David J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 205; Gender, Culture, Theory, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 187-211.

9

God in the Pentateuch: Reading against the Grain*

1. *Preliminaries*

a. *Method*

There seem to me to be three kinds of data we could use in constructing a picture of God in the Pentateuch. The first is what the character God says about himself, the second is what the narrator says about him, and the third is what the narrator depicts him as doing and saying.

The first kind of data might seem to some readers a very reliable type of information; for here it might appear that it is God himself who is talking about himself. But we need to realize that when the narrative says, 'The LORD...proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"' (Exod. 34.6), this self-description does not consist of the words of God himself (what language does *he* speak?) but of the words of the narrator (in Hebrew). These are no more than words put in the mouth of the character God by the narrator, and, behind the narrator, by the author. Such sentences of self-description contribute to our overall picture of the character God, of course, but the words in the mouth of God have no privileged status compared with

* An earlier version of this essay was published in *Studies in Old Testament Theology: Historical and Contemporary Images of God and God's People* (Festschrift for David L. Hubbard; ed. Robert L. Hubbard, Jr, Robert K. Johnston and Robert P. Meye; Dallas: Word Books, 1992), pp. 79-98, and is reprinted by permission. The essay was also delivered as the Peake Memorial Lecture, Leeds, June, 1994.

words spoken directly by the narrator in describing God's motives and actions.

Perhaps the second kind of data will be more useful. They will at least be words that the narrator is committing himself to, being his own words, and not words he is ascribing to one of his characters. Assuming that the narrator is a reliable one—which is not always a safe assumption even in biblical texts, for the narrator is sometimes ironical and sometimes extremely reticent, and in those respects at least not to be relied on in any simplistic fashion—we can take it that the descriptions the narrator gives us of the character God are material for our construction of a picture of God in the Pentateuch. The only problem here is that there are not many such descriptions of God on the part of the narrator. We learn from the narrator in Gen. 6.6 that Yahweh was 'sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart', and we find in Exod. 24.17 that 'the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire'—but there are very few sentences like these, describing his appearance, his feelings or his character, in the whole of the Pentateuch. We could hardly construct a very rounded picture of God on the basis of what the narrator tells us directly and descriptively about him.

There is a third kind of data, the account of what God does and says throughout the narrative. Here we have a much more plentiful source of knowledge about the figure of God in the Pentateuch. The problem with this source, however, is that its significance for the picture of God is at times far from clear. It is a risky business even in everyday life making inferences from a person's actions to their character; but in everyday life we usually have the possibility of cross-checking our provisional conclusions with the person himself or herself, of approaching other people for other points of view, and of seeing many repeated or similar actions. In the case of the character God—as of *characters* everywhere—all these possibilities are foreclosed to us. If we are to consider the character 'God in the Pentateuch' we shall be shut up to the evidence that the Pentateuch provides. We shall not be thinking about a real 'person', and we shall not be able to check our evidence from the Pentateuch with other evidence. The picture that results will be at times tantalizingly

ambiguous, and there will be tensions and incompatibilities in it that cannot be thoroughly resolved. It is simply impossible, for example, to say why it is that the character God does not allow Moses into the promised land,[1] or indeed what most of the motives and intentions of the character are.

The thrust of the present essay must in consequence be not toward developing some unified and coherent portrait of the God depicted in the Pentateuch, but to bring to the surface some of the materials, contrasting and inconclusive though they may be, that contribute to the portraiture.

b. *The Pentateuch as a novel*

Let us think of the Pentateuch as a novel.[2] Not that it is a work of fantasy, and not that it must be declared 'untrue' if it does not at every point report historical actuality with the utmost fidelity. Like *War and Peace* and *Adam Bede*, the Pentateuch has its own truth and its own credibility even when it recounts events we perhaps do not think actually happened, like a snake talking or a universal flood. Like a novel, it reports the inner thoughts of its characters, which no one else could ever have heard, and it recounts the dialogue of persons whose actual words had been long since forgotten when the author was writing. Like a novel, it transports its readers through space and time, makes them witnesses to the behaviours and changing motivations of its characters, and, on the whole, avoids the didactic and the dogmatic, insisting that its readers judge for themselves the persons

1. Num. 20.12 says it is because Moses 'did not trust' in the Lord; but it proves impossible to tell how his action of striking the rock evidenced a lack of trust.

2. The 'novel' is not just a modern genre, of course, for the ancient novel is well attested; see Graham Anderson, *Ancient Fiction. The Novel in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Tomas Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983); Ben Edwin Perry, *The Ancient Romances: A Literary-Historical Account of their Origins* (Sather Classical Lectures [1951], 37; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). I am grateful to my colleague Loveday Alexander for these references. I am not arguing that the Pentateuch *is* a novel of this kind from the point of view of its genre, but only that it is not improper to regard it as having some elements in common with the novel.

and the acts they encounter in its pages.

