# Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament

edited by
**DOUGLAS A. KNIGHT**

with contributions by

Walter Harrelson
Helmer Ringgren
Rudolf Smend
Walther Zimmerli
Arvid S. Kapelrud
Roger Lapointe
Douglas A. Knight
Odil Hannes Steck
Peter R. Ackroyd
James L. Crenshaw
Robert B. Laurin
Michael Fishbane
Hartmut Gese

**FORTRESS PRESS** **Philadelphia**

*Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76–007872*
*ISBN 0–8006–0484–9*

5785G76 Printed in U.S.A. 1–484

Chapter 7

# Revelation through Tradition

Douglas A. Knight

The period since the Enlightenment has seen perhaps more changes to our understanding of revelation than to any other dogmatic concept or doctrine. This is surely true in the area of systematic theology, for in comparison with their medieval counterparts modern theologians have learned the nature and limits of discourse about God. This hardly means that revelation is no longer a topic of concern for theologians or laity; the discussion continues with full vigor, although the parties involved are more or less aware that they cannot speak facilely of divine disclosure as a self-evident, unproblematic phenomenon. Nonetheless, biblical scholars are often chagrined to see that the results of a century of biblical research are all too seldom brought seriously and directly into play by modern systematic theologians.[1] This need is as pressing with respect to the question of revelation as it is in other areas. If we no longer can speak of the whole Bible uniformly as the revealed word of God, to what extent is revelation still a meaningful concept to be used with reference to the literature in the Old and New Testaments, and how can such use accord with wider dogmatic discussions?

This question gains focus if we consider only traditio-historical work on the Old Testament. Since the early part of this century an ever-increasing number of investigators has as-

1. For discussion of this whole question of the relation between the biblical and theological disciplines, cf. D. H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

sumed the presence in ancient Israel of a tradition process that yielded at its end the bulk of our present Hebrew Bible. Consensus on the exact extent and manner in which this occurred is, and probably always will be, elusive. But even the postulated process itself is of consequence for our understanding of revelation. Tradition, in all of its multiplicity, is *ex hypothesi* produced by the people, the community and its subgroups, engaged in the multiplicity of life. The process involves the people in an active rather than a passive way, for while the tradition preserves the memory of the past it is also subject to growth and change at the hands of new generations who face new situations that require a reconsideration of their heritage. To us the process may seem haphazard in that it is subject to the vagaries of history, yet what is striking is that the past constitutes the matrix for the people to deal with their present and their future. The actual form of each new stance may be unpredictable in advance, but in retrospect we can detect a certain constancy or cumulative intention at least in this manner of addressing the present needs.

Previous discussions in this book have dealt with constitutive situations of this Israelite tradition. There were impulses from the life and faith of the Israelites as also from their neighbors in the ancient Orient. There were historical incidents which the people understood to have a deeper meaning for them, and from generation to generation they continued to relate to these incidents and to probe their implications for them. There were spokesmen who saw the clear danger of relying on the past as a guarantor of the future, and they used these same traditions in a radically different way in order to jar the people back to the reality of their dependence, vulnerability, and obligations. There were centers of worship where often diverse traditions and theologies could converge and become submitted to the demands of religious practice.

In all of this it is possible, at one level, to explain this process of tradition growth solely in terms of human activity. In what

respect is Yahweh, the subject of so much of this tradition, *directly* involved in this process? Where is revelation to be seen here? Confessionally, the question can be—and often is—given a simple answer: it is God who acts in the specific events of history, or who reveals himself indirectly in the cumulative course of Israel's history, or who speaks directly through his chosen spokesmen, or who guides the process whereby the tradition and the literature are developed. Actually, it is as easy to discount any of these answers as it is to give them; witness the scholarly debate on each point during recent years. The best example, to which we shall return later, is the question of God's revelation in history: quite aside from the fact that an affirmation about God's involvement in an historical event can in no way submit to scientific testing, it is commonly noted that such an act would be meaningless without interpretation; and if this interpretation itself emerged among the people over a shorter or longer period of time, in what sense can we still apply to this whole network of event and interpretation the concept of God's purposeful self-disclosure? This problem has been the object of much discussion, and it will not receive primary attention here. It is also not our aim in the present study to make a comprehensive analysis of revelation in the Old Testament. Rather, we will limit ourselves here to analyzing certain implications of traditio-historical research at the point of the interrelationship between tradition and revelation.[2] We might anticipate somewhat by stating that our results will be quite different from previous ones simply because, like most practitioners of this ana-

2. This restricted scope of the present study must not be forgotten. To be sure, we will be dealing also with matters which touch on the Old Testament view of revelation, and for this we are presupposing the numerous studies on this subject which have appeared in recent years. However, the primary questions which we are posing here emerge only indirectly from the Old Testament. They stem immediately from our common assumptions about and reconstructions of the Israelite tradition process, and thus also from the investigative method of modern tradition historians (and neither of these is by any means a uniform phenomenon!). There is only one other, very brief study that has dealt with part of this problem about the implications of a postulated tradition for the concept of revelation, and that is G. Gloege, *Offenbarung und Überlieferung: Ein dogmatischer Entwurf*, ThF 6 (Hamburg-Volksdorf: Reich, 1954).

lytical and historical method, we will be most attentive to the human sphere where the tradition is formed and transmitted. It remains to be seen whether at this level one should think more in terms of human passive *reception* of revelation or human active *participation* in the revelatory experience.

Some initial comments about the Old Testament understanding of revelation would be in order. Recent investigations have demonstrated that there is no technical terminology reserved for revelation in this literature.[3] Verbal forms which are used to refer to the frequent occasions when God manifests himself, his will, or his power all occur in secular usage as well: *glh*, "uncover, disclose"; *r'h*, "see" and "be seen"; niphal and hiphil of *yd'*, "make oneself known," "make known"; hiphil of *ngd*, "make known, tell." In addition there is the expression *kĕbôd YHWH*, "the glory of Yahweh," and the important formula of divine self-presentation, *'ănî YHWH*, "I am Yahweh."[4] Yet with the frequency with which these and similar terms occur, it would surely be impossible to find a uniform concept of revelation behind all of the occasions of divine involvement throughout the Old Testament. Moreover, it is methodologically incorrect for us to restrict Old Testament revelation only to those passages where these terms are found. This is all the more obvious if we consider the diverse modes by which Yahweh works and can make his will known or through which persons can recognize his presence and power: the sacred lot, divination, dreams, natural occurrences and even nature itself, the spoken or written word of his messengers, historical

3. Cf. especially H. Haag, "'Offenbarung' in der hebräischen Bibel," *ThZ* 16 (1960), 251–58; R. Rendtorff, "Die Offenbarungsvorstellungen im Alten Israel," in *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, ed. W. Pannenberg, 3d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 21–41 = "The Concept of Revelation in Ancient Israel," in *Revelation as History*, ed. W. Pannenberg (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 23–53; and R. Knierim, "Offenbarung im Alten Testament," in *Probleme biblischer Theologie*, Festschrift G. von Rad, ed. H. W. Wolff (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1971), 206–35. The reader is referred to these for detailed discussions on the basis of numerous examples.

4. On the latter, cf. W. Zimmerli, "Ich bin Jahwe" (1953), *Gottes Offenbarung: Gesammelte Aufsätze zum Alten Testament*, ThB 19 (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1963), 11–40.

acts, his name itself, his covenant, his promises, his faithfulness, his law, diverse cultic institutions, and others.[5] In light of such diversity it seems quite appropriate to argue[6] that in ancient Israel, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East (or even today in the Western world), revelation was not only a theological matter but also an ontological, epistemological, and cosmological one. What conditioned the people's ready tendency to recognize God's presence in so many phenomena was quite simply their fundamental view of reality and thus their capacity to apprehend it. This preconditioning is itself one facet of the tradition process, as we shall see below.

Quite correctly, James Barr[7] has discerned the basic reason why a clear concept of revelation was not developed in the Old Testament as it has been in modern theology: its function then was not like its function now. Whereas today the concept of revelation serves to oppose current denials of God's existence and also to distinguish divine knowledge from information gained through science, the ancient Israelites did not face such situations to any significant degree. There was virtually no disbelief in God or the gods, nor was there doubt that the deity would relate to the people.[8] There was no rationalism or positivistic historicism to present the problem of how one could know or say anything about God and divine matters. Revelation is not a leading, mandatory concept in the Old Testament in the same way as are, for example, the distinctive nature of

5. On several of these, cf. H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), pp. 23–47; and various publications by H. W. Robinson, such as his *Redemption and Revelation in the Actuality of History* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1942), pp. 95ff.

