

SIMONE WEIL AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

SIMONE WEIL'S CRITIQUE  
OF  
THE OLD TESTAMENT

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#### SCOPE AND CONTENTS

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the critique of the Old Testament which is found in the writings of Simone Weil (1909-43). The critique will be examined both for its account of the history and literature of Ancient Israel and also for its criticisms of the concept of God and the form of religion which are found in the Old Testament. The critique will be investigated and assessed in the academic fields within which it falls, namely Old Testament scholarship, the study of the Ancient Near East, and the comparative and philosophical study of world religion as a whole.

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## INTRODUCTION

The subject of this dissertation is one of the themes found in the writings of Simone Weil, namely her discussion of the history and literature of ancient Israel as they appear through the Jewish Torah and the Christian Old Testament. Because the published corpus is still growing, and because of the prodigious range of the author's knowledge and interest, it is too soon to attempt an assessment, or even a description, of what she was saying as a whole. At the present time the most profitable approach to her writings would seem to be that of seeking the whole through the parts, by the detailed examination of her thought in such apparently different fields as politics, science, ancient and modern philosophy, education and religion. Within these areas even further concentration is expedient, especially in that of religion,<sup>1</sup> which includes the interpretation and appraisal of several traditions.

The attention which has so far been given to Simone Weil's religious thought has taken the form either of general accounts of its main themes, or of particular summaries and criticisms of

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1. What the words "religion" and "religious" mean, and whether the so-called "religions" are really definable entities, are complex and unsettled questions, as W.C. Smith shows in the introductory chapters to his book, The Meaning and End of Religion (Toronto: Mentor, 1964). By "the writings on religion" or "the religious writings" of Simone Weil is meant those of her remarks which both discuss the contents of various religious traditions and literatures, and also use the ideas and words of those traditions, "God", "sin", "incarnation", etc. What the word "religion" itself meant for Simone Weil is discussed in the fifth chapter of this study.

individual elements such as her Gnosticism.<sup>1</sup> The present study is undertaken in the belief that the enquiry can now be conducted in another way, through a comprehensive and detailed examination of her writings on one religious tradition. It will attempt to evaluate her critique of the Old Testament as a contribution both to the understanding of that tradition and to the general study of religions. Such an investigation and evaluation should constitute, together with similar studies of her treatment of the Greek, Indian, Egyptian and other religious traditions, a necessary part of the foundation for an understanding of her work as a whole.

Treatments of Simone Weil's writings on the Old Testament have hitherto been brief and selective. They have been published mainly in Catholic and Jewish circles, and have constituted a defensive reaction to her antagonism and criticism.<sup>2</sup> The present study attempts to investigate the whole range of her pronouncements upon the Old Testament, and to evaluate them purely in terms of the fields in which they fall, in terms, that is, of Old Testament interpretation and of the comparative and philosophical study of world religion.

One factor which adds to the significance and present relevance of Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament is its relation to her criticism of the philosophical and political pre-suppositions of modern Western society, which is one of the main

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1. See the bibliographies in Jacques Cabaud, L'Expérience vécue de Simone Weil (Paris: Plon, 1957), pp. 397-401, and Simone Weil (London: Harvill Press, 1964), p. 384.

2. See the bibliography attached to this dissertation.



themes of her thought. In religious terms this general criticism appears as a rejection of the heritage of Israel in Christianity, and as a call for the re-discovery of what she considered to be the truer and more authentic spirituality of Egypt, Greece and India. For example, her condemnation of totalitarianism in its fascist, socialist and religious forms is linked with, and to a great extent clarified by, her analysis of institutional and national idolatry in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> Thus a critical familiarity with this analysis and its context must precede any judgment upon her account of what she calls "totalitarian".

An adequate examination of Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament is also a necessary prerequisite for the consideration of her position vis-a-vis the Roman Catholic Church. In this area there is the vexed question of her refusal to be baptized and of the extent and finality of her reasons for staying outside the Church. For the reaching of an opinion upon this controversial point her writings on the Old Testament are of fundamental importance, since she criticizes Israel and Rome together for making religion into a social mechanism, and for causing the misconception of Christianity which she considers to have been more or less prevalent since the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

A third reason why Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament can be usefully studied as a prelude to the complete examination of her thought concerns her criticism of the idea of

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1. E.g. in Cahiers III (Paris: Plon, 1956), pp. 246, 247.
  2. E.g. in "Lettre a Déodat Roché", in Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 64.

providence, as it appears in the Biblical and Christian traditions. This view of providence, with its particularism in the choice of certain historical events as the vehicles of divine will and certain human groups as the recipients of divine favour, she finds in the Old Testament. She considers it to be behind the subsequent Christian and Marxist ideas of progress, and her frequent criticisms of the progressivist assumptions of much modern philosophy and politics will be better understood after an examination of her remarks on the Old Testament.

The terms of the title of this dissertation require some elucidation, as does the method of approach. The word "critique" is used of Simone Weil's writings on the Old Testament, because it carries the sense of both an account and a criticism, and also implies the possibility that certain criteria may emerge capable of more general application. Simone Weil says what she considers the Old Testament to have been, and where and why she thinks it was wrong. Certain tools of criticism, so to speak, which were shaped in her exercise, remain for further possible use in the study of religion.

The term "Old Testament" is used in this dissertation simply because it is the title which Simone Weil herself most commonly employed for the matter under discussion. The phrase, in her usage, denotes not only a body of literature, but also a society, a religion and a history. The Old Testament is treated in her critique as an experience, in the French sense of the word, bearing the meaning of both the English words "experiment" and "experience". Although she does not use the word "experience" itself in this

connection, the idea is expressed in such statements as, "Israël est une tentative de vie sociale surnaturelle", and "La Bible, c'est la révélation traduite en sociale."<sup>1</sup> The Old Testament is thus regarded as an experiment in social religion, and Simone Weil's critique is, in that sense, a critical account of the experiment.

How then is this critique to be approached? Following the stated connotations of the word "critique", this study will consider her writings for their account of the Old Testament, for their criticism of it, and for any possible criteria that will emerge for the comparative study of religion. The approach will aim at explication and critical assessment on these three levels. Explication in this context means the abstraction of the discussion of the Old Testament from Simone Weil's writings as a whole, the statement of the discussion's main themes, the pursuit of its principal implications, and some account of the direct references to other traditions and of the use of sources and general background. Explication asks the question, "What exactly did Simone Weil say about the Old Testament, and what are the implications of her position?" Critical assessment, on the other hand, asks the question, "Does the evidence, both biblical and extra-biblical, justify her verdict on it, and of what worth are the ideas involved in the verdict?"

Before this approach is developed into an outline of method three problems need to be recognized, all of which are particularly prominent in the study of Simone Weil through the very nature of the

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1. Cahiers III, p. 106.

subject and the primary sources. The first problem is on the historical and biographical level. The life of Simone Weil is an immense and complicated field of research in itself, and for general biographical studies readers are referred to the works of Jacques Cabaud, p. Bugnion-Secrétan, E. Piccard, M-M. Davy, and to the various reminiscences of Père J-M. Perrin and Gustav Thibon.<sup>1</sup> An attempt at a biographical and chronological ordering of Simone Weil's religious writings can be found in Pere Perrin's "Chronologie des écrits de Simone Weil concernant sa recherche religieuse."<sup>2</sup>

Although the present study is of an explicative and critical rather than an historical nature, biographical and chronological questions will be raised where they seem important for the interpretation of particular passages, or for the relating of ideas expressed on different occasions. A specific biographical question, which will have to be faced, concerns Simone Weil's familiarity with contemporary scholarship in the field of Old Testament study, especially among her fellow-countrymen, which had been very significant in the latter part of her lifetime.

A second problem is the related one of the primary literary sources, the manuscripts and publications of Simone Weil's work. The bibliographical aspect of research on Simone Weil is no less complicated than the biographical, as can be seen from the extensive lists

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1. See the bibliography appended to this dissertation. The work by Davy is Simone Weil (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1961).

2. J-M. Perrin (ed.), Réponses aux questions de Simone Weil (Aubier, Editions Montaigne, 1964), pp. 191-197.

produced by Michel Thiout and Jacques Cabaud.<sup>1</sup> Her writings are many and various, including articles for publication, private essays and statements of belief, letters, the contents of various notebooks, and one lengthy treatise in book form. Although pieces of her work are still being collected, it is unlikely that her whole output will ever be recognized or recovered, since she contributed prolifically and sometimes pseudonymously to periodicals, many editions of which did not survive the chaos of war in France.<sup>2</sup> However, there are reasons for a greater confidence regarding the completeness of the religious writings than is possible, for example, with the political. In the first place, as Perrin mentions, the religious writings<sup>3</sup> all derive from the period from 1941 to her death in 1943.<sup>4</sup> By this time, convinced both of the significance of her religious explorations and also of the imminence of her own death, she was intentionally leaving her work in the custody of friends and relatives. It did not, therefore, run the same risk of loss as was incurred by the earlier political articles. In the second place, the interest which accompanied and followed the original posthumous publication of her work was largely religious, with the result that this side of her output was the first to be re-assembled and investigated. The last publication in French of any religious writings was in 1962.<sup>5</sup> Although many

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1. Michel Thiout, "Essai de bibliographie des écrits de Simone Weil", Archives des Lettres Modernes (Oct. 1959, No. 26), and Jacques Cabaud, op. cit.

2. Michel Thiout, op. cit., p. 2.

3. See footnote 1 on page vi.

4. J-M. Perrin, op. cit., p. 193.

5. Pensées sans ordre ...

of the individual works and collections have now been published in English, quotations in this study will be in French, with reference to the English only where some particular circumstance requires it.

The third problem concerns the task of explication. It is the question of how the author herself regarded what she had written, and is particularly important in Simone Weil's case because of the discipline of thought and expression which she had learnt from her principal teacher in philosophy, Alain.<sup>1</sup> Because it concerns the progressive clarification of ideas, it is especially relevant to her private notes and essays, and therefore to most of her writings on religion. The discipline emphasized two methodological principles, both of which considerably complicate the task of explication: first, to write out an idea again and again, without correcting earlier versions; and secondly, to write out as fully as possible the arguments "against".<sup>2</sup> Clearly the knowledge of both these practices puts the reader on his guard against the automatic acceptance as definite opinion of any one individual statement. This applies particularly to the Cahiers, which are the workshop of Simone Weil's ideas, and which indeed probably owe their existence to Alain's advice to his students to spend two hours writing out their thoughts each day.<sup>3</sup> The present dissertation will, therefore, endeavour to take this factor

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1. Pseudonym of Émile Auguste Chartier. For accounts of Chartier's influence on her method of thought and expression see Jacques Cabaud, Simone Weil, p. 27, and M-M. Davy, Introduction au message de Simone Weil (Paris: Plon, 1954), pp. 36-69.

2. E.A. Chartier (Alain), Histoire de mes Pensées (Paris, 1950), pp. 35, 107, quoted in Davy's Introduction ..., p. 38.

3. M-M. Davy, Introduction au message de Simone Weil, p. 40.

into account, following the complicated and dangerous course of interpreting the general direction of Simone Weil's many presentations of an idea, rather than the simpler but misleading course of placing final significance on single statements.

With acknowledgement of these three problems, and on the basis of the general considerations mentioned above, the outline of the dissertation is as follows. The first chapter is a preliminary encounter with questions concerning Simone Weil's knowledge of the Old Testament: how familiar she was with the literary evidence, subsequent hermeneutical traditions, and contemporary scholarship; what she considered the Old Testament "experience" to have been; and how characteristic of the tradition itself were the themes upon which she fastened for positive appraisal. The putting together of these several questions seems necessary at an initial stage, so that in these different directions some kind of framework can be established within which the real business of the critique can be studied in subsequent chapters.

The second chapter is similarly of a prolegomenal nature, being an explication and critical assessment of her general theory about the religions of the Ancient East Mediterranean, within which her critique of the Old Testament has its place. The chapter discusses the notions of "revelation" and "history" implicit in her account, and also compares it with another more recent account of similar scope, that of C.H.Gordon in Before the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

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1. London: Collins, 1962.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters study her critique of the Old Testament conception of God, her critique of the social and historical dimensions of the Old Testament, and the relation of her Old Testament criticism to her view of religion as a whole. In these three chapters the study is principally explicative, although in each case some criticism emerges from the explication itself. In each chapter a major element of Simone Weil's thought is encountered: in Chapter Three the orientation of her philosophy and theology; in Chapter Four her rejection of the linear succession of events in history as commensurable with ultimate truth; and in Chapter Five her conception of what religion is.

The sixth and final chapter offers an assessment of her whole critique, discussing its value for students both of the Old Testament and of religion in general.



## CHAPTER ONE

### PROBLEMS CONCERNING SIMONE WEIL'S FAMILIARITY WITH AND EXEGESIS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT LITERATURE

Simone Weil's writings contain both an account and a criticism of the religion of the Old Testament. "Account" and "criticism" are ultimately related, but an initial separation of them is necessary. The account is not simply confined to the literary tradition, but includes Israel's political and religious life as well during a certain period of history. When Simone Weil particularly refers to the literature, she generally speaks of "l'Ancien Testament" and occasionally of "le Vieux Testament". In general discussion of the Old Testament she uses, without particular distinction, such terms as "Israël", "les Hébreux", "la religion juive", and "les Juifs".<sup>1</sup>

The task of this first chapter is to ascertain how well Simone Weil knew the Old Testament literature, and how she read it. The first question covers the following problems: what Simone Weil considered the Old Testament literature to be; in which language, did she read it; upon which parts of it did she concentrate; what were the emphases and omissions in her summary descriptions of the Old Testament experience; and what was her knowledge of contemporary critical study of the Old Testament. The second question, that of

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1. These terms can all be found in a section of La Connaissance Surnaturelle (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), pp. 171-173.

exegesis, covers the characteristic themes of her speculative comments (i.e. what she looked for in the literature) and the nature of her basic approach (i.e. the direction in which she thought the significance of the Old Testament lay). Under the second question also a comparison is made between her approach to the Old Testament and the way in which it was understood by its own exponents and subsequent traditions of interpretation in Judaism and Christianity.

The first problem is that of establishing the limits of the literary field which Simone Weil had in mind when she spoke of "les livres de l'Ancien Testament". There exists among her papers a French translation of the Hebrew Bible in two volumes, edited by Zadoc Kahn.<sup>1</sup> This is marked and annotated at many points, and was evidently greatly used by Simone Weil. However, even though this version was the Hebrew (shorter) canon, several of her remarks show that her own idea of the Old Testament was of the Catholic (longer) canon, and that she was familiar with the so-called "apocryphal" books. For example, she writes:

Parmi tous les livres de l'Ancien Testament, un petit nombre seulement (Isaïe, Job, le Cantique des Cantiques, Daniel, Tobie, une partie d'Ezéchiel, une partie des Psaumes, une partie des livres sapientiaux, le début de la Genèse ...) est assimilable pour une âme chrétienne;<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the problem of language, the evidence suggests that she did not know much Hebrew,<sup>3</sup> which is surprising for someone

1. Paris: Librairie Durlacher. Tome I, 1930; Tome II, 1931.

2. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 67.

3. Simone Pétrement, a close friend of Simone Weil in their student days and a frequent correspondent and companion in the years immediately following, wrote to D.R. on January 28, 1965, "Simone Weil, autant que je ne sais, ne connaissait pas l'hébreu."

with such a concern for the degree of attention paid to ancient texts, and with such obvious linguistic ability.<sup>1</sup> As Leslie Fiedler says, "Immensely learned in Greek, and willing to devote much time to learning Sanskrit, she was apparently never even tempted to learn Hebrew."<sup>2</sup> The rare occasions on which she does use Hebrew confirm rather than contradict the impression that she had no close acquaintance with Hebrew translation and exegesis. In one case, for example, she uses the title 'adonai tsebaoth, "Lord of Hosts",<sup>3</sup> to illustrate the militaristic and powerful nature of the Hebrew God, whereas neither the language nor the exegetical tradition need imply such a connotation. The tsebaoth could simply be the heavenly company of angels, such as the court in the first chapter of Job, or perhaps the remnant of a primitive pluralism in the concept of God.<sup>4</sup> In another case she accepts the Bible's own etymology of YHWH, the divine name, as an imperfect form of the verb hayah, "to be", which

1. For a reference to the translation of ancient texts see Cahiers II (Paris: Plon, 1953), p. 246.

2. L. A. Fiedler, "Simone Weil: Prophet out of Israel", Commentary (January 1951) p. 45.

3. In French, "l'Éternel des Armées". Simone Weil's use of the Hebrew here is very sarcastically treated by E. Lévinas in "Simone Weil contre la Bible", Évidences (Feb.-Mar. 1952), p. 10.

4. For a discussion on traces of pluralism in the Hebrew terms for God see The One and the Many in the Israelite conception of God, by A. R. Johnson (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1942); and E. Jacob, Theology of the Old Testament, (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 54, 55 for a discussion of tsebaoth.

is not regarded as certain on linguistic grounds.<sup>1</sup> This acceptance is made the basis of a considerably more questionable speculation on the connection of the tetragrammaton and ehyeh, "I am", with the first personal pronoun of Indo-European languages, such as Greek and Latin ego, English I and French je.<sup>2</sup> Simone Weil's lack of knowledge of Hebrew is thus seen in some of her more far-fetched exegetical speculations, which greater linguistic experience would have checked.

The third problem is the eclectic nature of her reading of the Old Testament literature. On the whole her speculative discussion is not upon the major and more indigenous portion of the literature, whose value she repeatedly and generally denies (as will be seen in the sequel), but upon the considerably smaller and less Hebraic elements, such as the pre-patriarchal mythology and the sapiential literature, with which she is in great sympathy. In other words, there is little indication of her familiarity with the main body of the writings, on which her condemnation of the tradition as a whole is based.<sup>3</sup> Armand Lunel cites as an illustration of the incompleteness

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1. For an account of the scholarly discussion on the tetragrammaton, in which the difficulty of translating YHWH is made very evident, see B.W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1957, 1966), pp. 38, 39. Anderson's discussion makes it clear that Simone Weil's ontological interpretation of the name is in the Greek tradition, as found in the LXX whereas even the Hebrew "to be" has an active rather than an ontological connotation. See La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 63, and Exodus 3:14.

2. Cahiers III, p. 254.

3. The word "tradition" is used here and subsequently to mean "the religion as found in the literature". The word is chosen for its connotation of "that which is handed down", "that which is observed", and "that which can, at least to a certain extent, be traced back to earlier stages and sources". It is used in this study as a general and neutral word for the Old Testament, as a phenomenon both in literature and in human history.

of her account of the Hebrew religious consciousness her neglect of the book of Jonah, which is an example of the tradition's own protest against the particularism for which she criticizes it.<sup>1</sup> In fact, she does mention the book of Jonah, but only to point out Jonah's bewailing of the fact that Nineveh is not destroyed, as evidence of Jewish vindictiveness.<sup>2</sup> She does not appear to realize that the book only mentions this in order to imply criticism of it. As a second example, although Simone Weil demonstrates a certain familiarity with the stories of Moses and Joshua, which illustrate the nationalistic, legalistic and militaristic aspects of Hebrew religion, she shows little awareness of the eighth-century prophets and Jeremiah, with their individual, internal and ethical emphasis. Thus the incompleteness of her judgment as to what the Hebrew religious consciousness was like is associated with an apparent lack of encounter with those texts which bear evidence of its breadth and complexity. However, to agree with Charles Moeller when he writes, "Le monde biblique est infiniment plus vaste qu'elle ne le prétend",<sup>3</sup> is not necessarily to dismiss as unworthy of examination her comments on what she did know of the Old Testament literature, nor to avoid asking why a mind so capable of encompassing wide and diverse subjects stopped short in the consideration of this particular one.

