

HISTORY AND THE WORD OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.¹

BY PROFESSOR D. MARTIN NOTH,
PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT EXEGESIS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF BONN.

DURING the last hundred years our knowledge of the ancient oriental world has grown surprisingly owing to the countless finds of monuments and inscriptions. Previously the Old Testament was, apparently, our oldest source for human history, but we know now that the Old Testament belongs to a comparatively late stage in the long and chequered history of the Ancient East, and that the history of Israel was conditioned by the historical situation and movements of the Ancient East.

To-day we have to seek the origins of the people of Israel in the history of the second millennium B.C. Now that the history of this period is well known, we are able to form a pretty good picture of it. Already towards the end of the nineteenth century the Amarna tablets, which contain letters to the Pharaoh from some of the near eastern kings and especially from numerous vassal chiefs in Syria-Palestine, had thrown light upon the political situation in Syria-Palestine during the years immediately before the Israelites took possession of the land. This was, and has remained, of first importance for the development of the Israelite occupation of Palestine and for Israel's history. At the same time it demonstrated the importance of the *milieu*.

Of more immediate relevance to Old Testament matters was the discovery, in 1929, of many clay tablets at Ras esh-Shamra, on the North Syrian coast. These documents gave us our first original religio-historical texts from the Canaanite world, and, like the Amarna material, they belong to a time immediately before the occupation by the Israelites. They proved—and

¹ The original text of "Geschichte und Gotteswort im Alten Testament" will be published in *Bonner Akademische Reden*. This slightly shortened English rendering, made by Professor T. Fish, was read as a lecture by Professor Noth at the University of Manchester on 5th December, 1949.

this had already been considered probable—that Israel not only took over the Canaanite speech of the land into which they entered, but also retained its religious traditions, rejecting only certain definite items, and introduced many of them into its own cult.

The Ras Shamra texts relate only to the environment of the Old Testament, though, of course, that environment acted as a cultural influence. But another more recent literary find contributes, if I am right, to the pre-history of Israel itself. It had already been observed that relations existed between, on the one hand, the rulers who founded the First Dynasty of Babylon, and the tribes of Israel, on the other. The structure of Personal Names was in both places similar.¹ The rulers in Mesopotamia clearly came from the steppe and desert along the Middle Euphrates, seeing that there are, on written documents of that period from the Middle Euphrates, personal names showing the same characteristic structure.² Nevertheless, in view of the distance in space and time between the rulers in Mesopotamia and the tribes of Israel, it was wrong to connect them historically. However, in recent years, some connecting links have been found.

There are, first, the so-called Egyptian *Ächtungstexte* (XIIth Dynasty). These showed that in the nineteenth-eighteenth centuries there were in Syria-Palestine kinsmen of the Babylonian rulers, having the same kind of Personal Names and constituting a new element of the local population. They thus showed that in that same period Mesopotamia in the East, and Syria-Palestine in the West, were traversed by tribes which belonged to the same area.³ It is in this area that the pre-history of the tribes of Israel is to be sought, as will appear perfectly clearly from the recently discovered documents to which I have already referred, and of which I propose now to speak.

In 1933, the French began to excavate the ruins of Tell Hariri (ancient Mari), on the Middle Euphrates. This was once the residence of kings and the hub of a political organisation of

¹ Cf. M. Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen* (1928), pp. 27 ff., 43 ff.

² Details in Th. Bauer, *Die Ostkanaanäer* (1926).

³ Cf. M. Noth, *Die syrisch-palästinische Bevölkerung des zweiten Jahrtausends v. Chr. im Lichte neuer Quellen* (Zeitsch. d. Deutschen Palästina-Vereins 65, 1942), pp. 20 ff.

importance. Here more than twenty thousand cuneiform tablets have been found. The publication and study of these tablets will take a long time. Already it has become clear that the contents of the tablets, and especially the letters of various kings of Mari, throw light not only on the contemporary historical situation, but also on the relations of those immigrants, of whom I spoke above, to the later tribes of Israel.

