

Wright, G. Ernest, The Old Testament Against Its Environment (SCM Press Ltd: London) 1950 reprinted 1960

p. 12 In the first place, it is increasingly realized to-day that the attempt to make of the Old Testament a source book for the evolution of religion from very primitive to highly advanced concepts has been made possible only by means of a radical misinterpretation of the literature. In the history of Israel as in the history of other peoples there are numerous primitive survivals. Is it possible to construct a system out of them in Israel and thus presume that we have defined early Hebrew religion? One cannot do this, we now know, with the contemporary polytheisms of Egypt, Canaan, or Babylon, nor for any known religion of the ancient world.⁷ Doubt must therefore be thrown on any picture of the God of Israel which attempts to portray him as a purely localized, anthropomorphic, nature deity, limited to tribe, shrine, or mountain, pacified by human sacrifice, a crude, capricious little despot whose hate and cruelty are unlimited by any moral consistency of character. It would be very difficult to find a parallel to such a god among any of the gods of the time. One must therefore become suspicious of the methodology which claims to discover such a deity, and to examine more carefully the modifying and contrary evidences in the oldest narratives and collections of law.

In the second place, we cannot assume that a mere description of an evolutionary process provides the explanation for matters which belong to the realm of religious faith. The development of ideas is not a theme in which Biblical writers show much interest, nor is it one which can create a community of faith, a people of God. How did Israel become a nation with such faith in its God that its very existence was conceived to be a miracle of grace? The prophets did not invent this remarkable conception since it existed before them. Sociological study cannot explain it, since the change in material status from nomadic to agricultural life could effect no such religious innovation. Nor can the environment provide the answer, since the Old Testament bears eloquent witness to the fact that Canaanite religion was the most dangerous and disintegrative factor which the faith of Israel had to face.⁸