Above all, the Pentateuch is a novel in that it is a machine for generating interpretations, to use Umberto Eco's phrase. There are so many complex strands in it, so many fragmentary glimpses of its personalities, that we cannot reduce it to a single coherent graspable unity that all readers will agree upon.[3] This chapter will therefore do no more than develop some possible readings of the Pentateuch. And these variant readings will not be just the result of the wilful imposition of readers' prejudices upon the text, for, like all texts, the Torah has, as Rabbi Ben Bag Bag long ago said, all its interpretations enshrined within it: 'Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it'.[4]

c. *God as a character*

Let us next recognize that the God in the Pentateuch is a character in a novel. God in the Pentateuch is not a 'person'; he is a character in a book. And there are no people in books, no real people, only fictions; for books are made, not procreated. Even when the characters have the same name as real people and remind us vividly of the real people whose names they bear, they are still made of paper. Even if I should write my autobiography, the readers of my book will not be encountering me, but only the fictive character I have chosen to create in my writing.[5]

The point, obvious though it is, is worth making in this connection if we are to speak honestly about the God in the Pentateuch. For if we were to imagine that the God of whom it speaks so extensively is identical with the 'true God'—the God who is worshipped and theologized about—we might have some seri-

3. The reader may wonder how this squares with the claim implied in the title of my book, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 10; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1976). It does not. I now think that there there is more than one way of saying 'what the Pentateuch is all about', though I still think that the theme of the fulfilment and non-fulfilment of the threefold promise is *one* fruitful way of talking about the Pentateuch.

4. *Pirqe Aboth* 5.22.

5. The point is further helpfully developed by Dale Patrick in his *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament* (Overtures to Biblical Theology, 10; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), Chapter 1 'The Characterization of God' (pp. 13-27).

ous theological problems on our hands, and at the very least we should be tempted to modulate what we read in the text of the Pentateuch in order to harmonize it with what we already believe we know of the 'true God'. No doubt there is a serious question here, namely what the relation is between the God who is a character in the book and the 'real God', but we cannot begin to address it until we have systematically made a distinction between the two. How else could we approach the issue of their relationship?

d. *Reading with and against the grain*

Most readers of the Pentateuch, the Jewish and Christian communities especially, approve of the story the Pentateuch tells. They think it was a good idea to create the world, to destroy it with a flood, to choose one family and nation as the principal object of divine blessing, and to give to that nation the land of Canaan as their homeland. They are in general sympathetic to the Hebrew people, and tend to believe that what was good for the Hebrews is what should have happened. In short, most readers of the Pentateuch have subscribed to the ideology of the text; they have read with the grain of the text.[6]

But it is not difficult to think how different the narrative could sound if one read *against* the grain, from the viewpoint of an Egyptian or a Canaanite, for example, or even from the perspective of a Jewish or Christian reader who was squeamish about killing or held very strict views about lying. Since the text itself offers very many *points d'appui* for such readings, it is hard to think of a reason why we should *not* make reading

6. I have used the image (which I did not invent; cf. Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975–1985* [London: Verso, 1986]) of reading with and against the grain in my paper, 'The Story of Michal, Wife of David, in its Sequential Unfolding', in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation* (ed. David J.A. Clines and Tamara C. Eskenazi; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 119; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), pp. 129-40 (129-30). The reader might consider also the image of moiré, 'the meaningful but unstable and reticulating patterns in shot silk' (George Steiner, in *On Difficulty and Other Essays* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978], p. 40). The phrase 'against the grain' goes back at least as far as Dryden (1694), according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

against the grain one of our normal strategies for approaching the text. It may be a way of disclosing to us a wider range of possibilities in the text.

We need not suppose that reading against the grain of the text is a sign of disrespect for the text. What is disrespectful to the text is to assume that it will say what we would like it to say. Nor is it harmful to the church or the synagogue to hear of readings against the grain. We should not assume that 'believing communities' always want to hear, or should hear, only the ideology of the text being rehearsed. Perhaps they also need to know what their texts are capable of, what unorthodox and unconventional meanings they can suggest, and what a large element of choice there is in any decision to take the text's perspective as the definitive word.

e. *The dialectic of the text*

I have just now been describing a dialectic that we can set up between the text and the reader, when the reader takes up a position, or starts out from a position, that is not shared by the text. There is another kind of dialectic we can pay attention to, however. It is a dialectic that is immanent in the text, a dialectic between the elements of tension in the text itself. In the Pentateuch such a dialectic comes to expression in the questions, Is God merciful or vengeful? Does God wish to reveal himself or conceal himself? Is God directing the course of human history or not? Without probing very far beneath the surface of the text of the Pentateuch, we soon form the impression that the text says quite different things on these subjects at different moments, that there is at the very least a tension in the text and at the most there is irreconcilable conflict.

The possibility of such dialectical relations in our texts needs to be in our mind when we address the issue of 'God in the Pentateuch'. Perhaps we will at the end of the day uncover some grand harmonizing truth that brings the poles of tension together and enables us to create some unitary vision of our topic. But even if that should happen 'at the end of the day', we shall have in the meantime to give weight to elements that pull apart from one another, or else we shall never know that there is any unitary statement to be sought for.

2. *Dialectic Readings*

a. *God and Noah*

Here is a very simple example of the dialectic readers may find themselves involved in with their text. The issue can be framed in this way: Is the story of Noah a story of God as saviour or of Noah as saviour?

The ideology of the text has some plain outlines. According to the text, all humans deserve to be wiped out by a flood because of their wickedness, but Noah finds favour in the eyes of Yahweh (Gen. 6.8). God tells Noah how he can escape the flood, God commands him to make an ark, God sends him into the ark, God shuts him in, God remembers him, and God tells him to leave the ark when the waters have subsided. In short, God saves Noah (and, with him, humanity) from the flood.[7]

Readers, however, might well find themselves asking, But what does God actually *do* to save Noah from the flood? If this is a story of some 'saving act' of God, let us say, how exactly does God act in order to save Noah? The answer has to be that God merely tells Noah what to do. God does not do anything himself to save Noah, he tells Noah how to save himself. Compared with some of the 'mighty acts of God' in the Pentateuch, such as the exodus from Egypt when Yahweh fights for the Hebrews and they have to do nothing but 'only to keep still' (Exod. 14.14), there is no saving act of God at the flood at all. So is it a story about God at all, if it is not about anything he does? Is it perhaps a story about the achievement of a great hero, who saves humanity from extinction by keeping alive his family in a boat? To be sure, the deity has warned the hero of the coming of the flood and has given him instructions about the ark that must be built if the flood is to be survived. But the actual saving *acts*