The problem of Simone Weil's selective or unrepresentative

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1. "Simone Weil et Israël", Revue de la pensée juive (July 1950), p. 49.

2. Cahiers III, p. 236.

3. "Simone Weil devant l'Eglise et l'Ancien Testament", Cahiers Sioniens (June 1952), p. 115.

reading of the literature leads to the problem of what she considered the Old Testament experience to have been, which is raised by her summary statements on the history and religion of the Hebrews. These are found at several points in her later writings, notably in her notebooks and in Lettre à un Religieux. Two such passages are worth quoting in detail, so that the pattern of emphasis and omission may be seen:

Les Hébreux, qui ont été quatre siècles au contact de la civilisation égyptienne, ont refusé d'adopter cet esprit de douceur. Ils voulaient la puissance...

Tous les textes antérieurs à l'exil sont entachés de cette erreur fondamentale sur Dieu, je crois - excepté le livre de Job, dont le héros n'est pas juif, le Cantique des Cantiques (mais est-il antérieur à l'exil?) et certains psaumes de David (mais l'attribution est-elle certaine?) D'autre part, le premier personnage parfaitement pur qui figure dans l'histoire juive est Daniel (qui a été initié à la sagesse chaldéenne). La vie de tous les autres, à commencer par Abraham, est souillée de choses atroces. (Abraham commence par prostituer sa femme.)

Cela donnerait à croire qu'Israël a appris la vérité la plus essentielle concernant Dieu (à savoir que Dieu est bon avant d'être puissant) de traditions étrangères, chaldéenne, perse ou grecque, et à la faveur de l'exil.

Dieu fait à Moïse et Josué des promesses purement temporelles, à une époque où l'Égypte était tendue vers le salut éternel de l'âme. Les Hébreux, ayant refusé la révélation égyptienne, ont eu le Dieu qu'ils méritaient. Dieu charnel et collectif qui n'a parlé, jusqu'à l'exil, à l'âme de personne. (A moins que, dans les Psaumes ...?) - De tout ce qui est pur comme personnages des récits de l'Ancien Testament, Daniel seul est pur. (Les autres sont Abel, Hénoc, Noé, Melchisédec, Job.) Il n'est pas étonnant qu'un peuple d'esclaves fugitifs, ou plutôt de fils des fugitifs, emmenés prendre par des massacres une terre paradisiaque par la douceur de la richesse, aménagée par des civilisations au labeur desquelles ils n'ont eu aucune part et qu'ils détruisent - un tel peuple ne pouvait pas donner grand' chose de bon. Ce n'était pas le moyen d'établir le bien sur ce

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1. Lettre à un Religieux (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), pp. 12, 13.

fragment de terre. Parler de "Dieu éducateur" au sujet de ce peuple est une atroce plaisanterie.

Even as summaries of the biblical material, without reference to external evidence, these accounts raise problems, in both their emphases and their omissions.

Among the emphases are the spirituality and pacific tone of Egyptian religion at the time of the exile and exodus, the violence accompanying the settlement in Canaan, and the personal purity of certain individuals who were either non-Hebrew or under non-Hebrew influence. In the first case, the impression of Egyptian "douceur" certainly does not come through the Old Testament narrative,<sup>2</sup> but then Simone Weil would not expect it to. In the Genesis account the scandal and intrigue of Abraham's visit to Egypt is on both sides.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the account at the beginning of Exodus of the affliction of the Hebrews before their Egyptian taskmasters does not indicate much "douceur".<sup>4</sup> If, as is more probable, Simone Weil's account of Egyptian spirituality and morality is based on extra-biblical sources, there are still problems. Ancient Egyptian texts certainly show phases of personal piety and ethical conscience, but they also bear witness to the nation's own sense of earthly destiny and empire.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Cahiers III, pp. 239, 240.

2. The French "douceur" in this context is better translated by something like "pacific tone" than the English "sweetness".

3. Genesis 12.

4. Exodus 1.

5. This can be seen from such surveys as James H. Breasted's The Dawn of Conscience (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1935) and John A. Wilson's The Burden of Egypt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

As Watkins shows, Simone Weil's examples of Egyptian piety can be countered with examples of Egyptian inhumanity.<sup>1</sup>

The second emphasis, the violence and destructiveness of the settlement in Canaan, although justified by most of the biblical material, involves the historical question as to how much of the conquest really did take place. Archeological problems concerning the date of the fall of certain cities, and literary problems arising from the desire of later historians and editors to make the entry into Canaan more sudden and victorious than it actually was render the basis of Simone Weil's charge less firm, at least historically if not theologically.<sup>2</sup>

The third emphasis, the association of personal purity<sup>3</sup> with non-Hebrew individuals and influence, is problematic in that it involves to a considerable extent the comparison of snatches of mysterious and legendary tradition (such as references to Abel, Enoch, Noah and Melchizedek) with lengthy accounts of much less remote figures like Moses, whose imperfections are described to show up all the more clearly the charismata that God was believed to have placed

1. P. Watkins, "Simone Weil; antisemitism and syncretism", Church Quarterly Review, Vol. 163 (Oct.-Dec. 1962), p. 469.

2. Among modern scholars Martin Noth, for example, finds little violence in the conquest. See M. Noth, The History of Israel (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 141-153.

3. "Purity" for Simone Weil in this context (see also the discussion on p.18 of this chapter) must mean not so much "non-violence", but "sinlessness" by the Old Testament's own standards of sin, which would include but not be limited to murder. Thus the figures mentioned by her as "pure" are presented in the Old Testament as upright or free from sin (for example Abel and Noah) in marked contrast with other characters of far greater importance for the Old Testament itself, like Moses and David, who are depicted quite frankly as at times showing all too human weaknesses (Moses' murder of the taskmaster, David's amours).



within them. It is doubtful whether mythological figures like Abel and literary figures like Job and Daniel and the Suffering Servant can be used to demonstrate by contrast the impurity of historical individuals. Even when she draws such a contrast, Simone Weil does not always do justice to the little evidence that she has concerning the "pure" individual. For example, Melchizedek's brief appearance, to which this chapter will return does not reflect unambiguous favour upon the priest-king, who blessed Abraham after a fearsome battle and thus earned a tenth of the spoils.<sup>1</sup>

Principal among the significant omissions from these summary statements are the social and ethical conscience as expressed in the law, and the tradition of prophetic protest and dissent. As P. Watkins points out in his article, Simone Weil ignored the recurrence in the Old Testament of the theme of responsible concern for the unfortunate and needy, such as the orphan, the widow, and the stranger within the gates.<sup>2</sup> She also ignored, although she occasionally mentions Isaiah as an exception to the general rule of violence, the size and persistency of the phenomenon of prophetic protest against military ambition, starting with Micaiah ben Imlah and going on through the eighth-century prophets to Jeremiah. The highly significant twenty-second chapter of I Kings is recalled by her to show, not the true and unpopular warnings of Micaiah, whom she does not even mention, but the hypocrisy and yea-saying of the court

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1. Genesis 14: 17-20.

2. "Simone Weil: anti-semitism and syncretism", Church Quarterly Review (Vol. 163, 1962), p. 465.

sooth-sayers.<sup>1</sup> That the great tradition of political and religious protest by Amos, Hosea and Isaiah might represent a national self-criticism as much arising out of the religion itself as the hypocrisy, injustice and commerce, which it condemned, did not apparently occur to Simone Weil.

A further problem concerning Simone Weil's knowledge of the Old Testament literature is the degree to which she was aware both of the technical questions involved in understanding the material and also of the state of Old Testament scholarship in her day, particularly in France.<sup>2</sup> The problem can only be approached on the basis of her writings themselves, and as far as the first part of it is concerned, the main impression given by them is a mixture of ignorance about the technical complexity of some passages and the application of critical techniques to others. Thus on the one hand she shows no doubt as to the historicity and unity of the Pentateuch from Abraham onwards, but on the other is firmly aware of the likelihood of a post-exilic dating for some of the so-called Davidic Psalms. On some occasions she seems more familiar with the content of other Ancient Near Eastern traditions than with that of the Old Testament. For example, she points out the high ethical tone of the righteous soul's confession in the Egyptian Book of the Dead<sup>3</sup>, but never

1. Cahiers III, p. 253, ref. I Kings 22: 13-23.

2. The question of Simone Weil's awareness of critical problems is taken here after that of her characteristic emphases and omissions, because the question of what techniques one applies to a text seems to follow from rather than precede the question of what texts one is even going to take into consideration.

3. Cahiers I, p. 72; II, p. 342.

mentions the existence of similar standards in the eighth-century prophets of Israel, or elsewhere in the Old Testament. Traces of experience dissimilar from the main current she regards not as evidence of greater breadth and complexity in the tradition, but as reminders, by contrast, of the tradition's limitation. Thus the account of Elijah's hearing Yahweh not in the wind, earthquake or fire, but in the still, small voice is for her a "morceau de mystique égaré dans ces histoires atroces".<sup>1</sup>

There is little evidence in Simone Weil's writings of an awareness, even less a familiarity, with contemporary trends in Old Testament research. This is somewhat surprising, since the period in which she might have been expected to acquire some knowledge of the subject, from the late 1920's to the early 1940's, was one in which French scholarship was particularly significant. To this period, for example, belongs much of the work of Lods, Dussaud, Parrot, Schaeffer and Virolleaud, the last two figures being particularly associated with the discovery and analysis of the Ras Shamra material.<sup>2</sup> Although Simone Weil does mention the Elephantine papyri (an earlier discovery) and the Ras Shamra tablets, she does not seem to be familiar with the implication of these texts for Old Testament study, or with the scholarship which explored such implications.<sup>3</sup> For example, her

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1. B.W.Anderson's discussion of this passage in Understanding the Old Testament, pp. 216-218, shows that its tone can be interpreted as intrinsic to the Hebrew tradition, perhaps relating back to the Mosaic theophany at Sinai.

2. As can be seen from a work such as H.W.Robinson (ed.), Record and Revelation (London: O.U.P., 1938), which is an appraisal and summary of Old Testament research of the period.

3. Cahiers III, pp. 253, 254.

emphasis on the distinction between the Israelite and neighbouring religious traditions (which will be examined in the next chapter), does not take into account the degree of Canaanite influence in the Old Testament, which the Ras Shamra material has demonstrated. Thus, although she is very interested in the figure of Daniel, she never mentions the Dn'l of the Ugaritic mythology.

Simone Weil's exegesis of Old Testament literature, as well as her knowledge of it, raises problems. Apart from her summary indictments of the Hebrew experience, her main treatment of the Old Testament is in the form of fragmentary comments and speculations upon those figures and episodes in which she saw reflected the pre-occupations and pre-dispositions of her own mind.<sup>1</sup> Her remarks upon two Old Testament figures, Job and Melchizedek, illustrate particularly well the manner of her exegetical speculation and its characteristic themes. Such themes represent in a positive sense what Simone Weil found in the Old Testament, albeit, in her view, unappreciated for their true worth by the Hebrews. What needs to be asked of these themes is whether they are, so to speak, there for a person who is not looking for them, and whether they were there for the Hebrews themselves. The three themes which emerge most clearly from the discussion which follows are the experience of extreme

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1. Clearly "summary" and "exegesis" cannot be fully separated, and indeed the summaries quoted at length on p. 6 include and imply exegesis. However, to illustrate Simone Weil's exegetical bias as at this point by reference to her more fragmentary comments has the advantage of bringing another kind of Simone Weil's writings on the Old Testament within the purview of this first chapter.

necessity and affliction; the realization of the beauty and order of the world; and the figure of the perfect man.

For Simone Weil the book of Job is "un miracle",<sup>1</sup> and "d'un bout à l'autre, ... une pure merveille de vérité et d'authenticité."<sup>2</sup> She follows Origen in thinking that its story may be as old as that of Moses,<sup>3</sup> and she places it with the Iliad and the Gilgamesh Epic as a classical expression of man's vision of the world as a sphere of necessity and affliction.<sup>4</sup> In her view, the story was taken by the Hebrews from an alien culture, and incorporated into their tradition without being fully understood.<sup>5</sup> For her, Job was a just and perfect man, perhaps a type of Christ, who experienced the deepest affliction, and who, by enduring the void which resulted from the removal of all his reasons for honouring God, was vouchsafed a manifestation of God's reality through a vision of the beauty of the world.<sup>6</sup> According to Simone Weil's account, the turning-point in Job's drama, his outcry against God, represents the rupture, or even death, of his own soul, as he experiences in his suffering the infinite distance between the justice of God and the conditions of existence in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Through his attention to the order of the world, represented by his

1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 297.
2. Attente de Dieu (Paris: La Colombe, 1963), p. 84.
3. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 245.
4. Cahiers II, p. 176.
5. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, pp. 245 and 290.
6. Attente de Dieu, p. 84.
7. Cahiers II, p. 185; La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 298.

affliction, which cannot be explained by a simple theodicy, he comes to see the world's real beauty, which is a sign in the world of a goodness that is beyond the world.<sup>1</sup>

Simone Weil suggests that the Old Testament's misunderstanding of the original story went as far as the alteration of its structure. She thinks that there was originally a third stage in the progression of suffering, after the loss of possessions and posterity, which left Job's body untouched, and the bodily affliction, which left his life untouched. This would have been his death, and resurrection. Thus she writes:

Ce serait une histoire en trois temps au lieu de deux.  
Cela semble bien le plan du poème. C'est alors une  
histoire de dieu mort et ressuscité. Car Job est dieu,<sup>2</sup>  
puisque'il peut affirmer légitimement qu'il est parfait.

Her interpretation thus includes a historical hypothesis, within which the differences between her account and the biblical evidence are explained.

However, the hypothesis itself is an example of her exegesis, and the themes which it allows her to see behind the Old Testament evidence can still be compared with those of the text itself. First, the theme of necessity, certainly of supreme importance in the book of Job, is given by Simone Weil an emphasis which differs from that in the text. In the text Job's suffering is the affliction of material, domestic and physical disaster upon a righteous man, narrated to

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1. A detailed examination of the ideas of Simone Weil's which are involved here is found in Chapter 3, pp. 81-85.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 290.

provoke an examination of Israel's traditional theodicy, i.e. that the righteous man prospers. For Simone Weil, however, the affliction is an even more devastating one, the disruption of a man's very self, as he goes through an experience of the world's isolation from God before he re-discovers God with new clarity. It is something more akin to the torture of Prometheus,<sup>1</sup> or the "dark night" of the mystic.<sup>2</sup> According to her, the Joban theophany is the result of Job's acceptance of affliction, and of his refusal to stop loving the now dry sources of his former well-being.<sup>3</sup> In the biblical text, however, Job's initial acceptance of suffering gives way to an attitude of defiance to God, as expressed in his challenge: "let the Almighty answer me!"<sup>4</sup> Only the prose framework (chapters 1, 2 and 42: 7-17), which the Hebrew author borrowed from Ancient Near Eastern sapiential traditions, fits Simone Weil's account of Job's acceptance of necessity. The cycles of poetic discussion in the main body of the book show Job, far from accepting his suffering, to be defying God's dispensation by invoking his own righteousness. As Anderson writes, "Only at the very last, after Yahweh has rebuked him, does he repent of his wild and impatient changes, lapsing into something like the lull that follows a storm."<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the theme of the beauty of the world, though

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1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 298.
  2. Cahiers II, p. 185.
  3. Attente de Dieu, p. 84.
  4. Job, 31:35
  5. Understanding the Old Testament, p. 507.

present in the text, plays there a different role from that which Simone Weil assigns to it. (For her, Job and the Psalms are among the few writings in the Old Testament which express the beauty of the world. She evidently does not find it in the first creation story in Genesis, to which she rarely refers.) In the book of Job the great catalogues of the beauty and wonder of the world remind Job of his smallness and weakness, as against the creative majesty of God. The grandeur of creation bespeaks the power of God and rebukes the presumption of Job in daring to challenge him.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, according to Simone Weil's interpretation, the vision of the world's beauty is more of a grace granted to Job, after he has endured his passion. Thus she writes:

Job, au bout de sa nuit obscure, qu'il a traversé<sup>2</sup> sans consolation, voit manifestement la beauté du monde.

La grâce de Dieu est telle que parfois dans notre malheur même il nous fait sentir une beauté. C'est alors la révélation d'une beauté plus pure que celle qu'on connaissait jusque-là. Job.<sup>3</sup>

In her interpretation the manifestation of the world's beauty is associated with the vision of God himself.<sup>4</sup> She here conceives of beauty in Plato's sense, as a token of a greater perfection beyond the world,<sup>5</sup> rather than in the sense found in the book of Job, where it betokens not so much a distant good as a present power.

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1. Job, especially chapters 38-41. .

2. Cahiers II, p. 185.

3. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 89.

4. Attente de Dieu, p. 84.

5. For examples of her general thought on the place of beauty see Cahiers II, pp. 234, 235 and III, pp. 57, 58.



Another and more striking example of Simone Weil's reading of Greek ideas into the book of Job is worth a passing note. In one passage in the notebooks she writes:

Job. "C'est vers Dieu que s'élèvent mes yeux baignés de larmes, pour qu'il soit lui-même l'arbitre entre l'homme et Dieu, entre le fils de l'homme et son semblable." N'est-ce pas là l'idée du médiateur? "J'ai un témoin dans les cieux.

Un arbitre entre Dieu et l'homme doit être Dieu.  
Fonction judiciaire du Verbe.<sup>1</sup>

A reading of the Joban passage here quoted (16:18 - 17:2) shows that it is no more than a further challenge from Job to God to judge his (Job's) deserts. It does not contain the idea of a mediating logos, but is simply a desperate and ironical reminder to God of the justice which he seems to have forgotten. The whole point of the book of Job is that God never does maintain Job's right, whether through a divine mediator and advocate or any other way, but that Job learns to abandon reliance on his own righteousness and to submit to God's absolute sovereignty.

On Simone Weil's third characteristic theme, that of the perfect man, again the book of Job does not go nearly as far as her interpretation of it. There is no indication that the description of Job as blameless and upright carried with it the idea of his divinity. God's speeches of rebuke to Job, which contradict such an idea, she regards as a Hebrew gloss on the original.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, there is not even any evidence that the various pieces of Ancient Near Eastern

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1. Cahiers III, pp. 170, 171.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 290.

tradition, which have the motif of a righteous man who suffers, contained any suggestion of incarnation or of death-and-resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

Simone Weil's pre-occupation with the idea of a periodic incarnation is illustrated in her remarks on several Old Testament figures, notably Melchizedek. The idea is considered here not for its inherent worth but for the justice with which it can be applied to the Old Testament. Her speculation is that these figures (mainly in the early parts of Genesis and in books with a marked extra-Judaic background, like Daniel) derive from ancient recollections of the existence of perfect men. In one typical speculative passage she writes:

Si tous les êtres absolument purs sont des incarnations, cela donne: Abel - Henoch - Noé - Melchisédec. Et Job? Mais Job peut n'être qu'une allégorie. Et Daniel? Très mystérieux.<sup>2</sup>

All that can be asked of Simone Weil's speculation on these exceedingly remote figures is: Are they in fact represented in the text as absolutely pure, and is there any evidence that similar figures in neighbouring traditions were thus understood? On the basis of the literary evidence the answer to both questions is uncertain, leaving little basis for entertaining the speculation. It is not at all clear, for example, that the favour with which Abel's offering is regarded implies Abel's perfection, or that the possible hint of immortality in the case of Enoch should ever have implied divinity.