6. As Knierim has done, in *Probleme biblischer Theologie*, pp. 208ff.

7. J. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1966), pp. 82ff., especially pp. 88–90; cf. also W. Joest, *Fundamentaltheologie*, ThW 11 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1974), p. 29.

8. The "only" problem which could face them was the absence, hiddenness, or inactivity of God—or stated from the other direction: the inability of humans to elicit response from God at will. This dilemma, which was shared with others in the ancient Near East, is a fundamental human problem with far-reaching theological consequences. Cf. K. H. Miskotte, *When the Gods Are Silent* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1967); L. Perlitt, "Die Verborgenheit Gottes," in *Probleme biblischer Theologie* (see note 3 above), 367–82; and on the resultant "crisis of revelation," also Knierim, in *Probleme biblischer Theologie*, pp. 230–35.

Yahweh, the meaning of "people," the understanding of covenant. It was not some doctrine of revelation but rather the import of the tradition that functioned in polemics and self-appraisal—to turn the people away from false gods and destructive ways and to help them recognize that the true God was in their midst. And this very process, like the historical situations themselves, was always in motion. Thus, rather than there being a static depositum which defined once and for all the entire terms of the true religion in Israel, "what matters is the question of what more will be added to that which is known; or, whether that which is known has already been falsified by the use and interpretation which men have made of it; or, in what ways and under what conditions this knowledge is to be spread abroad to those hitherto outside of the tradition; or, in what way elements within that which was known are now to be replaced or rejuvenated through new relations."[9]

This, then, thrusts us into a different situation. Instead of being guided primarily by our own philosophical and confessional preferences as we attempt to understand revelation in Israel, we should be more attuned to the Israelites' own structures. Two currently popular theological schemes based on distinct models of revelation—one virtually equating revelation with history and the other defining revelation strictly in Christocentric terms as the self-revelation of God—are notably inadequate to deal fairly with the entirety of the Old Testament literature.[10] If revelation was not a topic of conscious concern for the Isrealites, we can hope to do them justice only if our approach is oriented toward that with which they were directly engaged: the immediate situation with its human and divine claims. There is a distinct traditio-historical dimension to this because of the role played by tradition in this situation—that is,

9. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation*, pp. 89–90.

10. The former is the program of W. Pannenberg and R. Rendtorff, although there are similarities here also with the "Albright School" of American scholars. The latter is most prominently represented by K. Barth. The extensive literature presenting and criticizing these approaches need not be listed here.

because the people were remembering, actualizing, reinterpreting, reversing, replenishing their heritage from the past. Inasmuch as this tradition is both the witness to revelation and also the scene for further revelation, this process may present us with implications that have not been sufficiently considered by biblical theologians or dogmaticians. For we are approaching revelation along lines of human activity, and not solely in terms of divine initiative. However, a word of caution is in order now, and it will deserve to be emphasized again later: Just as historical sciences are totally inadequate to verify revelation simply by describing the entirety of reality or the specific historical events in which God purportedly worked (this as a deserving criticism of the "revelation as history" idea), in like manner traditio-historical research should not presume that it can pinpoint revelation simply by decribing the tradition process. Revelation can be equated no more with tradition than it can be with history. As directly as the Israelites spoke of God and experienced his presence in their midst, the factor of his ultimate mysteriousness and his resistance to manipulation was never lost to them for long.

## TRADITION AS WITNESS TO REVELATION

Since the Old Testament (as also the New Testament) ceased to be identified in its entirety as the revelation of God, it has become customary in many circles to consider this literature as a *testimony* to divine revelation. This represents a perceptible shift in the understanding of the nature of the traditions that yielded the scripture: the words preserved here do not point immediately and absolutely to God, as if he revealed himself directly in them and remains in some manner incorporated in them. Rather, God is a step removed "behind" the scripture, and the traditions throughout their development and in their final canonical form serve an important function for faith by testifying to his presence and revelation in the past experiences of the people. Thus by "testimony" it is meant that those

verbal accounts which speak of the experienced presence or nature of God intend thereby to constitute a record of (what is perceived to be) God's revelation and its meaning for the people. So understood, these testimonies can be as religiously significant for us as they were for the Israelites—to the extent that we can identify existentially and perhaps historico-genetically with that ancient people.

Closer analysis shows that this phrase, "testimony to divine revelation," has been used in two distinctly different ways. On the one hand, the emphasis falls on the first element, the process of testimony among the people. The classical traditio-historical work by Martin Noth and Gerhard von Rad and also much of the work that followed in their wake[11] seem to be oriented toward the growing tradition and the development of Israel's consciousness of being the people of God. Whatever might have stood at the origin of each tradition—and historically it might be quite minimal in comparison with the later description of it—primary attention is directed to the description itself, that is, its development and function among the people. Accordingly, stress is laid on the kerygmatic objective or intention of texts, the ongoing need to address given cultural and historical challenges.[12] On the other hand and often in direct opposition to this, for others the emphasis falls on the second element, the revelation to which the tradition testifies. Interested especially in recovering the historical events in which Yahweh acted, such scholars as W. F. Albright and G. E. Wright, and from a different angle also F. Hesse and S. Herrmann, find traditio-historical work of value insofar as it does not detract seriously from the original act of revelation.[13] Some-

11. Cf. the discussion of relevant literature in D. A. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel*, rev. ed., SBLDS 9 (Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1975), 71ff.

12. Cf., e.g., the various studies gathered together in W. Brueggemann and H. W. Wolff, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975).

13. Cf. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel*, pp. 131–32, 194–221. A sound, if not devastating, criticism of the Albright and Wright approach can now be found in T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, BZAW 133 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974).

what schematically, we may say that in the former instance tradition (testimony) is understood as an interpreting, actualizing process, whereas for the latter it is considered as a process of remembering and preserving the revelatory essentials.

Surprisingly, this touches on a basic difference in the understanding not only of the traditio-historical method but also of revelation itself. To what does tradition witness, and how important is it that we recover this initial point, the primal divine datum at the onset of a given tradition? Indeed, need there be such a revelatory origin for each or any tradition? The best approach to this problem may be to ask about the *content* of revelation in the Old Testament. Clearly, we do not find here a definitive, total, ontological disclosure of Yahweh's essence or being, nor is he ever experienced directly and fully. Instead, it seems as though the content that is revealed is Yahweh's *will*.[14] This cannot be found in its entirety at one single place but is given usually in limited, situation-bound form, with the overriding will emerging (at best) from the full series. The concrete forms taken by this divine will are act (ordering, delivering, punishing) and word (usually referring to an act, either antecedently as promise or warning or subsequently as interpretation). There is good reason for us to consider the divine name itself, Yahweh, as the quintessence of this revelation in the sense that it is disclosed that the God who is here involved is Yahweh and not some other deity.[15] In the usual Hebraic sense, the name is not a mere label but signifies the full reality of the one bearing that name. Yet at the same time this name of Yahweh cannot be reduced to a tangible, exploitable object with exhaustive content. With Zimmerli, we should recognize

14. Cf. G. von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 5th ed., vols. 1 and 2 (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1966 and 1968), passim = *Old Testament Theoolgy*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1962 and 1965), passim.

15. For more discussion and literature on this, cf. W. Zimmerli, *Grundriss der alttestamentlichen Theologie*, ThW 3 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1972), 12–15; H.-J. Kraus, *Reich Gottes: Reich der Freiheit* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975), pp. 101ff.; Knierim, in *Probleme biblischer Theologie*, pp. 216ff.; and somewhat critically, R. Rendtorff, "Geschichte und Wort im Alten Testament" (1962), in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, ThB 57 (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1975), especially pp. 66–68.

Exod. 3:14 not as an absolute definition of Yahweh but as an underscoring of his identity and a statement of his freedom to act as he chooses in order to cause people to recognize his presence and power.