7. Cf. the account given of Genesis 1–11 by Gerhard von Rad as 'a story of God with man, the story of continuously new punishment and at the same time gracious preservation'; the Flood story itself he characterizes with the sentence, 'God transferred man…to a newly ordered world' (*Genesis: A Commentary* [Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, revised edition, 1972], p. 153). There is no doubt in von Rad's mind who is the hero of the story.

are those of Noah, who even in his six hundredth year is building the ark, collecting all the animals and stocking it with food—singlehandedly (the verbs in 6.16-21 are all in the singular).

The ideology of the text does not contain this second reading, I would say; the text does not authorize it, it does not encourage us to read it that way. But then neither does it disallow it, for it gives us all the data by which we may develop this reading against the grain. And once we have encountered such a reading, it is hard to forget it, hard to expunge the memory of its possibility from our consciousness, hard to adhere any longer to the idea of a univocal meaning of the text—hard, in short, to be sure what it is the text wants to say about God. The possibility of reading against the grain makes for a plurality of interpretations.

b. *God and the exodus*

Here is another example of a dialectic reading of the Pentateuch. It seems to be both a case of a reader reading against the grain and of a tension that is immanent in the surface of the text.

In a word, the text represents the exodus from Egypt as a great act of deliverance on God's part. The day of the exodus is called the day when 'the LORD brought you out from there by strength of hand' (Exod. 13.3), and the moment of victory over the Egyptians is recalled as the time when 'horse and rider he has thrown into the sea' (15.21). It is to be commemorated in time to come as the day when 'By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery' (13.14). The text has persuaded its readers that it is telling of a mighty deed of salvation.

What the text never says, in this connection, is that it was Yahweh who brought them *into* Egypt in the first place. In the book of Exodus, the presence of the Hebrews in Egypt is regarded as a given, and the only questions are whether, how and when Yahweh will remove them from the house of bondage. The story of the exodus begins only at the point when the Hebrews groan under their hard labour. Then Yahweh remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exod. 2.23-24)—which is to say, the narrative of Genesis 12–36. No

one in Exodus, in other words, seems to remember the events of Genesis 37–50, chapters that have told us how the Hebrews happen to be in Egypt in the first place; and no one seems to remember Joseph's words to his brothers, 'So it was not you who sent me here, but God' (Gen. 45.8), and 'Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good' (50.20).[8] It is evidently not only the new Egyptian king who knows not Joseph (Exod. 1.8), but the narrator also. And his character God seems to regard the presence of the Hebrews in Egypt as nothing more than an unfortunate accident that has happened to them; he never acknowledges that it is his own deliberate design.

Now it makes a difference (does it not?) whether the deliverance from Egypt is a sheer act of divine grace in conformity with the covenant to the forefathers, or whether it is a way of undoing the damage done to the Hebrew people by engineering their descent into Egypt in the first place. Regardless of how we resolve this question, or whether we resolve it at all, we are left with an equivocal picture of 'God in the Pentateuch'. A tension immanent in the larger text of Genesis plus Exodus has led to a reading that in some respect goes against the grain of the smaller text of the opening chapters of Exodus.

c. *God and the plagues in Egypt*

In at least one place there is an evident tension, on the surface of the text, over the behaviour of God during the affair of the Egyptian plagues. There is little doubt that the general intention of the text is to represent God as the saviour of the Hebrew people from the Egyptians: in Exod. 3.17 he says, 'I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites', and in 14.13 Moses says to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today'. But the text also contains a quite contrary view of God's activity: in 5.22-23, after the Hebrews have been compelled to find their own straw to make bricks, there is a question of Moses, 'O LORD, why have you mistreated

8. Though these words of Joseph's do not necessarily represent the narrator's point of view, as Yiu-Wing Fung, a graduate student at Sheffield, is pointing out in his dissertation on Joseph.

this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people'.

This is not the question of an opponent of God, and it is not rebuffed by God. Moses is not punished for asking it, and God effectively concedes the truth of it by not denying it but changing the subject in his response. Now I hardly need to observe that the text does not mean us to accept that this is how we should read the entire narrative of the plagues, as a sequence of damaging actions of God against the Hebrews; and the narrative as a whole ensures that we ultimately forget about this objection of Moses, or almost so. But what his question does is to open a window into the narrative, another angle of vision that enables the divine actions to be interpreted in another way from that of the text as a whole. This question of Moses invites us as readers to consider the whole plagues narrative from an alternative perspective; and even if we do not come to accept this perspective in the end a little note of ambiguity has been introduced into the portraiture of God.

There is another point at which the text, less overtly, introduces ambiguity into the larger picture. The casual reader remembers that after each of the plagues the Pharaoh promises to let the Hebrews leave Egypt but subsequently 'hardens his heart' and changes his mind. More observant readers know that it is *sometimes* said that the Pharaoh 'hardens his heart' (as in 8.11 [EVV 15], 28 [EVV 32]; 9.34) and *sometimes* that 'his heart is hardened' (as in 7.13, 14, 22; 8.15 [EVV 19]; 9.7, 35), but (most interestingly) that *sometimes* it is Yahweh who 'hardens the Pharaoh's heart' (as in 9.12; 10.1, 20, 27; 11.10).

