom in the OT Prophets,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, ed. by M. Noth and D. W. Thomas, pp. 192–204.

²⁰ Deut 4 6; 34 9.

²¹ Cf. Prov 15 8; 19 17; 20 28; 21 3; Job 29 and 31. Duhm declares that chap. 31 “bedeutet den Höhepunkt der alttestamentlichen Ethik” (*Das Buch Hiob*, p. 145).

was to be found in his mouth.²² The priests who taught for hire were blood brothers of the prophets who would prophesy only when their mouths were filled.²³

It is perhaps worth remarking that the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible correspond broadly to the *tôrāh* of the priests, the *dābār* of the prophets, and the *'ēšāh* of the wise. The correspondence of the first two divisions is obvious. Among the *k'ûbîm* are found the three Hebrew wisdom books, indeed the five, if we include Psalms and the Song of Songs according to the ancient Catholic reckoning. Of the remainder, Ruth is a parable, Lamentations a small psalter, Daniel 1–6 and Esther turn in part on the superior wisdom of Jewish piety,²⁴ and Ezra is described as endowed with divine wisdom.²⁵ The Writings thus represent that element in OT literature most closely associated with wisdom, and least dominated by priestly and prophetic ideas.

Can it be, then, that the Torah as designating the Pentateuch corresponds in content to the substance of the priestly *tôrāh* in old Israel? The various corpora and strata of laws and ordinances, cultic and non-cultic, are embedded in a composite story of how Israel came to be the covenant and cultic community of Yahweh, established in the land of Israel. The older *Heilsgeschichte* has been interwoven in the Tetrateuch with a later *Kultgemeindengeschichte*.²⁶ Though the *Heilsgeschichte* is based on what may be called a *prophetic* interpretation of Israel's constitutive experience in the age of Moses, its formulation as narrative is not analogous to oracular pronouncements. Rather, it corresponds to the confessional affirmations²⁷ which accompanied the rites of Passover,²⁸ and the offering of firstfruits,²⁹ and with the probable temple ceremony of covenant renewal.³⁰ The parenetic counterpart of the confessional affirmation is seen clearly in the structure and style of Deuteronomy. Of this von Rad declares that "the remarkable way in which parenesis,

²² Cf. Östborn, *op. cit.*, pp. 108–10. ²³ Mic 3 5, 11.

²⁴ Dan 1 4, 20; 2 18; 5 12, 14; Esther 1 13; 6 13. ²⁵ Ezra 7 25.

²⁶ Cf. von Rad: "P will allen Ernstes zeigen, dass der im Volke Israel historisch gewordene Kultus das Ziel der Weltentstehung und Weltentwicklung ist" (*Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. i, p. 233).

²⁷ As von Rad says, the objective of the J epic was "das Credo, jenes alte Bild der Heilsgeschichte, in völligerer, weitausgebauter Gestalt vor seinen Zeitgenossen zu entfalten" (*Gesammelte Studien zum A.T.*, p. 77); cf. G. Ernest Wright, "In worship these historical events are rehearsed" ("The Faith of Israel," *Interp. Bible*, vol. i, p. 377b).

²⁸ Exod 12 26–27; Deut 16 1–3, 6. Cf. J. Pedersen, *Israel*, vol. iii–iv, pp. 384–415, 728–37; Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, pp. 284–85.

²⁹ Deut 26 1–11. Cf. von Rad, *Gesammelte Studien zum A.T.*, pp. 11–16.