Thus the content of the revelation must be something complex and probably nonpropositional in character. The fact that it is usually anchored or at least perceived in some specific historical situation leads us to the important question of its *purpose,* and this is something which is implied already in the concept of Yahweh's *will.* Gloege[16] considers revelation historical in three senses: (a) the revelation has the character of *personal event* in which God with his will approaches humanity; (b) it confronts persons with the necessity of making a *decision;* and (c) it happens on *the plane of real history* and can affect institutions and ordinances of the community. Thus understood, this "structure" of revelation in the Old Testament has both a personal (a and b) and a concrete (c) side. By not restricting revelation to a simple unilateral act of God, Gloege has perceived the essential character of the Old Testament phenomenon: the purpose of revelation necessitates that the "recipients" play an important role.[17] And this is also a process: the implications of revelation need to be drawn out, and new generations can be confronted with a decision so long as the tradition is present to witness to the past and, through interpretation, to put the demands before the people anew.

In light of this, it appears that the question of an absolute, primal revelatory datum in the ideal sense of something to which later tradition "simply" witnesses (= recollects, remembers, preserves in memory) yields a contorted picture of Old

16. Gloege, *Offenbarung und Überlieferung,* pp. 23–25. It should be noted, however, that the Old Testament understanding of God's revelation in all of creation would have to be strained considerably to fit Gloege's pattern.

17. In the second section below, we will argue that Gloege has not carried this principle far enough—at least not if we consider the implications of traditio-historical work. Cf. also W. McKane, "Tradition as a Theological Concept," in *God, Secularization, and History: Essays in Memory of Ronald Gregor Smith,* ed. E. T. Long (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1974), pp. 44–59.

Testament revelation. To state it schematically again, a given act of revelation is not a punctiliar event limited to the original historical situation in which it occurred, but ideally it is a durative confrontation—sometimes with, but often without an identifiable, retrievable origin. Yahweh did not act in the exodus only for the benefit of that generation, and the Israelites were constantly enjoined not to forget those benefits and claims on them (Exod. 12:26–27; 13:14–16; Deut. 6:20–25; Ps. 78:1–8). As long as the tradition remained a vibrant, growing witness, the revelation continued and Yahweh's will and identity would be known.

Examples from several levels may elucidate this testimonial character of tradition and thus also the inadequacy of the concept of a primal revelatory depositum.

The first has to do with the Decalogue, considered by many (especially outside of the Old Testament discipline) as the prime example of God's revelation to Israel. What has traditio-historical (and form-critical) work uncovered here? For one thing, the Decalogue's relation to the Sinai tradition and thus to the whole exodus/Sinai/wilderness/conquest complex is questionable, at least on the basis of internal, literary criteria. However we choose to understand the Sinai tradition and the revelation there, the pericope with these ten commandments stands out as an obvious insertion into the narrative. Analyses of the Decalogue itself have thrown serious doubt on its antiquity in its present form.[18] Although we need not think in terms of a form-critically uniform "primitive Decalogue," most of the commandments experienced an intricate history in which elements were added and deleted in different periods. Most have close parallels in other ancient Near Eastern collections. Even their apodictic form is not unique to the Israelite cult, for the latter six commandments clearly spring from a common

18. Cf. the literature discussed in Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel*, pp. 357–66; also W. H. Schmidt, "Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Erwägungen zur Komposition des Dekalogs," VTS 22 (1972), 201–20.

clan-ethos. We can find shorter and longer lists other than this, and we must conclude that this collection of ten is itself a result of a long process of selection. The primary distinctive characteristics of the Israelite Decalogue thus appear to be: the religious motivation expressed in the opening commandments, and the concise, trim nature of this short compilation of central prohibitions, suitable in this form for recital in the cult. What do all these analytical results suggest about any revelatory depositum, a primary datum given at some point by God and remembered in the tradition? To say that "Israel was placed under the exclusive claim of the divine Lord of the Covenant" or that "the Decalogue was the charter of freedom which Yahweh had presented to his people delivered from Egypt," flies in the face of these analytical results—unless we understand these statements as referring to a long process in which the revelation became realized.[19] Externally, the text witnesses to a divine revelation and the unilateral bestowal of law. Traditio-historically, the text betrays a long developmental process with uncertain and not necessarily revelatory origins (at least not in the sense described in the text), and it testifies not to a single datum in antiquity but to the people's ongoing sense of urgency to face the religious and ethical obligations resulting from their covenant with Yahweh.

The problem of how tradition relates to revelation becomes especially obvious when we consider the self-manifestations of God, the theophanies. Since from all signs the texts in these cases intend to describe—be it in ever so poetic language—acts of divine self-revelation, we need to survey the nature of these traditions in somewhat more detail. Yahweh, either himself or through his angel (*mal'āk*), appears to the patriarchs, to Moses, to leaders, to his prophets, or in the form of his glory (*kābôd*)

19. The statements are from J. J. Stamm and M. E. Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research*, SBT 2/2 (London: SCM, 1967), 113–14. That they perhaps also are thinking of testimony in this interpretive sense seems clear in their final sentence (p. 114): the Decalogue's "significance was, above all, in the position which, from the earliest times on, it came to occupy in the life of ancient Israel."

to those present in the cult. There can be little doubt about the central importance of theophanies in the Israelite faith (probably more so in the earlier period when they found more frequent entry into the literature), as numerous recent studies have demonstrated.[20] Again here the described phenomena themselves are not open to verification,[21] but we can ascertain through literary analysis some of their effect upon the recipients. Thus rather than asking how God actually revealed himself in these cases (as if these were objective phenomena capable of empirical demonstration), we are better advised to frame the questions in this way: how did the Israelites perceive and describe God's direct presence among them, and what are the dynamics through which these perceptions emerged and were incorporated in human tradition? With an eye to such factors figuring into the tradition process, considerable analysis of these testimonies to divine appearances is possible: (a) Certain *formal constancies* can be discovered, at least in imagery and perhaps also in genre. Jeremias finds a genre with two main elements in it: Yahweh's coming and the accompanying tumult of nature. While the latter element seems to have been taken from Israel's neighbors, Jeremias considers (though mistakenly[22]) the former to be distinctly Israelite in origin, under the influence of the Sinai tradition though without a direct literary impress from it. The *"Sitz im Leben"* of this genre was originally the victory songs of the premonarchical period; the proto-

20. For discussions of texts and references to further literature, cf. especially J. Jeremias, *Theophanie: Die Geschichte einer alttestamentlichen Gattung*, WMANT 10 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965); J. K. Kuntz, *The Self-Revelation of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967); and F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

21. Indeed, it seems safe to say that most scholars today would not be willing to affirm that God appeared and acted exactly in the forms described in these theophanic texts. These descriptions can be studied at face-value in terms of form, motifs, function, and their history, but in all such analysis historical criticism is operating, at best, at the third level of symbolism (Ricoeur's *gnosis*) in trying to express differently the experiences stated at the primary or secondary symbolic levels by the ancient Israelites. (These categories are adapted from the suggestive structure of Paul Ricoeur; cf. especially his *The Symbolism of Evil* [Boston: Beacon, 1969].)

22. Cf. F. Schnutenhaus, "Das Kommen und Erscheinen Gottes im Alten Testament," *ZAW* 76 (1964), 1–21.

type is found in Judg. 5:4–5.[23] Even after this genre was removed from this cultic matrix, it continued for centuries to have an effect on theophanic descriptions in Israel—in psalms and hymns, in prophetic utterances, in narratives, and in apocalyptic visions. (b) Certain affinities with *extra-Israelite theophanic descriptions* can also be determined, for it was not only in Israel that a deity sought contact with humans, that is, that humans felt contacted by a god. Besides the above-mentioned divine approach and the tumult of nature, there are numerous other motifs that Israel shared with her neighbors, for example, storm and thunder, images of warfare, chaos, fire, royal images. Thus in the wider sphere as also in Israel there was a definite interest in such divine manifestations, and much of the imagery employed was not of Israel's own making. (c) Besides the form and motifs, certain *theological beliefs* seem to guide these theophanic descriptions in the Old Testament. Among these are: it is Yahweh who initiates the theophany (although persons can cultically appeal for a revelation); Yahweh's self-manifestation is always only partial and allusive; it is so tremendous that it induces fear and dread in the recipient or observer;[24] divine disclosures are not arbitrary or capricious, but for specific purposes and usually to special persons; theophanic holiness is frequently juxtaposed with human sin and atonement; the use of anthropomorphisms in the theophanies is deemed appropriate because of the Israelite belief in Yahweh as a personal and living God, not because they conceived of him as having essentially a human form;[25] throughout Israel's history it is not an unknown god who discloses himself, who comes as if from a

23. Somewhat differently, Cross (*Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, especially pp. 147ff.) finds two theophanic genres in Canaanite and early Hebrew poetry: the march of the Divine Warrior to battle, and the return of the Divine Warrior to assume kingship. The mythic pattern behind them was replaced in early Israel by an epic pattern, and the battles fought by Yahweh the Divine Warrior were particularized temporally and spatially as the battles of the exodus and the conquest. Cross associates the revelation at Sinai with the second genre.

