CHAPTER 1

Introduction

MY PURPOSE IN what follows is to offer a picture of the religion of Israel with respect not only to its historical development but to its essence and inmost character as well. Neither aim is an easy undertaking. Whether the investigator concentrates on the historical course taken by this religion or sets out to shed some light on what it is essentially, in itself, the difficulties that ensue are equally great.

With regard to the second task a modern phenomenologist has said, 'the true nature of religion is a holy mystery, an enigma that one can only guess at. Our speculations may be correct, more or less; but the heart and centre of belief is a secret known only to the believer himself.'[1]

Now when we come to deal with the religion of ancient Israel, even though we are not Israelites we are not talking about something that is essentially foreign to us. Although in a fashion different from that of Jews whose way of life is based much more directly on the Old Testament, there has always been in this western Christendom of ours a vital connexion with the world of ancient Israel. Through many and various channels, church, synagogue and even art, the Old Testament as the record of ancient Israel's religion has imprinted itself deeply upon the way we believe and think, the way we live, and even the way in which we manage our political affairs. The religious confrontations and events to which it testifies very largely determine even now the character of our spiritual and mental outlook. It was not for nothing that a historian of culture like Allard Pierson began his book on *Spiritual Forefathers* with a brief account of Israel. The very title adumbrates the notion that it is possible to share, in terms of our own experience, the essential elements of this religion, in modern western Europe, even twenty centuries after the most crucial, initial stages of its development were concluded.

On the other hand, this does not mean, as so many people think,

that getting to grips with the religion is therefore easy. To read a book like the Old Testament is more difficult than is often supposed. Small wonder that many who are quick to open the Bible soon shut it up again, because they have the feeling of being set down in a strange world, which they do not understand, even when they have before them a new translation of the Bible in the most up-to-date language.

People who have this experience with the Old Testament are often closer to the mark than those who, relying on a certain measure of general familiarity with the biblical narratives, skim through the book in a casual way and think that in so doing they are taking the whole thing in their stride. The truth is that there is an enormous distance, in time, place, culture and modes of thinking and belief, between our world and the world of ancient Israel.

The book was written over a period between two and three thousand years ago in the world of the ancient Near East—in a world very strange to us, and where life and thought were dominated by Semitic civilization. What men believed then—and the manner of their belief—was conditioned by experiences, attitudes and circumstances known to us only in part, and was couched in a language with which, as a channel of expression, we never become fully conversant, even if we have been dealing with it over a considerable period. These factors are calculated to ensure that, so far as ancient Israel's religion is concerned, it is and always will be true that we know in part.

In a broad sense, the problem of grasping the essential character of the faith of Israel is nothing new. We find it in ancient Israel itself, although on quite a different level, of course, from the primarily intellectual concern with literary and historic problems that engage us. For instance, we have prophets contending over what was the will and purpose of God, in the conflict of Jeremiah with Hananiah in 593 B.C., or of Elijah with Ahab in about 860.*

The Old Testament is full of argument about God and his activity, so that one can trace within Israel itself a progressive development in religious thinking, although this is not to say that there could not be regress as well as progress. Religion in Israel was always on the move, and in process of change.[2] As we explore the area constituted by Israel's religion, we shall see that it does not confront us with a cut-and-dried system of religious ideas and assured beliefs, but much

* Cf. Jer. 28 and 1 Kings 17f., respectively. From this point on, for dates which are before Christ the customary indication by the letters 'B.C.' will be dispensed with.

more with a process of spiritual growth, a strenuous endeavour to comprehend the God of Israel better and better. So strong indeed is this impression that we may be permitted to wonder whether we ought to speak of the religion of Israel in the singular at all. It has been conceived in so many different ways during the long period of Israel's existence as a people that one may well ask whether it is possible to point to one religious idea in it that is paramount.