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1. e.g. in J.B.Pritchard (ed.), Ancient Near Eastern Texts (Princeton, 1955) the Babylonian writings: "I will praise the Lord of wisdom", pp. 434-437, and "A dialogue about human misery", pp. 438-440.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 63.

On the other hand, Utnapishtim in Tablet 11 of the Gilgamesh epic, the Noah-like figure in a Mesopotamian flood story anterior to the biblical one, was after his adventure given eternal life and made like the gods.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Melchizedek Simone Weil's speculation is at its most fanciful. In the few Old and New Testament occurrences of the name she sees absolute purity and incarnation,<sup>2</sup> redemption,<sup>3</sup> and an affinity with ancient cultic and mythological figures like Demeter and Dionysus.<sup>4</sup> Although her main inference of "incarnation" is from the Melchizedek passages in the epistle to the Hebrews (which she ascribes to Paul),<sup>5</sup> she sees some indication also in the Old Testament. For example, thinking presumably of the festive and mystical associations of "bread" and "wine", she sees in Melchizedek a type of redemptive figure:

Et pourquoi n'y aurait-il pas une autre rédemption transformant plaisirs et désirs en joie contemplatrice? N'est-ce pas la fonction de Dionysos ... N'est-ce pas celle de Melchisédec, roi de la Justice et de la Paix?<sup>6</sup>

Such a speculation is too far-fetched for the remote glimpses that Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 afford of this figure. That his appearance in the Old Testament is evidence of Canaanite and perhaps more distant

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1. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, pp. 93-97.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 63.

3. Cahiers III, p. 173.

4. Lettre a un Religieux, p. 17.

5. e.g. Ibid., p. 18.

6. Cahiers III, p. 173.

influence on Hebrew religion is clear. However the nature of the influence in this case seems to have been a royal-priestly ideology of Justice and Peace rather than a Dionysian mysticism.<sup>1</sup>

Simone Weil's familiarity with the Old Testament literature, as revealed in her summary statements, and her speculative interest in particular texts, together suggest the nature of her approach to the material. This approach is of interest in that it differs greatly both from the way in which the writers of the Old Testament interpreted Israel's experience, and from the way in which the Old Testament experience is generally expounded to-day.

Her approach can be called "non-dialectical", since it tends to look for ideas, people, and a whole religious and political climate, which at any one point would bear the imprint of purity and truth. She admits no possibility of the Old Testament gradually building up a picture of the truth, or of pure religion developing in the tradition by stages, through a succession and synthesis of partial truths and half-formed perceptions, but she judges each episode, statement and character by its correspondence (or lack of it) with criteria which she has already accepted. Thus she is far more interested in Melchizedek than in Abraham because the former, in his brief appearance, bore what she considered to be the marks of truth and purity, whereas the latter, though immensely important in the whole development of Hebrew religious consciousness, became early

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1. See "Melchizedek" in Grant & Rowley (eds.), Dictionary of the Bible (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), p. 642, and also G. von Rad, Genesis (London: S.C.M., 1961), p. 175, where the bread and wine are interpreted as simply a meal.

associated in her mind with an impure act. Simone Weil sees the Old Testament in terms of black and white, both of which can at any point be identified. For example, she writes:

Tout est souillé et atroce, comme à dessein, à partir d'Abraham inclusivement, chez tous ses descendants (sauf quelques-uns des prophètes: Daniel, Isaïe; d'autres????) - Comme pour indiquer tout à fait clairement: attention! Là, c'est le mal!<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, her treatment of prophecy is "non-dialectical". Prophecy was for her, not the tradition's self-criticism, or one side of a tension, but co-incidence with truth. Thus for her, "l'histoire d'Osiris est une prophétie infiniment plus claire, plus complète et plus proche de la vérité que tout ce qu'on nomme de ce nom dans l'Ancien Testament."<sup>2</sup> Anything is prophetic for Simone Weil, which bears the hallmarks of truth, such as are most clearly revealed in Christ. The story of Osiris contained the theme of resurrection from death, whereas the Old Testament figures bear little trace of that theme. In an Israel as characterized by Simone Weil prophecy is contrast, the unrecognized intrusion of what happens to correspond with the truth, as in the cases of Melchizedek and Job. This almost typological approach to the Old Testament literature is presumably what Mlle. M-M. Davy had in mind when she wrote that Simone Weil sees the Old Testament in a Hellenic way, "mais elle le perçoit en tant qu'hellénique ..."<sup>3</sup>

Another critic of Simone Weil's remarks on the Old Testament

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1. Cahiers III, p. 237.

2. Lettre a un Religieux, p. 18.

3. M.-M. Davy, Introduction au message de Simone Weil (Paris: Plon, 1954), p. 126.

points out the nature of her approach in a different way. Peter Watkins observes that in the "Israel" of the Old Testament there are two distinguishable references, the community "of the will of God" and "that of disobedience and apostasy."<sup>1</sup> He suggests, in what seems to be unexceptionable exegesis, that in the "churches" of both the Old and New Testaments there is a tension between the community as willed by God and the community as constituted by men. The "dialectic" of the Old Testament can then be understood as the attempted approximation of the latter to the former. This movement was, at least, the hope and belief of the protagonists and writers of the Old Testament books, but, as Watkins observes, Simone Weil does not even see the tension within which such a movement can be conceived.<sup>2</sup>

The non-dialectical nature of Simone Weil's approach to the Old Testament literature is also evident in the way in which she divorces the Old Testament from subsequent developments in both Judaism and Christianity. From a Jewish point of view her direct access to the scriptures is itself unrealistic and unjust. As Emmanuel Levinas says:

Etre juif, c'est croire à l'intelligence des pharisiens et de leurs maîtres. A travers l'intelligence du Talmud, accéder à la foi dans la Bible.

Judaism has a hermeneutical tradition inseparable from its scriptures, and not entirely subsequent to them, and it is through this that the

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1. P. Watkins, "Simone Weil; antisemitism and syncretism", Church Quarterly Review (Vol. 163, Oct.-Dec. 1962), p. 464.

2. Ibid.

3. E. Lévinas, "Simone Weil contre la Bible", Évidences (Feb. Mar. 1952), p. 10.

Jews themselves have approached their Bible. Levinas goes on to say:

Le malentendu majeur entre Simone Weil et la Bible ne consiste pas à avoir ignoré les textes du Talmud, mais à ne pas en avoir soupçonné la dimension.<sup>1</sup>

To examine Simone Weil's remarks on the Old Testament for their correspondence with the totality and detail of the literary evidence and for their awareness of the tradition's own complexity and self-understanding, is to reach a cul-de-sac. Some inhibition or blind-spot kept her from taking full account of those areas of the tradition, which should have led her at least to modify her indictment of Israel's experience. However, not to examine her remarks at all would be to miss a very sharply focussed expression of the antithesis between the Judaic and non-Judaic religious traditions. Even though her enormous affinity for the latter meant that her account of the former was at times eclectic and unjust, at least the implications of the antithesis which she reveals are worth exploring. With contemporary culture becoming increasingly aware of the contrast between the Biblical (Judaic-Christian) and Far-Eastern religious consciousness, Simone Weil's account of the Old Testament, in its very over-statement of the case, could serve as a point of departure for further thought. Even if the Old Testament literature itself is more complex than she appeared to find it, her criticisms, as will be shown, are sufficiently relevant to much of the tradition and to the general study of religion to warrant the closest attention.

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1. Ibid., p. 10.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PROBLEMS CONCERNING SIMONE WEIL'S ACCOUNT OF REVELATION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The preceding chapter dealt with what may be called the "literary" problems raised by Simone Weil's remarks on the Old Testament. The present chapter turns to the principal "historical" problem, that of her beliefs about the origin and tradition of true religion in the civilizations of the ancient East Mediterranean. Her "theory", since such it may be called for want of a better word, is best expressed in one of her statements on Melchizedek:

Les passages de l'Écriture (Genèse, Psaumes, saint Paul) concernant Melchisédec prouvent que dès l'aube d'Israël il existait hors d'Israël un service de Dieu, une connaissance de Dieu situés sur le plan même du christianisme, et infiniment supérieurs à tout ce qui a jamais été possédé par Israël.<sup>1</sup>

Simone Weil's summary accounts of the Old Testament experience, encountered previously, state that this true religion was confronted but rejected by Israel in Egypt and then partially assimilated during the exile in Babylon.

The theory is elaborated at several points in her work, notably in the essay on "Les trois fils de Noé et l'histoire de la civilisation méditerranéenne";<sup>2</sup> in a section of the notebooks, in which much of the same material appears, together with other thoughts;<sup>3</sup>

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1. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 17.
  2. Attente de Dieu, pp. 177-189.
  3. Cahiers III, pp. 231-248.



in a section of the Lettre à un Religieux<sup>1</sup>; and in the letters to Déodat Roché<sup>2</sup> and Jean Wahl.<sup>3</sup> The procedure of this chapter will be, first, to set out what Simone Weil said about both the occurrence and the content of the revelation; secondly, to consider the nature of what she said, and the sense in which "history" and "revelation" are understood by her in this context; thirdly, to study the use of the Old Testament evidence in the elaboration of the theory; and finally, to see how aspects of the theory compare with other recent views of similar geographical and historical compass.

A good starting-point for an exposition of the theory is found in the statements in the letters to Déodat Roché and Jean Wahl. Thus she writes to Roché:

Je crois qu'avant les conquêtes romaines des pays méditerranéens et le Proche-Orient formaient une civilisation non pas homogène, car la diversité était grande d'un pays à l'autre, mais continue; qu'une même pensée y vivait chez les meilleurs esprits, exprimée sous diverses formes dans les mystères et les sectes initiatiques d'Égypte et de Thrace, de Grèce, de Perse, et que les ouvrages de Platon constituent l'expression écrite la plus parfaite que nous possédions de cette pensée.<sup>4</sup>

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1. pp. 43-46.

2. Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), pp. 63-67. Roché was the author of two articles on Catharism, which Simone Weil had read while in Marseilles. In her letter to him, dated 23 January, 1940, she offers admiration and encouragement for his studies of Catharism, showing the similar direction of her own thoughts.

3. Deucalion (Paris: No. 4, Oct. 1952). Wahl was one of the group of writers who in 1936 founded the Nouveaux Cahiers, and at whose meetings Simone Weil was frequently present. She wrote to him from New York in 1942.

4. Pensées sans ordre ..., p. 64.

and to Wahl:<sup>1</sup>

I believe that one identical thought is to be found - expressed very precisely and with only very slight differences of modality - in the ancient mythologies; in the philosophies of Pherekydes, Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Plato and the Greek Stoics; in Greek poetry of the great age; in universal folklore; in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita; in what remains of the sacred writings of Egypt; in the dogmas of the Christian faith and in the writings of the greatest Christian mystics, especially St. John of the Cross; and in certain heresies, especially the Cathar and Manichean tradition. I believe that this thought is the truth, and that it requires to-day a modern and Western form of expression.

These statements express Simone Weil's general theory about man's apprehension of truth through the ages, which includes a particular account of the history of that apprehension in the geographical area and historical period associated with the Old Testament. In both statements the key words are "je crois" and "une pensée". In both cases the historical occurrence of a phenomenon is presented as an article of the author's own faith, and the nature of the phenomenon is defined as thought. From the statements it is evident that the "pensée" was not a single proposition or concept. Its connotation is not necessarily conceptual, and much of the material mentioned is non-philosophical in form. What the thought was, or how it is recognised, is not mentioned in these statements, but it is evidently regarded as the truth. It seems to be some basic illumination or orientation of mind, which can be expressed in mythopoeic, dramatic, ritualistic, philosophical and even mathematical forms.

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1. Quoted here in the English translation in Richard Rees (ed.), Simone Weil, Seventy Letters (London: O.U.P., 1965) p. 159, while the original version, in Deucalion, is being traced.

This account of religion in the ancient East Mediterranean, which can be called the theory of a Hamitic revelation, had for Simone Weil a more than academic interest. It was occupying her mind during the period spent in Marseilles in 1940-42, in sight of the Mediterranean Sea, and in a part of France where the Albigensian movement had flourished in the twelfth century A.D.. Simone Weil's world was still the classical, with the Mediterranean at its centre. She believed that true religion had arisen and had been spread among the ancient civilizations of the East Mediterranean, and had appeared also in the West, for example among the Druids of Iberia and later among the Albigenses in Languedoc.<sup>1</sup> The closing sentence of "Les trois fils de Noé" is the heartfelt prayer of a young woman who was witnessing the devastation of a continent, which she believed was now suffering for the neglect of its holy past: "Puisse l'esprit de Cham fleurir bientôt de nouveau au bord de ces vagues."<sup>2</sup>

Much of Simone Weil's account of the occurrence and tradition of a revelation in the ancient Near East is built on the biblical story of Noah and his sons after the deluge.<sup>3</sup> According to her the story records the original revelation, which was granted to Noah, and the recognition and custody of that revelation by Ham and

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1. For her ideas about the medieval manifestation of this revelation, see the essays written for a special number of the Cahiers du Sud (1943), "L'Agonie d'une civilisation vue à travers un poème épique", and "En quoi consiste l'inspiration occitanienne?" English translations can be found in R. Rees (ed.) Simone Weil: Selected Essays (London: O.U.P., 1962), pp. 35-54.

2. Attente de Dieu, p. 187.

3. Genesis 9: 18-28.

his descendants. Thus she writes:

Noé étant "une figure du Christ" (voir Origène), un juste parfait, dont le sacrifice a plu à Dieu et sauvé l'humanité, en la personne de qui Dieu a fait alliance avec tous les hommes, son ivresse et sa nudité doivent probablement être entendues au sens mystique. En ce cas, les Hébreux auraient déformé l'histoire, comme Sémites et meurtriers des Cananéens. Cham aurait eu part à la révélation de Noé; Sem et Japhet auraient refusé d'y avoir part.<sup>1</sup>

Cham a vu la nudité de Noé ivre. N'est-ce pas l'ivresse mystique, dionysiaque, et la nudité qui est le contraire de la honte du péché qui força Adam et Eve à se couvrir, le salut, la perfection? Cham n'a-t-il pas eu une révélation? La malédiction qui l'a frappé n'est-elle pas celle du malheur qui attend tout contact entre l'homme et Dieu, toute pureté humaine? (Cf. Hippolyte d'Éuripide.) Sem et Japhet n'ont pas eu part à la révélation.

With this account of a revelation to Noah, which bears her characteristic reading of Dionysian and Christian themes, like the account of Melchizedek, Simone Weil fuses a religio-ethnological scheme, following first the table of nations in Genesis 10. Disregarding the internal difficulties of this genealogy, she accepts its main division of nations. Thus she regards Japheth as the ancestor of the Indo-European peoples, Shem as the ancestor of the Semitic peoples, and Ham as the ancestor of the Canaanites, Akkadians, Egyptians, Hittites, Philistines, Cretans etc.. To the Hamitic line she adds, from her reading of Herodotus and from her general acquaintance with ancient traditions, the Phoenicians, the Pelasgians and the Trojans - three classifications of rather more problematic reference.<sup>3</sup> She can then say, "Toute la civilisation

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1. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 43.

2. Cahiers III, pp. 241, 242.

3. Simone Weil's grouping of the nations is found in Attente de Dieu, pp. 177-182, Cahiers III, pp. 241-243, and Lettre à un Religieux, pp. 43-45.

méditerranéenne qui précède immédiatement les temps historiques est issue de Cham. Cette liste est celle de tous les peuples civilisateurs."<sup>1</sup> The Hamitic peoples are thus regarded as the custodians of a revelation, which was the principle civilizing influence in Mediterranean antiquity.

Following Herodotus, Simone Weil then states that the Greeks, though themselves in the line of Japheth, received much of their religious tradition from the Egyptians and some also from the Pelasgians.<sup>2</sup> She envisages the geographical current of religious influence flowing from Phoenicia to Egypt, and from Egypt, through Crete, to Greece. The high spirituality and culture of Egypt and Phoenicia (in particular, Tyre) she finds acknowledged even in the Old Testament, in passages from Ezekiel which she quotes.<sup>3</sup> In these the former glories of Tyre in "the garden of God" are extolled,<sup>4</sup> and Egypt is said to have been a great tree in Eden, in which all the birds of the air made their nests.<sup>5</sup>

The final element in Simone Weil's account of the Hamitic revelation as a fact in history is the suggestion which she makes to explain the absence of any reference in the Bible to the Trojan War and the absence of any reference in Greek tradition to the Hebrew conquest of Palestine. Taking the thirteenth century dating for the

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1. Attente de Dieu, p. 178.

2. Herodotus, Histories II, 50.

3. E.g. in Lettre à un Religieux, pp. 44, 45 and Cahiers III, pp. 242, 243.

4. Ezekiel 28: 11-15.

5. Ezekiel 31: 1-9.

exodus from Egypt, she suggests that the Israelites entered Palestine so easily because many of the Canaanite warriors were up in Troy, helping their fellow-Hamites, the Trojans, to fight the Greeks. She sees the Trojan War as one of the great clashes between the descendents of Ham and those of one of Noah's other sons, and the outcome, the physical defeat of the Hamites but their spiritual influence upon the conquerors, she regards as typical.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the substance of the Hamitic revelation Simone Weil says little in the way of direct summary, although from a few scattered comments and pieces of speculation upon specific myths and rites certain themes emerge. One of these is the belief in God as a compassionate creator. She writes, "Il semble donc que les peuples issus de Cham, et d'abord l'Égypte, ont connu la vraie religion, la religion d'amour, où Dieu est victime en même temps que maître tout-puissant."<sup>2</sup> In the first place, then, within this revelation the activity of God is seen as arising out of love rather than power, particularly the act of creation. To illustrate this point Simone Weil notes a Gnostic reference, quoted by Clement, to the effect that Pherekydes, a Syrian and the master of Pythagoras, borrowed his theology from the "prophecies of Ham". This theology included the statement: "Zeus, au moment de créer, se transforma en Amour ..."<sup>3</sup>

1. Attente de Dieu, pp. 188, 189.

2. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 45.

3. An examination of ancient Near Eastern creation myths in, for example, Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, pp. 3-8, 60-72 shows the view of creation as an act of love to be far from prominent. This quotation appears in Simone Weil's works in Lettre à un Religieux, p. 43.