³⁰ Deut 31 9–13; Josh 24 1–28; II Kings 23 2–3; Neh 9 1–3; 10 1, 29–30. Cf. E. Sellin, *Geschichte des israelitisch-jüdischen Volkes*, vol. i, p. 101; M. Noth, *The History of Israel*, Eng. tr., pp. 100–01; J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, pp. 115, 149; von Rad, *Theologie des A.T.*, vol. i, pp. 27, 194–95.

laws, binding by covenant, blessing and cursing follow upon one another points . . . to the course of a great cultic celebration."³¹ Pfeiffer thinks of Deuteronomy as, in form, the final prophetic oracle of Moses; "the style," he says, "is that of a pulpit orator."³² But the prophets were not pulpit orators, and Pfeiffer himself goes on to ascribe the authorship of the book to a priest of Jerusalem.³³ What more natural than that a priest — or, for that matter, a Levite of North Israel — should compose his speeches in the manner of a priest rather than of a prophet? Surely von Rad is right; the book "still bears the stamp of a cultic form that has exercised an extraordinary influence on its style."³⁴

One feature of this style is noteworthy in this connection — the opening apostrophe "Hear, O Israel!" In Deut 20 3 and 27 9 this is the way in which a priest addresses the assembly. When it appears elsewhere in Deuteronomy³⁵ it is always in contexts which presuppose or are appropriate to a priest's injunctions. "Israel" is here the body of the laity present in the temple court, and distinguished from the clergy as in Pss 115 9–11; 118 2–4. The prophets never apostrophize the people in precisely this form.³⁶ Again, in Deut 1 5 the purpose of Moses in recapitulating the narrative of events since Horeb is said to be to make plain this *tôrāh*, just as in a later age at another covenant ceremony Ezra and the Levites "helped the people to understand the *tôrāh*."³⁷ I find it hard to follow Kaufmann's view that the cultic ceremonies were performed by the priests in silence.³⁸

The responsibility of priests and Levites to give instruction in religious matters as well as to officiate in the sacrificial cultus is frequently referred to — in Deut 33 10, Hosea, Micah, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Malachi, to name only some.³⁹ II Chron 15 3 says significantly that "for a long time Israel was without the true God, and without a teaching priest, and without *tôrāh*." Apart from their giving of oracular responses by manipulation of the Urim and Thummim,⁴⁰ the *tôrāh* of the priests was

³¹ G. von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, Eng. tr., p. 14.

³² R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 53.

³³ Pfeiffer, *op. cit.*, p. 179. ³⁴ von Rad, *Studies*, p. 15.

³⁵ Deut 4 1; 5 1; 6 3–4; 9 1.

³⁶ The closest analogy is Isa 44 1, which is not a spoken oracle.

³⁷ Neh 8 7.

³⁸ Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, Eng. tr. by Moshe Greenberg, 1960, pp. 303–05. Kaufmann argues that "the various acts of the priest are performed in silence" because "P makes no reference to the spoken word in describing temple rites." This is an argument from silence, for silence. P says nothing of the verbal ritual for the presentation of first fruits, which Deut 26 5–10 nevertheless provides. Joel 2 17 shows that prayer was *not* absent from the priestly cult, as Kaufmann claims; cf. also Solomon's priestly acts of benediction, prayer, and sacrificing (I Kings 8 14, 22, 62) and Elijah's prayer accompanying sacrifice (I Kings 18 36–37). Cf. also II Sam 6 12–15.

³⁹ Hos 4 4–6; Mic 3 11; Ezek 44 23; Hag 2 11–13; Mal 2 4–9, 17.

⁴⁰ Deut 33 8; I Sam 14 18–19; 40–42; 28 6.

of at least four kinds.⁴¹ First, it was naturally their duty to give instruction in cultic obligations, and to make rulings to safeguard ritual holiness and to distinguish between clean and unclean.⁴² Second, the priests had a judicial function in association with lay judges, in a court of appeal at the central sanctuary.⁴³ The decision was both a *mišpāt* and a *tôrāh*, the former presumably referring to the actual decision handed down, and the latter to the principles of covenant law on which the decision was made. In keeping with this it seems, third, that various forms of the Decalogue, as the gist of the covenant law, were formally proclaimed at periodic covenant renewal ceremonies.⁴⁴ The decalogue of Deut 5 and the dodecalogue of curses in Deut 27 are both introduced by the priestly apostrophe "Hear, O Israel!" and the latter is said specifically to have been proclaimed by the Levites to an assembled congregation. The so-called "ritual decalogue" of Exod 34 has something more than a cultic flavor. Lev 19 reads like an expanded decalogue, and is in form a solemn declaration addressed to the assembled congregation.