In the first place, the Mari texts shorten considerably the interval of time. From them we deduce that the First Dynasty of Babylon is to be dated some centuries later than hitherto. Consequently, the historical events in the ancient East during the second millennium B.C. approximate more closely in time. The Mari texts belong to the end of the eighteenth century B.C. They show that the kings and the rulers of Mari and of the neighbouring tribes in the Syro-Arabian desert and in Mesopotamia belong to the same circle as the First Dynasty of Babylon and their contemporaries mentioned in the Egyptian *Ächtungstexte*. Moreover, we notice at once some remarkable contacts with the world of the Old Testament. Names and words which otherwise occur only in the Old Testament occur frequently in the Mari texts.¹ One of the larger neighbouring groups, frequently mentioned in the Mari texts, bears the name "Benjamites" (Banû-Jamina).² This does not mean that here we have the ancestors of the later Israelite tribe of Benjamin. But at Mari, as in the Old Testament, Benjamin occurs as a tribal name, and actually with the designation "dweller in the south".³ There occurs also a military commander, designated as *dawîdûm*. Here, certainly, we have the word which occurs as a proper name in the Old Testament, the name of David the King. Likewise the name of Noah occurs in the Mari texts, in the more original phonetic form *Nàh*.⁴ We may say therefore that, although further research is needed into connexions such as these, the connexions certainly exist.

¹ For a general survey of Mari texts see W. von Soden, *Das altbabylonische Briefarchiv von Mari* (Die Welt des Orients, 3, 1948), pp. 187 ff.

² Cf. G. Dossin in *Mélanges Dussaud II* (1939), pp. 981 ff.

³ The Mari texts make certain this explanation of the name which was proposed long ago, for the corresponding designation "dweller in the north" occurs in them.

⁴ J. Lewy in *Mélanges Dussaud I* (1939), pp. 273 ff.

Such similarities as I have just quoted are noteworthy but they do not take us very far. But there is another phenomenon which touches an essential portion of the Old Testament, i.e. Old Testament prophecy. We shall now take a close look at this, making use of three of the Mari texts so far published.

In one of these texts,¹ published last year, the governor of the royal city, Mari, by name Itur-ashdu, reports to the king, away on a campaign, as follows: A man, whose name and native town are given, has come to him and informed him that he has had a dream in which he was transported into the sanctuary of the god Dagan in the city of Tirqa. This god questions him and he answers. Then he instructs him, saying: "Now go! I send you to Zimri-lim (the king of Mari): (to him) you yourself shall say: Send me thy messengers, and lay all thy affairs before me." The text goes on to say that the god Dagan will thereupon give him the victory over the hostile Benjamites.

Alongside this we must put another short text which I give here in translation in order to convey an impression of this kind of text. It runs:

To my Lord (i.e. King Zimri-lim) speak. Thy servant Kibri-Dagan (has spoken) as follows: 'The god Dagan and the god Ikrub-il are safe and sound. The city Tirqa and district are safe and sound. Moreover on the day on which I dispatched this tablet to my lord on the way, a man of the god Dagan came and spoke the following word to me: "The god has sent me (with the following instruction): send speedily to the king! offerings for the dead shall they offer to the spirit of Jahdun-lim". This has the man spoken to me. I communicate it to my lord. May my lord do whatever he thinks right.'²

Lastly, the same Kibri-Dagan, in a text³ which unfortunately

¹ Published and studied by G. Dossin, *Revue d'Assyriologie*, 42 (1948), pp. 125 ff.

² Cf. *Archives royales de Mari* III (1948), Nr. 40. The text runs, in transcription:

¹[a-n]a be-lí-ia ²kí-bí-ma ³um-ma Ki-ib-ri-^dDa-gan ⁴warad-ka-a-ma ^{5d}Da-gan ù ^dIk-ru-ub-il[ša]-al-mu ⁶a-lum Ti[r-k]a^{k1} ú ^ha-al-šu-(um) ^{ša}-lim ⁷ša-ni-tam ^{um} ^up-pí an-ni-e-im ⁸a-na[š]i-ir be-lí-ia ú-ša-bi-lam ⁹awilum mu-uh-hu-um ^{ša} ^dDa-gan ¹⁰il-li-[i] k-ma ¹¹a-wa-tam ki-a-am iḫ-bi-[e-im] ¹²um-ma-a-mi ¹³ilum^{lum} iš-pu-ra-an-[ni] ¹⁴hu-mu-uṭ a-na ^{šar}[ri] ¹⁵šu-pu-ur-ma ¹⁶ki-ḫs-pí a-na i-ṭe₄-im-m[i] ¹⁷ša la-aḫ-du-un-li-[im] ¹⁸li-ik-ru-bu ¹⁹an-ni-tam awilum mu-uh-hu-um ^{šu-ú} ²⁰ik-bi-e-im-ma a-na be-lí-ia ²¹aš-ta-ap-ra-am ²²be-lí ^{ša} e-li-šu ^{ṭa}-ba-at ²³li-pu-úš