Lack of information about these "prophecies of Ham", together with the observation that such occult ascriptions in Gnostic tradition may have little historical value, prevents one from considering as anything more than pure speculation Simone Weil's question, "Ce Cham serait-il le fils de Noé?"<sup>1</sup> However, the idea of love as a religious principle, re-appearing as it does in those parts of Plato's writings where the philosopher is invoking distant traditions,<sup>2</sup> may well have been part of Greece's inheritance from a far-travelled current of thought. Simone Weil finds this theme particularly in two Egyptian texts, of which she writes, "Jamais depuis l'Égypte on n'a trouvé ailleurs des expressions d'une douceur aussi déchirante pour la justice et la miséricorde surnaturelles envers les hommes."<sup>3</sup> The texts to which she refers are a description of the equity of the created order, from the Coffin Texts, and "The Protestation of guiltlessness", from the Book of the Dead.<sup>4</sup> Certainly such texts show a strong sense of human equality and moral responsibility. However, they contain nothing to justify Simone Weil's juxtaposition of the idea of justice, with the idea of sacrifice, found in other areas of Egyptian tradition. By linking the notion of justice with Egyptian sacrificial practice, such as the annual sacrifice of the ram in Thebes, in which the skin is placed over the statue of Zeus, (also in Herodotus),<sup>5</sup> she believes that she has an indication of the

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1. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 43.

2. Hamilton and Cairns (ed.), Collected Dialogues of Plato (New York: Bollingen, 1961), "The Symposium" 201d-212c and "Phaedrus" 244a-257b.

3. Attente de Dieu, p. 180.

4. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, nn. 7,8. and 34-36.

5. Histories, II, 42.

association, in the religious consciousness of Egypt, between divine love and divine sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

A second theme of this superior revelation is the twofold one of relation within the godhead and mediation between God and man through a divine incarnation. In particular she sees evidence, in Egyptian and Greek traditions, of belief in a second divine person, "autre que le Dieu créateur et puissant et en même temps identique, à la fois sagesse et amour, ordonnatrice de tout l'univers, institutrice des hommes, unissant en soi par l'incarnation la nature humaine à la nature divine, médiatrice, souffrante, rédemptrice des âmes ..."<sup>2</sup> For Simone Weil the reality of this "god who is other than God" (dieu qui est autre que le Dieu") is concealed behind such other names as Osiris, Dionysus, Prometheus, Love, heavenly Aphrodite, Hades, Core, Persephone, Minos, Hermes, Apollo, Artemis, the world-Soul, and Logos.<sup>3</sup> No-one would dispute the probability that the notions of relation within divinity, and of incarnation and suffering on behalf of mankind, are contained in at least some of the figures mentioned, but that these figures of widely differing contexts can be classed together and given a meaning beyond their known and respective references is less justified. For example, the beneficence and suffering of Osiris almost certainly had an original chthonic reference, in which the god's death at least primarily

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1. Attente de Dieu, p. 181.

2. Ibid., p. 181.

3. Ibid., p. 182.



related to the agricultural cycle,<sup>1</sup> and of which Simone Weil shows little awareness - similarly with Core and Persephone.<sup>2</sup> The theme of plurality and relationship within the godhead is found by Simone Weil also in what she considers to be evidence of a third divine person, distinguished as the power of deity, and of a fourth figure, who represented purity, virginity and maternity.<sup>3</sup> Such beliefs express, in her view, an understanding of the principle of relation within deity, which the Hebrews never achieved.

A third theme is indicated in a sentence in Les trois fils de Noé, where Simone Weil writes, "Malgré leurs contacts fréquents et prolongés avec l'Égypte, les Hébreux restèrent imperméables à la foi dans Osiris, dans l'immortalité, dans le salut, dans l'identification de l'âme à Dieu par la charité."<sup>4</sup> This judgment expresses her conviction of the prominence of the soteriological aspect of religion, which complements those theological aspects already mentioned. She sees in the ritual, mythology and speculation of ancient Egypt and Greece a concern for the identity and immortality of the individual soul, and a desire for its ultimate participation in both the being and the passion of God. She finds this concern illustrated in the Egyptian belief in the union of the soul with Osiris after death.<sup>5</sup>

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1. See James H. Breasted, The Dawn of Conscience (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1935), pp. 94-114 for a survey of the function and significance of Osiris.

2. See the articles on Core and Persephone in Harvey (ed.), The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature (Oxford: 1951).

3. Attente de Dieu, pp. 182, 183.

4. Ibid, p. 183.

5. Cahiers II, pp. 323, 324.

With such themes in mind Simone Weil calls this religion "supernatural", claiming that the Hebrews rejected it for a "natural" religion, because they were interested not in the individual soul's participation in the immortality of God, but in the realization of national political aspirations in the material and mortal sphere. Thus she writes: "A la révélation surnaturelle Israël opposa un refus, car il ne lui fallait pas un Dieu qui parle à l'âme dans le secret, mais un Dieu présent à la collectivité nationale et protecteur dans la guerre."<sup>1</sup>

Such, then, is Simone Weil's theory about the occurrence and tradition of a true revelation in the ancient East Mediterranean. It states, first, that a revelation occurred at certain times and was transmitted through the years by certain civilizations, and, secondly, that the revelation was true and superior to that of Israel. Inasmuch as the theory constitutes a suggestion as to what must have happened among certain people at certain times, it is, in principle, open to empirical examination. Inasmuch as it constitutes a judgment as to which thoughts are true, and which are not true, it goes beyond the field of historical probability into that of religious and philosophical truth. The theory is about the history of a revelation, and thus raises for the reader the questions as to what "history" and "revelation" mean for Simone Weil in this context.

Her view of revelation in the theory needs to be examined first, since it is her certainty about the nature and substance of revelation that leads her to speculate upon its occurrence in

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1. Attente de Dieu, p. 183.

antiquity. Before she turns to history, so to speak, she knows what she is seeking. From the passages that have been quoted in this chapter it is evident that revelation is regarded by her as the individual's experience of encounter with the reality of God, naked and unashamed. It is the dawning of an awareness of the nature of God and man, accompanied by some kind of ecstasy. Of her own experience she writes, "... le Christ lui-même est descendu et m'a prise."<sup>1</sup> The Hamitic revelation is superior to the Old Testament because, in her view, it is more Christian.<sup>2</sup> Finding such themes as divine mediation, incarnation, death-resurrection, and redemption in certain figures of religious tradition and certain areas of philosophical writing, she conceives of the probability of a series of revelations, which bear the hallmarks of what was for her the most clear and compelling record of a revelation, the Gospel of Christ.

Simone Weil uses the word "revelation" in its full and traditional meaning of "divine disclosure". In revelation, knowledge of God is given. Although the receptive role of man in this transaction is envisaged by her ("Cham n'a-t-il pas eu une révélation?"),<sup>3</sup> his active role and readiness are also emphasized. A man can turn his back on a revelation which he does not want:

A la révélation surnaturelle Israël opposa un refus ...<sup>4</sup>

Revelation is received and accepted. However, it is also and

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1. Attente de Dieu, p. 38.
  2. Lettre a un Religieux, p. 17.
  3. Cahiers III, pp. 241, 242. The italics are mine.
  4. Attente de Dieu, p. 183.

subsequently expressed, by the recipient. In writing of what is received, Simone Weil uses the word "révélation" itself, or "pensée", as in the letters to Roché and Wahl. It is when considering what is expressed by the recipients, in what form their revelation is passed on, that she produces her characteristic catalogue of personalities (Osiris, Dionysus, etc.) and quasi-personal abstract figures (Love, Logos, world-Soul). For her, revelation can be expressed mythically, in terms of stories about super-human people and miraculous deeds, or philosophically, in terms of ideas. Indeed she does not draw a line between the two. The drawing of such a line is from her point of view unimportant, and from any point of view very difficult, for example with Eros.

It will have become apparent from the texts so far quoted in this study that Simone Weil does not bother to say of Osiris that he is mythical, of Moses that he is historical, or of the Logos that it is philosophical, and so on. She does not recognize these distinctions as meaningful for the answering of the question, "Do they or do they not express the supernatural revelation?"<sup>1</sup> Her judgment of "true" or "false", "pure" or "impure", on any figure in the Old Testament, remarked upon in the previous chapter, is paralleled in her use of material which in modern scholarship would be termed "mythological". The "pensée" or "révélation" with which she is concerned is for her present in Osiris and the Logos and almost absent from Moses. That one of these figures may be called "mythical", one "philosophical",

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1. Simone Weil's use of the distinction "natural" and "supernatural" in the matter of revelation and religious thought will be discussed in the next chapter.

and one "historical" is in this context irrelevant and indeed meaningless.

Thus Simone Weil's theory starts with her own experience and with her conviction as to the themes which belong to the understanding of such experiences. The question of history arises when she proceeds to recognize evidence of the experience and the themes in literary and archeological remains of Near Eastern antiquity. What sort of historical claim is she making when she says, in effect, "I believe that such-and-such happened"? The claim does not, for example, fall within any of the three methods of history-writing which are analysed in Hegel's General Introduction to the Philosophy of History.<sup>1</sup> She is not writing "original history", recounting events either as an eye-witness or as a member of the same age and culture as that which is being described; nor is she writing "reflective history", as one surveying and interpreting across the ages historical material of a spirit alien to her own; nor even is she writing "philosophical history", resolving the tension between preconceived ideas and empirical facts through the concept of history as the manifestation of the Absolute, which is Reason. Simone Weil's theory is not simply an interpretation of events, as is "reflective history", nor a demonstration of the rationality of events, as is "philosophical history". It is, rather, a conjecture,<sup>2</sup> which is based on a conviction as to the nature of revelation, previously

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1. Hegel, Reason in History, trans. Robert S. Hartman, (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), pp. 3-10.

2. "Conjecture" is used here in the sense of an opinion which has to go beyond the evidence, but in the direction in which the evidence, though insufficient, does not disallow.

derived from her own experience and thought, and which is worked out through her selection and interpretation of literary and other evidence. How legitimate her theory is, qua conjecture, can be discovered by an examination of her use of the evidence. Since the body of relevant material is now so vast, the enquiry is limited to her use of the Old Testament literature in the elaboration of her conjecture, and to a comparison with the conclusions reached in a more recent survey of the same cultural area and period.

A central place in the elaboration of Simone Weil's theory is occupied by her religio-ethnological speculations on the Noachian traditions in Genesis. These speculations are a further example of her non-critical treatment of Old Testament texts.<sup>1</sup> She takes for granted the documentary integrity of the passages upon which she comments. However, in the cases of both the blessing and cursing of Noah's sons in Chapter 9 and the table of nations in Chapter 10 there are technical problems,<sup>2</sup> internal to the text, which tend to disqualify the passages from at least part of the use to which Simone Weil puts them. These problems are not of the more fanciful or pedantic kind which can sometimes be found in biblical criticism, but are recognized in most standard modern commentaries, such as those of Speiser, von Rad, and Simpson. Such commentaries all agree that the Noachian narrative is a fusion of material from Priestly and Yahwistic sources, and that the flood story was originally quite

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1. The epithet "non-critical" is used here in the technical meaning of biblical criticism, as the use of literary, historical and textual techniques in the study of the Bible.

2. Genesis 9: 18-28, and 10:1-32.

separate from the story of Noah's vine-growing and drunkenness. In particular, they all find evidence of the documentary disunity of the story of Noah and his three sons. Von Rad points out that the idea of an "ecumenical" scheme of nations, as in 9:18, "Shem, Ham and Japheth", seems to be laid over a more ancient "Palestinian" scheme, "Shem, Japheth and Canaan", as in 9: 25-27.<sup>1</sup> As evidence of this duality scholars point to the change of name from Ham to Canaan halfway through the narrative, and to the probability of "Ham, the father of ..." in verse 21 being a redactional gloss. On the Palestinian level the story of the blessing and cursing of the sons seems to represent an Israelite tradition about the orgiastic nature of Canaanite worship in contrast to the modesty and austerity of its own worship. This etiological myth of racial and religious discrimination has become fused with what was probably an originally independent story about the first vine-grower and husbandman. Thus scholars have acknowledged and analysed as far as possible the problems of this passage. Although, as von Rad says, "It is filled with difficulties and obscurities for which the final explanatory word has not yet been spoken",<sup>2</sup> what is known of the passage renders improbable Simone Weil's reading of it as a clear ecumenical scheme of nations, based on the account of an original mystical revelation, which was accepted by one genealogical line and rejected by the other two. Elements of these stories may well derive from a distant and inaccessible East Mediterranean folklore, and upon the nature of this

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1. G. von Rad, Genesis (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), p. 131.

2. Op. cit., p. 131.

Simone Weil, as much as anyone, is entitled to conjecture. Indeed the similarity of the name "Japheth" with that of the Greek mythological figure "Iapetos" may, as she and Speiser suggest,<sup>1</sup> be significant, although von Rad<sup>2</sup> and Hicks<sup>3</sup> do not accept the connection. Her speculation upon the names of Noah's other two sons, that "Shem" may be the same as the Greek sema ("sign"), and that "Ham" may be the same as the Greek root cham ("ground") finds less scholarly support.<sup>4</sup>

Similar problems apply to the table of nations in Genesis 10. Again the complications noticed by scholars tend to render less legitimate the use to which Simone Weil puts the material. For her this is an ethnic genealogy of the inhabited world (and thus "ecumenical", as von Rad uses the word), which is sufficiently clear and unproblematic to bear the weight of serious ethnological conjecture. However, scholars again point to evidence of documentary disunity, with both Priestly and Yahwistic material in the passage. They also note that, although it is clearly a conscious pioneer attempt at an ethnography, the main criteria of classification are geographical and political (as, for example, the linking of the Canaanites with the Hittites), whereas modern ethnology is strictly linguistic in this area. Simone Weil's theory depends upon an

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1. Cahiers III, p. 236 and E.A. Speiser, Genesis (New York: Anchor Bible, 1964), p. 65.

2. Op. cit., p. 134.

3. "Japheth" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Abingdon, 1962), vol. II p. 802.

4. Cahiers III, p. 236.



ethnography in which geographical proximity was the main consideration, whereas modern ethnology would be more inclined to link distant nations which had similar languages than neighbouring nations which had different languages. The table of nations in Genesis is well described as "a map in literary form".<sup>1</sup> As for the details of it, some correspond to Simone Weil's scheme, whereas others raise problems. The presentation of the Japhethite line, which does acknowledge linguistic as well as geographical proximity (verse 5), certainly seems to fit the Indo-European races, with scholars agreeing on the identity of "Javan" in verse 4 as the Ionians. However, as Speiser remarks, the Japheth of Chapter 10 seems to be different from the Japheth of the blessing and cursing.<sup>2</sup> According to his interpretation of the Japheth reference in the blessing and cursing, Japheth is identified with the Philistines,<sup>3</sup> whereas in the table of nations the Philistines are linked with the Egyptians in the Hamitic line, as Simone Weil would prefer.

Simone Weil's use of the table of nations in the elaboration of her ideas about ancient Near Eastern religion is seen in her treatment of the reference to Nimrod, a descendent of Ham, in verses 8 to 10 of Chapter 10. She wonders whether Nimrod, who is described as a mighty hunter and the founder of Mesopotamian kingdoms, was an equivalent figure to Heracles,<sup>4</sup> and places him on her list of

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1. Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. II, p. 802, article on "Japheth".

2. Speiser, op. cit., p. 63.

3. Ibid., p. 63.

4. Cahiers III, pp. 233, 236.

incarnational heroes.<sup>1</sup> She points to the existence of a temple of Heracles in Tyre, mentioned by Herodotus,<sup>2</sup> as confirming the possibility of traditions about a Heraclean figure being known in Palestine. Although there is no reason why such a possibility should not be admitted, the suggestions of scholars as to the identity of Nimrod as a historical Mesopotamian ruler are more plausible, since the references in the passage to Mesopotamian localities are so specific and seem to be, as Speiser says, "clear proof of a sound historical background."<sup>3</sup> Thus Speiser himself suggests the identity of Nimrod as Tukulti-Ninurta I, the first Assyrian conqueror of Babylonia.

The story of the blessing and cursing of Noah's sons in Genesis 9 and the table of nations in the following chapter are thus generally regarded as problematic in the extreme, and therefore as an area for reasonable conjecture. However, Simone Weil's particular line of speculation is somewhat weakened by the few glimmers of clarification that scholarly examination of the passages has produced.

A similar conclusion is to be drawn from her use of the passages from Ezekiel. According to her, parts of the prophecies against Tyre and Egypt contain traces of the cultural and religious superiority of these peoples, and traces also of incarnational traditions. Thus she regards references to the greatness of the Prince of Tyre, who said "I am a god",<sup>4</sup> not as an expression of

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1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 245.

2. Histories II: 44.

3. Op. cit., p. 72.

4. Ezekiel 28:9.

o'erweening pride, clearly the implication of the present Hebrew context, but as a statement of the truth. Similarly, of the prophecy against Pharaoh in terms of the downfall of a great cedar, she writes:

C'est presque comparer l'Égypte à l'arbre de vie du Paradis Terrestre. Et l'Arbre de Vie, n'est-ce pas le Verbe? "Dans le Verbe était la vie." N'est-ce pas indiquer la sainteté de l'Égypte, sa mission d'initiatrice? Et peut-être même l'incarnation qui a eu lieu en Égypte.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly criticism of these passages in Ezekiel indicates once again that the material probably does hark back to remote and perhaps irrecoverable Eastern Mediterranean myths, such as a tradition about the Garden of Eden different from that behind Genesis 2.<sup>2</sup> As another example, the phrase, "wiser than Daniel", in 28:3, almost certainly refers to the Canaanite Dan'el, the royal and wise figure found in the Ugaritic texts. However, the question as to whether one should accept as just the prophet's condemnation of these traditions or Simone Weil's favourable interpretation of them takes one beyond the bounds of historical scholarship into the realm of religious preconceptions. It is significant that Simone Weil is quite content to agree with the prophet's judgment when he is criticizing his own people. Thus she quotes with approval a passage in which God is presented as giving the Hebrews the Law as something which was not itself good, but merited by their rebelliousness.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, certain general conclusions can be reached regarding

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1. Cahiers III, p. 243. Ref. Ezekiel 31: 1-18.
  2. See, for example, Ezekiel in The Interpreter's Bible, vol. VI, Herbert G. May.
  3. Cahiers III, p. 241. Ref. Ezekiel 20: 25,26.

regarding the standing of Simone Weil's theory of ancient East Mediterranean spirituality in the light of development in contemporary study. The most negative conclusion is that which seems to suggest itself in the field of ethnology, already mentioned. Here the modern ethno-linguistic picture of the ancient East Mediterranean area, as summarized for example by E.A. Speiser in his article on "The ethnic divisions of man", definitely cuts across Simone Weil's grouping of nations which shared both a religious and a racial heritage. According to Speiser, modern study, on strong linguistic evidence made available by recent discoveries, envisages a common Semitic-Hamitic group, which included the Akkadians, Amorites, Canaanites, Arameans, Arabs, Egyptians and Cushites; an Indo-European group, consisting of Hittites, Indo-Aryans, Philistines and others; and an unassigned group, including the Sumerians, Elamites, Kassites, Hurrians, Anatolians and others.<sup>1</sup> This clearly contradicts Simone Weil's scheme, which takes as its three groupings a Semitic, an Indo-European, and a Hamitic, the latter including Akkadians, Canaanites, Egyptians and Philistines. Her references to the Pelasgians, whom Herodotus mentions as the pre-Hellenic inhabitants of Greece and as an influence, together with Egypt, on Hellenic religion, are more problematic. She herself acknowledges the uncertainty of their identity, but allows herself to speculate upon it. However, such speculation is beyond the present scope of empirical ethnology, as also is her speculation on the ethnological factor in whatever history lies behind the epic of the Trojan War. At the same

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1. Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. III, p. 235.

time, the discounting of the strictly ethnological element in her view of ancient religion does not put out of court the possibility of the territorial dissemination and the chronological continuity of certain features of religion, be they rites, myths or ideas. In fact, the climate of political, cultural and religious intercourse and interdependence among the communities of the ancient East Mediterranean, as reconstructed by recent scholarship, would at least suggest a background out of which the geographical and historical transmission of religious ideas such as she envisages, would have been possible.