"(Levi) walked with me in peace and uprightness," says Malachi, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek *tôrāh* from his mouth, for he is the messenger of Yahweh of hosts."⁴⁵ The priest was to instruct men in ethical as well as in cultic obligations when consulted by individuals, as well as by public proclamation of apodictic laws and by the recitation of threshold liturgies such as Pss 15 and 24.

In the fourth place it is evident that the priests recounted and constantly referred to the *Heilsgeschichte* as the premise and authority for their teaching. "Central to Old Testament worship," says Kraus,⁴⁶ "was the recalling to mind of the salvation history." The decalogues of Exod 20, Deut 5, and Lev 19 identify the God whose words are being proclaimed, as Yahweh who brought Israel from Egypt. The decalogue of Exod 34 is introduced with the promise that Yahweh will drive out the Canaanites before Israel. The curses of Deut 27 were to be proclaimed on the day when Israel passed over Jordan in fulfillment of Yahweh's promise. In his farewell address Samuel recounts the "saving deeds" (*šîd^e qotⁱ*) of Yahweh, and promises to continue to instruct Israel (*hôrêšî*) "in the good and right way."⁴⁷ In Deuteronomy and the Holiness code, our two extensive examples of priestly parenthesis, the deliverance from

⁴¹ The term *tôrāh* seems always to refer to an "instruction," "directive," "law," formulated by the priest in words, rather than to a "sign" or "oracle" given by Urim and Thummim. The verb *yārāh* is once (Josh 18 6) used of the casting of a lot, but not (there) of the operation of the Urim and Thummim, which may have been a different sort of device for divination. Cf. G. Östborn, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-13, 91, 95-98.

⁴² Hag 2 11-13; Zech 7 3; Lev 10 10-11; 13 24-28; 14 35-48; Ezek 22 26.

⁴³ Deut 17 8-13; Ezek 44 24.

⁴⁴ Deut 31 9-13; cf. n. 14 above. ⁴⁵ Mal 2 6-7.

⁴⁶ H.-J. Kraus, *Gottesdienst in Israel*, p. 125.

⁴⁷ I Sam 12 23-24.

Egypt is constantly referred to as the ground of the appeal.⁴⁸ The spring and autumn pilgrimage festivals are historicized by associating them respectively with the Exodus deliverance and the entry into the land of promise.⁴⁹ By whom was this done, if not by priests? Finally, certain psalms of cultic origin, notably those associated with the thank offering, ring the changes on the mighty acts of God for Israel.⁵⁰

It seems clear, then, that Israel looked to its priests for instruction in a knowledge of God through the story of his promises and saving deeds, and through their declaring the ethical obligations of his covenant and the requirements of his cult. The fact that the prophets denounced the false optimism resulting from a too easy acceptance of the election promises, and a too mechanical reliance on cultic observance, should not blind us to the certainty that there were priestly mentors in whom Levi's covenant of life and peace was real. Most probably the men who composed the story of how Israel became Yahweh's people were the same as those who proclaimed that story. If the priest's function was broader than the conducting of the sacrificial cult, their literary efforts would not be confined to liturgy. Even the noncultic atmosphere of the J epic⁵¹ does not preclude priestly authorship. It was part of the priests' task to inculcate belief in the God who had brought Israel from Egypt to the promised land. If he had not forgotten the *tôrâh* of his God, he would teach men to know Yahweh's name, to remember his mighty acts, and to learn his ways.

