

# God *and* Earthly Power

*An Old Testament Political Theology*

J. G. McCONVILLE



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AN OLD TESTAMENT POLITICAL THEOLOGY

GENESIS–KINGS

by

J. G. MCCONVILLE



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For Bishop Kenneth Cragg  
On seventy years of ordination  
ויבאנו אל־המקום הזה (Deut. 26.9)

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## PREFACE

The present volume had its genesis in a Consultation in the Scripture and Hermeneutics Project series, held in Cheltenham in 2001. The topic was the use of the Bible in ethics and politics, and it took the form of a dialogue with Professor Oliver O'Donovan of Oxford University. I am indebted to Professor O'Donovan, not only for his published work which was the text for the Consultation (*The Desire of the Nations*), but also for his penetrating responses to the papers given there, including my own. (The papers and responses are in the volume entitled *A Royal Priesthood?*) Professor O'Donovan's proposal to build a political theology on the foundation of the Old and New Testaments was an indispensable stimulus to the thesis I offer here.

By the same token, I owe a debt of gratitude to my former colleague at the University of Gloucestershire, Professor Craig Bartholomew, now of Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario. As the Director of the Scripture and Hermeneutics Project, and a visionary advocate of the importance of hermeneutics in theology and biblical studies, he bears some responsibility for my attempt to broaden my study into this area.

The topic addressed here stands at a place where Biblical Studies meets other disciplines in Theology, and I have benefited from the wisdom of many in attempting to understand broader issues, though none bear responsibility for the specific formulations in this thesis. Among them I would mention Professor Jonathan Chaplin of the Institute of Christian Studies, Toronto, an influential contributor to the Consultation and volume named above. And Professor Stephen Williams of Union Theological College and Queen's University, Belfast, proved a friend indeed by graciously undertaking a close reading of the manuscript at an advanced stage, and making many useful observations on both form and content, which have had an important effect on the final form.

I am grateful too to my colleagues in the Department of Humanities at the University of Gloucestershire for their friendly collegiality and encouragement, enabling me to find the time to complete the work.

The book is dedicated, however, to Bishop Kenneth Cragg, in gratitude for the kindness and wisdom of a senior friend who attains in 2006 the seventieth anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood, and from whom I have learnt immeasurably, not least of the entailments of 'earthly power'. It comes with the warmest respect and good wishes.

I am grateful also to the editors at T&T Clark International, who have been unfailingly patient and helpful. While on the subject of their patience, I should explain my approach to transliteration of Hebrew in this volume. I have normally

followed the series practice of giving Hebrew in the unpointed original, but have used informal transliterations for words that recur frequently in the argument or in particular passages, in the hope that the book may not prove unintelligible to non-Hebraists. Where I have referred to standard translations of biblical texts, I have resorted most often, though not invariably, to NRSV.

## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ANE	Ancient Near East(ern)
<i>ANET</i>	James B. Pritchard (ed.), <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954)
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge
BEATAJ	Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums
BHT	Beiträge zur historischen Theologie
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BTAT	Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur <i>ZAW</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ConBot	Coniectanea biblica, Old Testament
Dtr	The Deuteronomist, Deuteronomistic
ESV	English Standard Version
EUS	European University Studies
EVV	English language versions
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HBS	Herders Biblische Studien
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
<i>IDB</i>	George Arthur Buttrick (ed.), <i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> (4 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962)
<i>IDBSup</i>	<i>IDB</i> , Supplementary Volume
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i> , Supplement Series
KJV	King James Version
NAC	New American Commentary
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
ÖBS	Österreichische biblische Studien
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
RSV	Revised Standard Version

SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SBAB	Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände
SBLSS	SBL Semeia Studies
<i>SCI</i>	<i>Studia Classica Israelica</i>
<i>SCJ</i>	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
SBTS	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study
SHS	Scripture and Hermeneutics Series
<i>StudBib</i>	<i>Studia Biblica</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
TBü	Theologische Bücherei
<i>ThPQ</i>	<i>Theologisch-Praktische Quartalschrift</i>
<i>TTod</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTE	The Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon
VTSup	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i> , Supplement Series
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
LXX	The Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
OG	Old Greek