For example C.H.Gordon's book, Before the Bible,<sup>1</sup> establishes a considerable degree of solidarity in the traditions of all ancient East Mediterranean peoples, and in particular in those of the Hebrews and Greeks. He writes that, "Greek and Hebrew civilizations are parallel structures built upon the same East Mediterranean foundation."<sup>2</sup> Protesting against the practice of compartmentalization of Hebraic and Hellenic studies, Gordon suggests a perspective for the understanding of ancient East Mediterranean religion which is similar to Simone Weil's, even if the specific account which recent research by himself and others produces is different. His main contention, which, after the deciphering of the Minoan texts and the establishing of the Northwest Semitic character of their language, changed from "a bold thesis" to a proven point, is that in the middle of the second millennium B.C. the whole East Mediterranean was united

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1. Collins, London, 1962.

2. Gordon, op. cit., p. 9.

by a common and Semitic culture. Thus he writes after February 1962, "As of now it appears that the common background of Greek and Hebrew civilizations is due mainly to the Northwest Semitic factor that covered the entire East Mediterranean (Palestine, Syria, the coast of Asia Minor, Cyprus, Crete and the Aegean) down to 1,500 B.C."<sup>1</sup> Gordon proceeds to suggest that just as the Christian and Roman West grew out of a common Hellenistic culture in the area in the last centuries B.C., so early Israel and Mycenaean Greece grew out of a common Semitic culture in the Amarna age.<sup>2</sup>

The present state of ancient East Mediterranean studies both clashes and corresponds with various aspects of Simone Weil's conjecture. The main contradiction is against the complete divorce which she wished to maintain between the Phoenician-Cretan-Greek culture and the Hebrew. It appears, rather, that the two strains had a common background, on the Semitic side, which accounts for the many parallels between Homeric epic, Ugaritic epic and Biblical tradition, illustrated throughout Gordon's book. However, there still remains the problem of the differences between the Greek and Hebrew derivatives of the Amarna synthesis, such as the exaltation of the monotheistic element in the Hebrew. It was not so much the case that Israel in Egypt encountered a strange and superior tradition which it rejected, but rather that in an area and from an age of common cultural climate the Hebrews seized upon and emphasized certain elements which were different from those taken by other civilizations,

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1. Gordon, op. cit., p. 301.

2. Ibid., p. 214.

though still using much the same mythological material. The question why this should have been so, the answer to which takes one beyond the bounds of historical investigation, is the point where speculation such as Simone Weil's is legitimate and increasingly significant.

Certain points of contact, when it is remembered that they are between the recent judgments of an expert and the partisan speculations of an amateur over twenty years ago, are remarkable. One such correspondence is that between Simone Weil's conviction of the centrality of Egypt in the cultural pattern of the area, which she saw expressed in Ezekiel 31, and Gordon's opinion, as when he writes:

The reason that the full contribution of Egypt to East Mediterranean literature is not yet realised, is the scholarly attitude. Once the nature of the problem is more widely appreciated, the rate of progress in evaluating Egypt's role will be stepped up.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, remarks of Gordon's suggest that the ancients' own mode of ethnographic speculation, which Simone Weil resumes, whilst being contradicted by modern linguistic study as serious ethnological theory, can be re-admitted as possibly reflecting a more realistic grouping of nations than the strictly physical one. Gordon notes that among East Mediterranean societies, even in the present day, "ethnos is a matter of social psychology rather than physical anthropology."<sup>2</sup> Gordon himself at one point indulges in an ethnological conjecture on the basis of part of the material in Genesis, showing how it fits the account of ancient East Mediterranean civilization suggested by the

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1. Ibid., p. 127.

2. Ibid., p. 33, footnote.

most recent studies:

We do not know precisely what the biblical author had in mind when he ascribed to Noah the prophecy that the sons of Japheth "will dwell in the tents of Shem" (Genesis 9:27). But no interpretation is at present more likely than that it refers to the Indo-European displacement of the West Semites, first traceable epigraphically when Greek Linear B supplanted Phoenician Linear A at Knossos.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the speculative or conjectural element in the interpretation of ancient ethnography is at certain points admitted by orthodox scholarship. Where Simone Weil's use of Genesis 9 and 10 least satisfies is in her theory of a Hamitic line of race and religion, which both simplifies the Biblical evidence and is now discounted by the results of recent research.

Another point of correspondence arises in answer to the question put earlier in this chapter, as to whether the similarities of culture and religion in the ancient East Mediterranean is a matter of co-incidence or of contact. The picture painted by Gordon of the community and mobility of religious and cultural activities in the area at that time makes it clear that the conscious tradition and custody of a complex of religious ideas and myths, as suggested by Simone Weil, was at least possible. In his chapter, "Channels of Transmission", Gordon discusses the many ways in which culture was carried, including ethnic migration, trade, military conquest, colonization, craftsmen's guilds, and journeys to cultic centres. The difference between Simone Weil's and Gordon's view lies in the identity of the cultural context of these civilizations at the time. Whereas Gordon uses the results of the most recent discoveries to show

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1. Ibid., p. 217.



that it was Semitic, Simone Weil thought it to be emphatically non-Semitic. However, it is remarkable that she envisaged at all a cultural unity in the area, and as clearly as she did, anticipating at least the general compass of subsequent opinion, when she wrote, for example:

Toute la civilisation méditerranéenne qui précède  
immédiatement les temps historiques est issue de Cham.<sup>1</sup>  
Cette liste est celle de tous les peuples civilisateurs.

A final point of correspondence is on the open nature of the whole question of ancient East Mediterranean culture, including the relation between the Biblical and other religious traditions. Simone Weil's theory and speculation implied an openness of the issue which, although it would not have been admitted by many even twenty years ago, is becoming increasingly acknowledged to-day. Thus Gordon can say:

Almost every facet of biblical study will be enriched by re-examination in its East Mediterranean framework. We are in for many surprises, but it is safe to predict that the surprises will<sub>2</sub> be in keeping with the plain meaning of the ancient texts.

and again:

The years ahead bid fair to be the most fruitful in the annals of Classical and Biblical scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

This view of the outlook for the study of ancient East Mediterranean religion is expressed also by M-M. Davy, who thus sees in the future the possible vindication of some of Simone Weil's conjectures:

Or notre époque a complètement renouvelé les moyens d'appréhension, soit qu'il s'agisse des formes de la critique ou des nouvelles découvertes d'oeuvres manuscrites ou archéologiques. La philologie, l'ethnographie

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1. Attente de Dieu, p. 178.
  2. Before the Bible, p. 300.

et l'histoire ont fait de tels progrès que l'histoire des religions est abordée d'une façon neuve. La pensée de Simone Weil ne se place pas à l'intérieur d'une méthode scientifique, mais il est possible que ses trouvailles soient plus tard ratifiées sur un grand nombre de points.<sup>1</sup>

The study of Simone Weil's speculation upon the origins and currents of ancient East Mediterranean religion, and particularly of her theory of true revelation, has thus been seen to be partly within and partly beyond the reach of the various means of historical investigation. Inasmuch as the speculation falls within this reach, those parts of it which seem to be dominated by the author's personal antipathy to the religious consciousness of the main Hebrew traditions, such as her emphasis on the non-Semitic nature of the civilizing currents, are being contradicted. Indeed the partisan flavour of some of her writings in this field go to the opposite extreme to that which Gordon criticizes in earlier scholarship, which was dominated by the antithesis: Greek - profane - Indo-European - Occidental versus Semitic - sacred - Asiatic - Oriental.<sup>2</sup> Such a compartmentalizing prejudice, which incapacitated East Mediterranean studies for so long, finds an equally dangerous alternative in Simone Weil's tendency towards the antithesis: Semitic - profane - Occidental versus Hamitic - sacred - Oriental. However, those parts of her speculation which spring from her grasp of the East Mediterranean civilizations of the mid-2nd millennium B.C. as a cultural unit of great religious creativity, have been shown to contain certain approaches that are vindicated by current scholarly opinion. As

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1. M-M. Davy, op. cit., p. 129.

2. Before the Bible, p. 11.

Gordon says, "If we want to understand the roots of our culture around the East Mediterranean in the second millennium B.C. we shall have to exercise our capacity to detect real sameness in apparent difference, and real difference in apparent sameness."<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, in suggesting that there was not only a largely homogeneous religious complex in the area at the time, but also, in Hebrew tradition, a concrete and significant rejection of it, undertook both kinds of detection.

In this chapter and its predecessor some attempt has been made to form an opinion on the literary and historical problems raised by her position. In both cases the investigator is brought up against the fact that certain notions as to the function of religion and the nature of divinity, apparently established a priori and accepted as axiomatic, determine the selection of material and constitute the criteria of judgment. In the next two chapters the most important of these will be examined with a view to their implications for the understanding of both Biblical religion in particular and religious thought in general.

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1. Before the Bible, p. 12. The need to distinguish real difference in apparent sameness is particularly emphasized in H. Frankfort, The Problem of Similarity in Ancient Near Eastern Religions, The Frazer Lecture for 1950 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951). This work complements Gordon's by exposing the dangers of looking for a "pattern" of religious ritual and mythology in several cultures, based on the evidence of few, or even one. The assumption that similarity of details implies similarity of essence or structure is especially criticized by Frankfort.

CHAPTER THREE  
THE OLD TESTAMENT  
AND THE CONCEPTION OF GOD

The consideration in the previous two chapters of the problems which are raised by the literary and historical aspects of Simone Weil's remarks on the Old Testament established the limits within which her particular criticisms of the tradition can be studied. Her pre-disposition towards certain ideas about God and religion,<sup>1</sup> which lay behind both her uneven knowledge of the Old Testament texts and her historical conjectures, also bore fruit in numerous critical comments upon the theology and religion of ancient Israel. Concerning her criticism of the Old Testament's conception of God, attention is given in the present chapter to her basic appraisal of Hebrew monotheism; to her own view of the right approach to and the essential theme of theology; to her four main criticisms of the Old Testament's approach; and to her treatment of the particular instance of creation and the origin of evil.

It is important, at the outset, to acknowledge Simone Weil's fundamental appraisal of the Hebrew contribution to man's thought about what he calls "God". On more than one occasion she admits the Old Testament's emphasis upon the unity of God as Israel's particular theological pre-occupation and vocation, comparable with those of other religious traditions. Thus she writes, for example:

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1. For a classification of the use of the word "religion" in this study, see back to footnote 1 on page ii.

Dans chaque nation de l'antiquité, il y a comme l'obsession d'un aspect des choses divines. Israël: Dieu unique. Inde: assimilation de l'âme à Dieu, dans l'état de perfection, par l'union mystique. Chine: passivité, absence de Dieu, action non-agissante. Égypte: salut et vie éternelle par l'assimilation à un Dieu souffrant, mort et ressuscité. Grèce: transcendance, distance du divin et du surnaturel, misère de l'homme, recherche de ponts (médiation) - (Et la Mésopotamie???)

(La mission d'Israël a été continuée par les musulmans. L'Inde et la Chine sont restées. Le Christianisme a pris succession surtout de l'Égypte, mais aussi de la Grèce.)<sup>1</sup>

Simone Weil does not despise, but rather respects, the peculiar monotheistic emphasis of Hebrew religion. However, she regards the tradition as having crashed headlong into every pitfall which lies on that particular way.

Before her criticisms are discussed in detail, attention must be given to her own claim as to what is the correct and only starting-point for the theological enterprise, for developing an idea of divinity. Old Testament notions of God are erroneous or inadequate, in her view, because they are associated with worldly aspirations after political survival, conquest, prosperity and security. They are entangled with political and nationalistic motives and they expect vindication in material events. They become associated with episodes and circumstances which offend human morality. To God's agency are imputed atrocities and injustices which contravene the moral code that God himself is meant to have revealed. Such, for Simone Weil is the kind of contradiction which arises if the pursuit of the idea of divinity is conducted in the wrong direction. For her

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1. Cahiers II, pp. 184, 185.

there is a "vérité essentielle concernant Dieu",<sup>1</sup> which is the criterion for all discourse about deity and a standard before which the ideas of God in the Old Testament fall short. It is through the absence, or at least neglect, of this truth that Israel's peculiar monotheistic emphasis becomes, in Simone Weil's view, so pernicious and destructive. This essential truth is the thought which, in the judgments which she made upon Old Testament literature and ancient East Mediterranean religion, was taken as axiomatic. To this consideration must now be given.

Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament starts out with what she considers to be a self-evident factor, the reality of God as the absolute good. Thus she writes at the beginning of her essay, "Israël et les Gentils", striking the keynote for all that follows in the essay, "La connaissance essentielle concernant Dieu est que Dieu est le Bien. Tout le reste est secondaire."<sup>2</sup> Similarly she writes in Lettre à un Religieux, "Car la vérité essentielle concernant Dieu, c'est qu'il est bon",<sup>3</sup> and speaks of "... la vérité la plus essentielle concernant Dieu (à savoir que Dieu est bon avant d'être puissant) ..."<sup>4</sup> In La Connaissance Surnaturelle she says, "Que Dieu soit le bien, c'est une certitude. C'est une définition."<sup>5</sup> Thus Simone Weil has an intellectual certainty about the reality of God.

1. Lettre a un Religieux, p. 11.

2. Pensées sans ordre .... p. 47.

3. p. 11.

4. p. 13.

5. p. 275.

It can be said to result from a combined ontological, moral and experimental approach to theism. In the statement sent to Maurice Schumann in 1943, "Théorie des Sacrements", she writes:

Pour tout ce qui concerne le bien absolu et le contact avec lui, la preuve par la perfection (parfois faussement nommée preuve ontologique) est non seulement valable, mais la seule valable. Cela résulte immédiatement de la notion même de bien.

For Simone Weil the self-evidence of the proposition of God's reality is not so much a case of the idea of existence leading logically to the idea of God (qua an existent greater than which cannot be conceived), as in the traditional ontological argument, but rather a case of the idea of and desire for good implying the reality of absolute good. An essential step in her "proof" is her assumption that only good can produce good, and that only the reality of absolute good (or perfection) can explain man's desire for absolute good. Thus she writes:

Point essentiel du christianisme - (et du platonisme) - :

Seule la pensée de la perfection produit du bien - un bien imparfait. Si on propose de l'imparfait, on fait le mal.

On ne peut proposer réellement la perfection que si elle est réellement possible; c'est donc la preuve que la possibilité de la perfection existe ici-bas.

and similarly:

Savoir que Dieu est le bien - ou plus simplement que le bien absolu est le bien, croire que le désir du bien se multiplie de lui-même dans l'âme si l'âme ne refuse pas son consentement à cette opération - ces deux choses si simples suffisent. Rien d'autre n'est nécessaire.

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1. Pensées sans ordre ..., p. 136.
  2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 313.
  3. Ibid., p. 277.

Men can only become good by contemplating that which is better than themselves, that is perfection. There are and have been good men - therefore perfection is a reality. The "incarnations" and perfect men, who figure in Simone Weil's historical and literary speculations, are men in whom absolute good, or God, is present and revealed, as the fruit of their contemplation of and consent to it.

For Simone Weil the desire for good implies the reality of absolute good. However, this reality is not to be confused with the existence of the created world of nature and human nature, which she calls "nécessité". By "necessity" she means the Greek ananké, as she finds it and its cognate forms at certain points in Greek literature.<sup>1</sup> In her usage it means the limitation placed upon man by the physical laws of the created world and by the equally restrictive forces of his own nature and society. Her usage thus maintains ananké's principal connotation of "constraint".<sup>2</sup> She frequently emphasizes the difference, distance or contradiction between good and necessity, quoting Plato's words from Book VI of The Republic, "... how great is the real difference between the necessary (anankaïou) and the good ..."<sup>3</sup> She speaks of "existence" or "being" as an element of the realm of necessity, and not primarily as a property of the absolute good. She writes:

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1. e.g. Plato, The Republic VI, 493c and Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War 5, XVII, 105.

2. Liddell & Scott, Greek-English Lexicon.

3. 493c. Trans. Paul Shorey in Hamilton and Cairns. For examples of Simone Weil's use of the quotation see Cahiers II, pp. 358, 359, Attente de Dieu, p. 155 and L'Enracinement, p. 211.



Mais, me dira-t-on, ce bien existe-t-il? Qu'importe? les choses d'ici-bas existent, mais elles ne sont pas le bien. Que le bien existe ou non il n'est pas d'autre bien que le bien.<sup>1</sup>

... le Bien est au-dessus de l'Être et Dieu est Bien avant même d'être ce qui est.<sup>2</sup>

Réalité et existence font deux.<sup>3</sup>

Simone Weil's theistic certitude thus concerns not so much something which is encountered in terms of its existence, but something which is encountered in terms of its nature, as good. God is the absolute good which transcends the category of being or existence as man knows it in the natural world. This transcendence of the good, like the difference between necessity and good, is a theme which she finds in Book VI of The Republic, as in the following sentence:

In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence (to einai) and essence (ten ousian) is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.<sup>4</sup>

Man's experience of the contradiction between his bondage to necessity and his desire for good is, for Simone Weil, the raw material for any conception of God. A long but extremely important passage in one of her later writings expresses clearly her position:

La contradiction essentielle de la condition humaine, c'est que l'homme est soumis à la force, et désire la justice. Il est soumis à la nécessité, et désire le bien. Ce n'est pas son corps seul qui est ainsi soumis, mais aussi toutes ses pensées; et pourtant l'être même de l'homme consiste à être tendu vers le bien. C'est pourquoi nous croyons tous qu'il

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1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 284.
  2. Pensées sans ordre ..., p. 49.
  3. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 280.
  4. 509b.

y a une unité entre la nécessité et le bien. Certains croient que les pensées de l'homme concernant le bien possèdent ici-bas le plus haut degré de force. Ce sont ceux qu'on nomme les idéalistes. Ils se trompent doublement, d'abord en ce que ces pensées sont sans force, puis en ce qu'elles ne saisissent pas le bien. Elles sont influencées par la force; de sorte que cette attitude est finalement une réplique moins énergique de l'attitude contraire. D'autres croient que la force est par elle-même orientée vers le bien. Ce sont des idolâtres. C'est la croyance de tous les matérialistes qui ne tombent pas dans l'état d'indifférence. Ils se trompent aussi doublement; d'abord la force est étrangère et indifférente au bien, puis elle n'est pas toujours et partout la plus forte. Seuls peuvent échapper à ces erreurs ceux qui ont recours à la pensée incompréhensible qu'il y a une unité entre la nécessité et le bien, autrement dit entre la réalité et le bien, hors de ce monde. Ceux-la croient aussi que quelque chose de cette unité se communique à ceux qui dirigent vers elle leur attention et leur désir. Pensée encore plus incompréhensible, mais expérimentalement vérifiée.