The knowledge of God mediated through the prophets had much in common with the priestly tradition. Both groups took their stand on the conviction that Israel was a chosen people, and both demanded exclusive allegiance to Yahweh. Even though specific references to the covenant are rare in the prophets prior to Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, the assertion that Israel had special obligations as Yahweh's peculiar people was the fulcrum of their message.⁵² The call of Moses to bring Israel out of Egypt, the command to speak the words Yahweh will put in his mouth, the "signs" given him of Yahweh's presence and power — these show that Moses was regarded as a prophet and a type of the true prophets who would be raised up in days to come.⁵³ In Deut 4 9–10 Israel is enjoined above all to remember the day at Horeb when Yahweh's word through Moses constituted her a people.

Whereas to the priests Israel's tradition meant that Yahweh had chosen her to be a priestly kingdom and a continuing religious community and that he was ever-present at her shrines, to the prophets

⁴⁸ Deut 13 5, 10; 16 1, 3, 6, 12, etc.; Lev 18 3; 19 34, 36, etc.

⁴⁹ Deut 16 1–3, 6; Lev 23 42–43. ⁵⁰ Pss. 105, 106, 135, 136, etc. Cf. Jer 33 11.

⁵¹ von Rad, *Gesammelte Studien*, p. 76.

⁵² Cf. Amos 2 9–10; 3 1–2; 9 7; Hos 2 17; 11 1; 12 13; 13 4–5; Isa 1 2–3; 5 7; 8 6, Mic 6 2–5; Jer 2 4–13; 7 21–23.

⁵³ Exod 3 1–12; 4 15–17; Deut 18 15–18.

Israel was Yahweh's people primarily in the context of his historic purpose, past and present. To them he was not so much a holy Presence dwelling in Israel's midst, as an active, righteous Being ever demanding that his word be heard afresh. The priests spoke of what Yahweh is, because of what he has done. The prophets spoke of what Yahweh will do, because of what he is. They confronted men in the present with the God of Israel's past. A voice spoke within them which they could not choose but to hear. It summoned them to speak what they had heard, whether men would listen or no. They were driven on by an overpowering will to say what they shrank from saying. Their oracles were both their own and God's, colored by the prophet's personal qualities and circumstances, yet differing in manner and emphasis rather than in substance. The Yahweh who speaks through them all is demonstrably the same living God of justice, righteousness, mercy, and holiness; a God of historic purpose, of judgment and salvation, demandingly present in the arena of human moral decisions, insistent in his requirements, dependable in his responses. He is the one Lord with whom Israel had to do.

The prophet shared with the priest the central convictions concerning Israel's temporal and spiritual history. Because he was sensitive to the meaning of that history for religion and life in his own day, he had the makings of a prophet before he became one. Now the divine word had become articulate in his mind, and he must utter it. Like Balaam, he was one who had listened to the speech of God, had knowledge of the high God, saw a vision of Shaddai.⁵⁴ But his "vision" was not normally of strange unearthly scenes like those of the apocalyptists. It was a perception of the meaning of what the sovereign Lord had done and intended to do.⁵⁵ The prophet was permitted to overhear what went on in the divine council,⁵⁶ when Yahweh's word was sent forth to accomplish his purpose in the earth.⁵⁷ The prophet was no mere messenger boy, carrying a communication in which he had no interest. The message had become part of himself. To receive and speak it was like a woman in the ancient agony of childbirth, bringing forth what had grown within her.⁵⁸ In the prophet the knowledge of God, derived from tradition and belief, had become an immediate apprehension through the possession of his whole being by God's word.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Num 24 16.

⁵⁵ Cf. L. Köhler, *Old Testament Theology*, Eng. tr., p. 103: "All apparitions (Erscheinungen) are verbal and revelatory . . . there is always a thought-content in addition expressed as a rule in plain words."

⁵⁶ Amos 3 7; Isa 6 8; Jer 23 18, 22; I Kings 22 19-22.

⁵⁷ Isa 14 24-27; Mic 4 12; Jer 49 20; Isa 46 9-10; 55 10-11.

⁵⁸ Isa 21 1-4; Jer 20 9; 23 9.