## Chapter 1

### READING THE OLD TESTAMENT POLITICALLY

#### 1. *The Old Testament in the Modern World*

The present volume aims to contribute to a discussion of how the Old Testament might be understood politically, both in its own terms and in relation to the modern world. Such a project is contentious from every conceivable angle. A secular world would banish the Bible from public discourse, and so if possible pre-empt the question. A suspicious world regards the Bible as serving the interests of those who promote it, powerful élites, insiders excluding outsiders, and so doubts its capacity to be the vehicle of radical critique. And an influential voice within biblical scholarship gives credence to this suspicious attitude, with its thesis that the Old Testament was born in an act of self-assertion by an élite group in post-exilic Judah, pressing its claim to land and status over against other contenders.

I introduce the present topic in this way, not to concede any of the above, but to declare the nature of the argument. The responses to the Old Testament that I have alluded to here (and which will be represented specifically as the argument proceeds) are not themselves value-free, but are part of the passionate discourse that the Bible provokes. For the Bible is of course contentious, with its claims about a world that is subject to the mercy and judgement of the one God, made known in the life and the Scriptures of Israel. Its message (in the course of its growth and development) ran counter to the interests of great powers from Assyria to Rome, as well as meeting resistance from many who called themselves 'Israel'. And this was so because by its nature it intruded upon public and private life, and compelled response.

The topic, therefore, demands attention, not avoidance. The Old Testament has exerted influence on political life in many ways over centuries, and even today it still does so, whether overtly, as in the politics that converge on Palestine, or somewhat tacitly, in the ways in which nations with Christian traditions have subtly drawn on it in support of national aspirations.<sup>1</sup> The Old Testament's presence in public life has not simply faded into the past, but is alive and well. It

1. Or not so subtly; see below, Chapter 5, for examples. See also Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 185–209, especially pp. 195–8; and also Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), for an account of the legacy of biblical and religious ideas in European politics since the French Revolution.

is also potentially dangerous, as many of its modern critics have quite rightly seen, for undeniably the name of God has been invoked in the interests of human power and ambition, and with violence. But it is for this reason that it needs to be heard and understood. It is open to abuse not only by those who would exploit it for their own purposes, but also by those who would reduce or dismiss it by casting it as the willing tool of such interests. Yet when carefully heard, it may prove the only bulwark against self-aggrandizement and idolatry.

## 2. Reading the Old Testament

If the Old Testament is contentious in the world at large it is no less so in the scholarship that is dedicated to it. For here as elsewhere the overarching commitments that are played out in contemporary hermeneutics are manifest. For classical critical scholarship, the issue confronted was the perceived hegemony of Christian theology in matters of biblical interpretation, and the aim was to preserve the Bible from misappropriation in the interests of dogma. As part of its reconstruction of Israelite history and religion, it sought to uncover the interests that lay behind texts. The surface biblical story of how God providentially delivered his chosen people Israel from captivity in Egypt gave way to a narrative in which the texts were found to lack fundamental unity, but rather expressed various aspirations. The 'J' document was propaganda for the Davidic Empire; the Priestly parts of the Pentateuch promoted the interests of the Aaronide priests; the deuteronomistic literature promoted the reform of King Josiah, and thus the interests of the royal court of Judah.

In recent times, the debate about the Bible has taken on the hues of modern hermeneutical discourse, and the tendencies in classical criticism have been pursued in new ways. Here one sees quite distinct directions. In one important version, the suspicion implicit in the older scholarship has been taken to a new level. The search for underlying agendas is no longer perceived as a matter of judicious historical research, but is rather of the essence. Consequently, the Old Testament has been 'rumbled' by the alert critic. The Old Testament, as winners' history, may not be trusted in the matters about which it purports to speak. There was in reality no 'ancient Israel'; rather this is a construct of a powerful group that needed a sacred history in order to authenticate its political goals.<sup>2</sup>

The newness of this mood should not be underestimated. The older scholarship, though alert to various interests, largely supposed that the writers of the Old Testament preserved actual sources, to which they were in measure bound.<sup>3</sup> With

2. Oliver O'Donovan, in his bid to restore biblical history to the discourse of political theology, begins his thesis with a chapter entitled 'Beyond Suspicion'; O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 6–29.