The experiential rooting of Simone Weil's approach to the idea of God emerges from this passage as two-fold. First, she regards her assumption that man does desire good and that his desire is contradicted by the state of the world as justified by the form and fate of man's philosophies. Secondly, she considers that contemplation of the good actually produces in individual men an experience here and now of the transcendent unity of good and necessity, an experience of the presence of God. To such an experience, found in the accounts of mystics through the ages, Simone Weil herself bears testimony.<sup>2</sup> Thus she regards as the true approach to the conception of God what she calls at one point "la preuve ontologique expérimentale".<sup>3</sup>

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1. "Fragments, Londres 1943" in Oppression et Liberté (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), pp. 209-210. A similar passage occurs in "Y a-t-il une doctrine marxiste?", pp. 228-231 in the same volume.

2. Attente de Dieu, pp. 38, 39.

3. Cahiers III, p. 36.

The foundation of Simone Weil's religious thought is the contradiction between the absolute good, which surpasses the relative goods, belonging to the realm of existence, and the condition of necessity within that realm. What she meant by "good" and "necessity", and by the problem of relating the two, emerges from her particular objections to the Old Testament conception of God, which will be studied in this chapter. It will be already clear that she starts with a contradiction, or polarity, which seems to correspond with the antithesis, "supernatural" and "natural". Some elucidation is, however, necessary.

In the first place, Simone Weil uses the word "nature" surprisingly rarely, preferring "nécessité", "l'ordre du monde", and "les conditions de l'existence". If by "nature" is meant the state of being in the universe, then for Simone Weil it is "nécessité", a mechanistic network of movements and pressures which follow from the world's origin as that which is other than God.<sup>1</sup> Although she does not often use the word "natural" to describe the realm of necessity,<sup>2</sup> she frequently describes as "surnaturel" various aspects of the realization of the good in the experience of someone in bondage to necessity, such as knowledge and behaviour.

In the second place, a reader who approaches Simone Weil's thought with notions such as "natural good" or "natural virtue" (which could be called "Greek") experiences some difficulty. For her the

1. The relation between the notions of "necessity" and "creation" is shown at the end of this chapter.

2. An example of her use of the contrast, "naturel" and "surnaturel", is found in La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 56. See page 69 of this chapter, and footnote.

good is contradictory to necessity, and is "hors de ce monde". She therefore does not call it "naturel", because it does not belong to or derive from necessity. However, as is seen in the passage quoted above, she does consider that the desire for good is one part of man's basic condition. She is certainly in the Greek tradition when she considers that the orderliness of what would be called to-day "the natural world" betokens a perfection and a harmony that are beyond it. Although it might be said that her comparatively infrequent use of the word "nature" shows her on the surface to be more in the tradition of the Hebrews, who had no single equivalent word for "nature", her concept of "nécessité" represents her idea of nature more clearly perhaps than the word "nature" itself would have done.

It is in the sense outlined above that she uses the contrast, "naturel" and "surnaturel", of ideas of God and ways of knowing God, as will be shown in this chapter. That which is "naturel" derives from the realm of necessity and can be understood in terms of necessity, such as "existence", "presence", "activity", "personality" and "power". That which is "surnaturel" arises from the contemplation of the good and transcends the categories and values of necessity.

One problem has to be encountered before Simone Weil's four main criticisms of the Old Testament approach to the reality of God are examined. This is the twofold question as to whether it is possible to consider the Old Testament in terms of religious ideas and dogmatic theology, and whether Simone Weil goes farther in this respect than the texts warrant. Several recent writings, though differing in particulars, share an emphasis on the claim that the Old

Testament does not contain a systematic and conceptual doctrine of God. James Barr, for example, regards the tradition as too "multiplex" for a central or "key" conception to be extrapolated.<sup>1</sup>

Walther Eichrodt notes that the Old Testament contains little formal doctrine about the being and attributes of God,<sup>2</sup> but does assume that it is possible "to construct a complete picture of the O.T. realm of belief."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, G. Ernest Wright states of the Old Testament, "the being and attributes of God are nowhere systematically presented but are inferences from events ..."<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil's own comments upon the Hebrew deity do not exhibit that over-conceptualizing which such observations would preclude. The word "théologie" is rare in her writings on any religious subject, and particularly so in her comments on the Old Testament. She occasionally speaks of the "conception" of God, as for example in Lettre à un Religieux:

Aux yeux des Hébreux (du moins avant l'exil, et sauf exceptions) péché et maleur, vertu et prospérité sont inséparables, ce qui fait de Iahveh un Père terrestre et non céleste, visible et non caché. C'est donc un faux dieu. Un acte de charité est impossible avec cette conception.

On pourrait poser en postulat:

Est fausse toute conception de Dieu incompatible avec un mouvement de charité pure.

Sont vraies, à des degrés divers, toutes les autres.<sup>5</sup>

Simone Weil's use of "conception" here can be regarded as arising not from an unwarranted reading of the Old Testament as a book of doctrine,

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1. James Barr, Old and New in Interpretation (London: S.C.M., 1966), p. 15.

2. W. Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), Vol. I, pp. 32, 33.

3. Eichrodt, op. cit., p. 25. The italics are Eichrodt's.

4. G. Ernest Wright, God who Acts (London: S.C.M., 1952), p. 57.

5. p. 68.

but from the discernment of a theme which marks many of the narratives and judgments in the tradition, namely the correlation of divine blessing and material prosperity. In her criticisms of the Old Testament "conception" of God, Simone Weil is describing and passing judgment on the predominant themes of the portrait of Yahweh, not extrapolating a systematic theology. In terms of Wright's claim that the Old Testament is the recital of a history rather than a dialectic of religious ideas,<sup>1</sup> it can be said that Simone Weil's criticisms of Yahweh can be directed against the principal themes implicit and explicit in the recital, and against the portrait or pattern of deity which emerges from the history. Such is the case with the four elements in the portrayal of Yahweh which are most out of line with what is claimed by Simone Weil to be the true approach to the reality of God. They are the naturalism or carnality of the conception of Yahweh, its immediacy, its personification, and its amorality.

Her first criticism of the Old Testament portrayal of deity is associated with her use of such words as "natural" and "carnal" to describe the God of Israel. As has already been seen, she considers that the Hebrews rejected a spiritual approach to the reality of God, found in the religion of Egypt, for "un Dieu charnel et collectif."<sup>2</sup> The Old Testament's emphasis upon the activity and achievement of God in the world implies for her a positivity that is not in keeping with the conception of God which is reached from her point of departure,

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1. Wright, op. cit., pp. 33-58, Chapter Two, "Theology as Recital".

2. Cahiers III, p. 239.

and which is for her only too easily understood in terms of Israel's political ambition. She holds an absolute antithesis between the spiritual nature of God and the material nature of the world and of existence in the world. In her view, therefore, the expression of the former in terms of the latter must be negative. So she writes:

Dire que Dieu se pense, c'est dire 1<sup>o</sup> qu'il n'est pas autre chose que pensée; 2<sup>o</sup> qu'il ne pense pas une chose autre que soi. Toutes les affirmations, au sujet de Dieu, ont pour sens véritable des négations.

However, in the Old Testament she finds on the whole not a negative, but a positive picture in worldly and material categories such as existence, presence and activity. In this sense she sees the Old Testament deity not as supernatural, but as natural, not as spiritual, but as carnal.

This criticism can be seen most clearly in terms of a favourite image of Simone Weil's, that of heaviness, "la pesanteur". According to this image, just as a mechanical law of gravity applies to the physical world, and can be said to be natural, so a personal law of gravity applies to the world of human thought and behaviour, and can also be said to be natural. As an apple falls from a tree and water finds its own level, so the human Ego spills over into any void which it encounters and automatically exercises all the power that it possesses. This tendency in human behaviour, whether described as such or projected into the action of anthropomorphic deities, is the downward and natural movement of "pesanteur". When elaborating the significance of this image Simone Weil on occasions quotes a sentence

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1. Cahiers II, p. 326.

from the Melian dialogue in Thucydides' Peloponnesian War.<sup>1</sup> Of present concern is her use of the quotation in a statement about the Old Testament deity:

"Nous croyons par tradition au sujet des dieux, et nous voyons par expérience au sujet des hommes, que toujours, par une nécessité de nature, tout être exerce tout le pouvoir dont il dispose." Il n'en est pas ainsi du Dieu des chrétiens. C'est un<sup>2</sup> Dieu surnaturel, au lieu que Jehovah est un Dieu naturel.

The Thucydidean sentence expresses, for Simone Weil, the personal and psychological law of gravity. In the context the Athenians are appealing to a natural law of behaviour to justify both their territorial expansion and their expectation of good fortune in battle.<sup>3</sup> They claim that their course of action conforms to the natural order of things, to ananké. Simone Weil's point is that such behaviour is indeed as natural as the physical law of gravity, and comes within the realm of necessity. However, she would add, man's peculiar capacity is to desire, and to have an idea of, the good which is beyond necessity, and thenceforth to act not naturally but supernaturally, resisting the urge to expand. Bearing in mind the territorial ambitions of Israel under Moses and Joshua, and the ascriptions to God of leadership and intervention in war, one can see how Simone Weil uses the Athenian formulation in the Melian dialogue to make the point that Yahweh was a "natural" God.

The Old Testament deity obeys the downward and natural

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1. Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, 5, XVII, 105. (Trans. Richard Crawley, Rev. by R. Feetham.)
  2. Cahiers II, p. 75.
  3. Thucydides, op. cit., 5, XVII, 105.



movement of "pesanteur", rather than the ascending and supernatural movement of grace. She writes of the Hebrews, "Leur Dieu était lourd."<sup>1</sup> Although there is no evidence that she was aware of the fact, Simone Weil's application of the notion of heaviness to the Hebrew conception of God has strong exegetical support in the semantics of the Hebrew word kabod, "glory". This word appears in the Old Testament as an attribute or condition of deity and has the original connotation of "heaviness" or "weight", from the radical KBD.<sup>2</sup> As applied to Yahweh kabod expresses the notion of the inescapable presence and importance of God, as of one whose weight has to be taken into account.<sup>3</sup> By the same token, however, Simone Weil's characterization of Yahweh is incomplete, since the notion of the outgoing favour of God (as opposed to his weight or standing, in himself) is also present in the Old Testament in the Hebrew chen, "grace", which can have the connotation of gracefulness in movement and action.<sup>4</sup>

Her criticism of the naturalness and carnality of the Old Testament deity is directed in particular against the notion of divine omnipotence. Taking at its face value Exodus 6, verse 4:

And God said to Moses, "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them ..."

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1. Cahiers II, p. 27.
  2. Koehler & Baumgartner, Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros (Leiden: Brill, 1953), pp. 418-422.
  3. See, for example, G. von Rad, Old Testament Theology, Vol. I (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 239, 240.
  4. Koehler & Baumgartner, op. cit., pp. 314, 316; and Brown, Driver, Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), pp. 335-337.

she observes that up to the time of Moses the children of Israel "... ne connaissaient de Dieu que l'attribut de puissance, et non le bien qui est Dieu même."<sup>1</sup> Certainly the conception of God as almighty, exemplified in the title El Shaddai, was one of the earliest in the formation of the Old Testament deity, and remained an element of the portrait throughout the tradition. Simone Weil observes further that even after Moses until the Babylonian exile, with her usual exceptions, "Dieu est continuellement voilé par l'attribut de la puissance."<sup>2</sup> The veil of power, in her opinion, keeps man from the true conception of divinity, because he is attempting to envisage God in terms of the world's, and ultimately his own, existence. Power, as man knows it, is ability to act in the world, and thus for Simone Weil behaves according to the Thucydidean formulation. She writes:

Se représenter Dieu tout-puissant, c'est se représenter soi-même dans l'état de fausse divinité.  
L'homme ne peut être un avec Dieu qu'en s'unissant à Dieu dépouillé de sa divinité (VIDÉ de sa divinité.)<sup>3</sup>

What Simone Weil is saying here, and what will be considered further in the next chapter, is that the conception of God in terms of power in the world is ultimately no more than the deification of such power, and is in this sense idolatry.

Simone Weil also makes her criticism of power as the attribute of a carnal or natural deity from another point of view, that of the means used for combatting what is considered to be evil:

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1. Pensées sans ordre ..., p. 48.
  2. Ibid., p. 49.
  3. Cahiers II, pp. 220, 221.

Le mal ne peut être rendu pur que par Dieu. Il faut que mal soit rendu pur, ou la vie est impossible. Dieu rendant pur le mal, c'est l'idée de la Gîta. C'est aussi l'idée de Moïse et Josué, des Croisades, de l'h. (H. regardé par les adolescents comme une incarnation). Mais ce sont deux purifications essentiellement autres! Autres comment?

Jehovah, l'Eglise du Moyen-Age, H., ce sont des Dieux terrestres. La purification qu'ils opèrent est imaginaire.<sup>1</sup>

Any notion or practice of purification, of seeking to adjust the state of the world to the idea of good, must for Simone Weil have its source not in the realm of necessity, through the use of force, but in the realm of good, through contemplation and restrained action. A God who is depicted as striving to overcome the world's evil by the exercise of power in the world is an earthly deity, and no God at all. Simone Weil's notion of an ordering of the world, which neutralizes evil by containing it, in contrast to that of an attempted elimination of evil by force, will be considered further in the next chapter. It is, presumably, this notion which she calls "l'idée de la Gîta".<sup>2</sup>

The Old Testament emphasis upon the active and powerful role of God in the world is contrasted also with aspects of Egyptian and Greek tradition. Simone Weil interprets the Theban sacrifice of the ram, and Aeschylus' phrase, "suppliant Zeus", as indications of an awareness of the negative and passive role of deity in the realm of necessity. One could not imagine, she writes, a "Iaveh suppliant".<sup>3</sup> The God of the Old Testament does not plead, but commands.

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1. Cahiers III, p. 136. "h." and "H." are abbreviations for hitlerism and Hitler.

2. S.W.'s use of the Bhagavad Gita requires a lengthy and complex study, which, for reasons of space and priority of relevance, cannot be included in this dissertation.

3. Pensées sans ordre ..., p. 50.

Her criticism of the Hebrew deity as natural and carnal reflects a judgment not only upon the portrayal of Yahweh, but also upon the kind of mental process behind such a portrayal. Not only is Yahweh a natural deity, in Simone Weil's sense of the word "natural", but knowledge of him is also natural, as opposed to supernatural. There is a kind of thinking which conforms to the principle of "pesanteur" just as a kind of behaviour does. With regard to the idea of God this thinking tends towards positivity and objectivism. Simone Weil writes of it:

Il s'agissait de forger, sans conception de l'Incarnation, tout un peuple monothéiste, pensant tout entier Dieu sans intermédiaire. Pensant Dieu, et pourtant sans "réalisation métaphysique", car elle n'est pas donnée à tout un peuple. Pensant Dieu avec le manas.

The phrases, "pensant Dieu ... sans 'réalisation métaphysique'" and "pensant Dieu avec le manas", suggest that the Old Testament thought of God is an attempt at a direct conception, which can be "packaged", so to speak, and made available for a whole nation. It tries to treat the reality of God as an object of consciousness no different from any other. There is no recognition that, in thinking of God, the mind's processes and words, accustomed to dealing with the natural world, are taking on more than they can manage in the ordinary way. There is no admission that propositions and definitions should be used, in this unique instance, negatively, or at least symbolically. In Indian religious thought, which Simone Weil invokes at this point, the Sanskrit manas sometimes has the connotation of direct reflection, grasping as an object the significance and substance of what the

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1. Cahiers I, p. 161.

consciousness encounters. In the Chandogya Upanishad, for example, the contemplation of manas occurs early in the progressive worship of Brahman, giving way to more adequate forms of consciousness, such as citta, dhyana and vijnana.<sup>1</sup> For Simone Weil, however, as for much of the Indian tradition, ultimate reality is to be conceived as consciousness rather than object of consciousness, as is revealed by a remark of hers on the idea of trinity:

Dieu un, purement un, est chose. Ancien Testament -  
Coran - Dieu un et trois est pensée.<sup>2</sup>

Natural thought of God is thus, for Simone Weil, the treatment of God as a simple object of knowledge and accessible as such to any human collectivity.

The peculiar and transcendent nature of the mind's apprehension of God was an increasing pre-occupation in Simone Weil's last months, and her notebooks of that period are appropriately entitled La Connaissance Surnaturelle by those responsible for their publication. At one place in the collection her distinction between natural and supernatural knowledge is elaborated:

Il y a une raison surnaturelle. C'est la connaissance, gnose, gnosis, dont le Christ était la clef, la connaissance de la Vérité dont le souffle est envoyé par le Père.

Ce qui est contradictoire pour la raison naturelle ne l'est pas pour la surnaturelle, mais celle-ci ne dispose que du langage de l'autre.

Néanmoins la logique de la raison surnaturelle est plus rigoureuse que celle de la raison naturelle.<sup>3</sup>

1. Chandogya Upanishad, VII, 3-7.

2. Cahiers II, p. 190.

3. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 56. Here Simone Weil uses "natural" in the sense of "remaining within the realm of necessity", not in the sense, perhaps more familiar in the Greek tradition, of "belonging to the total reality of man's nature", since, as was pointed out on p. 60, the total reality of man's condition is for her not only his bondage to necessity but also his aspiration after good. This passage illustrates well the difficulty of reading Simone Weil with Greek terminology in one's own mind, even though what she is saying derives ultimately from Greek rather than from Biblical ways of thinking.

Natural reason's behaviour before a contradiction is either to acknowledge a logical dead-end and retrace its steps, or to deny it, or to postulate a synthesis. Supernatural reason, on the other hand, can positively accept the contradiction, regarding it as an indication of the inability of sheer intellect to reach beyond the realm of necessity, and as a point for contemplation and attention. Thus, confronted by the contradiction between the good that man desires and the necessity to which he is bound, supernatural reason avoids the alternative courses open to natural reason by accepting the transcendence of absolute good.<sup>1</sup> It seeks some realm of mediation, or metaxy,<sup>2</sup> in which the relation between the two sides can still be expressed. This, for Simone Weil, is supernatural reason's own more rigorous logic. The Old Testament conception of God, however, with its direct ascription of events in the world to the purpose and agency of God, sees the good in necessity, denying the contradiction, and thus takes one of the courses open to natural reason, ignoring the idea of mediation.

Thus emerges the second general aspect of the Hebrew deity which Simone Weil criticizes - its immediacy. Two passages illustrate effectively her objection to the lack of metaxy in the Old Testament conception of God:

Moïse, Josué, Samuel. Il s'agissait de forger, sans conception de l'Incarnation, tout un peuple monothéiste, pensant tout entier Dieu sans intermédiaire. Pensant Dieu, et pourtant sans "réalisation métaphysique", car elle n'est pas

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1. As she says in La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 83, "La contradiction est le levier de la transcendance". Contradiction is the point of contact between the transcendent and necessity in the realm of reason.