With this in mind, we would do well to take to heart what was said not so very long ago by Professor S. H. Hooke:[3] he condemns the free-and-easy use of the general expression, 'the religion of Israel', as though such a thing did indeed exist and as though everyone means the same thing by it. Formulas such as the one just mentioned, or for that matter like 'true Yahwism' or 'the religion that finds expression in the Old Testament', are too vague. We must distinguish clearly between the phases of religion in ancient Israel which are so disparate in many respects, certainly in the later period, but still more so, earlier. It is evident that there are three forms of religion which stand in line of succession, and indeed side by side, regarding which it is hardly possible to say what common factor there is between them: (*a*) the religion of the patriarchs, (*b*) that of the ancient Hebrew tribes who remained in Canaan and whose religion was an amalgam of that of the patriarchs and that of the Canaanites, and (*c*) the religion of the Israelites who took part in the exodus and were 'in the wilderness'. We may assume that these forms of religion displayed important differences, even though we cannot hope to delineate them accurately. Hooke goes on to say, 'How far there was some common and central element in these three historically separate strands which caused them to blend and ultimately develop into what might be called the "official" religion of Israel is a difficult question.' In other words, he is really denying in principle that there is a specific, standard form of the Israelite religion to which one can point. It was always in process of development and subject to continuous change.

There is a lot of truth in that. Any student of Israel is going to reach the conclusion that her religion presents a motley array and appears in a great variety of forms and that between various phases of it the disparity is very considerable indeed. Still, it is questionable whether one has to take the business of separation so far that a basic link between them, at least in certain instances, becomes impossible to maintain. The question is worth pondering carefully, at any rate as regards the first period that Hooke refers to—the patriarchal age

(*a*)—and to a great extent also for the period of the ancient Hebrew tribes between the time of the patriarchs and of the judges (*b*). Because the data on the religion of the patriarchs are so hard to evaluate with any degree of certainty, we are in a position to state only a few tentative conclusions about (*a*)—and then with the utmost caution; and of (*b*) also, although there are of course a number of fixed points in the Genesis and Judges narratives to which one can refer, we can offer only a very incomplete picture. It is not unlikely that for both periods we shall have to reckon with fairly sharply divergent types of religious life.

But then one would have to add to this that in some sense both periods reflect prehistorical, preliminary stages of Israel's religion. They represent, that is, the religion of the Hebrew tribes in the era prior to the emergence of the people of Israel. One cannot speak of a religion of Israel, in the full sense of the term, until there is an entity, a people of Israel; and as this was formed only during the period of the judges, it is only from then on that a religion of Israel can really be said to exist.

Where Hooke's category (*c*) is concerned—the religion of those tribes which lived through, and experienced, the Mosaic period—the case is different again. Here too it is to a considerable extent true to say that we cannot reconstruct it; but (as Hooke himself would allow) this much is certain: that the main features of this form of religion persisted in the official religion of Israel of a later time. That is plain from the fact that the principal critics and implementers of Israelite religion—the later prophets—based themselves on it and were for ever appealing to it. The most distinctive feature of this form of religion is that Yahweh, who is later on to dominate the spiritual life of the people of Israel and their existence as a nation, now makes his appearance. I would want to say, therefore, that if we set aside the earliest phases of Israel's religion which it is difficult for us to reconstruct in view of the lack of adequate literary data to which an assured date can be assigned, and which we can regard as preliminary, we can envisage it, in broad outline, as a single entity. That is still true, even when we fully recognize that the religion assumed many divergent forms of expression in the course of the centuries and that some of those forms incorporated elements so very alien in character that we are bound to describe them rather as syncretistic than as typical of Israel.