3. Martin Noth's analysis and explanation of the Deuteronomistic History is a case in point. Much of the work on DtrH since Noth shares his intention of reconstructing a history; e.g. G. N. Knoppers, *Two Nations Under God: the Deuteronomistic History of Solomon and the Dual Monarchies* (HSM, 52-53; 2 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993–94).

careful reading, a course of Israelite history and religion might still be discerned. Moreover, many of those who based their work on the critical reconstruction of Old Testament history did so in the hope of promoting a better understanding of theology.<sup>4</sup> The more suspicious modern readings, beginning roughly with Morton Smith and Joseph Blenkinsopp,<sup>5</sup> diverge in principle from this kind of interpretation. Adopting sociological models, they look deliberately to the period in which the books are thought to have been formed to discover ideological reasons for their composition. P. R. Davies has pursued the argument rigorously. For him, 'ancient Israel' is an invention of the religious élite in Persian Yehud, under the aegis of the Persian authorities and their policy of reorganizing the empire around temple administrations and law codes.<sup>6</sup> The Old Testament was written in scribal schools, to which are owed both its impression of unity and its apparent antiquity.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that the accounts of Smith, Blenkinsopp and Davies all aim to explain the Old Testament as *canon*. Canon itself thus becomes a function of domination.

The renunciation of a history and religion of ancient Israel in this approach is overdrawn, there being little evidence that the kind of literary activity described by Davies happened in the manner or milieu he postulates. More important for our present interest, however, is the way in which the approach tends to disqualify the Old Testament from speaking, especially on political matters. The scribes could criticize their own régime, but did so circumspectly, '...so that no direct criticism of the current authorities is explicit'.<sup>8</sup>

Keith Whitelam, accepting Davies' analysis,<sup>9</sup> took forward the idea of domination. Not only was the Old Testament itself the product of an exclusive group's bid to protect its position, but biblical scholarship was affected more than it realized by the Old Testament's own account and interests. To the extent that the object of its interest was conceived as the 'history of Israel' it failed to be a history of the region and its peoples as such. Whitelam's sub-title, 'the silencing of Palestinian history', illustrates his thesis, that both the Old Testament itself and its interpreters have been guilty of an act of exclusion, an exclusion that

4. This point has been well made by John Barton, who disputes the explicit or implicit claims of the modern 'canonical approach' that historical criticism was anti-theological, and argues that many of its practitioners from early to recent times had religious beliefs and theological interests; John Barton, 'Canon and Old Testament Interpretation', in Edward Ball (ed.), *In Search of True Wisdom: Essays in Old Testament Interpretation in Honour of Ronald E. Clements* (JSOTSup, 300; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 37–52 (39–43).

5. Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971; London: SCM Press, 2nd edn, 1987); J. Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), e.g. pp. 147–8.

6. P. R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* (JSOTSup, 148; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992, repr. 1995), pp. 101–3, 111–12.

7. Davies, 'Ancient Israel', pp. 114–15, 124–5.

8. Davies, 'Ancient Israel', p. 103. As Davies' thesis depends on the assumption that texts ostensibly about the past are really about the present (see p. 118) this argument is rather weak.

9. Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 3.



applies both to ancient non-Israelite peoples, and to modern Palestinians. Citing Edward Said's thesis regarding the close interconnections between scholarship and nationalism,<sup>10</sup> he argues that Old Testament historiography has its roots in Eurocentric nineteenth-century nationalism, has consequently shown a fascination with the emergence of a 'nation state' in ancient Israel, and has thus been the ally, in effect, of modern nationalism, specifically Zionist nationalism. Archaeology has evinced similar commitments.<sup>11</sup> Biblical studies, in embracing an 'Israelite' reading of the Old Testament, and specifically in its refusal to use the term 'Palestinians' to refer to the population of the land in general, 'is, thereby, implicated in an act of dispossession which has its modern political counterpart in the Zionist possession of the land and dispossession of its Palestinian inhabitants'.<sup>12</sup> On such a view, the biblical texts are the creatures of the political interests of the powerful not only at the point of their generation but also in the history of their appropriation. They are in consequence unlikely to be available for constructive theological or political thinking. Indeed, theological interpretation is apparently foreclosed at the outset.<sup>13</sup>