The first ambiguity that arises is whether in the cases where the hardening of the Pharaoh's heart is spoken of in the passive ('his heart was hardened') we should understand it was the Pharaoh himself or God that did the hardening. If it was God, then most of the heart-hardening that was going on in the text was God's doing and not the Pharaoh's. Of course, we can never know which of these possibilities we should choose, but we can hardly help wondering about it, especially because of the second ambiguity.

The second ambiguity in the portrayal of God here is a very

tantalizing one: it is the evidence in the text that God was working against his own purposes by making the Pharaoh keep the people in Egypt at the very time that he was himself trying to get them liberated from Egypt (and publicly proclaiming that as his intention). Readers of Genesis have had occasion before this to wonder at the role of the deferrals of the promise, and at God's penchant for making things difficult for himself (like choosing a childless nonagenarian to be the father of a multitude of nations),[9] but never before have we encountered such an uncompromising conflict in the divine actions. How are we to read this dissonant behaviour on God's part? Are we to say, The God of the Exodus is so powerful that he can remove every obstacle placed in his way—even those he in his omnipotence has put there himself (like an irresistible force getting rid of an immovable object)?, or, The God of the Exodus has difficulty in deciding whether he really wants these Hebrews to be out of Egypt, and defers the moment of their release as long as possible?, or, The humiliation of the Egyptian king and the transforming of him from a free agent resisting God into a mere pawn in the divine hands is more important to God than achieving the freedom of the Hebrews at the earliest possible moment?[10] Or are we to go on inventing more and more explanatory accounts of the circumstances?[11]

9. See Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 96; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990); David J.A. Clines, 'What Happens in Genesis', in *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 94; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 49-66.

10. On this last reading, see the essay by David M. Gunn, 'The "Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart": Plot, Character and Theology in Exodus 1–14', in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (ed. David J.A. Clines, David M. Gunn and Alan J. Hauser; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 19; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), pp. 72-96.

11. The issue in the narrative is often cast as the problem of causality (that is, who caused the hardening of the Pharaoh's heart?), but the reader will see that I am not setting the problem up in these terms, which deflect attention from the truly critical problems in the text for the portrait of God. Nevertheless, I cannot forbear quoting some sentences from a standard work that show how badly this issue too stands in need

As if aware of the oddity in God's behaviour, the text addresses the problem by offering an explanation of God's hardening the Pharaoh's heart. In Exod. 10.1-2, Yahweh says to Moses, 'I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I have made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them—so that you may know that I am the LORD'. It is an explanation that bows under its own weight. For, in the first place, if the Pharaoh's heart had not been hardened and he had agreed to let the Hebrews go earlier, there would have been no need for 'signs' to show Yahweh playing with ('making fools of') the Egyptians; can Yahweh mean that he simply wanted to enjoy the discomfiture of the Egyptians, and that the hardening of their hearts was his ploy to give a justification for his repeated assaults on them? And, in the second place, to say that he has hardened the hearts so as to give the Hebrews something to remember in later years is to suggest that there was no justification or necessity for the hardening of the hearts at the time. Can the text really be implying that the Hebrews would otherwise not have had enough folk memories to pass on to their children, not enough evidence that 'I am the LORD'? And in the third place, we have to remember the angle of vision on this narrative opened up by Moses' earlier question, 'Why have you mistreated this people?' (5.22). That is to say, while Yahweh is having all this sport making a fool of the Pharaoh and while all these memories are being laid down in the national consciousness, the

of critical reformulation: '[T]he biblical writers speak of God hardening men's hearts...At the same time they avow men harden their own hearts...They found no apparent inconsistency in ascribing this activity both to God and to men. For men, by acting in accordance with their own self-will, were carrying out the divine purpose' (V.H. Kooy, 'Harden the Heart', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* [ed. George Arthur Buttrick *et al.*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962], II, p. 524). On this I might comment first that it is not the end of the matter to say that 'the biblical writers...found no...inconsistency'; perhaps they should have, and perhaps we do. And in the second place, does it resolve the issue to say that humans acting freely are carrying out the divine will, unless we are prepared to say also that God acting freely is carrying out human will?

Hebrews are still at work in the brick kilns. Every day that passes in fruitless negotiations with the Pharaoh is another day of slave labour for the people of God, even if the text does not draw our attention to the fact at this moment.

None of this is to say that we *must* read the text this way, fix our attention exclusively on the negative aspects that undermine it in some degree and ignore the larger picture, which is ungainsayably an account of God's deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt. But whatever we do, the textual data remain, and the picture of God remains intriguing and ultimately unexplainable. If the narrator had set out to portray a deity whose purposes were not entirely clear and whose behaviour was from time to time eccentric, a deity who operated under the self-professed slogan, I will be whatever I will be, he might well have given us such a narrative as this.[12]

d. *God and the chosen people*

Fundamental to the ideology of the Pentateuch is the idea that God has chosen the people of Israel from among all the nations on earth. The idea first becomes apparent in Genesis 12, though the language of choosing is not yet used. When Yahweh tells Abram that he will make of him a great nation and that he will bless him and make his name great (12.2), he does not say in so many words that he will *not* make other men into ancestors of great nations, that he will *not* bless them or make their name great—but he implies it. The blessing to Abram has to be preferential and competitive or otherwise Abram's significance for the 'families of the earth' (12.3) is unintelligible.