In this respect Israel's religion is not at all different from all other

religions of the ancient world and of our modern era, whether it be the Babylonian-Assyrian and Egyptian religions or Christianity and Islam. The Babylonian-Assyrian religion, like that of Egypt, presents in the various stages of its existence a great multiplicity of aspects; yet both religions have a character of their own. The way in which these various aspects are commingled, even where the two religions show an intrinisic affinity and agreement, is such that one has to recognize the peculiar and unique character of both. That is just as true of Christianity. In what a variety of forms *that* appears! We have only to think of the religion of the Coptic monks, of the medieval scholastics, of the mystics, Reformers, Quakers and Methodists, who all have certain common traits that point to one essential element as their ultimate source. As soon as we look at this conglomeration of Christian groups together and compare it with Islam or Buddhism, Parseeism or the religion of the Druses, to name just a few religions, major and minor, it once again becomes, in spite of its diversity, very plainly and recognizably a distinct community *vis-à-vis* those other religions. There may perhaps be little outward difference between a Coptic chapel and an Islamic mosque; and the ceremonies conducted in them may have many things in common. Even so, there is as much need to distinguish between them as between a Jewish synagogue and a Calvinist church, although in both the walls are bare; and there is a large affinity, outwardly at least, between the respective liturgies used when a religious service is under way.

Outward forms are a determinative factor for a religion only up to a certain point. There was a lengthy period during which the religion of Israel countenanced the ancient holy places scattered up and down the land; but there came a time when, because they had become a hotbed of thriving syncretism, they were abolished, and then it was only at one place in Jerusalem that sacrifices were allowed to be made. This gave quite a different look, outwardly, to the religion of Israel; and also modified its internal structure. Yet this does not mean that what is known as the Deuteronomic Reform totally altered the character of Yahwism. The religion *after* the Reform remained in essentials what it had been before.

The best way to get an idea of the distinctive character of Israel's religion, as bearing the stamp of Yahwism, is to compare it with those attaching to the religions of the other peoples of the ancient East.[4] This we shall do, therefore, in the succeeding chapter, where our aim will be to etch in the general contours of Israelite religion, as dis-

tinguished from the oriental religions of the ancient world, which were so different in their essential nature, however much they may at times resemble and remind us of it.

To anticipate somewhat at this point, I would maintain that Israel's religion can best be typified by one word, by a name: Yahweh. It is this that dominates completely all the source-material that we possess for this religion: the Bible. This name occurs more frequently than any other noun or verb in the book. It has been calculated that it is used more than 6800 times, as against the 2500 occurrences of the general term for 'god', *Elohim*. Even in the old pre-exilic documents the name is that most often employed. It is possible that if we had more records from the sanctuaries of Northern Israel the proportion would be different, although it is not at all likely; for even there, during the period of the kings, the majority of theophorous personal names were formed with the Yahweh-name. One may take it as being predominant, therefore, even in North Israelite circles. This fact, based on a statistical examination of linguistic usage in the texts, accords entirely with the unconditional status of Yahweh in Israel's religion.[5] Although we cannot speak in terms of an explicit monotheism (not *ab initio*, at any rate), Yahweh as Israel's God is without partner or competitor. He is not merely the head of a pantheon; he is 'God alone'. That is why the Old Testament can from time to time speak of God under various appellations (*El, Elohim, Eloah*); and in every case it is clear that Yahweh is meant. The word *El* does not function as a kind of determinative of Yahweh. There is not a god, Yahweh, beside other gods: in so far as these are taken for granted, they are not comparable with Yahweh; the notion of incomparability is applicable in the Old Testament to Yahweh alone. Yahweh tolerates no other at his side. He has no partner. He is a jealous God, as a recurrent formula has it, that expresses just how intolerable is any failure to recognize Yahweh's absolute uniqueness. In the religion of Israel, therefore, we find an element of intolerance that is essentially foreign to the polytheism of the ancient East. Elijah can order the killing of the priests of Baal under the very eyes of Ahab; and this has nothing to do with the clash of politics, as it would have done in, say, Egypt or Babylon. There too the priestly faction of one city might well be involved in conflict with that of another; but such cases are different in kind from that of Elijah in Israel, where the issues were purely religious in character. For Elijah certainly cannot be regarded as a political figure. Polytheism is by its very nature tolerant, relativist,