There is, however, a contrary tendency in modern hermeneutics, in which texts are precisely *not* bound by their original functions or intentions. In the search for the location of meaning, attention has largely turned away from the world 'behind the text' to focus on the text itself, or the 'world of/within the text', and the world 'in front of' it: meaning lies in an engagement between texts and those who read them. There is no single form of this approach, with greater and lesser freedom accorded to the reader, and greater and lesser constraints exerted by the texts. Yet in common is the point that texts by their nature cannot control the reading process. As Iser put it: 'The text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process'.<sup>14</sup> In similar vein Umberto Eco spoke of 'open texts',<sup>15</sup> and Paul Ricoeur of a 'surplus of meaning'.<sup>16</sup> The fundamental assump-

10. Whitelam, *Invention*, p. 20; Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. 51.

11. Whitelam, *Invention*, pp. 20–1. He cites Finkelstein's study of the 'Israelite settlement', as 'an interpretation of the archaeological data from the Late Bronze to the early Iron Ages which assumes the unity and identity of Israel, in effect an incipient nation state, in the Palestinian highlands' (p. 21); I. Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988).

12. Whitelam, *Invention*, p. 46.

13. E. T. Mullen, for example, refers to his study of the Pentateuch as a 'non-theological, secular analysis'; *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), p. 5.

14. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. ix; cited A. C. Thiselton, "'Behind" and "In Front of" the Text: Language, Reference and Indeterminacy', in Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene and Karl Möller (eds.), *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (SHS, 2; Carlisle: Paternoster Press/Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 97–120 (100).

15. Umberto Eco in (for example) 'Intentio Lectoris: the State of the Art', in Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 44–63 (49–50).

16. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: T.C.U. Press, 1976), p. 45. The same concept appears as a 'principle of plenitude', that is, as Dan Stiver puts it, 'a text or event can mean

tion here is that texts are by their nature capable of becoming meaningful in new ways, independently of conditions that brought them to birth.

There is, furthermore, a specifically canonical dimension to this. Historically, the biblical texts have been predominantly read theologically, or canonically. That is, they have been heard to speak to faith communities in a multiplicity of settings, and they have been read in relation to each other. The potential of the canonical texts to become meaningful in fresh ways has been a basic postulate of biblical interpretation. George Aichele, describing the working assumptions of 'biblical theology' (though he does not share them) and alluding to Ricoeur, puts this well: 'The canonical text overflows with a surplus of meaning, an abundance of significance, that allows it to speak to all times and peoples'.<sup>17</sup>

In this discussion, as we have seen, a specific issue concerns whether the canon is the product of the narrow interests of a particular group, and thus tainted with oppressive ideology, or whether it is liberative and capable of speaking critically and prophetically. The importance of this dilemma in the political interpretation of the Bible may be seen from an exchange between Christopher Rowland and Itumeleng Mosala. Mosala thinks that black theology, to be effective, needs to understand both the history and culture that affects the reading of the Bible and the political agendas that lie behind the texts. He thus adopts what he calls a 'historical-materialist' method, 'to get to the bottom of real events, relationships, structures and so forth'.<sup>18</sup> Reading the Book of Micah accordingly, he addresses his enquiry not to the 'surface' of the biblical text, but to the disparate parts from which it has been composed. He does so on the grounds that these reveal the real oppression of the poor by the powerful strata of monarchical society. The canonical final form, in contrast, represents a re-appropriation of such by an élite that adduces themes from Davidic theology – namely 'stability, grace, creation, restoration, universal peace, compassion and salvation' – and now casts itself in the role of victim.<sup>19</sup> The affinities with Davies' reconstruction are clear. Rowland argues, in contrast, that it is the final form that preserves the variety of readings, readily conceding that liberative readings jostle with more accommodating ones (he refers especially to the Gospel of Luke), but arguing that this at least ensures the survival of the liberative voices, and that readers of

all that it can mean'; Stiver, 'Ricoeur, Speech-act Theory, and the Gospels as History', in Bartholomew *et al.* (eds.), *After Pentecost*, pp. 50–72 (58). Stiver refers there to Ricoeur, 'Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics', in J. B. Thompson (ed.), *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 165–81 (176).