2. Simone Weil generally maintains the Greek word.

donnée a tout un peuple. Pensant Dieu avec le manas. Cela est violent, contraire à la nature. L'extrême violence seule pouvait y parvenir. Faute de metaxy, le glaive jouait le rôle de metaxy; la terreur et l'espoir, les sanglantes horreurs et le ruissellement de lait et de miel.<sup>1</sup>

Il ne peut y avoir de contact de personne à personne entre l'homme et Dieu que par la personne du Médiateur. Hors lui il ne peut y avoir de présence de Dieu à l'homme que collective, nationale. Israël a en même temps, du même coup, choisi le Dieu national et refusé le médiateur. Israël a tendu peut-être de temps à autre au véritable monothéisme? Mais toujours il retombait, et ne pouvait pas ne pas retomber, au Dieu de tribu.<sup>2</sup>

The positive aspect of this indictment, the choice of a collective and political deity, will be considered in the next chapter. The negative aspect, the rejection of a mediator, and the relation between the two aspects, are the present concern.

Simone Weil's criticism of immediacy follows directly from the contradiction between good and necessity. God, being the absolute and transcendent good, is incommensurable with the world, which is the realm of necessity, and which is not God. The language of necessity, (human concepts such as existence and power), and the institutions of necessity, (political structures such as the tribe or nation), cannot bear direct relation to the transcendent. If a direct relation is sought, sooner or later violence has to be done, and the weapons of necessity, both literally and metaphorically, are used to defend the good, compromising it in the process. It is in this sense that the adoption of a national or tribal deity implies the rejection of mediation. On the other hand, a true approach to the relation between

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1. Cahiers I, pp. 161, 162.

2. Cahiers III, p. 255.

God and man is achieved, for Simone Weil, when the need for an intermediary figure is accepted. In an intermediary realm, or through an intermediary figure, the supernatural can be emptied of what the natural cannot contain, and the elements of necessity will express, by being negated rather than asserted, the nature of the transcendent. Thus, as even the idea of divinity is made up of attributes from the realm of necessity, one can only approach the true God by emptying him of his divinity as it has been understood. If one seeks to approach God directly, by-passing the intermediary stage, one reaches only a natural God, such as Yahweh:

Nul ne va à Dieu créateur et souverain sans passer  
par Dieu VIDÉ DE SA DIVINITÉ. Si on va à Dieu directement,  
c'est Jehovah (ou Allah, celui du Coran).

Nous devons vider Dieu de sa divinité pour l'aimer.<sup>1</sup>

In order to conceive of God as almighty and powerful in his own way, one has to pass through an intermediary stage of negation, in which he is emptied, so to speak, of the connotation of such predicates in terms of necessity. This process, Simone Weil maintains, is not generally evident in the Old Testament.

It might seem initially that here she does not do justice to the tradition, with its complicated apparatus of mediation between God and people in the institutions of law, priesthood, sacrifice, and prophecy, and in the stories of angelic visitations. However, she herself clarifies the issue by saying that at certain points in the Old Testament there are traces of a true notion of mediation, but that on the whole mediation in Hebrew religion is falsely conceived.

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1. Cahiers II, pp. 218, 219.



True mediation is that which originates with God, and is read and understood as a sign by man. False mediation is a man-made structure which, so to speak, tries to reach God by straining the elements of necessity beyond their limits. She suggests that the appearance of the rainbow to Noah, and his interpretation of it, are an example of true mediation, whereas the tower of Babel is an example of the false, because "elle venait de la terre et non du ciel."<sup>1</sup>

According to this distinction the Hebrew institutions of law, sacrifice and prophecy can be understood as arising from a false attempt at mediation. They are human and largely social institutions which represent a collective outreach towards God, rather than areas in which the elements of necessity are negated and translated into symbols of the transcendent. The great individual prophets of moral conscience and religious reform are an exception within the general pattern which Simone Weil, as was observed in a previous chapter, did not sufficiently take into account. Deutero-Isaiah's vision of the suffering servant, which for Simone Weil was one of the high points of the tradition, certainly fulfils her criteria for a true expression of the nature of the absolute in human terms, of the good in terms of necessity.

There are two ramifications of her idea of mediation which are relevant to the case of the Old Testament. They are time and causality. Of the former she writes at one point, "Un médiateur est nécessaire parce qu'il n'y a aucun rapport possible entre Dieu et le temps."<sup>2</sup> Time, like existence and activity, is for Simone Weil an

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1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 289.

2. Cahiers II, p. 162.

element of necessity and a condition of the created order. It is not directly commensurable with the transcendent. Objects and actions in the realm of necessity can only be of a limited and relative good because of their temporal quality. For Simone Weil there must be an intermediary figure expressing God in terms of time, and it must reveal the contradiction between necessity and good. It is "L'être déchiré le long du temps. Dieu sur la croix."<sup>1</sup> At another point Simone Weil writes, "Toute l'épaisseur des causes secondes entre Dieu et le monde."<sup>2</sup> The Old Testament, as will be shown in the sequel, ascribes to God the direct causality of certain historical events. This ascription is a further example of the immediacy to which Simone Weil objects in the Old Testament portrait of God. Causality, as a phenomenon within the created order, can only be traced initially and positively within that order. With causality, as with time, an intermediate stage is required, in which a relation to God can be conceived and expressed negatively rather than positively. Causality is a separation, and not a link, between God and the world.

Thus, in different ways, Simone Weil's approach to the conception of God demands a sense of metaxy which she does not find to any great degree in the Old Testament, and to which that tradition's own apparatus of pragmatic mediation in law and priesthood does not correspond.

A third element of the Old Testament's approach to deity which is contrary to her own is its personification. On the occasions when

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1. Cahiers II, p. 162.

2. Ibid, p. 268.

she criticizes the conception of God as a person, and when she elaborates her idea of God's transcendence over the categories of personality and impersonality, she does not in fact mention the Old Testament. However, since this criticism is so central to her thought about God, and is so closely related to her other criticisms which are overtly directed against the portrayal of Yahweh, it can be placed in this study.

Personification is the attribution or ascription of personality. In her essay, "La Personne et le Sacré",<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil criticizes the modern exaltation of personality, because it obscures the understanding of what is really and only holy in a man, that in him which expects good and not evil. "C'est cela avant toute chose qui est sacré en tout être humain."<sup>2</sup> She writes:

Ce qui est sacré, bien loin que ce soit la personne, c'est ce qui, dans un être humain, est impersonnel.

Tout ce qui est impersonnel dans l'homme est sacré, et cela seul.<sup>3</sup>

La perfection est impersonnelle. La personne en nous, c'est la part en nous de l'erreur et du péché. Tout l'effort des mystiques a toujours visé à obtenir qu'il n'y ait plus dans leur âme aucune partie qui dise "je".<sup>4</sup>

From this essay it appears that personality for Simone Weil is the self as appetitive and vindictive,<sup>5</sup> preserving its individuality and seeking its own ends. Man as a personality accedes to the pressures

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1. Écrits de Londres (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), pp. 11-44.

2. Op. cit., p. 13.

3. Ibid., p. 16.

4. Ibid., p. 17.

5. Ibid., p. 13.

of "pesanteur". Personality is the assertion of individual will in the realm of necessity, not the surrender of it in the quest for good. On a certain level science, art and literature are forms of "épanouissement de la personne", but on a higher level achievement is impersonal and anonymous.<sup>1</sup> "La vérité et la beauté habitent ce domaine des choses impersonnelles et anonymes. C'est lui qui est sacré."<sup>2</sup> The implication of such a view of personality for the Old Testament conception of God is clear. Here is a deity who, instead of being conceived primarily on the impersonal level of goodness, beauty and truth, is frequently depicted as wilful, vindictive and jealous, and as active in the realm of necessity as an ego among egos. "Personne" for Simone Weil bears the connotation of expanding self-hood. It concerns the individual self as conscious of identity and status, as exercising will and achieving ambition. It is significant for her that Yahweh is conceived primarily on such a plain of self-hood. He is omnipotent, wilful, jealous, and the author and achiever of a purpose in history.

An interesting contrast can be drawn between Martin Buber's famous conception of the I-Thou relation between man and God, which arises out of the Hebrew religious tradition, and these thoughts from Simone Weil:

Aspect personnel et impersonnel de Dieu.  
Peut-être avoir une relation personnelle avec un Dieu impersonnel?  
N e pas dire "je" à Dieu, ne pas lui dire "tu". "Je" et "tu" séparent les hommes, et cette séparation les force à monter plus haut. Sans "je" ni "tu" que le rapport soit

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1. Ibid., pp. 16, 17.

2. Ibid., p. 17.

plus intime qu'aucune union humaine.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Buber conceives of God as man's interlocutor in a great dialogue, and as the ultimate and real object of man's encounter with the world and other men, for Simone Weil God's only dialogue or person-to-person relationship is with and within himself. "Dieu seul a rapport à soi."<sup>2</sup> The poles of her religious thought are not man and God, or man and man, but God and God. Man's goal is to lose his ego in the reality of God, which goes beyond personality, rather than to achieve a person-to-person dialogue with deity.

In Simone Weil's view God is no more impersonal than personal, since he transcends the antithesis itself, but it is on the impersonal level that man achieves his highest conception of him, since here at least he is negating the attributes and abuses of human personality. Writing of the beauty of the world, for example, she says, "la beauté du monde prouve un Dieu à la fois personnel et impersonnel, et ni l'un ni l'autre."<sup>3</sup> However, she continues:

Si le moi comme personne s'évanouit à mesure et pour autant que l'homme imite Dieu, comment suffirait-il de concevoir un Dieu personnel? La représentation d'un Dieu personnel entrave cette imitation.<sup>4</sup>

The personification of God does not exhaust his reality, but on the contrary prevents the closest conception and imitation of God open to man. The Old Testament can be seen as remaining on the level of personification, not simply because of the various degrees of

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1. Cahiers II, p. 50.
  2. Cahiers II, p. 189.
  3. Cahiers II, p. 154.
  4. Cahiers II, p. 154.

anthropomorphism in its texts, but in Yahweh's role as a "personne", in Simone Weil's sense. Her view of the relation between the personal and the holy implies a condemnation not of anthropomorphic imagery but of the role that deity may be given in such imagery. In fact, the accounts of visions and theophanies in the Old Testament show a graphic transcendence of human form,<sup>1</sup> but God is still conceived as a sovereign personal being.

A fourth element in the Hebrew conception of deity which meets with criticism from Simone Weil can be called, for want of a better word, its "amorality", though the issue is not expressed by her simply in terms of good and evil. The problem concerns what she calls, "Ambiguïté des notions de divin et démoniaque."<sup>2</sup> What she means by "démoniaque" first needs clarification. She evidently means demonic in a pejorative and not a favourable sense. Though in Greek literature daimon can simply mean genius or mediating spirit, Simone Weil's contrast, divine and demonic, in this context precludes such a meaning. She does, however, keep the connotation of an intermediary realm between the divine and the human. She implies that any concept of God or religion, however falsified by compromise with necessity, at least achieves some level of spirit beyond the strictly human. However, unless the concept is purified by the idea of perfection, it remains in a demonic limbo, and is all the more harmful for having comprehended the reality of the supernatural without its goodness. She writes:

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1. e.g. Ezekiel 1.
  2. Cahiers III, p. 253.

L'ambiguïté entre les notions de divin et de démoniaque est un écueil tout à fait inévitable de la pensée humaine. Mais elle est au maximum dans la tradition d'Israël.<sup>1</sup>

In the first place she claims that the Hebrews' immediate apprehension of God as a single personal being, sovereign over the world, and conceived in terms of his activity rather than of his nature, led to a morally indiscriminate idea of the supernatural. Thus, according to her:

La croyance au Dieu unique, sans distinction des personnes ni des principes de bien et de mal, a pour conséquence, ou pour cause, en tout cas est inséparable de la cécité morale telle qu'elle se trouvait chez les Hébreux. L'unité des contraires est mal faite.<sup>2</sup>

The thought of God in terms of necessity, without any negation or mediation, leaves him with the moral neutrality which necessity itself exhibits. The conception of God has not come to terms with the contraries good and evil. Such thought is of God as matter:

Il y a deux manières d'obéir à Dieu, comme matière et comme esprit. Faire le mal, c'est obéir à Dieu comme matière. Il ne peut rien y avoir en nous qui n'obéisse à Dieu. Par suite, si nous lui obéissons comme matière, l'esprit est absent, Dieu en nous est mort.<sup>3</sup>

"Obedience", like "revelation", is a word that Simone Weil receives from the Hebrew rather than the Greek religious tradition. However, also like revelation, obedience takes on in her writing a significance which differs from the biblical. Obedience, for both the Old Testament and Simone Weil, is the implementation in action of the imperative implicit or explicit in revelation. Revelation in the Old

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1. Cahiers III, pp. 255, 256.
  2. Ibid., p. 253.
  3. Cahiers II, p. 188.

Testament ascribes the use of political and military power to the initiative and agency of God, and consequently sanctions, and indeed demands, the exercise of such force in his name by his people.

Revelation for Simone Weil is the individual's vision of absolute good, and no behaviour of his must compromise the moral imperative therein implied.

In the second place the lack of discrimination in the portrayal of Yahweh is found by Simone Weil not only on the moral level but also on a "supernatural" level:

Ambiguïté du démoniaque et du divin. Quand le surnaturel entre dans un être qui n'a pas assez d'amour pour le recevoir, il devient du mal. Tout progrès implique qu'on reçoive plus de surnaturel qu'on n'a d'amour. D'où les tentations des saints. Il suffit de rester orienté vers Dieu pour les surmonter. Autrement toute la grâce se tourne en haine; comme par la conversion tout le mal se tourne en amour.

The movement of grace, which is the realization of the supernatural good in the life of him who directs his attention and desire towards it, exceeds the capacity, so to speak, of the devotee through its very nature as generous. He possesses more of the "supernatural element" than his own love may be able to direct, and it is then not divine, but demonic. The implication here is that a man, or nation, who conceives of and worships the divine as power rather than goodness, i.e. in terms of its ability to do what it wills rather than in terms of its nature, only experiences the divine as powerful, and thus experiences not the divine but the demonic. The power to do good, which Simone Weil never denies to deity, when divorced from the good,



becomes neutral and potentially destructive. So Simone Weil can write:

Les Hébreux - jusqu'à l'exil qui les a mis en contact avec la sagesse chaldéenne, perse et grecque - n'avaient pas la notion d'une distinction entre Dieu et le diable. Ils attribuaient indistinctement à Dieu tout ce qui est extra-natural, les choses diaboliques comme les choses divines, et cela parce qu'ils concevaient Dieu sous l'attribut de la puissance et non pas sous l'attribut du bien.<sup>1</sup>

Ce diable qui est venu proposer au Christ d'accomplir pour lui les promesses faites depuis des siècles au Messie, qui d'autre pouvait-il être que Iaveh? (Un aspect de Iaveh - car un autre aspect de Iaveh est le vrai Dieu.)<sup>2</sup>

Inasmuch as Yahweh was conceived as a God of goodness, and Simone Weil admits that on occasions he was so conceived, he was the true God. When, however, he was depicted as exercising power at the dictates of "pesanteur" rather than of goodness, making materialistic and imperialistic promises to his people, he was a false God - indeed he was the very devil who tempted Christ with similar promises in the wilderness.

The four above-mentioned characteristics of the Old Testament conception of deity are exemplified in the accounts of the divine act of creation in Genesis. One is not surprised, therefore, to find in Simone Weil's writings a very different understanding of creation, including and implying criticism of the Old Testament account. Whereas for the Priestly and Yahwistic redactors creation was a positive act and the created order was itself good, Simone Weil

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1. Pensées sans ordre ..., p. 55.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 273.

describes creation with such words as "plaisanterie",<sup>1</sup> "folie",<sup>2</sup> "crime",<sup>3</sup> "abandon",<sup>4</sup> "fiction",<sup>5</sup> and even, from one point of view, "péché".<sup>6</sup> Whereas the biblical account of the origin of evil places it after the act of creation, for Simone Weil it accompanies, or even precedes, the creation of the world. Her account conflicts with those of Genesis in two main areas: the nature of the creative act; and the relation of the creative act to the origin of evil. She nowhere rejects outright the Genesis accounts of creation and fall, but admits them as one version among many alternatives, though one which is severely limited by its emphasis on the power of God and by its commitment to the serial and chronological form of narrative. She says:

L'histoire de la création et du péché originel dans la Genèse est vraie. Mais d'autres histoires de création et de péché originel dans d'autres traditions sont vraies aussi et enferment aussi des vérités incomparablement précieuses.

The nature of the creative act she regards as withdrawal and self-diminution on God's part, rather than as the assertion of power. Her view is expressed with particular clarity in two essays which appear in Attente de Dieu, "Formes de l'Amour implicite de Dieu", and "L'amour de Dieu et le malheur". She writes in the former:

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1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 222.
  2. Ibid., p. 33.
  3. Ibid., p. 225.
  4. Ibid., p. 49.
  5. Ibid., p. 176.
  6. Ibid., p. 168.
  7. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 68.

La création est de la part de Dieu un acte non pas d'expansion de soi, mais de retrait, de renoncement. Dieu et toutes les créatures, cela est moins que Dieu seul. Dieu a accepté cette diminution. Il a vidé de soi une partie de l'être ... Dieu s'est nié en notre faveur pour nous donner la possibilité de nous nier pour lui. Cette réponse, cet écho, qu'il dépend de nous de refuser, est la seule justification possible à la folie d'amour de l'acte créateur.

and in the latter:

Dieu a créé par amour, pour l'amour. Dieu n'a pas créé autre chose que l'amour même et les moyens de l'amour. Il a créé des êtres capables d'amour à toutes les distances possibles. Lui-même est allé, parce que nul autre ne pouvait le faire, à la distance maximum, la distance infinie. Cette distance infinie entre Dieu et Dieu, déchirement suprême, douleur dont aucune n'approche, merveille de l'amour, c'est la crucifixion.

Cet univers ou nous vivons, dont nous sommes une parcelle, est cette distance mise par l'Amour divin entre Dieu et Dieu. Nous sommes un point dans cette distance. L'espace, le temps, et le mécanisme qui gouverne la matière sont cette distance.

This view of creation follows from Simone Weil's basic approach to the reality of God, and is incompatible with the Old Testament approach.

Its merit is that it accounts for the contradiction between man's desire for the good and his experience of necessity. Necessity is that which is other than the good, and that which, in the act of creation, God allowed to be, by withdrawing himself and by breaking the circuit of his perfectly just self-love. In this sense Simone Weil can say, as the Old Testament cannot, "La Création est abandon",<sup>4</sup> and "La Création est abdication".<sup>5</sup> She cannot simply say of the

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1. p. 106.

2. p. 87.

3. p. 90.

4. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 49.

5. Ibid., p. 67.

created order, as Genesis does, " ... it was good."<sup>1</sup> It is not good in itself because it owes its existence to the withdrawal of good. At this point her account differs from that of Plato's Timaeus (29e-34b), with which it shares the idea of creation as an act of generosity, because in the Timaeus the world is considered as in itself good, being indeed a newly created god. For Simone Weil it is only good when it is accepted as absolutely other than good.<sup>2</sup> It is the distance between God and himself, which can be eliminated when it is accepted as absolute void and thus disappears in the saint's vision of and union with God. Inasmuch as man accepts the world as necessity, as void of God, then paradoxically it can be said to be God himself, since it no longer stands between man and God as a false deity:

Ce monde en tant que tout à fait vide de Dieu est  
Dieu lui-même.  
La nécessité en tant qu'absolument autre que le bien  
est le bien lui-même.<sup>3</sup>

Man can see through the universe to God, only when he ceases to see God in the universe. This point is not reached in the Old Testament, which depicts God as acting upon and within the world.