syncretistic. In Israel's religion, as in its derivative, Christianity, and in Islam, which originated under the influence of both, there is a streak of intolerance, because the religious relation, in both a national and a personal context, is dominated by the God who makes himself known as the unconditioned, the absolute One, to those who believe in him. From the moment that Yahwism makes its appearance on the scene of history until now, that is fundamentally how it has been. Because of this, it has a strong resistance to every kind of syncretism and tends to assume an imperialist attitude towards all other religions. In principle they are rejected, even though this or that component of the religions competing with Yahwism may be absorbed by it. As soon as Yahwism encounters other religions there is a protracted struggle; and in the event some elements get accommodated, others expelled. Obviously, this issue was not one to be settled in the short term; it took centuries, in fact, for the process to be finally completed. Perhaps one ought even to say that it never was concluded, but only broken off abruptly at the time of the exile.

It would appear, therefore, that we can confidently ascribe to Yahwism a character all its own. As I said, this is a thesis which I intend to elaborate in the chapters that follow, first by making a comparison with the other religions of the ancient East, and then by means of a more detailed typology of Israel's religion in the earliest period at which it presents itself clearly to us.

That is, in effect, the period of the earliest monarchy, the time of Saul and David, the age in which Yahwism, along with the people of Israel themselves, had really 'dug in'. In their day Israel left behind her the period of sharp division among the tribes and embarked on one in which she came to be united as a people and achieved her own independent existence as a nation. More and more the old pastoral mode of life gave way to agriculture; and life in cities began to develop too. The need to enter upon a distinctive existence as an independent state gradually made itself felt.

A written record has come down to us from this period, or from very soon after it, which tells the story of the earliest monarchy and of the rise of David's dynasty. It is the first detailed source offering enough material, in the religious sphere, among others, to form the basis for an outline of the structure of Israel's religion. At all events it yields more substance for a descriptive account than does the Song of Deborah, which might form, as it does in Buber's celebrated sketch of *The Prophetic Faith*,[6] a possible starting-point. For the Song stands

too much on its own as an extraordinary, spontaneous outburst of thanksgiving for victory won after a crucial battle to serve as a point of departure for a considered view of a religion in its historical framework. Naturally, it is of the first order of importance as a record, aesthetically as well as historically and in a religious context; and so it will prove extremely useful when we come to probe more deeply into the early course of events.

The fact that we have to delve so far back into history in order to get sufficient data for an outline of Israel's religion, going as far back as the earliest years of the life of Solomon,[7] illustrates very clearly the nexus of problems presented by the Israelite source-material.

There are definite reasons why it is exceptionally difficult to handle the Old Testament as history in a fair and responsible way. The chief reason is that in the course of history many of the ancient sources were re-issued after having first been worked over—that is, meddled with—by an editorial hand. The fact that they were read and re-read and passed on, and were evidently, therefore, a vital factor, culturally speaking, has had its big advantages, but also a number of drawbacks. One advantage has been that these sources have remained extant and not been lost or fallen into oblivion (as in the rather damp climate of Palestine might otherwise have been the case; for inscribed records, even of clay, did not readily stay in good condition in the soil there). But it is a drawback, from our standpoint, at any rate, that because of the additions and alterations introduced from time to time by revisers it is very difficult to sort out which parts of the transmitted historical documents are primitive and which are not. This can be done up to a point with the aid of stylistic research and criticism; but the criteria employed for this are not infallible and not easy to apply. The result is that although a fair amount of material from early Israel has survived, it is a tiresome and often highly uncertain business to prise this out of the textual context into which it was placed at some later period and thus to make it available for purposes of historiography. In that respect we are much better off where the Egyptian and Babylonian-Assyrian literature is concerned. Indeed it is possible in the latter case, on the basis of the archaeological evidence or of the study of letter-formation and the rules of grammar, to date a large number of the surviving texts fairly accurately. Again, the texts written in those languages are found singly, and only very seldom found bundled together as a collection, so that each literary unit can be quite clearly distinguished from its fellows.