17. George Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001).

18. Itumeleng Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 3–4.

19. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 101–53; see pp. 102–3, 118–21. He goes on: 'Micah itself, as is true of most of the Bible, offers no certain starting point for a theology of liberation. There is simply too much de-ideologization to be made before it can be hermeneutically usable in the struggle for liberation'; p. 121.

Luke have had no difficulty in hearing them.<sup>20</sup> Rowland does not deny that Luke may have been produced by an élite, but he shows that the text could nevertheless not be reduced to an instrument of their ideology.<sup>21</sup>

In a different debate, Michael Wolter comes to a similar conclusion. Arguing that the formation of the (NT) canon was not the consequence of a consistent theological programme (but rather had a strong element of compromise), he claims that the plurality of the canon even has a positive significance, because it maintains that Christian identity can and must take different forms in different social contexts, without however becoming subsumed by any such context.<sup>22</sup> Here too, therefore, the forces that produced the canon cannot determine its interpretation in advance.

### 3. *The Text and its 'Worlds'*

The idea of 'worlds *behind, of/within, and in front of*' the text has already been introduced in the preceding pages. I propose to adopt it as a methodological basis in the study before us, because I believe it offers a conceptual possibility of doing justice to the complexity of interpreting a biblical text with an interest in its contemporary significance, as well as a measure of control.<sup>23</sup> Some further considerations are in place at this stage, however.

#### a. *'Behind the text'*

It may seem that the drift of the preceding argument suggests that any attempt to recover the 'world behind the text' cannot play an effective part in interpretation. But this would be unrealistic and unconvincing. I have argued only against allowing interpretation to be unduly influenced by over-confident theories of the text's origins, and by an excess of 'suspicion' about the motives for its production. In practice, texts can hardly be understood apart from some grasp of the world in which they were produced. Thiselton rightly counsels against detaching the text from 'the extra-textual world of reality'.<sup>24</sup> The problem with reading the Old Testament is that so much of what counts as knowledge about the specific origins

20. Christopher Rowland, 'In This Place: the Center and the Margins in Theology', in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), pp. 177–82.

21. Rowland, 'In This Place', p. 182.

22. Michael Wolter, 'Die Vielfalt der Schrift und die Einheit des Kanons', in John Barton and Wolter (eds.), *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons* (Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 45–68 (61–2).

23. Thiselton also claims that the three dimensions are inseparable from each other in the reading process; "'Behind" and "In Front of" the Text', pp. 102, 108. See also W. R. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: an Integrated Approach* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), who adopts the concept throughout.

24. Thiselton, "'Behind" and "In Front of" the Text', p. 100. See also his comments on p. 107, and reference to K. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 48–90, 229–59.

of texts is approximate and provisional. This difficulty is felt even by those who argue strongly for a particular setting. E. T. Mullen takes the view, like Davies, that the Pentateuch was formed in the Persian period by an élite in Judah under the auspices of the imperial authorities, arguing that its purpose was to establish an ethnic identity for the returned community and especially its leadership. Yet it proves impossible to locate the process of formation to that period, as Mullen sees:

There can be little doubt that the process itself would have been much more complex than the factors mentioned above would suggest [viz. the need to form a tradition for the community in the context of Persian policy]. Since there is evidence that the Pentateuch was still open to modifications as late as the latter half of the third century BCE, then it is clear that caution must be taken in postulating a precise time at which the Pentateuch was completed.<sup>25</sup>