³ *Archives royales de Mari* II (1941), Nr. 90.

is fragmentary, informs the King that on another occasion a Man of the god Dagan¹ came to him and said: The god Dagan has sent me (with the following instruction:) "Send to thy Lord" . . . and then follows, as before, a definite instruction.

In these texts, therefore, we have a kind of messenger of God who, unasked and unbidden, suddenly appears with some definite divine charge.² I know of no phenomenon in the whole of the ancient East which quite corresponds to this. The nearest is that scene at Byblos where the Egyptian Wen-Amon relates his sea trip along the Palestinian-Syrian coast, with the words: When he (i.e. the King of Byblos) sacrificed to his gods, the god seized one of his big boys and made him mad, and he said: "Fetch up the god! Fetch the messenger, who has him with him! It is Amon who has sent him: he it is who allowed him to come."³

Here also, apparently, we have to do with a message of God which is spontaneously proclaimed. This account of Wen-Amon belongs to about 1100 B.C. and seems to be an isolated one. But it is not impossible that there is some slight historical connexion between it and the contents of the Mari texts quoted earlier, seeing that relatives of the population in and around Mari also came to Syria-Palestine. But we cannot be certain because the appearance of this man in Byblos is not in that respect clear.

But the similarity of the messengers of God cited on Mari texts to the description of the appearance of the Old Testament prophets is unmistakable. They also behave plainly as messengers of God: unasked and unbidden they declare the word which is laid upon them for the occasion. The customary introduction: "So has Jahweh spoken" is the traditional formula of the message; by it a messenger introduces himself as one com-

¹ The text at this point is badly preserved. We might expect that before the words *ša dDa-gan* (l. 17) the original had something like *awilum muhhum*, as in the preceding text, l. 9.

² The text of lines 19, 20, runs: *dDa-gan iš-ṣu[ra-an-ni] a-na be-li-ka šu-ṣu-ur-ma*.

³ Ranke's translation in H. Gressmann, *Altorientalische Texte zum Alten Testament*² (1926), p. 72.

missioned to deliver orally a message.¹ The agreement between here (in the Old Testament) and there (Mari) extends to the wording of the declaration. When the man in the first text quoted from Mari hears the god Dagan say to him in a dream: "Go, I send thee to Zimri-lim: thou shalt say as follows", we think of the instruction which the prophet Jeremiah hears in his vocation-vision: "Thou shalt go to all to whom I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak" (Jer. i. 7); or we think of the commission which the prophet Ezekiel receives: "I do send thee unto them (i.e. the Israelites) and thou shalt say unto them: Thus saith the Lord God" (Ez. ii. 4).

And when in the second and third Mari text the messenger of God establishes his credentials before the royal messenger with the words: "The God has sent me", "the god Dagan has sent me", we recall that the Old Testament prophets also referred to their mission in almost identical words. They had to do that, and they did it, before anything else, whenever there was doubt as to their legitimacy and whenever their frequently harsh word aroused embittered opposition. Jeremiah xxvi is an impressive example of this. Jeremiah's harsh word of judgment against the Temple of Jerusalem so provoked the priests and the cultus enthusiasts of this sanctuary that they wanted to kill him. Jeremiah has nothing to say in his defence before the royal officials except one thing: "Jahweh has sent me" (verse 1), and then, once again: "Of a truth, Jahweh has sent me to you, to say all these words in your ears" (verse 15).