Though the idea of Israel's election surfaces at various points in the Pentateuch, the language of God's 'choosing' Israel

12. The divine self-description in Exod. 3.14 could well be translated, 'I will be what I will be', and some commentators have rightly remarked on the note of concealment in this formulation; see, for example, Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (tr. David E. Green; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), p. 20: 'In this figure of speech resounds the sovereign freedom of Yahweh, who, even at the moment he reveals himself in his name, refuses simply to put himself at the disposal of humanity or to allow humanity to comprehend him'.

becomes prominent only in Deuteronomy.[13] In Deut. 4.37 and 10.15 it is tied up with God's 'love' for the ancestors and his effecting of the exodus from Egypt; in 6.7 and 14.2 it is a choosing of Israel as God's own people, out of all the peoples of the earth. The announcement of God's choice of Israel is hedged about, as the theologians do not tire of pointing out,[14] with safeguards against Israel's drawing improper implications from the fact: it was, for example, 'not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you' (7.7). We wonder, incidentally, whether any Israelites of whatever century needed to be told that they were not the most numerous people on the face of the earth; even without a state educational system or encyclopaedias, did they really imagine Israel was a greater state than Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia or Persia? Or, if they did, how does the author of Deuteronomy happen to know that they were not? And, if they did not, is there perhaps a lack of candour in denying this was a reason for God's chosing them? Nonetheless, whatever the implications, there is no doubt that the Pentateuch represents God as the God of the Hebrews—God of the Hebrews, that is, in a way he is not God of the Egyptians or Hittites, for example (even if he is God of those nations in any sense at all).

This is all right if you happen to be an Israelite and have no dealings with Hittites. You know all you need to know, which is that Yahweh is your God. But if you happen to be a Hittite, or even a twentieth-century reader of the Pentateuch, how congenial is it to encounter in its pages a deity who is bound in this way to just one nation: the nation claims that he is their peculiar deity, and he professes that he has chosen them as his own peculiar people? What is the sense in this arrangement, what rationale is offered for it—especially since the Pentateuch itself

13. Cf. A.D.H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (New Century Bible; London: Oliphants, 1979), p. 60: 'What is really distinctive in Deuteronomy is that the whole life of the people is regulated from the point of view of its relationship with Yahweh, and the basic element here is that Israel was chosen by Yahweh'.

14. Cf., e.g., Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), pp. 110-11.

regards God as the creator of the whole world? And above all, for our present consideration of God in the Pentateuch, what does this exclusivity say about the character of the deity represented here? The Pentateuch itself sees no problem here, nothing to be excused or justified; if anything, it makes a point out of there being *no rationale* for the choice of Israel as the people of God. But it does not occur to it that the very idea that there should be just one nation that is the chosen people—leaving the rest of humanity unchosen—is itself problematic.

The time-honoured language, and the sense of fitness that creeps over us through long acquaintance with the idea, should not be allowed to soften the sense of shock to the modern conscience (religiously formed or otherwise) that such an example of nationalistic ideology must deliver. Nor should we blur the contours of this distinct figuration of God in the Pentateuch with some pacific harmonization or identification of this God with the universal deity of the Christian religion—or, for that matter, patronize the God of the Pentateuch by excusing the myopia of his vision as a necessary stage in the progress of religion.

The grain of the text, in short, assumes the centrality of the Jewish people and portrays a God whose attention is concentrated upon that nation. So long as we stay within the ideology of the text, we experience no discomfort with the portraiture. But the moment we position ourselves outside the text and become conscious of our own identities as non-Hebrews (which we might do even if we are Jews today), it becomes difficult not to take a more quizzical view of the character. If we do not actually *approve* of a universal deity having one favourite race, we are bound to take a different view of that deity's character from a reader who happily embraces the ideology of the text.

3. *Unifying Readings*

The readings presented above of the character God in the Pentateuch are meant only to be exemplary of the ambiguities and indeterminacy of the portrait offered by the text. They themselves, readings against the grain of the text, go against the grain also of the central tradition in biblical scholarship, which has generally striven for a harmonizing and unifying

depiction of the character of the deity in the Old Testament, one indeed that maximizes the compatibility of the portrait with that of the God of the New Testament and of Christian theology. This standpoint is of course quite legitimate—provided only that it is recognized that, like all standpoints, it has to be chosen, and, when it is chosen, it restricts the range of vision.

In this section I will present some themes from the scholarly literature that treats the depiction of God in the Pentateuch, works like Gerhard von Rad's *Old Testament Theology*,[15] Walther Zimmerli's *Old Testament Theology in Outline*,[16] Claus Westermann's *Elements of Old Testament Theology*,[17] and Bernhard W. Anderson's article, 'God, OT View of', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*.[18] To all these authors, it should be noted, 'God' is not a character in a literary work called the Pentateuch, but is a real being concerning whom the Pentateuch is written. So far as I can tell, they do not think the Pentateuch ever says anything untrue about this 'real God' and, even as Christian theologians, they do not seem to find any inconsistency between the figure of God in the Pentateuch and the God of Christian worship and theology.[19]

1. *God is present*. The Pentateuch is not a story of human

15. Trans. D.M.G. Stalker; Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1962. Volume 1, pp. 129-305, deals with 'The Theology of the Hexateuch'.

16. Trans. David E. Green; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1978.

17. Trans. Douglas W. Scott; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.

18. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, II, pp. 417-30.