24. These first three matters are discussed in Kuntz, *The Self-Revelation of God*, pp. 28–45.

25. Cf. J. Barr, "Theophany and Anthropomorphism in the Old Testament," VTS 7 (1960), 31–38; and Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation*, p. 22.

distance and without a distinct identity, but rather it is the same Yahweh who has been known and worshiped in Israel since early times. (d) The immediate and lasting *effect* of the theophany can be traced—whether on clans,[26] tribes, leaders, prophets,[27] those in the cult,[28] or whomever. Also the recognition-formula, "that you may know that I am Yahweh," can figure into this.[29] In sum, what do these theophanies contribute to our understanding of Old Testament revelation? Indeed they are generally presented as unilateral divine acts, and yet there is a distinctly human dimension to their expression in tradition. Biblical scholarship has focused as much on the latter dynamic as on the former, and quite appropriately so because of the important role played here by the people's ontological preunderstandings (*Vorverständnis*) and because of the function and history of the traditions themselves. From this we must conclude that the theophanic descriptions are not objective or reportorial accounts but testimonies to what the people perceived or experienced as divine encounters. While it may be inevitable that we say this because of our historicism and rationalism, we must also be clear that we are thereby perhaps departing from the form and spirit of the literature itself.[30]

26. Note especially the considerable discussion on this subject since A. Alt's pioneering thesis about the cult-founding revelations to the various patriarchs; "Der Gott der Väter" (1929) = "The God of the Fathers," in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 1–77.

27. Perhaps the best example is Jeremiah who, without doubting that he had been called or that Yahweh continued to put his word in him, nevertheless struggled mightily with the consequences which this had for him. Cf. also discussions in I. P. Seierstad, *Die Offenbarungserlebnisse der Propheten Amos, Jesaja und Jeremia*, 2d ed. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1965).

28. Here the priestly *kābôd* concept is important, as also the priestly oracle. This whole subject about divine manifestations in the cult is vital for understanding the Israelites' concept of revelation, but it will not be treated further here. Cf. instead, e.g., the recent articles (with references to further literature) on *kābôd* (glory) and *pānîm* (face) in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. E. Jenni and C. Westermann, vols. 1 and 2 (München: Chr. Kaiser; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1971 and 1976), s.v.

29. W. Zimmerli, "Erkenntnis Gottes nach dem Buche Ezechiel" (1954), in his *Gottes Offenbarung*, 41–119; and "Das Wort des göttlichen Selbsterweises (Erweiswort), eine prophetische Gattung" (1957), in ibid., 120–32.

30. That a certain skepticism among the Israelites themselves about specific instances of divine appearances and revelations was also possible can be seen most clearly in the problem of false prophecy. Cf. the instructive discussion by J. L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict*, BZAW 124 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971).

Yet on the other hand this testimonial characterization seems to accord well with the way theophanies function in the Old Testament itself—in confessionals, in praises and in acts of legitimation (e.g., of a cultic place).

But revelation for the Israelites was much more extensive and fundamental than only this, and the Old Testament literature describes God's involvement in human affairs also in other ways than just what can be form-critically classified as theophanies. Such literary types as myths, legends, folktales,[31] historical narratives, parenesis, even psalms and instructions often intend to incorporate, either directly or indirectly, something of divine revelation.

A good example is the myth. Paul Ricoeur has done biblical scholarship a great service with his phenomenological analysis of the symbolic nature of myth, his case in point being the myths about the origin and nature of evil.[32] Stated briefly, his thesis is that myth is a symbol developed in narrative form, and as such it constitutes the secondary level after the primary attempt to express the experienced human phenomenon with elementary verbal symbols. Thus myth is disclosure (may we add "testified"?) in that it explicates, directly but not "rationally," the connection between the human and what is considered divine. In its three functions of expressing concrete universality, temporal direction, and ontological exploration, myth has its own mode of revelation which resists facile transfer to another clear language by means of allegorical interpretation. Yet for us who live and think in an age when myth and history are no longer bound together, it is finally possible through "demythologization" (not "demythization") to understand myth as myth, that is, to comprehend its symbolic nature and its disclosing power as a stage beyond the primal symbols. Thus, discovering the experiential sphere which the myth ex-

31. For an intriguing example of the testimonial potential of folktales, cf. E. Haller, "Märchen und Zeugnis: Auslegung der Erzählung 2 Könige 4,1–7," in *Probleme biblischer Theologie* (see note 3 above), pp. 108–15.

32. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*; cf. also discussions in *Die Eröffnung des Zugangs zum Mythos*, ed. K. Kerényi, WF 20 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967).

poses can constitute for us an existential verification of the testified experience and thereby bring us to the third level of symbolism, that of *gnosis*, of speculation and recognition in categories of understanding devoid of the etiological element in myth. Ricoeur's analysis of the biblical "Adamic myth," under this phenomenological perspective, yields unexpected insights. While his approach is not clearly exegetical, it depends heavily on the results of form-critical and traditio-historical scholarship since Gunkel. Had biblical exegetes not stressed and traced the communal, vital matrix from which the myths emerged, it can be doubted that his thesis about the symbolic function and testimonial nature of myth among the people could have been applied as effectively to the Israelite situation. Yet at the same time, by demonstrating our access to the disclosing power of myth, he has legitimated the modern effort to grasp ancient phenomena (such as tradition) through framing our questions at a level other than those of the ancients.

It is not only myth that can give witness to an experienced disclosure of God or to the divinely ordered essence of life. Other set forms also intend this, although they are not necessarily symbols in the same sense as are myths. Even psalms and wisdom literature, which von Rad considers as Israel's answer to Yahweh's revelation in history, nature, and individual lives,[33] are thus based on the people's belief in God's presence. We do not usually find revelation here in the direct sense of Yahweh's self-manifestation as we see in the theophanies, although theophanic imagery occurs at numerous places throughout. The psalms presuppose prior revelation and thus give witness to it indirectly, through praises and thanksgivings for past divine involvement, appeals for new intercession, ruminations on the divinely ordered nature of things.[34] Something similar could

33. Von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 1, pp. 366ff. = *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 355ff.

34. Von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 1, p. 376 = *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, p. 364: "Israel's artistic *charisma* lay in the realm of narrative and poetry. . . . In the art of making Jahweh and the splendour of his manifestation and his working visible in poetry, Israel was more daring than any other people."

be said for much of wisdom literature, although there is a different thrust to the type of testimony appearing here.[35] Even in a broader sense it may be appropriate for us (although the Israelites may not have seen it like this[36]) to regard the majority of the whole Old Testament as Israel's response to Yahweh, for it was in the development of its tradition that Israel sought to state its beliefs and work out the implications that revelation had for it.

There is one final area that needs our attention—the complex of history, tradition, and revelation.[37] There can be no doubt today that Israel believed that Yahweh acted in its history and that it confessed this in its literature. However, this simple statement can raise numerous questions, and these have stimulated much debate in recent years. How did the Israelites come to this belief—both generally (that Yahweh is a god who acts in history) and specifically (that his presence or intervention is to be seen especially in one event or another)? Was there any development to this belief, such that an interpretation of history in general or of certain individual events in specific emerged in the course of time, rather than that this interpretation accompanied the events themselves and was preserved thereafter? In our own theological and historical work are we to distinguish carefully between Israel's confessional picture of history and the historico-critical reconstruction of what "really happened"—and not be bothered greatly by any discrepancy between these two? Where might revelation be found here—only in the interpretation, only in the events themselves, or indirectly in some careful correlation between the two (thus in history in a broad sense)? What is the relationship between word and deed? Can we determine whether it was the historical

35. See below, Chapter 10 by J. L. Crenshaw.

36. Chr. Barth ("Die Antwort Israels," in *Probleme biblischer Theologie* [see note 3 above], pp. 44–56) has, through semantic and exegetical analysis, sought to restrict the applicability of this term, "Israel's answer," to the Deuteronomic demand for decision. This has good biblical justification yet diminishes the equally valid thrust of von Rad's observations.