Now this agreement between Mari and Old Testament cannot be accidental. All the more so precisely because in the whole of the ancient East nothing really comparable has been found up to date. It cannot therefore be doubted that in the Old Testament prophets we have the figure of a messenger of God such as we find on the Mari texts, and that this messenger of God is not merely a figure which is parallel to Old Testament prophets but it belongs to the pre-history of prophecy. We must suspect that there is here a historical connexion, especially since, as I

¹ On this see especially L. Köhler, *Deuterjesaja stilkkritisch untersucht* (1923), pp. 102 ff.

have already mentioned, striking relations between the Mari texts and the Old Testament exist. It is not possible as yet to define the kind and manner of this historical connexion. The time-gap remains relatively great. Nevertheless there is reason to hope that further discoveries will bring more light. Meanwhile we must be content with the general statement that in all probability the origin of the Israelitish tribes is to be sought in those circles which are first recognisable in the time of the First Dynasty of Babylon in the culture regions on the edges of the Syro-Palestinian Desert. It is manifest therefore that the pattern of the prophet, which for the Old Testament is central, had a pre-history. The great importance of the Mari texts for the Old Testament is clear from the fact that not only have they brought a new understanding of the historical and religio-historical environment of the Old Testament, but also that they begin to throw light on the origins of Israel and the essential elements of Israelitish life and belief.

And yet, even if we assume a historical connexion between the messenger of God on the Mari texts and the prophet of the Old Testament, there is a clear difference between the two. This difference lies not in the manner of the occurrence, but in the content of that which is announced as the divine message. According to the texts so far found at Mari, the message deals with cult and political matters of very limited and ephemeral importance. The message of Dagan communicated in the dream has in view the sanctuary of this god, which the king has not sufficiently taken into consideration. The king must lay his affairs before the god Dagan and in his sanctuary support permanently the messengers who in some way can convey to him the oracles imparted in the sanctuary. The editor of this text has suggested that here we have to deal with a forged message with the aid of which the Dagan priests of Tirqa wished to push their sanctuary into the foreground. But there is no convincing reason for this suggestion. And even if we accept it, this 'pious fraud' could only be effective if it was at that time thought possible that a man in a dream could receive such a message from the god. In the second of the texts we have mentioned, the message demands that sacrifices be brought for

the dead spirit of the previous king, Iahdun-lim. No reason for this is given. We may suppose that some disaster had been traced back to the activity of the spirit of Iahdun-lim whom they must conciliate by sacrifices.

In any case, for purposes of illustration, we might compare the messages of the two men who, according to Old Testament tradition, on one occasion appeared before David as "prophets", in the same way as the messengers of God at Mari had recourse to the king. After the census ordered by David in Israel and Judah, the "prophet" Gad appeared before the king in order to put to him, in the name of his God, the choice of three different calamities as punishment for this irreligious enterprise. Shortly afterwards Gad again appeared before the king to bid him erect an altar on a particular spot that the plague might be stayed from the people (2 Sam. xxiv. 11 ff., 18 f.).

Also, according to the traditional text of 2 Sam. vii. 4 ff., the "prophet" Nathan received by night—also in a dream—the instruction to deliver to King David a message from God, to the effect that God did not approve of David's intention to build a temple for the ark of God.

All that is true, but there is also the account of the sending of the "prophet" Nathan to David after the king's adultery with the wife of one of his retainers, and Nathan's earnest rebuke of the king for his sin. An incident such as this surpasses, in depth and principle, anything that we find in the Mari texts. The same is true of the words of rebuke spoken by the "prophet" Elijah against the unfaithfulness and lawlessness of King Ahab of Israel.

When we come to the prophets of the prophetic books, any comparison of their content with the messages from God in the Mari texts is out of the question. The prophetic literature deals with guilt and punishment, reality and unreality, present and future of the Israelite people as chosen by God for a special and unique service, the declaration of the great and moving contemporary events in the world as part of a process which, together with the future issue of that process, is willed by God.

Even where the prophets give practical directions in a concrete situation, they keep this larger connexion in view. As a

rule they speak not in words of principle or of comprehensive survey, but carry out their commission in respect of some particular situation. But even here, generally speaking, whilst making detailed pronouncements *ad hoc*, they relate the particular situation with which they deal to the great subject of God's purposeful action in history. When the Assyrian might breaks into Syria-Palestine, they announce the imminent event and explain it. Or when the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar attacks, they demand a definite attitude towards him. But they always speak in the name of God who alone disposes of the great powers of world history and whose will all powers and movements of history serve. These prophets are on a level incomparably higher than that of the messenger of God in the Mari texts.