⁵⁹ Cf. G. Östborn, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-56; R. B. Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets*, pp. 105-19.

That knowledge, moreover, was a growing knowledge, as in all personal relationships. God's character and purpose were ever more clearly understood. As the prophet observed what was going on around him, he was confirmed in his convictions. He perceived "signs" of Yahweh's presence and activity, as in the social calamities which Amos interpreted as warnings, or in the birth of a child which to Isaiah would confirm his confident prediction. By analogy he recognized the meaning of events in the sight of a steaming cooking pot, in a potter's blunder, in an experience with ungrateful sons or with an unfaithful wife.⁶⁰ The assonance of *qayis*, *qēs*, of *šāqēd*, *šōqēd*,⁶¹ became luminous with significance. The prophet watched his own oracles of doom and promise let loose in the world, with their ineluctable consequences like the ancient power of the curse and the blessing.

The prophet was not only the mouth of God, but the eyes and ears of the people if they would let him be that. He was at the same time Yahweh's witness in his controversy with Israel, and Israel's conscience. He spoke what he knew and testified to what he had seen. For all time the Hebrew prophet stands as evidence that the God who is exalted in righteousness, and mysterious beyond the range of thought, is yet one who speaks to man; as evidence that God can be known as one person knows and has dealings with another, and that this knowledge pertains to the whole life of man.

Alongside the priest and the prophet stood the *hākām*, who treasured and taught an ancient wisdom about human life. It is sometimes difficult to decide whether the term *hakam* in particular instances is a descriptive epithet or designates a recognized group, even a profession. When Jeremiah correlates the wise man with the mighty man and the rich man, it seems to be the former; whereas, when he associates the wise man with the priest and the prophet, the latter is more probable.⁶² The elders were a venerable but not a professional group. On the other hand, the scribes, attached to the court and the temple, and their colleagues whose services were made more generally available were professional.⁶³ Men like Hushai and Ahithophel, who were members of the king's privy council, and teachers who assembled and taught the materials of the wisdom tradition are to be classed in the same way.⁶⁴

As in the wisdom literature of Mesopotamia and Egypt, there were, as we know, two divergent streams in Hebrew wisdom. One was conservative, conventional, confident, worldly-wise, and didactic. This is represented by all but one of the contributors to the Book of Proverbs,

⁶⁰ Jer. 1 13-14; 18 2-6; Isa 1 2; Hos 1 2; Amos 4 6-11; Isa 7 14-16.

⁶¹ Amos 8 1-2; Jer 1 11-12.

⁶² Jer 9 22; 18 18.

⁶³ II Sam 8 17; I Kings 4 3; II Kings 12 10; Prov 25 1; Jer 8 8; 36 4.

⁶⁴ II Sam 15 12, 37; Prov 1 2-6; Eccles 12 9, 11.

by Job's counselors, and by some wisdom psalms.⁶⁵ The other current is radical, heterodox, skeptical — as in the Words of Agur;⁶⁶ in Job the hero of the poem; in the poet who put together the greater part of the book which bears Job's name; and, of course, in Qoheleth.

But while the radicals are profoundly critical of the conservatives and especially of their bland affirmation of the doctrine of retribution, both rely on reason, and both argue largely from the same premises. Both are concerned to discover an order and structure understandable by man's mind, an order of divine creation and providence, a moral order, a right social order. Both address themselves to man as man, rather than to Israel the chosen people, or to man as Israelite. For both, God is to be thought of primarily as the Creator, the necessary ground of man's existence, whether or not he be knowable by man. Neither has any thought of God and man participating together in events, nor or any sense of history, let alone salvation-history. To both, man is a creature who understands or does not understand, rather than one who hears and chooses, who accepts or rebels against the responsibility laid upon him by God. To both God is remote, mysterious, and in himself inaccessible. "Only a whisper of him do we catch."⁶⁷ The link with God is not God's self-revelation in event and prophetic word, nor yet the seeking of his face in worship. Rather it is wisdom, a divine gift.⁶⁸ Those who have received that gift strive to make themselves at home in an orderly structure of existence which is meaningful to the mind and conscience. Their goal is equilibrium.