37. For more discussion and numerous literature references, cf. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel*, pp. 127–36.

act *or* the interpretative testimony that was more constitutive of Israel? These questions will not occupy our attention at this point, although we will take up some of them later.[38] Here it is sufficient merely to note that much of the Old Testament literature testifies to Yahweh's direct engagement in Israel's history—in calling and guiding the patriarchs, in leading the oppressed people out of Egypt, in guiding them through the wilderness, in giving them the law, in conquering the land, in coming to Zion and founding the Davidic dynasty, in working through other powers to bring doom to Israel and Judah, in releasing them from exile and giving them the land a second time. While modern scholars may question whether such "historical" acts can be classified as revelation in the sense of divine self-disclosure, the Israelites themselves were not concerned with fitting these deeds into some scheme of revelation as we are often inclined to do. For them God's engagement was self-evident (for "all flesh" to recognize, Ezek. 21:10 [21:5]; Isa. 49:26), and they could perceive in it Yahweh's will for his chosen people.

To conclude this section we need to look again at what we mean when we say that tradition is a witness to revelation and why this concept is important. Examples of different order have been given above, and our argument can be restated and expanded in the following summarizing points:

(1) The Old Testament describes many occasions of revelation (both as word and event), but traditio-historical work has taught us the intense difficulty of recovering those occasions. Thus only in an ideal sense can we speak of revelatory deposita at the base of the traditions, for the traditions themselves often experienced such a long and intensive development that precise reconstruction of their origins eludes us in most cases—and in some cases may even be drastically different from the present description in the Old Testament. Thus one service rendered by tradition history is to replace our fascination for absolute

38. Cf. also the discussion by R. Smend, above, Chapter 3.

origins with a need to understand the ensuing process of reflection and existential struggle.

(2) Statements about revelation—both those by the ancient Israelites as well as those by us—are essentially confessional in nature. Consequently, even when (or if) we can recover the revelatory occasion (e.g., the exodus, the prophet's call), the divine dimension is not subject to historico-critical verification —or to disproval. We need to remain clear about this, even though such a consideration would have been foreign to the Israelites. For after all, as we have noted above, revelation did not function as a doctrine for the Israelites in the same way that it does for us since the Enlightenment.

(3) The striking feature about Israelite tradition is its power of growth. With good reason this power can often be attributed to what happened at the origin of a given tradition, the perhaps revelatory experience which it may describe. This, however, is not to discount later formative impulses (with which we will deal in the next section). It is rather to ask why a testimonial, a tradition, arose in the first place and what gave it its tenacity.

(4) Our access to Old Testament revelation is through the tradition and the tradition process. In light of the above points, our research should focus on this tradition—the formation and function of this testimony. Thereby we are not denying the existence of a history of revelation but are recognizing that our immediate task is to understand the history of the *testimonies* to that revelation. This is especially important because it was in the tradition process that the community was engaged in, among other things, the task of identifying revelation. To describe the dynamics through which this occurred and through which that experienced as revelation was incorporated and retained by tradition, we need to deal with categories of history, society, religion, the demands of life, kerygma, existential choice, and the human relation to what is considered revelation.

(5) A further question concerns the potential and the limi-

tations of tradition to pass on to later generations the revelatory content experienced in previous times. On the one hand, tradition can lend itself to actualization, to formation of solidarity with the past, to apologetics, to confrontation and accusation, to promotion of new efforts to face present and future needs. Yet on the other hand, tradition can be a place of refuge and comfortable security, can be an excuse for institutional conservatism and personal callousness, can stifle rather than promote life.

(6) When the problem is formulated in this way, we are thrust finally upon the ultimate question not of *what* God reveals (whether himself, or truth, or insight, or moral priorities, or whatever), nor of *how* he reveals (whether through word, or action, or all of history)—but of *why* he reveals. In light of the diverse, unconscious witness of the Old Testament to the former two questions, a clear answer to these seems elusive, and there will be differences of opinion among scholars as long as these problems are addressed as if they are of primary importance. But the Old Testament shows more clarity on the third matter, the purpose of God's acts of salvation, of his words of promise and warning, of his acts of punishment, of his disclosure of his identity. These occur so that the people might recognize Yahweh's lordship, and thereby also human responsibility to him and to fellow humans. The phenomenon of tradition is all-important here because in it the claims are developed and placed before each new generation. By means of vibrant tradition and responsible reinterpretation of it the purpose of divine revelation can be fulfilled.

(7) Through our own engagement with the Old Testament tradition it is possible for the purpose of that revelation to which it witnesses to find fulfillment for us as well. This however does not mean that this engagement need take the form of uncritical, pious acceptance of the prima facie affirmations found in the Old Testament. On the contrary. Just as the vitality of the Israelite tradition depended on its promoters' remaining responsive to the changing situations of life and just as that process consequently saw the unceasing emergence of

new ideas, implications, and applications of past insights, so also today our task is to interpret the ancient traditions in light of the historical criticism and the existential needs of our age. The above discussion on the modern approach to myth provides one example of this critical, yet creative analysis that can bring to consciousness truths which for millennia have resisted explicit expression. The task of exegetical interpretation and also of biblical theology is not to restate the meaning of the Old Testament texts in ways which would be appropriate and meaningful to the ancient Israelites—but to us. As did the Israelites, we can find that the greatest service rendered by tradition is not its retention of answers to old questions—but its inadequacy to provide us with simple solutions to our own new problems. Precisely this challenge, coming at the nexus where the past and the future meet the present, is the locus of revelation.

## TRADITION AS LOCUS OF REVELATION

The above section has, without intending to probe all aspects of the phenomenon of revelation in the Old Testament, sought to determine certain implications of traditio-historical research for our understanding of that revelation. In essence, it has drawn attention away from the revelation itself and has directed it instead to the history and the (often testimonial) nature of the traditions. This same shift, we might note, appears to be effected—perhaps unintentionally—by most traditio-historical investigations themselves. In the present section we will want to refine the above discussion on the relationship between tradition and revelation, especially at two points: the potential of tradition to promote *and* to hinder revelation.

In identifying tradition as a "locus" of revelation we are purposely avoiding the terms "mode" and "depositum." The latter would suggest that revelation is a static quantum which can be reduced to words, contained in tradition, and then apprehended by others (either then or now) who become familiar with these traditions. The Old Testament would stand in direct opposition to such a notion, for Yahweh is not bound by

what people tell about him but is ever free to break common expectations and to appear in new and radical ways. Similarly, tradition cannot be considered a "mode" of revelation in the strict, direct sense of the "how" of revelation, that is, a form which Yahweh can use to channel the new communication of his will to the people (as with visions, angels, the sacred lot, the oracle). Both of these notions run aground on the essentially backward orientation of the *traditum*, the transmitted material with its testimonial character. The term "locus" is more appropriate because the tradition, both in *traditum* and *traditio*, constitutes the context of revelation. It does this in two respects: it provides the categories for apprehending and understanding revelation, and it is the springboard for new revelatory occasions.

In the first instance, *tradition constitutes the pre-understanding (Vorverständnis) and precondition for revelation*, and this is the case not simply because it precurses temporally a given revelatory occasion. Tradition delivers the framework—intellectual, historical, religious, hermeneutical—needed for a new event or word to be meaningful. It incorporates ethos and ontological structures, thus the predilections, priorities, pre-understandings, and linguistic patterns of a whole people or a subgroup within it (the latter of which usually will have a clear profile distinct from other groups—e.g., Rechabites, Levites, and priests in Israel).[39] This fundamental role of tradition in providing for each generation both the categories of understanding and the ground for personal meaning is underscored by modern philosophy.[40] It can easily be seen to be the case in the Israelite situation, especially with respect to how the presence of tradition bolstered the people's apprehension of revelation.