He finally concedes that the theory of the Pentateuch's composition in the Persian period by the returned exiles in Jerusalem 'has to be somewhat hypothetical, since there exists no direct empirical evidence for either the composition of the Pentateuchal traditions or the ways in which they were applied within the community'.<sup>26</sup> The Persian hypothesis finally suffers from the handicaps which Mullen claimed stood against the traditional theories about Pentateuchal formation, evidence for which 'is all internal to the argument itself and is supported only by its own presuppositions'.<sup>27</sup>

To this fundamental difficulty in historical research we may add a factor indicated by the Old Testament itself. Old Testament books do not point unequivocally to times of their composition. In the case of the Book of Isaiah, for example, the composition cuts across the two main periods to which its structure and content draw attention, the Assyrian and Babylonian. And this appears to be not merely a testimony to a long period of growth, but a strategy of the composition, which brings together the prophetic messages to Judah in the two periods (and probably beyond them) in a theological composition that is not determined by any one. B. S. Childs, drawing attention to this aspect of the book, thought that it was deliberately lifted out of specific historical contexts in order to apply more effectively to new contexts in which it might be read.<sup>28</sup> The same point holds for Deuteronomy, with the difference that specific settings (apart from the Mosaic) are not explicitly indicated. While it locates itself at a point prior to the entry of Israel to the land of Canaan, formal and theological indicators allow it to be read broadly against the background of ancient Near Eastern law and treaty, and particularly in relation to neo-Assyrian concepts; and it finally has a

25. Mullen, *Ethnic Myths*, pp. 73–4. For evidence for this late finalization of the Pentateuch he refers to G. Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), p. 146. He also points to Qumran as the earliest evidence for the Pentateuch and other OT literature as basically complete.

26. Mullen, *Ethnic Myths*, pp. 75–6.

27. Mullen, *Ethnic Myths*, p. 157.

28. B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), pp. 336–8.

post-exilic horizon.<sup>29</sup> Many books of the Old Testament are impossible to date with certainty.

However, the examples mentioned show that it is impossible to ignore the historical, social, religious and cultural matrix within which the texts were formed. While it is true that Deuteronomy cannot simply be identified with a vassal-treaty, whether Hittite or neo-Assyrian, a responsible reading of the book is bound to pay attention to the affinities it shares with these, as they are likely to be essential to a nuanced understanding of its character and purpose. The 'world behind the text', therefore, is indispensable. We simply have to enter the caveat that our knowledge of how the texts relate to that world is imprecise. The relationship between the text and the world 'behind' it always eludes complete description; it is rather a matter of ongoing comparison and modification, as part of the full range of the interpretative process. This modest approach to understanding texts historically is not only realistic, but also has the advantage of refraining from forcing texts into a mould cast by an overriding theory of origins.

#### b. 'Of/within the text'

The idea of the world 'of' or 'within' the text recognizes that texts (whether historical or fictional) represent an imaginative construction of the world, which is then offered to the imagination of the reader. It is thus distinct from the world behind the text, since that is independent of the text. The world of the text is a construct entailed in its production, lying close to the idea of the text's 'horizon', which in Gadamer's hermeneutics has to be 'fused' with that of the reader if the text is to be understood.<sup>30</sup> A first concern in the study that follows is to identify a text within the Old Testament which offers the possibility to the reader to reflect on theology and politics. In choosing Genesis–Kings, I have decided to focus on the 'primary history' of the Old Testament.

It is increasingly recognized that Genesis–Kings forms a distinct entity. The designation 'primary history' for Genesis–Kings is owed to D. N. Freedman, who thought it was an exilic composition.<sup>31</sup> The concept, if not Freedman's specific hypothesis, has been followed by a number of writers. Davies adopts it in the context of his thesis that the scribal project in Yehud required a coherent account of the origins of Israel,<sup>32</sup> as does Mullen.<sup>33</sup> The basic justification for viewing it in this way is that it offers a complete account of the story of Israel from its origins to the exile.<sup>34</sup>

29. See below, Chapter 2, for more on the background of Deuteronomy.

30. See Stiver, 'Ricoeur', pp. 58–9, for this comparison. He refers to H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall; New York: Crossroad, rev. edn, 1991), p. 297. See also above, nn. 14–16.