19. Von Rad, for example, even thinks that 'it is a bad thing for the Christian expositor completely to disregard [the cosmology of Genesis 1] as obsolete', since '[i]n the scientific ideas of the time theology had found an instrument which suited it perfectly' (*Old Testament Theology*, I, p. 148). For a case where von Rad does think that a theological view contained in the Old Testament has its defects, see his *Old Testament Theology*, I, p. 344 (on the Deuteronomist's conception of history); but somehow the motive behind this defect turns out to be the very thing that gives the Deuteronomist's work its 'theological grandeur'. Terence E. Fretheim has correctly remarked on how the portrait of God in Old Testament scholarship 'bears a striking resemblance to the quite traditional Jewish or Christian understanding of God regnant in synagogue or church' (*The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* [Overtures to Biblical Theology, 14; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984], p. 17).

history in which God appears at the margins, making only occasional interventions like a *deus ex machina*. Even when the narrative does not foreground him,[20] he remains the story's dominant character. Very little is said in the Pentateuch of the nature of God in himself; it is always God in relationship with humans, involved in the events of family or national history. Westermann, for example, says that '[t]he story told in the Old Testament is...not a in the sense of a series of God's salvation acts, but rather a history of God and man whose nucleus is the experience of saving'.[21] Nor is it a story of divine actions unilaterally injected into the course of human affairs, for 'all of God's acts and speaking are directed toward eliciting a response'.[22] Similarly Anderson writes: 'Just as persons are known in the context of relationship, so God's self is revealed in his historical relations with his people. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not the God of speculative thought. He is known by what he has done, is doing, and will do—i.e., in the events of history'.[23] Beyond doubt, this is a fundamental aspect of the character God in the Pentateuch.

2. *God speaks*. God is the principal speaker in the Pentateuch. Most of the central chapters of the Pentateuch, from Exodus 20 to the end of Numbers, are the speeches of God. If you write down ten of the page numbers of the Pentateuch at random, and look them up to see if God speaks or is quoted on them, you will probably find, as I did, that on 6 out of 10 pages there are words of God.

The significance of this speaking is variously understood by the theologians. Sometimes it is seen as being God's *self-revelation*. The pervasiveness of God's speech is said to establish that the text 'does not purport to be the record of human initiative in seeking for and discovering God' but rather 'testifies to

20. Robert L. Cohn, 'Narrative Structure and Canonical Perspective in Genesis', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983), pp. 3-16, has shown how God increasingly retreats into the background throughout Genesis 12–50.

21. Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, pp. 10-11.

22. Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, p. 27.

23. Anderson, 'God, OT View of', p. 418.

God's overture, God's initiative'.[24] Sometimes the speech of God in the Pentateuch is seen as God's *summons* of Israel to obedience, God's announcement of his requirements. The Pentateuchal law, spoken by God to Moses, can indeed be regarded as a gift, but 'Every gift implies an element of duty',[25] and the words of God essentially impose duties upon their hearers. Sometimes the words of God are seen rather as *instruction*, the emphasis being on God's speech as guidance for life rather than as legal requirements. Sometimes it is stressed that the words of God that direct Israel's behaviour are effectively part of his *salvation* of the nation. So, it is argued, the law must not be 'separated from God's saving deed and absolutized. Because God encountered Israel as savior, he commanded to it his will.'[26] Sometimes the words of God are seen as the *provisions of the covenant* that defines the relationship between God and the people.[27] No matter what the precise significance of God's speaking is, speech is a prominent element in the characterization of God in the Pentateuch.[28]

3. *God promises*. The Old Testament as a whole has commonly been read, by Christian interpreters, as promise, to which the New Testament corresponds as fulfilment.[29] However appropriate or otherwise that may be for the Old Testament generally, the theme of promise is certainly perceived as an important thread in the Pentateuch's depiction of God. Zimmerli, for example, sees God's promise to the ancestors in

24. Anderson, 'God, OT View of', p. 419. Anderson is speaking of the Old Testament in general, it should be noted. To take another, not uncharacteristic, example, G. von Rad deals with the speeches of God to Moses at Sinai (the 'Law') under the rubric of 'The Divine Revelation at Sinai' (*Old Testament Theology*, I, pp. 187-305).

25. Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, p. 109.

26. Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, p. 176.

27. Cf. Ronald E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), p. 110: '*Tôrâh* is the comprehensive list of instructions and stipulations by which Israel's covenant with God is controlled'.

28. See also Patrick, *The Rendering of God*, chapter 6 'God's Speaking' (pp. 90-100).

29. See, for example, Clements, *Old Testament Theology*, chapter 6 'The Old Testament as Promise' (pp. 131-54).

Genesis as 'constitut[ing] the…subject matter of the patriarchal history',[30] so fundamental is it to the entire narrative. And I have argued myself that the theme of the threefold promise to the ancestors of progeny, land and a divine–human relationship binds the whole Pentateuch together: while Genesis develops the element of the promise of progeny, Exodus and Leviticus concern themselves with the promise of the divine-human relationship, while Numbers and Deuteronomy focus on the promise of the land.[31] We can safely say therefore that God is viewed in the Pentateuch as the one who promises.[32]

4. *God saves*. In the work of Gerhard von Rad in particular we find the Hexateuch (the Pentateuch plus Joshua) characterized as 'salvation history' (*Heilsgeschichte*), that is, as a narrative of God's saving acts, or, as the 'biblical theology' movement put it, 'the mighty acts of God'.[33] Von Rad found the core of the Hexateuch in the confessional statement of Deut. 26.5-9, which he called Israel's Credo: 'A wandering Aramaean was my ancestor… We cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction… the LORD brought us out of Egypt'. In these words are recapitulated, said von Rad, 'the main events in the saving history from the time of the patriarchs…down to the conquest'. The God of the Pentateuch is thus a God who delivers and saves.[34] To the same effect Westermann writes, 'The experience of the deliverance at the beginning [that

30. Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, p. 29.

31. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, esp. p. 29.

32. See also Walther Zimmerli, *Man and his Hope in the Old Testament* (Studies in Biblical Theology, II/20; London: SCM Press, 1971), pp. 42-69.

33. Cf. George Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (Studies in Biblical Theology, 8; London: SCM Press, 1952). On the 'biblical theology' movement, see Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), and J. Barr, 'Biblical Theology', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Supplementary Volume* (ed. Keith Crim; Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 104-11.

34. For some brief criticisms of von Rad's conception of 'salvation history', see, for example, Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, pp. 14-15, who points out that God acts for punishment as well as for salvation, and that an ongoing activity of 'blessing' also needs to be taken account of (see the next point).

is, at the exodus as the beginning of Israel's national history] means for Israel that Yahweh will *remain* Israel's saviour. As he was the saviour at the beginning, so his rescue continues to be expected, prayed for, and experienced. Yahweh is the saving God.'[35]

5. *God blesses*. Westermann in particular has drawn attention to this aspect of the character of the God of the Pentateuch. On the first page of Genesis, God appears as the originator of blessing, that is, of a general benevolence that is 'universal and valid for all forms of life'. Blessing differs from saving, according to Westermann. God's saving is 'a special turning towards a particular group' and is experienced in 'individual events or a sequence of events'. Blessing, on the other hand, is a 'quiet, continuous, flowing, and unnoticed working of God which cannot be captured in moments or dates',[36] and which is directed toward humanity in general and not just toward Israel. The Pentateuch as a whole, though it consists for the most part of a story of salvation, that is, of the salvation of Israel, is nevertheless framed by two major statements of God's blessing: the blessing of the creator in Genesis 1–11, and 'the blessing in Deuteronomy directed toward the people in the promised land'.[37] It is hard to say, therefore, whether it is God's saving or blessing that is the more prominent in the Pentateuch; both must be given full recognition.

Here then have been five things that contemporary Old Testament theologians find the Pentateuch to be affirming about God. Without question, all these statements about God are well attested in the Pentateuch, and many students and scholars would be content to conclude their account of the God of the Pentateuch with a catalogue like the foregoing—more developed and more sophisticated, no doubt, but essentially on these lines. But each of these statements, however 'positive' or 'constructive', deserves to be probed more critically, for each statement both implies and denies far more than is evident on the surface.

35. Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, p. 37.
36. Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, pp. 102-103.
37. Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, pp. 103-104.

4. *Conclusions*

Reading against the grain implies that there *is* a grain. It implies that texts have designs on their readers and wish to persuade them of something or other. It implies that there are ideologies inscribed in texts and that the readers implied by texts share the texts' ideologies.[38] But, as I have suggested earlier, readers are free to resist the ideologies of texts, and, what is more, texts themselves sometimes provoke readers into resisting them by manifesting tensions immanent within the texts themselves. All the same, there is no obligation to resist, nothing wrong in adopting the ideology of one's text. All that is wrong is not knowing and admitting that that is what you are doing *or* not permitting other people to resist the ideology of the text.

I do not want to deny that the five points in the previous section represent, with whatever measure of success, the ideology of the Pentateuch on the subject of God—that is to say, the grain of the text. But so that those who wish to accede to this ideology know what they are doing, and can recognize that they are making a choice when they do so, I shall offer a few reflections that go against the grain.

None of the five themes in the figuration of God in the Pentateuch that I have outlined above can be said to be entirely true about the character. Some qualification must always be added,

38. This is loose anthropomorphic talk, I know (see for example Stephen Fowl, 'Texts Don't Have Ideologies', *Biblical Interpretation* 3 [1995], pp. 15-34). Strictly speaking, texts do not have grains any more than they 'have' meanings. Authors would like to put grains in their texts, of course, and readers are forever finding grains in texts, even though they are not there. But since authors do not own their own texts, not forever, authors' intentions do not constitute the reality of the texts they compose or determine their meaning. And from the readers' side, what counts as the grain of the text for them is no more than what some interpretative community or other decides to call the grain. So when I am reading against the grain, I am really reading against the practice of an interpretative community, sometimes even against myself and my own first reading. Strictly speaking, the text is not to blame for the thoughts that come into my head when I am reading it, but I am not always speaking strictly; like most people, in everyday speaking and writing I go on ascribing meaning and grain to texts.

even though our handbooks of Old Testament theology uniformly devote themselves to exposition and refrain from critical evaluation of the portrait.

It is true that God in the Pentateuch is present, speaks and saves—but on the whole it is true only if you take the position of Israel. If you adopt the point of view of the Egyptians or the Canaanites, God is not experienced as a saving God, and the only words you will hear addressed to you are words of reproach and threat. If you are not Israel, you do not know the presence of God, and the main reason is not some defect in you but the fact that you have not been chosen. It is perfectly true that the character God in the Pentateuch saves Israel from Egypt, but it is equally true that the same God destroys or humiliates the Egyptians, and ignores almost everyone else. The text does not wish us to think that, or, if it allows us to know it, it wants us to suppress that knowledge and concentrate on the deliverance of Israel. But when the deliverance of Israel is effected precisely through the destruction of the Egyptian soldiers, when what is deliverance from one point of view is death from another, must we succumb to the text's ideology and suppress part of the reality it bears witness to?[39]