39. Cf. also the discussion by O. H. Steck, below, Chapter 8.

40. Cf., e.g., H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 2d ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965), especially pp. 250ff.; A. Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967); and Schutz and T. Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

On the plane of historical events, for example, the exodus would have been a simple case of slaves' making a fortuitous escape—if there had been no belief in a god who intervenes benevolently in human affairs; the settlement of the land would have appeared as a not uncommon shift of semi-nomads to sedentary life—if there had been no notion of a god who promises land to the tribes; David's establishment of Jerusalem as the capital of his empire would have been merely a political and strategic choice—if the city had known no cult tradition which could combine effectively with its new political significance and other elements to form a powerful image of Zion as the dwelling place of Yahweh; the prophets' message would at many points have been incomprehensible—if the people had not recognized the allusions to past events and the often radical reinterpretation of them; the fall of Jerusalem and the deportation of the people would have had the finality of innumerable other such events in the history of the world—if the exiles had not recognized that it was the deserved punishment about which the prophets had spoken. On the plane of tradition, the literary context in which a narrative, a law, a prophetic utterance, a wisdom maxim is remembered affects the sense of it. Even the introduction of the divine name Yahweh (Exod. 3:15; 6:3) is effected through reference to the people's prior experience and knowledge. Similarly, ideas, notions, problems—as radically new and different as they may seem—do not enter the human sphere as if into a vacuum, but always find structures present which enable the people to comprehend them and relate to them. And at the foundation, as we have noted earlier, the very ontological and epistemological views which allowed the Israelites to perceive revelation as they did were elements of the heritage they shared with the ancient Near East. Thus it can be seen that tradition, by forming the framework in which revelation can be recognized as revelation and appropriated as a meaningful occurrence, participates in that revelatory occasion as a necessary precondition.

Secondly, *tradition is a locus of revelation insofar as it serves*

*as the occasion or springboard for such revelation.* For all the importance of tradition in passing down structures of understanding and meaning, its recipients did not always, perhaps not even usually, appropriate its content uncritically or unreflectively. To a great extent they remained in dialogue with the antecedent tradition—and at the same time in dialogue with their own times.[41] In this respect we can see a tension between the tradition and the given new situation. The new age could raise problems for which the tradition had no ready answer, and the tradition could force perspectives and demands on the new epoch which strictly speaking do not emerge from this new situation alone. Of course, it was the given generation or group or individual that was caught here in the middle and that had to address this tension. This gave rise to interpretation—whether creative or conservative, responsible or irresponsible in light of the pressing human and divine claims. It was often, but not always, coupled with a kerygmatic intention. What was interpreted was not only the tradition about Yahweh's great deeds in Israel's past—but anything (laws, instructions, promises, narratives, prophetic utterances) that was included in their heritage and that had or could be made to have a direct meaning for the present. It is the mere presence of the tradition that stimulates this engagement, that occasions the need to do more than merely acquiesce unthinkingly to one's situation. The outcome of each such instance of tension between tradition and the present can (though of course may not) in turn be incorporated in the tradition for later generations. This is the vibrant process which yielded the Old Testament, a multiplex and intricate record of many persons' strugglings with the demands

41. For example, the essence of "*Vergegenwärtigung*" (actualization, re-presentation; cf. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel*, pp. 5–6) is not that the past acts of God are re-told or re-presented (usually in the cult but also elsewhere, as in the family) merely for antiquarian purposes, as if simply to secure agreement that they had happened in the past. The purpose is rather to create a situation in which the people of a new generation can feel affected by the past events, can realize the implications for their own lives, can open themselves to the continued impact of previous revelation. But for this to be effected, interpretation geared to the new situation was mandatory, and through accumulation of such interpretations the tradition itself grew.

of life, old and new, human and divine. That we find here failures as well as successes attests to this process—and to the irreplaceable worth of the Old Testament. It was on this stage that revelation (in Gloege's sense of God's personal and concrete confrontation with humanity) had to occur—in the human struggle of facing present needs, informed by the past and concerned for the future.

The implication of this whole picture is clear. We need to claim for humanity a more significant, active role in the revelatory process than is commonly done.[42] In this, however, the human struggle, seen formally as the reception and reinterpretation of tradition, is not being equated in its entirety with revelational discernment. For one thing there are too many examples of human insensitivity and apostasy throughout this process, and secondly the Old Testament tends to picture God as the initiator of his revelation. Furthermore, the tradition process, even in its best moments, cannot elicit or procure revelation in a formal sense (although we might assume that the Israelites, like us, would be interested in gaining as much information as possible about the nature and will of God). Yet to the extent that there is revelation in the Old Testament literature, the occasion for it must have been the tradition process which produced this literature, in the circle of that human community. In a real sense the quest for the terms of the just life in communion with Yahweh was no mean enterprise. The nature and responsibility of humanity (Gen. 1:26–27) had to be pursued by all people and in all situations anew. This was especially the case in times when radical discontinuity, triggered

42. It is a significant deficit of Gloege's outline on the relation between revelation and tradition that he did not consider more of the implications of this formative creative process. Our thesis raises, of course, fundamental questions about the definition of revelation. Perhaps it is wisest first to admit the ultimate mysteriousness of divine disclosure, of God's communication with humans. Then one cannot a priori restrict the definition to the *self*-revelation of God. To the extent that God is engaged in life in this world, revelation will aim to serve the purposes which he sets for this life, and thus the revealed content may not always be identifiable with the personhood of God—except perhaps in a rather extended or indirect sense.

by historical reversals or social change, yielded a need for reassessment and redirection.[43] Revelation could enter into the process of legitimate quest—just as God could also break unexpectedly upon the scene of apostasy and injustice.

A series of brief examples will help to elucidate these two points, viz., that the tradition carries structures of meaning and that the tradition process creates new meaning.

The first example is the one with which we concluded the previous section: the complex of history, tradition, and revelation. As is well known, von Rad has argued forcefully, supported also by the work of Noth, that the concept of a "linear historical span," embracing numerous events in which Yahweh intervened, emerged in Israel during a long process of interpreting those events through tradition formation, fusion, and arrangement.[44] This linear course of salvific events came to constitute the Pentateuch (von Rad: Hexateuch), just as the later picture of God's continued activity despite Israel's failures was developed into the Deuteronomistic History and the Chronicler's History. Whatever happened in the "real" course of history and however God may have acted in those events, for von Rad and Noth these "pictures of history" were the result of processes of human awareness and interpretation of divine activity. It does not do to dismiss these kerygmatic interpretations as "unhistorical" figments of the imagination; they spring out of the people's experience of history and constitute a world of meaning which as such was also an historical reality, even if we often tend to consider its nature different from that of an incident or "event."[45] The pictures serve an essential function

43. Cf. especially the discussion of P. R. Ackroyd, below, Chapter 9; and Knierim's comments on the "crisis of revelation," in *Probleme biblischer Theologie*, pp. 230ff.

44. Von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 2, pp. 108ff. = *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, pp. 99ff.

45. Actually, it is misleading to contrast the event and the interpretation too sharply; cf. R. Smend's discussion on the complex relationship between tradition and history, above, Chapter 3. J. Barr's most recent statement, "Story and History in Biblical Theology," *JR* 56 (1976), 1–17, suggests that we should substitute the concept of story for that of history if we wish to grasp the essential theological thrust of the Old Testament or at least of its narrative corpus. Barr has

for faith, and without them the events would be disconnected incidents of divine engagement, with no larger purpose stretching beyond the accomplishment of the isolated acts. Israel's release from Egypt would be on the same plane as that of the Philistines from Caphtor and of the Arameans from Kir.[46] But the point is that divine revelation which took the form of historical events would, in order to be comprehensible, also have to find its complementary expression in human language and become a part of human tradition. And traditio-historical research would suggest that such expression usually occurred not all at once close to the time of the events, but in the whole process in which the tradition emerged.

The creation traditions in Gen. 1–2 can be seen to be a locus of revelation in several respects. Even if a fully developed theology of creation appeared only later in Israel's history, wonder and speculation about the origin of the world and of humanity were such common features in the ancient Near East (as in most cultures) that we can suspect that they contributed to the framework of understanding the events experienced in Egypt, in the wilderness, and in the newly settled land. The traditions themselves about creation do not obviously have their origin in a word of God, and they can hardly be traced back to the event itself.[47] Their origins lie in an impenetrable past, and we can do little more than observe similar motifs in other literature and attempt to draw whatever lines of connection we can. The significant aspect that can account for the rise of these traditions is human grappling with the existential condi-

---

certainly touched an important point here, especially with respect to the final form of the narrative, and he can muster much support from modern discussions on the theology of story and storytelling. Yet it is not entirely clear how this characterization of the literature is to do justice to the long history of the traditions, nor how the term "story" can be applied meaningfully to the non-narrative materials of the Old Testament.

46. Amos' relativizing utterance in 9:7 can be seen as a needed rebuke of the tendency in Israel to assume, because of their picture of history, that they could claim special privilege in Yahweh's eyes.