Our constantly increasing knowledge of the historical environment of the Old Testament raises anew, and with special urgency, a fundamental question. The history of Israel is linked up with the contemporary history of the Ancient East. The language of the Old Testament is, as we now know, not only not a holy language or a primitive human language, but not even the oldest sister in the family of oriental languages. Leaving out altogether the non-Semitic languages of the ancient east of very great age, we know that the language of the Old Testament is a relatively young member of the group of Semitic dialects. Also, it has turned out that the forms of divine worship in Israel, the cult with all its arrangements and actions, go back, in great part, to ancient and long traditions of pre-Israelitish Syria and Palestine. We now see that this historical limitation touches, at an even deeper level, the essential content of the Old Testament, and that the character of the prophet as the central mediator of God's word in the Old Testament has a history which lies outside Israel. Comparisons between tellers of fortune, givers of oracles, seers and ecstasies, and the Old Testament prophets have long been made, and in this way it is possible to explain and make intelligible certain features of the prophetic character. But such comparisons do not get to the heart of the matter which is that the prophets knew themselves to be messengers of God and as such formulated their sayings.

But now we are confronted by the unquestionable messengers

of God on the Mari texts, in an area which is historically connected with the later Israel. And the fundamental problem is by no means solved by the fact that the words of the Old Testament prophets are, in content, far more rich and far more spiritual and on a higher level than the utterances of the messengers of God on the Mari texts. The problem lies in the fact that increasingly, and now in a most essential point, the qualitative difference between the Old Testament and its historical and religio-historical environment is being wiped out, whilst from the standpoint of Biblical tradition the only apparent possibility in this matter is an Either/Or, a Yes and No, divine truth or human error, and, to Biblical tradition, it seems intolerable that there should be any connexion between the genuine word of God, in its immediacy and in its independence of human nature, and human-historical conditions.

Is, then, a connexion between God's word and the ever changing historical phenomena possible? Or is not the claim that the Old Testament gives us the pure word of God untenable once we allow that the content of the Old Testament, including its essential elements, has a history?

From the point of view of Biblical revelation, the question is not properly posed thus, and the alternative which has been indicated does not really exist. This is because, according to the Bible, God manifests himself in history just as in the sphere in which human life on this earth is lived, through the agency of characters and phenomena as they occur in history. The facts that the character of a messenger of God was traditional and was known in the historical world of Israel and that this character appears in the Old Testament prophets, are relevant in this connexion and make this circumstance intelligible. The Biblical Word of God encounters man in the world in which he lives, and accordingly he must be spoken to as man. There is no need for man in this world to detach himself from life and be superior to it in order to seek the way to God. What is more, he cannot do it. The Biblical faith is thoroughly unmythical. It is true that in the world of Old Testament experience ecstatic trances were not unknown, and the Old Testament prophets knew cases of this sort. But it is characteristic

that they never appealed to such inner mysterious experiences in order to prove that they were genuine. Rather, they suspected that the ecstasies were false prophets. And when they were asked for proof of genuineness, they said quite simply that they "were sent" as messengers of God.

Moreover, the Bible does not really make an essential division of the world into a sphere of Holiness, which is the godly sphere, and a sphere of unholiness, which is the sphere of all else in the world. It is true that the concept "holy" is, in the Old Testament, often used of cult objects, sanctuaries and holy cities, holy days, holy utensils and holy sacrifices. The holy was perilous and untouchable. But in such cases we are dealing essentially with a hang-over from some primitive traditions. Besides, in spite of the numerous cult regulations contained in the Old Testament, cult does not seem to be of first importance, indeed in Prophecy it appears as something at least problematic. It must be added that the Old Testament knew quite well that other peoples worshipped their gods in similar fashion, that it is a general religio-historical phenomenon in which Israel also participates for purposes of worship. But in its proper and original sense, the predicate "holy" in the Old Testament, belongs to God, and it is relatively rarely used of men, and then not in the sense of holiness indwelling in man himself, but in the sense of holiness ascribed to men or in the sense of an obligatory tie with God: "Ye shall be holy as I am holy" (Lev. xix., etc.).