The election of Israel is, without question, a thorny problem for the character of God in the Pentateuch. Some writers have thought to ameliorate matters by emphasizing that Israel's election is not thought to be an end in itself but for the purpose of bringing benefit to the other nations. Bernhard Anderson, for example, writes that 'the deepest insight into Israel's election or special calling is that God has chosen Israel to be the historical agent of world-wide blessing'. But he has to go on to say, 'Admittedly, Israel did not always understand her [*sic*] calling in

39. As an example of the prevailing agreement to regard the exodus as an 'act of God' but to ignore the fact that it did any harm to anyone, see Paul D. Hanson, *Dynamic Transcendence: The Correlation of Confessional Heritage and Contemporary Experience in a Biblical Model of Divine Activity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 28-35. Raphael Jospe, 'The Concept of the Chosen People: An Interpretation', *Judaism* 43 (1994), pp. 127-48, has recently undertaken to show, from a Jewish perspective, that chosenness is not a marker of privilege but 'an internally-directed Jewish responsibility to live in a certain way, based on the Torah' (p. 127)—but this too denatures the concept 'chosen'.

this universal perspective'.[40] The fact is that Israel, or shall we say in the present context, the narrator of the Pentateuch, seems to give a very low priority to this 'deepest insight', for it is very difficult to see how the Israel of the Pentateuch brings blessing to anyone at all,[41] and does not rather spell disaster for all the nations it comes into contact with. Genesis 1 and 9, indeed, speak of God's blessing upon humanity in general, and Westermann especially wants to give the idea of universal blessing parity of place with the idea of particular salvation for Israel.[42] But the Pentateuch does not support his view, for it consistently privileges Israel and marginalizes the other nations.

If we now turn our attention to the theme of God promising in the Pentateuch, again the realities in the text do not allow a clear and unambiguous statement. There is no doubt that the divine promises to the patriarchs are fundamental for the dynamic of the Pentateuchal narrative: God promises progeny, a relationship and land, and the narrative presses towards the realization of those promises. But it would be unacceptably short-sighted to depict the God of the Pentateuch as making promises without also asking whether or to what extent those promises are fulfilled. He promises to make Abram into a 'great nation' (Gen. 12.2), but has this happened in the course of the Pentateuchal narrative? The promise of the land has certainly not been realized by the end of Deuteronomy, and the divine–human relationship is decidedly less stable than we had imagined when it was first promised to the patriarchs. But perhaps this is the point at which we should question the notion of the 'Pentateuch' as an independent literary work, and invoke the entity that we can call the 'Primary History', that sequence of historiographical narrative that runs from Genesis to the end

40. Anderson, 'God, OT View of', p. 429.

41. Joseph providing food for the Egyptians is the one evident exception (cf. Gen. 47.25), but even this benefit must be set against the fact that in order to do so he deprives the Egyptians of their animals and land and 'made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other' (47.21). See also my essay, 'What Happens in Genesis', in *What Does Eve Do to Help?* , pp. 49-66 (58).

42. Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, Part III 'The Blessing God and Creation' (pp. 85-117).

of 2 Kings.[43] Yet if the boundaries of that work are to form the horizon within which we consider the promises and their fulfilment, the news is even worse than if we restrict ourselves to the first five books. For by the end of the narrative of the Primary History, Israel has lost the land, it has been thrown out of God's presence (2 Kgs 24.20), and the threat of Deut. 4.27 has been fulfilled, that Israel is to be scattered among the other nations and only a few of its members are to survive. Perhaps we might then reflect that even the exile is not the end of the story—though it is the end of the history-writing; perhaps the promises even now, in our own day, still await their fulfilment. But whatever historical moment we fix on to take our soundings in order to discover whether the promises have been fulfilled, we find an ambivalent situation. In short, in the Pentateuch God makes promises, indeed, but if we are to properly appreciate the character of this Pentateuchal God we need to be able to determine whether there is any truth in these promises; and the answer is far from clear.

It is the same with the speaking of God. There is no doubt that the God of the Pentateuch is not a distant, uninterested or uncommunicative God. But if we are to say anything more than bland generalities we have to flesh out what this speaking consists of. Here again there are ambivalences. For as well as the words of moral guidance he speaks to Israel in the Pentateuch there is, for example, an oracle from him about Esau and Jacob, that 'the elder shall serve the younger' (Gen. 25.23). We, for our part, find ourselves asking, Why should the traditional rights of the firstborn be overturned at this point, why should a man who cynically buys a birthright for the price of a meal be divinely authorized to keep it, is it in any case possible to 'buy' a birthright, and why in any case should one of them 'serve' the other, considering that they are brothers? Or, to take another example, what is one to make of the amazingly elaborate instructions given by the character God for the construction of the tabernacle and for the performance of sacrifice in his honour? What kind of a deity is it that wants to specify to this degree precisely how he is to be worshipped and what will count as

43. See Clines, 'The Old Testament Histories: A Reader's Guide', in *What Does Eve Do to Help?*, pp. 85-105.

legitimate and illegitimate expressions of reverence for him? What kind of a person is it, we might say, that is so concerned for his own honour and that lays so many constraints on the responses of others to him?

There are no straightforward answers to such questions. The God of the Pentateuch is a complex and mysterious character, passionate and dynamic but by no means conformable to human notions of right behaviour. He is not very lovable, but he must be obeyed. He has his plans, but they are not infrequently deflected. He does not do very much explaining, and he relates to people mostly by a system of threats and promises. He has his favourites, and he is fiercely loyal to them. He is hard to please. But which of all these characteristics should weigh heaviest in the scales? The Pentateuch is a machine for generating variant readings of the character of God, and the answers it gives will be shaped by the kinds of questions we allow ourselves to address to it. None of our readings will be disinterested, all will enshrine our own ideology.