Even when the wisdom streams diverge, the feeling for order and structure is common to both. In Proverbs and in Job's counselors this appears as an established moral order of human life, undergirded by the rewards and punishments of an overruling providence. To Job himself the moral structure of his universe seems to have split apart, so that he stands gazing into an abyss of meaninglessness. His agonized effort is not so much to justify himself as to bridge the chasm, to re-establish a viable order of justice, without which he cannot believe in the God in whom, paradoxically, he must believe. To Qoheleth, on the other hand, the search for ultimate meaning has proved futile, and he has given it up. He reconciles himself to the grim facts of life and the mystery of existence by achieving a minimal equilibrium of satisfaction, in such positive good as can be extracted from simply being alive.

This radical strain of wisdom in Israel seems to have been evoked in the sixth century B.C., when the catastrophic disruption of the national life called all traditional beliefs into question. Before the Exile the conservative, affirmative strain was dominant. The wise man gloried in

⁶⁵ Pss 34 12-23; 37; 127; cf. 111 10.

⁶⁶ Prov 30 1-4. ⁶⁷ Job 26 14.

⁶⁸ Prov 2 6; 8 10, 21; Job 35 10-11; cf. Sirach 1 1, 9-10; 17 7, 11; 24 1-12.

his wisdom, and it was a more confident and more secular wisdom than later it became. The pre-exilic materials in the Book of Proverbs⁶⁹ illustrate it.

The wisdom movement, of course, was the result of reason reflecting upon experience, including religious experience. Various impulses contributed to its development, and in all of them the reaching out for a principle of rational meaning and moral order is observable. Folk wisdom comments on and instructs in the accepted way of life of a traditional society. The knowledge and skill of the artisan demonstrate a pattern of activity which makes him outstanding in what he does. The scribe has comparable knowledge and skill, and by his organization and practice of the literary art he helps to tie together the framework of society. The classification of natural objects and phenomena after the fashion of Egyptian *onomastica*, attributed to Solomon,⁷⁰ was an attempt to introduce some rational order into the infinite variety of nature. The 'ēṣāh of the counselor was a proposed course or pattern of action. The instructor of youth set up guideposts for an acceptable, successful, and worthy way of life.

The wise men of pre-exilic times concerned themselves chiefly with the place of wisdom in human affairs, with skill in the business of living. The writers of Job, Qoheleth, and the later parts of Proverbs go on to examine the relationship of this human wisdom to religious belief and experience. Here we come to the famous theme sentence of the final editor of Proverbs (who seems also to have been the author of chaps. 1–9), viz., "the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge." It is customary to explain "the fear of the Lord" as approximately equivalent to our word "religion." It has, in fact, different shades of meaning according to the writer and the context.⁷¹

An example of the primary meaning, religious awe, is Job 37 23–24: "Shaddai is exalted in power and justice, . . . Therefore men fear him." In Exod 9 30 the plagues are said to have been sent to teach Pharaoh that he must recognize Yahweh as a powerful God to be reckoned with. In a weaker sense Prov 24 21 associates reverence for Yahweh and reverence for the king. In Jer 26 19 and elsewhere,⁷² "to fear Yahweh" means to submit to him. The non-Israelite settlers in Samaria were provided with a Yahweh priest to instruct them in the way to worship him as god of the land, so that he would not continue to plague them with lions.⁷³ Solomon's prayer in I Kings 8 43 contemplates the accession of

⁶⁹ Most of Prov 10–31.

⁷⁰ I Kings 5 12–13 (E.V. 4 32–33). Cf. A. Alt, "Die Weisheit Salomos," *ThLZ*, 76 (1951), pp. 139–44.