47. Despite the views of Calvin, Chemnitz, Pascal, and Astruc; cf. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel*, pp. 41–42.

tions and mysteries of life.[48] Any revelation which we see in these chapters will seemingly need to be amenable to this base point.

The formation of the Israelite concept of her deity demonstrates also this important process of tradition growth. Since the people in all periods presumably believed in a god and probably gave no thought to any developments in their concept of him,[49] they included in their literature no single definitive description of how they originally came to know him (as if it could be located at a specific point, with no antecedent or preparatory basis). The description in Gen. 12:1–3 at the outset of the people's burgeoning self-consciousness—quite aside from the fact that it is commonly attributed to the later Yahwist as an ad hoc literary construction—does not serve this purpose. Similarly, the various divine self-presentations (e.g., Gen. 17:1; Exod. 3:6) do not constitute some initial introduction of a concept into a situation in which there was absolutely no belief in gods or in which a totally contrary view of deity existed.[50] Consequently, scholars have sought elsewhere for ways to account for the Israelite concept. From all indications it appears that it is a conflation of numerous elements from the surrounding regions, each providing distinctive traits and the language to express them. Cross has recently argued that the main features can be detected in Canaanite and early Hebrew poetry; the conflation was of 'Ēl (the god of the fathers, the

48. Cf. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*; and C. Westermann, *Genesis*, vol. 1 (chs. 1–11), BK 1/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, [1966] 1974), pp. 91–92.

49. Until perhaps the syncretism had been carried dangerously far, as, e.g., Elijah perceived.

50. Knierim's characterization of the self-presentation formula, *'ănî YHWH*, as a "revelation *sui generis*" (in *Probleme biblischer Theologie*, pp. 222ff.) is misleading. As Zimmerli (in *Gottes Offenbarung*, pp. 26ff.) and Rendtorff (in *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, pp. 32–33) have discussed, both Gunkel and Gressmann found that this formula actually originated in polytheism where a god, in appearing to someone, would often identify himself so that he would not be mistaken for another god. It thus cannot be considered a revelation unique *to* Israel, although it might be uniquely *Yahweh* who uses it in Israel. Quite another question is whether this formula played a role in the formation of Israel's *concept* of God.

warrior leading his covenant-people, the creator-progenitor) and Ba'al (the storm god, the dragon killer, the creator-cosmic ruler).[51] However we are to picture this conflation, it seems certain that the Israelite view of God was something that emerged in the course of time, bore imprints from diverse sources, gradually separated itself consciously from its oriental environment, and with time exerted an increasingly significant influence on the Israelite traditions. What does this do to the concept of revelation? If the Israelites grew to know their God in this way, it would mean either that revelation had to occur in small installments at several different times—or that it was based in the human questing and reflecting process itself as the people moved through history. It would be a mistake to consider this any more accidental or haphazard than is history itself. Rather, it was a vital, cumulative, and probably conscious process of seeking to determine the contours of revelation. The impact which this emerging concept of their God Yahweh had for the Israelites certainly played a, indeed *the* fundamental role in the formation of their tradition. And the people's search for full understanding of the nature of their God had not stopped even by the time their biblical history reached an end.

To dramatize this thesis about human tradition as a locus of revelation we will allude briefly to two other cases. In the book of Ruth we do not find a god who acts terrifyingly in historical events. Yahweh here is a hidden God working through the human sphere to fulfill his purposes (2:12, 20; 4:13–14). From all signs it is the humans who do the struggling and thus bring about their own salvation. Yet God is nonetheless present and active at all points. This is one of numerous examples[52] of certain narrators' moving away from the portrayal

51. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, passim. An earlier study by W. H. Schmidt deals with many of the issues related to the development of Israel's concept of God: *Alttestamentlicher Glaube und seine Umwelt: Zur Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Gottesverständnisses* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968).

52. Cf. von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 1, pp. 62–70 = *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 48–56, for other such cases. See also P. Trible, "Two Women in a Man's World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth," *Soundings* 59 (1976), 251–79.

of sacral events as the primary plane of God's actions. This occasional but decided preference for the least visible form of divine intervention may also give us grounds to suggest that, at all other periods as well, God's action (and thus also his revelation) might have occurred in the context of human struggles with the conditions of life—and that means also in the vital process of tradition reception and formation.

The final example may appear to be an unlikely one: the wisdom tradition as a locus of revelation. It is common for studies of Old Testament revelation to omit completely any consideration of wisdom.[53] In large measure this is due to the tendency today to define revelation solely in terms of divine *self*-revelation and to see history as the main sphere of God's activity. Thus, Wright is led to a highly problematic, even tendentious conclusion: "Wisdom literature is not the center of the scriptural canon; it is peripheral to it."[54] The problem is not so simple as this, neither literarily, theologically, or historically —as recent studies on the influence of wisdom in diverse parts of the Old Testament have shown. To be sure, the sage's word is not obviously revelatory. It is not oracular but is continuous with the world. The primary motivation evidently is to determine and to teach the structuredness of the world and the art of living. Instructions ranged over all facets of human existence: ways to deal with other people (the wise and the foolish, the disadvantaged, strangers, women), the managing of money, table manners, right speech and right silence, behavior at the royal court, and many more. It is not at all apparent that this could have anything to do with revelation—until we consider the sage's point of departure: "the fear of Yahweh is the begin-

53. This includes also the above-mentioned studies by Rendtorff, Zimmerli, Gloege, and (for all practical purposes) Kuntz and Knierim. Cf. however J. C. Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946); several passages in von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 1, pp. 382ff. = *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 370ff.; and also Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation*, pp. 72–74.

54. G. E. Wright, "Historical Knowledge and Revelation," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament*, Festschrift H. G. May, ed. H. T. Frank and W. L. Reed (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), p. 291.

ning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10; 1:7; 15:33; Ps. 111:10). Wisdom generally presupposes membership in the covenant community and reverent obedience to the divine will. From this base point the sage could seek to determine the rational ordering of the world, the limits set on humanity by God, and the most propitious means of conducting the daily affairs of life. The last enterprise had little to do with revelation expressly; it was a process of reason, common sense, and experience. Yet there was a clear notion that Yahweh stood behind wisdom per se (cf. *ḥokmat 'ĕlōhîm* in 1 Kgs. 3:28; also 5:9 [4:29]; Exod. 28:3 and 31:3; and even Gen. 41:16, 38–39). Precisely at the connection between world order (or creation) and Yahweh's will the sapiential circles related—indeed identified—cosmic wisdom with divine revelation (e.g., Ps. 104:24; Prov. 3:19–20; cf. Jer. 10:12). As von Rad states, "the word which calls man to life and salvation is the same word as that which as wisdom already encompassed all creatures at Creation. It is the same word which God himself made use of as a plan at his creation of the world."[55] Knowledge of order and of the world is indeed limited (cf. Job 38ff.; Eccl.), although it is the sage who with his reason can make the most of what we do know of this—and thus also of Yahweh's power and will. We can consequently see that revelation is by no means irrelevant for the wisdom tradition and is not merely limited to the plane of historical events. What is striking for our purposes here is that the means of apprehension were the human processes of reason and immediate observation.

One more aspect to our understanding of tradition as a locus of revelation needs to be faced directly, and this is a negative one: *tradition as a hindrance to revelation.* By no means must we esteem all tradition and all stages in the process of tradition formation so highly that we fail to see that, at many points in Israel's history, it was precisely the misuse and misinterpretation of past tradition that caused severe problems for the

55. Von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 1, pp. 464–65 = *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, p. 450.

people. Much of prophetic preaching was directed precisely at this point.[56] Not all Old Testament tradition can be said to be based on revelation or to promote its apprehension by later generations. The same, in fact, could be asserted for religion itself—a problem which the prophets also perceived. Tradition has power simply because it is antecedent to us and implies experiential truths, and this makes its potential for constraint as great or greater than its potential for vitalization.[57]

It is not easy for us to find criteria for discerning legitimate witnesses to revelation and legitimate occasions of new revelatory insight, but two negative conditions stand out. Although these are formulated in our terms, it can be argued that they accord with the intent of the Old Testament itself with respect to the role of past tradition: (a) *An interpretation should not tend to petrify earlier revelation or its interpretation, absolutizing it into a convention that stifles rather than promotes life.* This would pervert revelation by thwarting its original purpose. A few examples of this problem and the way it was overcome:[58] In the face of barbaric and excessive principles of punishment for purposes of social control among other primitive peoples, the *lex talionis* (Exod. 21:23–25; Lev. 24:17ff.; Deut. 19:21) arose in order to limit measureless vengeance to no more than equal recompense; yet this in turn needed to be softened further in other later laws (and explicitly also in Matt. 5:38ff.). The concept of inter-generational punishment (e.g., Exod. 34:7), underscoring the absolute importance of obedience to Yahweh and forming a basis of the Deuteronomistic theology of history, became so oppressive to the people in exile

56. Numerous examples of this are given in the discussion by W. Zimmerli, above, Chapter 4, and need not be repeated here.

