

of each tradition or fragment thereof, from what circle does it come and what did the members of that circle think it meant? The saga of early Israel are composed of many items, each with its own history but arranged around certain great experiences which form a canonical framework for the whole. This framework is not derived from historical experience, but from cultic worship. The initial question, we therefore infer, cannot be about history, nor even about theology and history, but about cultic memory and cultic celebration.

A comparable situation in New Testament study destroyed the older quest for the historical Jesus. Is the search for the historical behind the early Israelite traditions also destroyed? And in any event is this search for the historical really desirable in Biblical study, or is it a search for a will-of-the-wisp which is not theologically significant in any event? If the Bible is first and foremost a heilsgeschichte, is it not foolhardy to attempt to reduce it to the plane of secular history? Is historical criticism to be the measure of revelation and its validation? These are rather basic questions, and they stand at the very centre of Old Testament study to-day.

The disciplines of Biblical history and archaeology have been developed largely in a humanistic atmosphere, and one of the axioms within that atmosphere has been the assumption that anything learned about ancient times is an automatic good which needs no justification. Many of those who have been attracted to the heilsgeschichte aspects of modern Biblical theology have for the first time thrown the Biblical archaeologist on the defensive with questions as to the relevance of his work and as to the nature of the history with which he understands himself to be concerned. Yet to this writer any Biblical interpreter who loves theology, but not in equal measure the 'flesh and bones' of history, is certain to fail in his interpretative effort. Various modern forms of gnosticism or docetism can indeed hide behind the revival of Biblical theology. Biblical heilsgeschichte is a celebration of events which Biblical man thought really happened and which he interpreted as the mighty work of the God of human life and history, and as well sovereign Lord of all creation. Is it not a matter of considerable importance to theology for the Biblical scholar to assert that in Scripture we are dealing, not with real history understood by faith, but instead with cultic legends elaborated and transmitted through liturgy? Can this be said to represent the assured results of present research? Surely the investigation of the subject is by no means irrelevant to faith.

This much we do know that the more details we have learned about ancient life and times during the last century, the better we have come to

exegete the Bible and to comprehend the significance of its testimony. At the same time, we must be on guard against the implication that the purpose of archaeological and historical investigation is to measure and to authenticate the 'new reality' which the Scriptures reveal. The historical search is only one of several branches of Biblical research, and it is a purely *descriptive* investigation. It provides basic data needed to assess the nature of the Biblical testimony and to understand the various ways God used to reveal Himself. It obviously cannot confine truth to its own dimensions, but the 'truth' that it is able to discover is certainly of primary significance to those who would seek to understand the manner in which God has chosen to be God in our midst.

Following von Rad's formulation of the cultic issue we would say that central to the patriarchal stories are the kerygmatic themes of election and promise, and that the individual episodes in the life of Abraham are subsumed within them. These themes are surely derived from religious teaching in a later community which also used them in public confession. The patriarchal stories are therefore cultic in the sense that their form and intent as they come to us is to glorify God and to expound His work in the creation of a 'new thing', a people of God. In analyzing the cultic theme of promise, however, von Rad makes certain historical statements. He believes that the promise of the land (Gn 12<sup>1</sup>) and of becoming a great people (v. 2) may well stem from the patriarchal period, while the promise, 'in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed' (v. 3), probably derives from the theological particularity of the Yahwist writer in the tenth century. Yet von Rad is able to offer no proof for these historical conclusions; they are merely hypotheses which appear reasonable and are then taken up into the historical understanding of the Yahwist.<sup>1</sup>

What is the background of the individual fragments of patriarchal tradition? The Joseph story is a fairly coherent and lengthy composition which surely was polished while still in oral form, but otherwise we are faced with episodes, each of which must have had its own history of transmission. Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (ch. 22), for example, is concerned in its present form to portray Abraham's faithful obedience as the true response which God desires. Yet at an earlier stage it must once have been concerned with the abolition of child sacrifice. Gunkel, however, by textual emendation makes the historical conclusion that the story was once a cult legend of an obscure

<sup>1</sup> Cf. von Rad, 'Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuch', in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* [Munich, 1958], 68 ff., 74.