According to the Biblical tradition God encounters man in the midst of the unholy, i.e. ungodly, world, and he makes use of historical circumstances of this world.¹ That is quite clear from the essential content of the Old Testament. If it is correct that the proper sphere of divination in the Old Testament is the history of Israel, that is tantamount to saying that the field of the operation of the word of God is the historically conditioned event, even in its minutest details. Thereby, and precisely on that account, is the genuine historicity of Israel strongly emphasised in the Old Testament. Israel was not from time immemorial. It first came into being within the world of old

¹ See G. Mensching, *Vergleichende Religionswissenschaft*² (1949), p. 66.

oriental peoples. It was not from the beginning in possession of the land which it later inhabited, but it came to possess it at a historical moment of time and by so doing displaced older inhabitants. It was never considered to be the hub of world events, the other peoples being on the rim. It had, humanly speaking, a past which was hardly brilliant. Its ancestors, the Patriarchs, had once been semi-nomads. They were wandering shepherds, without estate and land, and were dependent on the superior power of the inhabitants of that time and place. Their descendants lived for a long time in the lowly condition of strangers in Egypt. In one passage in the Old Testament it is expressly stated that Israel was smaller and weaker than the peoples who had preceded them in the land, and accordingly much smaller and weaker than the powerful peoples in the wider circle of the ancient world. It is also added that Israel was no more honest and no better than other peoples (Deut. ix. 1, 4 ff.). It is clear from the Old Testament itself that Israel was one of the younger, smaller and less important peoples of world history. And it is just this sobriety of historical thinking that is the ground for the statement that in this insignificant portion of history God has operated and spoken uniquely, and that he has used the existing historical stature of the tribes and people of Israel in order to reveal himself.

As particular instances of this we may recall how God made use of the institutions that were to hand. In the matter of cult, for example. Here was a traditional cult system which had been definitely fixed through old cult and cultural traditions. This cult system must now serve to give a definite character to divine worship. It must now be filled with a content which bears the impress of the Old Testament Word of God, and at the same time run the constant risk of being used once more idolatrously.

We instance the institution of kingship. Kingship in Israel was founded—rather late—in a definite historical situation. It was modelled on kingship as known for a long time to other peoples (1 Sam. viii. 5). And this institution is not considered, as among other peoples, as a divine, eternal element of a world order which was itself valid for all time. It was understood as something that had come into being in historical times. God

made use of this institution, according to the Old Testament, in order to realise his purpose in the history of Israel. And, according to the Messianic proclamation, God will, at some future time, use that institution for a decisive operation. But the possibility was not excluded that kingship might continue to develop into a human autocracy.

Now it is to groups of facts of this kind that the religio-historical phenomenon of the messenger of God belongs. We know from the Mari texts that messengers of God were known in the pre-Israelite times, within the circle from which the tribes of Israel derive. According to the Old Testament, God made use of such in order that, at some fixed and decisive time in history, the word of God might be declared, announcing the imminent event and, at the same time, explaining it as a piece of God's purposeful activity. But God did not prevent the existence of false prophets who capriciously gave themselves out to be messengers of God. Because the fact is that all phenomena of human history are ambiguous, and it is not possible by means of external criteria to distinguish the genuine from the counterfeit.

The facts concerning the connexion between history and the Word of God as they appear in the Old Testament can be set out briefly. It cannot be proved that the Old Testament method of divine revelation, which makes use of given historical phenomena, stands higher than other methods. All that can be said is that it speaks to men in the world in which they actually live: in the world of history. More than that: it could not be proved that the Old Testament and the Bible generally do deal with what is truly divine revelation and with what is truly the Word of God. For that cannot be proved. It is right, in this context, to quote the Old Testament prophet who formulated his commission thus: "Thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord Yahweh: they may hear or they may not . . . but they shall know that there hath been a prophet among them" (Ez. ii. 4 f.). And that word from the Gospel, that it can be "granted" to a man "to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God" (Luke viii. 10).