57. Cf., e.g., Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation*, pp. 190–91, and also p. 32: "But it is within the tradition, where man uses that which is God-given to form structures of disobedience to God, that the most deceptive and dangerous forms of sin have to be looked for."

58. Post-exilic treatment of the law cannot simply be classified as an example of such absolutizing a tradition into a convention, for its intent under Ezra was not to stifle life but to preserve both it and the community's national and religious identity in the face of foreign influences, religious syncretism, and a decline in morale.

(Lam. 5:7) that a word liberating them from their cynicism was needed (Jer. 31:29–30; Ezek. 18). Trust in the presence of Yahweh in the cult and also the conventions of worship there that demanded no moral counterpart in daily life elicited from Jeremiah a strong condemnation and a reordering of priorities (7:1–15). Observant of discrepancies between Yahwistic "orthodoxy" and the realities of life, Job and Qoheleth sought explanations or means whereby they themselves would be able to continue. (b) The second negative condition is that *an interpretation should not give false hopes to persons and thereby diminish the urgency of their coming to terms with their specific situation.* The best example of this is seen in the false prophets, those who in the name of Yahweh and through reference to Israelite traditions sought to fill the people with "false hopes" (Jer. 23:16) by calming them with the anesthetizing words *"šālôm šālôm"* when there was no *šālôm* (6:14 = 8:11). Similarly, the people in the eighth century could look with such satisfaction to the covenantal promise to Abraham and the guarantee of the Davidic dynasty that they neglected the obligations associated with the Sinaitic covenant. Yet the greatest danger possible under both of the above negative conditions was that of perverting the presence of Yahweh into a convention and domesticizing it for manipulative use whenever convenient. The repeated witness of the Old Testament is that such misuse of revelation, of tradition, elicited a severe reprisal from Yahweh. Yet it is striking that even this divine response is often presented as something which the people should have known, that is, if they had had the correct interpretation of tradition and had acted accordingly.

Our understanding of tradition as a locus of revelation elevates the process of tradition formation and transmission to a position of potentially high theological importance. This active participation of humans in the revelatory process affects directly our understanding of revelation in several ways:

(1) Narrow and exclusivistic definitions of what constitutes revelation and how it occurs usually grant only an insignificant,

passive role to human recipients, and this no doubt finds some (though not total) support in the biblical witness itself. Yet by our assuming the growth of tradition in Israel we tacitly shift considerable responsibility onto the people themselves, and it seems that we are best advised to face this squarely and to broaden our definitions as needed, especially in terms of God's involvement in the processes of this world.

(2) Revelatory inspiration becomes "democratized." It is not restricted to a very few chosen individuals, as if it were their private possession or special privilege. All members of the covenant community who participate in the slightest way in the formation of the tradition can be contributing to potentially revelatory occasions. This can be seen especially clearly in the case of the prophets' disciples. In contrast to previous tendencies to classify prophetic utterances as either "genuine" (from the prophet master) or "nongenuine" (from his anonymous disciples), scholars now avoid such prejudicial language since later additions and reworkings can be as theologically and historically important in their own right as the earlier ones. The point is that "traditioning" is a function of the community, and it is not for us to set up a scale of values with clear preferences for one stage or another.

(3) Important features that emerge in the tradition and that then give special thrust to the ongoing process can often be related to revelation. Examples may be the formation of their view of God, the notions of election, of covenant, of historical deliverance, of righteousness, of divine wrath, of apostasy, the essence of faith, the prohibition against idolatry, the importance of social ethics. Such central features, several of which are distinctively Israelite, gave special impetus to the tradition process —not as impulses that in finished form suddenly entered the stream, but as concepts which emerged slowly in the sense that the traditionists continually endeavored to probe their meaning and implications. These have revelatory impact insofar as they indicate the nature of the God to whom the people are to relate. Furthermore, it might be noted, because of this and because

of their importance in the development of the tradition they may deserve more of our attention than does some artificial quest for the "center" of the Old Testament.

(4) Just because the tradition develops we must be very careful not to connect this with the older idea of "progressive revelation."[59] Tradition understood as a locus of revelation suggests in no way that there may have been an evolutionary development of revealed religion from an early stage of primitiveness on to later, more advanced and enlightened stages. Our discussions above have instead put the emphasis on each individual stage in the history of the people, not on some overriding progression. Each generation, group, and individual face a distinctive situation to which they, informed by their tradition and yet interpreting it anew for themselves, must respond. This very struggle can constitute for them an occasion of revelation. To be sure, there is a forward thrust and cumulative power to tradition, but this only means that the person later in time simply has more historical and reflective data at his disposal and contributing to his decision than did the earlier person.

(5) It becomes clear, then, that we can speak of a "history of revelation" only in a limited, nonevolutionary sense. The points along the way which we can set in chronological order are the individual acts of revelation, whether on the plane of history or on that of tradition. But in neither sphere is it such that we can add together the individual points as if producing a mathematical sum. An element of continuity can be seen in the growing understanding of God, but the ultimate purpose of all revelation, viz., the appropriate relation of humanity to God and of human to human, puts the individual situation in priority over the whole historical sweep. This is a lesson to be learned not only from the postulated tradition process but also from the Old Testament witness itself.

59. Cf., e.g., C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1928, revised 1938), especially pp. 245–85.

## CONCLUSION

The choice of preposition in our title, "Revelation through Tradition," proves to be important. Revelation is not understood "as" tradition in the sense that the latter may be its mode or even its identity, nor is revelation contained "in" tradition like some ready commodity. It distorts the picture even to assert that revelation is "prior to" tradition—either in the temporal sense of preceding it as an initial, retrievable datum, or in the hierarchal sense of superiority (and thus without considering the purpose of revelation). The relationship between revelation and tradition is too complex to be reduced to any of these formulas. It can even be questioned, as we have seen, whether we today are correct in looking so hard for a clear concept of revelation in the Old Testament, for certain things that were assumed and perceived then do not submit easily to "revelation" (as we are accustomed to structure it) and yet were fundamental to their view of God. Nevertheless, insofar as we believe that God did in revelation approach the Israelites, this occurred to a great extent "through" tradition. The multiple sense of this term is intentional: First, tradition delivers the structures of understanding that are prerequisite to apprehending revelation as revelation. Second, revelation could come by reason of the process in which the Israelites engaged the dilemmas of life and fashioned their faith in covenant with Yahweh—a process which was fundamental also to the formation of the tradition and which was often carried out on the stage of tradition. Third, once revelation had "occurred" it could be channeled to later generations only through the *traditum*, which would then function as witness to the prior revelatory occasion and could confront later persons with its implications as well. In all of this we see the people themselves acting, and we have no basis for supposing that God was somehow guiding or steering this total process *despite* human participation.

This intricate relationship between revelation and tradition

clearly does not exhaust all categories of revelation, which in its ultimate mysteriousness resists simplification to convenient propositions. For this reason also theology must not be equated with the history of tradition; since the latter is marked all too often by cases of injustice and apostasy, tradition can constitute only one, albeit a very important contribution to our understanding of theology. The strength of tradition, like that of revelation, is its direct relation to concrete human situations. Its pluralism and multiplicity signify its authentic tie with life. Similarly, revelation cannot be abstract, timeless, absolutistic, impervious to the varied fabric of the community itself. Yahweh's revelation occurs in his continuous involvement with the people's strugglings for survival and meaning. The relationship between revelation and tradition is consequently parallel to the relationship between Yahweh's commitment and Israel's creativity. There is a reciprocity and mutuality here which yield a dynamic of high theological significance. This perspective, usually neglected in biblical-theological and systematic-theological treatises on revelation, is a significant consequence of the traditio-historical postulate about the anchorage of Old Testament literature in the situations of life.