⁷¹ Cf. L. Dürr, *Das Erziehungswesen im A.T. und im Antiken Orient*, pp. 123–24.

⁷² Jer 32 39; Eccles 3 14.

⁷³ II Kings 17 24–28.

foreigners who would "know thy name and fear thee, as do thy people Israel." Finally, the phrase sometimes denotes deep and genuine piety, trust and whole-souled obedience, as in the story of Abraham's offering of Isaac.⁷⁴

As it is used in Proverbs, "the fear of Yahweh" seems to mean simply belief in God and acceptance of his moral standards. Thus it denotes an intellectual and moral attitude rather than piety or participation in religious rites. The theme sentence of Prov. 1 7 affirms that religious belief is the premise or the first principle of wisdom.⁷⁵ The converse of this is affirmed in 2 1-5 — that the discipline of wisdom opens the door to the knowledge of God. In Prov 1 29 "knowledge" and "the fear of the Lord" are correlated so as to suggest that the former denotes specifically *religious* knowledge, as in the threefold endowment of the Messianic king in Isa 11 2 — "wisdom and understanding" (wisdom to judge justly);⁷⁶ "counsel and might" (wisdom to govern effectively)⁷⁷; "knowledge and fear of Yahweh" (wisdom to worship God rightly).

What more can be said about the place of religious belief in the Book of Proverbs? A first impression of the older sections is that they are largely secular in tone and self-regarding in motivation. Yet among them are to be found religious admonitions which there is no compelling reason to set aside as later accretions. In addition to the teaching that Yahweh's rewards and punishments are inherent in the very structure of man's life,⁷⁸ there is frequent reference to God's overruling power,⁷⁹ to his care for his faithful servants,⁸⁰ to his approval or disapproval as sanctions for right conduct (quite apart from material reward and loss),⁸¹ and to the spiritual consolations of religion.⁸² Belief in God is to be a real factor in the life of the wisely religious individual, confirming his commitment to the way of life which that belief calls for.

This position is essentially that of Job's counselors. They are genuinely religious men, according to their lights. Eliphaz would commit himself to God, the creator and moral governor of man, a God whose justice is axiomatic.⁸³ He has thought out his theology, and is sure that it rings true.⁸⁴ He and Bildad draw strength for their belief from the

⁷⁴ Gen 22 12; cf. Isa 50 10; Prov 29 25; Job 15 4; 18 21.

⁷⁵ Prov 1 7; cf. 9 6; 15 33; 8 22-31; Job 28 23.

⁷⁶ Cf. I Kings 3 9, 28; Prov 8 15. Cf. R. B. Y. Scott, "Solomon and the Beginnings of Wisdom," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, pp. 270-71.

⁷⁷ Cf. II Kings 18 20; Job 12 13; Prov 8 14.

⁷⁸ Prov 10 29; 11 31; 12 21; 13 21; 15 6, etc.

⁷⁹ Prov 16 1, 33; 21 30-31; 29 26, etc.

⁸⁰ Prov 10 3, 22; 15 25; 16 7, etc.

⁸¹ Prov 11 20; 12 2; 15 8-9, 26, 29, etc.

⁸² Prov 14 31; 15 29; 18 10, etc.

⁸³ Job 5 8-16; cf. 8 3.

⁸⁴ Job 5 27.

long tradition of wisdom.⁸⁵ But direct knowledge of God, they declare, is impossible — as if a finite man should imagine that he could participate in the *sôd 'elôah*, the inner council of God.⁸⁶ Job knows all this, he retorts. He accepts as fact what tradition had taught him, that God is indeed ruler of nature and of the life of man.⁸⁷ That is what creates his problem. If religious knowledge is to be more than something learned by rote, Job must be able to find God at the point of his deepest religious concern. When finally God confronts Job from the stormwind, it is Job himself who is under scrutiny. He cannot answer God, and his own questions remain unanswered. But he has *met* God at the point of deepest religious concern, which is more than to understand all mysteries inherent in divinity. “I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; now my eye sees thee.” Still Job does not understand, but now he knows.