31. D. N. Freedman, 'The Law and the Prophets', *VTSup*, 9 (1963), pp. 250–65; *idem*, 'Canon of the Old Testament', *IDBSup* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), pp. 130–6.

32. Davies, 'Ancient Israel', pp. 124–5.

33. Mullen, *Ethnic Myths*, pp. 57–8.

34. It is the only such account, since Chronicles–Ezra–Nehemiah omits the formative events of exodus and Sinai.

This remains the case even though the canonical division between Torah or Pentateuch and Historical Books or Former Prophets cuts across certain narrative and theological interconnections between those blocks. These interconnections have long been recognized in critical scholarship, albeit in different ways. For example, the concept of a Hexateuch was based on the view that the Abrahamic land-promises of Genesis cannot be severed from the only story of their fulfilment, in Joshua.<sup>35</sup> Conversely, the Deuteronomistic theory thought the evident connections between Deuteronomy and some of the language and concepts of the historical books decisive, leaving a 'Tetrateuch' of Genesis to Numbers. Each view carried a certain weight, yet neither was a complete description. The Deuteronomistic analysis found it impossible to read Joshua without reference to material in the books preceding Deuteronomy (hence Noth's 'priestly' additions, including the participation of Eleazar the priest and the heads of the tribes in the distribution of land, Josh. 14.1–2; 19.51; 21.1–2, and the setting up of the Tent of Meeting at Shiloh; Josh. 18.1; 19.51).<sup>36</sup> And the clear echoes of the Exodus narrative throughout Joshua–Kings show that neither of the proposed boundary lines is definitive.<sup>37</sup> While there are real issues of composition here, it is finally inevitable to respect again the traditional linkages which present Genesis–Kings as a unified narrative.<sup>38</sup>

The considerations above are primarily literary, but the focus on Genesis–Kings is informed, second, by a certain 'canonical' interest. The reasons for invoking the idea of canon are first, that the literature has been shaped and preserved by a canonical process, so that its status as canon is bound to be acknowledged in its interpretation, and second, that it recognizes that the texts have a crucial theological dimension which should not be foreclosed at the outset.<sup>39</sup>

In adopting the notion of canon for the present enquiry, I do not mean the process of canonization, but rather what eventuates from the process, namely an invitation to read the books in terms of their shared canonical status (hence as an

35. The Hexateuch is associated particularly with G. von Rad in classical twentieth-century Old Testament interpretation: 'The Problem of the Hexateuch', in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken; London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966). In an important recent work, Konrad Schmid revives both the Hexateuchal idea and the unity of Genesis–Kings. The promises to the patriarchs and the exodus from Egypt constitute a double foundation for the origin of Israel. While promise and fulfilment of the latter are found within Exodus, the fulfilment of the patriarchal promises occurs in Joshua; *Erzväter und Exodus: Untersuchungen zur doppelten Begründung der Ursprünge Israels innerhalb der Geschichtsbücher des Alten Testaments* (WMANT, 81; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999), pp. 196–7. See also his reflections on the relationship between Hexateuch and Pentateuch, pp. 290–3.

36. M. Noth, *Das Buch Josua* (HAT, I/7; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1953), pp. 10–11.

37. K. Schmid, *Erzväter und Exodus*, p. 78; e.g. Josh. 2.8–11; 5.1; 9.9; 24.2–8; Judg. 2.1, 11; 6.8–9; 1 Sam. 4.8; 6.6; 2 Sam. 7.6; 1 Kgs 8.16; 8.51; 2 Kgs 17.7, 36; cf. C. Westermann, *Die Geschichtsbücher des Alten Testaments: Gab es ein deuteronomistisches Geschichtswerk?* (TBü, 87; Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1994), pp. 39–40.

38. For Schmid, Genesis–Kings is unified according to a structure of 'Heilsgeschichte' ('salvation-history') in Genesis–Joshua, followed by 'Unheilsgeschichte' ('judgement-history') in Judges–Kings; *Erzväter und Exodus*, pp. 290–1.

39. Pace Mullen; see above, n. 13.