Qoheleth, on the other hand, ends his search for understanding with the outright denial that the human mind can *either* know God or understand his ways.⁸⁸ To him, God is the inscrutable power behind phenomena, about which man can do nothing, no matter how crooked and distorted his world may seem. Man's own fate is already determined for him behind an impenetrable veil.⁸⁹ All his effort and anxiety cannot alter the way the world is. Man's only good is whatever satisfaction he can derive from simply being alive. It may seem strange to claim that such complete agnosticism has any contribution to wisdom as a way to the knowledge of God. But I recall a remark of John Macmurray's in one of his early books, “atheism may have a relative truth . . . (by) rejecting a conception of God which is false.”⁹⁰ Insofar as the dogmas of orthodoxy were untrue to his experience, Qoheleth was right to deny them, and to affirm what he was certain of within the limits of his rationalism. Like Job, he will not speak falsely for God. Thus he erects his private altar ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩ ΘΕΩ.

Thus priesthood, prophecy, and wisdom each contributes something indispensable to the Bible as the Book of the Knowledge of God. The Bible holds and will continue to hold a differently defined but uniquely significant place in Judaism and in Catholic and Protestant Christianity. To religious men and women of the Hebrew-Christian tradition this knowledge comes now in much the same three ways as in old Israel: through priestly, prophetic, and wisdom channels.

First, it comes through participation in the worship, theology, and

⁸⁵ Job 8 8–10; 15 18.

⁸⁶ Job 15 8.

⁸⁷ Job 12 2–13 2.

⁸⁸ Eccles 1 13; 3 10–11; 8 17.

⁸⁹ Eccles 1 15; 3 14–15; 9 1–6.

⁹⁰ J. Macmurray, *Creative Society*, p. 14.

ethos of ongoing religious communities. These are rooted in the creative moments of their origins, when, according to the Bible and the faith it supports, God revealed himself within history by mighty acts for us men and for our salvation. A religion which has come down to us from the past thus, in its priestly function, renews itself in contemporary terms as a valid way to the knowledge and service of God.

Second, we come to know God in a present engagement of our wills with the divine will, in the hearing again of the words of prophecy. Mic 6 8 has all human life and all time for its *Sitz im Leben*. Prophecy is perpetually fresh and new because it ever speaks to man in the moment when he must choose. He is confronted by the God of the prophets present and active in the whole range of human affairs, private and public, national and international, political and cultural. The prophets teach us to be alert to that divine reality, to perceive in its light the real nature of the issues we face in the modern world, and to accept our responsibility before God.

Third, we come to a clearer knowledge of truth and of God through the self-discipline of learning and through dedication to its most worthy goals. Reflection in the light of experience upon the meaning of life and of religion, and upon the right order of human life in society; the positive affirmation of personal and moral values — these correspond to the contribution of the wise men of Israel. There is knowledge of the truth about life and God to be found in the accumulated wisdom of the race, and in particular (we would claim) in the principles of social order and personal relationships affirmed by the Hebrew-Christian tradition. Moreover, in that tradition we observe the engagement of great minds with ultimate questions of the nature and purpose of God, of the meaning of human existence, and of the spiritual history and destiny of man. Technically, this may be termed speculative knowledge. But “speculative” is a trivial epithet to apply to the architectonic thought of the theologian of Prov 8, to the spiritual explorer who gave us the seventy-third Psalm, and to the poet of Job, soaring like an eagle toward the darkened heavens. Here, indeed, is a knowledge of God which cannot be catalogued and labeled. It is a knowledge which transcends the demand to know, an awareness of the mystery which lies beyond all knowledge and which draws the wondering mind ever deeper into itself. For in the very face of that mystery a religious wisdom discerns that the mysterious One is good, that he is concerned with all that pertains to man, and that he communicates with man at the deepest level of his being.