Concerning the relation of the creative act to the origin of evil, Simone Weil's view is both explicitly and implicitly critical of the Old Testament account. According to Genesis the created order was good, and there was an earthly paradise, which was subsequently

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1. Genesis 1, vv. 10, 12, etc..
  2. Cahiers III, p. 18. This point of difference helps to explain the difficulty which was noted earlier in the chapter, concerning Simone Weil's idea of nature and the Greek idea of natural good.
  3. Cahiers III, p. 18.

lost through man's disobedience, self-will and hybris. The account is a serial narrative in which the creation of the world precedes the origin of evil. "La Genèse sépare création et péché originel à cause d'un récit fait en langage humain."<sup>1</sup> However, the serial and chronological account of creation and fall, though it may result naturally from the strictures of human language, is in Simone Weil's view totally misleading. For her, creation and original sin are two sides of the same coin: "La création et le péché ne sont que deux aspects, différents pour nous, d'un acte d'abdication de Dieu. Et l'Incarnation, la Passion, sont aussi des aspects de cet acte."<sup>2</sup> The quotation of a passage from the Cahiers will serve further to clarify Simone Weil's argument:

Toutes les difficultés (insurmontables) concernant l'histoire du péché originel viennent de ce qu'on se représente cette histoire comme se déroulant dans le temps. Alors qu'elle exprime des rapports de causalité, ou plutôt ce qui dans le surnaturel répond analogiquement aux rapports de causalité.<sup>3</sup>

She objects to the depiction of the movement from good to evil in time. Time is itself part of the created order, being other than the eternity of absolute good, and cannot therefore be commensurate with the good. Time itself is a result of the act which is from one point of view the creation of the world and from another the origin of evil: "... le temps procède du péché et ne l'a pas précédé."<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil writes:

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1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, pp. 70, 71.
  2. Ibid., p. 91.
  3. Cahiers II, pp. 257, 258.
  4. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 75.

Adam avant le péché n'est pas concevable; on ne peut concevoir qu'une antériorité causale, non temporelle, entre sa création, son péché et son châtement ...

... Il était en état de péché du fait qu'il avait une volonté propre. Il est évident qu'il n'y a pas eu une période de temps où il était en état d'innocence.<sup>1</sup>

Thus for Simone Weil the creative act and the origin of evil are inter-related, in that the created order was de facto not good, and in that the free-will of created beings was de facto sinful, implying independence from the good. In answer to the charge that her theory makes God guilty of sin she admits that in one sense this is so (the origin of evil being the price of creation), but also maintains that such is no less the case when the original sin is placed in time, since what follows from the act of creation would be no less the will of God than creation itself.<sup>2</sup> From man's point of view God sinned in offering existence to him. From God's point of view man sinned in accepting it. Man must forgive God for creating him, so that God can forgive him for being created:

Le grand crime de Dieu envers nous, c'est de nous avoir créés; c'est que nous existions. Notre grand crime envers Dieu, c'est notre existence. Quand nous pardonnons à Dieu notre existence, notre existence est pardonnée par Dieu.<sup>3</sup>

It is the aim of true religion, therefore, not to consolidate man's existence in the created order, as was the case in the Old Testament, but to "undo" his creation, to be "de-created":

La création comme production d'une apparence que nous devons défaire (ou est-ce le péché? mais sont-ils séparables?) L'apparence qu'il y a autre chose que Dieu.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Cahiers II, p. 196.
  2. Cahiers II, p. 258.
  3. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, pp. 225, 226.
  4. Cahiers II, p. 133.

From the preceding exposition of Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament conception of God, in general terms and in the instance of creation, two observations can be made. The first is that what she considers to have been the Hebrew portrait of deity corresponds to a great extent, though not entirely, with the evidence of the Old Testament literature. As Lunel remarks, her representation of Israel's God, though incomplete, is not false.<sup>1</sup> In particular the negative element, the experience of the absence and silence of Yahweh, is more evident in the tradition than her observations would suggest.<sup>2</sup> She seems not to have noticed that Christ's cry of dereliction, which is so central to her thought, was in fact a quotation from the Psalms.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the notion of God's love, though eclipsed at the moments of imperialism and vindictiveness to which she constantly refers, is very prominent in the Old Testament usage of the Hebrew chesed, "lovingkindness". However, even chesed has an individual and nationalistic, rather than a universal, connotation, being (in G.E. Wright's paraphrase) "gracious loyalty to the covenanted promises".<sup>4</sup> With regard to Simone Weil's critique of the Genesis accounts of creation and original sin, she does not appear to have realized the small extent to which the rest of the Old Testament literature returns to them. Certainly the theme of creation is sounded in the Psalms and Deutero-Isaiah,<sup>5</sup> but rarely anywhere else, and it is dubious whether

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1. Armand Lunel, op. cit., p. 47.

2. E.g., Psalms 13:1, 22:1, 27:9 and 1 Kings 19:12,13.

3. Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34, Psalms 22:1.

4. God Who Acts, pp. 85,86. See also Wright's use of Exodus 34:6-7 in the same passage.

5. E.g. Psalms 104 (though this, significantly, contains much material from the Egyptian Aton Hymn), and Isaiah 40:12 etc.

anything nearly approaching a doctrine of original sin is found in the tradition.

A second observation, which leads this study to its next chapter, is that Simone Weil's criticism of Yahweh repeatedly brings one up against the Old Testament's acceptance of the events and entities of human history as vehicles of God's direct intervention in the world. The "pesanteur", the immediacy, and the personification raise this problem, and the moral ambiguity is one of its implications. The Old Testament conception of deity arises from the attempt to make a direct relation in human thought between the reality of God and the order of the world, whereas Simone Weil's approach suggests an indirect relation. Her criticism of the place of the social and historical elements in the Old Testament is concerned with the translation of that direct relation into the realm of human actions and institutions.





election and covenant. Thirdly, one can investigate more fully the charge to which all these elements contribute, that of idolatry. Fourthly, consideration can be given to her own alternative view of the way in which the elements of human experience can be used as a framework for religious thought and activity.

That Simone Weil did view the religion of the Hebrews as a socio-historical construction is evident from her summary accounts of the Old Testament which were considered in Chapter One. Further examples are found in several series of notes in La Connaissance Surnaturelle.<sup>1</sup> She notices that the starting-point of the specifically Hebrew story in Genesis, following the general traditions regarding human and religious origins, was God's promise to Abraham of a land for his posterity.<sup>2</sup> Here, in the experience attributed to the first patriarch, are sounded the themes of a chosen people and a promised land, which are fundamental to the Old Testament. At another point Simone Weil uses the word "théocratie" of Israel.<sup>3</sup> The word itself illustrates her analysis of the Old Testament's fundamental error, which lay in attempting to realize a social and political structure that would bear relation to the conception of God as a ruling power. Any theocratic experiment, however, in her view lays itself open to the charge of subordinating the conception of divine goodness to that of divine power.

For Simone Weil a socio-historical analysis implies an

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1. pp. 63-67; 212; 213-214; 220-222.
  2. Ibid., p. 213. Ref. Genesis 12:1-3, 17:1-8.
  3. Ibid., pp. 63,64.

an unfavourable moral judgment. A community which places an absolute expectation within the realm of necessity, by setting the seal of divine agency upon its own history cannot but produce more evil than good in the world. The institutional legalism and physical violence, required to hold its structure together and protect it, become equated with the purpose and power of God. Such an attempt at a direct and unmediated relation between structures and events of this world on the one hand and God on the other can only be catastrophic:

Cela est violent, contraire à la nature. L'extrême violence seule pouvait y parvenir. Faute de metaxy, le glaive jouait le rôle de metaxy; la terreur et l'espoir, les sanglantes horreurs et le ruissellement de lait et de miel. Il ne pouvait en être autrement. On les dressait par les massacres qu'on leur faisait accomplir comme pour ceux qu'on leur infligeait.

These words, from a passage quoted previously for its theological implications, express Simone Weil's view of the inevitability with which violence and suffering result from the exclusive adoption of a socio-historical form of religion.

Three features of her account of the social and historical dimensions of the Old Testament, which carry the main burden of her indictment, are the comparison between Israel and Rome; the description of both as manifestations of the "gros animal"; and her treatment of the leadership of Moses and Joshua. All three themes are illustrated in another passage from the Cahiers:

Quant au grand dans l'ordre social, seul en est susceptible celui qui a capté une grande partie de l'énergie du gros animal. Mais il ne peut pas alors avoir part au surnaturel.

Moïse, Josué, telle est la part au surnaturel de

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1. Cahiers I, pp. 161,162.

ceux qui ont capté beaucoup d'énergie sociale.

Israël est une tentative de vie sociale surnaturelle. Il a réussi, on peut le supposer, ce qu'il y a de mieux dans le genre. Cela suffit. Inutile de recommencer. Le résultat montre de quelle révélation divine le gros animal est susceptible. La Bible, c'est la révélation traduite en social ...

... Rome, c'est le gros animal athée, matérialiste, n'adorant que soi. Israël, c'est le gros animal religieux. Ni l'un ni l'autre n'est aimable. Le gros animal est toujours répugnant.

From the same speech in Plato's Republic in which she finds mention of the difference between the necessary and the good, Simone Weil takes the image of "a great strong beast" for the untamed mass of society, with its whims and appetites.<sup>2</sup> Socrates' speech is a denunciation of the conventionalism of the Sophists, who humour society as one would humour a wild beast, "calling the things that pleased it good, and the things that vexed it bad."<sup>3</sup> As the great beast, society is a structure of "pesanteur" and of "nécessité".

In Simone Weil's view ancient Israel and imperial Rome manifested the principle of "heaviness":

A Rome, peut-être, pesanteur seulement.  
Chez les Hébreux peut-être aussi? Leur Dieu était lourd.<sup>4</sup>

She considers that in these civilizations the pressure of social necessity was the dominant one. An individual Roman or Hebrew, she writes, would always think in terms of "we".<sup>5</sup> This common commitment to the "gros animal" explains further the unique position of Judaism

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1. Cahiers III, p. 106.

2. Plato, The Republic (trans. P. Shorey), VI, 493a-c.

3. Ibid., VI, 493c.

4. Cahiers II, p. 27.

5. Ibid., p. 243.

in the Roman empire. The social solidarity which distinguishes Judaism from the frailer religions of a mystical and individualistic nature enabled it to stand up to Rome.<sup>1</sup> Indeed the clash between these two social power-structures in a sense produced Christianity, providing a framework in which mysticism could exist even under the pressures of necessity.<sup>2</sup> However, the taint of the "gros animal" upon Christianity almost at its very beginning is none other than "the mark of the Beast".<sup>3</sup> For Simone Weil the beast of the Republic and that of the Apocalypse are one and the same.<sup>4</sup> What is so pernicious about making the habits of the beast the elements of religion is the positive use of worldly categories, the sanctification of society's appetites. The God of the beast is the natural God, conceived exclusively in terms of presence and power. The beast hides the absence of God.<sup>5</sup>

As Simone Weil's favourite external analogy of Israel's ethos and experience was imperial Rome, so her favourite internal example is the exodus and settlement under Moses and Joshua. Reference of some kind to this episode occurs in most of her accounts and criticisms of the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> What might seem, from a statistical point of view, to be an undue concentration upon a relatively short and early stage in a long history, is not so when one remembers that the Hebrews themselves regarded it as the formative and archetypal experience in their

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1. Cahiers II, p. 169.

2. Ibid., p. 170.

3. Revelation 16:2.

4. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, pp. 67, 272.

5. Cahiers II, p. 359.

6. E.g. Cahiers I, pp. 161, 162; 165-167; Cahiers III, p. 106.

dealings with Yahweh. To achieve the social power which they needed to have, according to Simone Weil, Moses and Joshua must have appealed to the instincts of the "gros animal", to power, partisanship and prestige, of which the Hexateuch contains much evidence, as she shows.<sup>1</sup> The question as to whether in fact the exodus and settlement were as violent as most of the biblical account suggests has already been considered.<sup>2</sup> However, from one point of view the question is irrelevant, since the later Hebrews at least thought that there had been great and violent victories, and happily attributed them to Yahweh's initiative and agency.

Moses is thus regarded as a demagogue who should have known better. After all, he had been exposed to Egyptian wisdom and, according to Simone Weil, must have passed on much of the mythology and wisdom of the early chapters of Genesis.<sup>3</sup> He had in his own mind come to conceive of God as absolute being, according to her interpretation of Exodus 3:14:

(La véritable révélation de Moïse, c'est le moment où Dieu lui dit: "Tu diras que tu viens de la part du Dieu qui se nomme Je suis".)<sup>4</sup>

In spite of all this, because of territorial and political ambition for his people, he attempted to harness social forces, by covenant and law, and also physical force, claiming for the resulting structure the will and agency of God. His attempt at the impossible marriage of demagoguery and religion resulted in the ambiguity, already noticed in its

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1. Cahiers I, pp. 161, 162; 165-167.
  2. Chapter One, p. 9.
  3. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 64.
  4. Cahiers II, p. 326.

theological occurrence, of the divine and the demonic.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst Simone Weil's account of Moses' and Joshua's leadership in terms of appeal to the political and territorial aspirations of the people is warranted by much of the biblical evidence, it ignores one factor which is emphasized by Martin Buber in his essay on "Biblical leadership".<sup>2</sup> This is that in the matter of appealing to and controlling the will of the people Moses was on certain occasions, such as that of the golden calf, conspicuously unsuccessful, and that he is in fact depicted as being of a timid nature. Furthermore, according to Buber, this note of personal failure was a definite characteristic of the Old Testament leader from Moses, through Saul and David, to "the long line of prophets whose existence is failure through and through."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the relation between the leader's social power and God's action, in the conception of the Hebrews, was not as direct as Simone Weil would have it. It is not so much the case that the leader's power over the people was seen as divine, but that God was seen as triumphing through the leader's wavering hold of the people and by his might, not the leader's, saving the day. Buber writes:

It is always the same story. The purpose of God is fulfilled, as the Bible itself says in one place, not by might, nor by power, but "by my spirit".<sup>4</sup>

However, the main claim of Simone Weil's account still holds, namely that God is conceived as actively intervening in the political history

1. Cahiers II, p. 225.

2. Will Herberg (ed.), The writings of Martin Buber (Cleveland & New York: Meridian Books, 1956), pp. 218-230.

3. Buber, op. cit., p. 223.

4. Ibid., p. 222.

of a people. Even if the leader's power is not directly equated with God's, the act of God that eventually triumphs is still conceived as an act of power in the world. Reference to the oracle of Zechariah, which Buber quotes, shows that "by my spirit", beruchi, still contains the idea of power, though the power is God's and not man's.<sup>1</sup> Thus Buber's observation calls into question Simone Weil's contention that successful manipulation of the "gros animal" by Moses was the means of Yahweh's management of the Exodus. However, the observation does not detract from her more fundamental claim that Yahweh's role in history was conceived as one of active intervention.

At a second stage, Simone Weil's discussion of the social and historical dimensions of the Old Testament can be approached through her criticism of the four themes of revelation and providence, election and covenant. It has already been shown that revelation for Simone Weil is the individual's apprehension of absolute good through desire, thought and mystical experience. It is the realization of the nature of God. She does not speak of an Old Testament revelation, or of a biblical version of revelation, but of the degree of revelation to which the "gros animal" is susceptible, and of the Bible as revelation translated into social terms.<sup>2</sup> The question for her is how much of the true revelation does the Old Testament allow itself to contain. Her answer is, "as much as can be borne by the pre-occupation with a nation's history". God is approached by the Old Testament not with the question of his nature but with that of his purpose for a

1. Zechariah 4:6,7.

2. Cahiers III, p. 106. "Bible" here means the Old Testament.



particular nation. His reality is sought primarily in the history of a nation and not in the nature of the universe or of the human condition. The problem of revelation, in Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament, thus becomes the problem of providence. The Hebrews knew of God primarily what they could learn from their own past, and they believed of God what could be realized in their future. God spoke through the nation's past about the nation's future. His favour and displeasure alike were to be read in events in the physical and human realms, which he controlled and in which he could intervene. Simone Weil by no means rejects out of hand the idea of providence. As a general concept, meaning a way in which all elements in the universe and events in history can be seen as relating to the reality of God, she accepts the notion of providence, and has her own understanding of it. However, to the relation between God and events in the Old Testament she has certain specific objections, which will now be considered.

Three of her objections concern the Old Testament's depiction of God's providence as divine intervention in the natural course of events, the miraculous manipulation of causality. She writes:

Dieu a créé cet univers comme un tissu de causes secondes; il semble y avoir de l'impiété à supposer des trous dans ce tissu, comme si Dieu ne pouvait parvenir à ses fins sans attenter à sa propre oeuvre.

Si on admet de tels trous, il devient scandaleux que Dieu, n'en fasse pas pour sauver les innocents du malheur.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the first objection is that the idea of God's relation to the world as intervention in the chain of causality is impious, implying that the universe, once made, still needed to be tinkered with, and

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1. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 54.

that its laws, once decreed, occasionally needed to be broken.

The second objection, evident from the same passage is that such a view of providence is pitiless. If God could leave loop-holes in his workmanship, why could he not have contrived some more, to save the innocent from their suffering? If God occasionally disrupts the tissue of second causes for particular reasons, he is responsible for all the atrocities which he does not prevent by his intervention.<sup>1</sup> For Simone Weil this kind of providentialism is inconsistent with the true conception of God and leads to morally inferior religion. It is perhaps partly with this difficulty in mind that she writes, "L'idée de la Providence diminue la pureté de l'amour de Dieu."<sup>2</sup> If you look into the world for evidence of God's mercy, according to Simone Weil, you will not find it. You find only the harsh rule of necessity. Any religion which claims to find evidence of divine mercy in nature must be pitiless.<sup>3</sup>

The third objection to the Old Testament depiction of providence concerns its particularism, or partiality. National and personal providentialism subordinates the cause of other people to one's own cause. God is expected to intervene in events for the particular cause of one's own personal or national destiny, but not for the general cause of peace and well-being. Simone Weil objects to the notion of a divine plan inasmuch as it implies the subordination of one thing as a means to another as an end, because for God, "tout est

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1. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 59.
  2. Cahiers II, p. 194.
  3. Cahiers III, p. 40.

égal."<sup>1</sup> Similar criticism is found in a section of L'Enracinement, in which the author analyzes at some length the view of providence which she considers Christianity to have inherited to its detriment from Rome and Israel.<sup>2</sup> Such a providentialism regards the action of God as "un trouble, une anomalie dans l'ordre du monde",<sup>3</sup> and as "une intervention personnelle ... dans l'univers pour ajuster certains moyens en vue de fins particuliers."<sup>4</sup> Particular threads of cause and effect, extracted from the whole network of causality, are regarded as reflecting the will of God, not as parts of a whole which reflects God's will, but as particular interventions on behalf of favoured parties. In this respect also providentialism, as a doctrine of divine intervention, diminishes the purity of the love of God,<sup>5</sup> since it sets the love between man and God in a context of ulterior motive and contract.

A fourth problem that Simone Weil finds with the Old Testament providentialism is its refusal to accept the mechanical nature of chance. What she admires in the Iliad and the Greek tragedies is the depiction of the complete helplessness of man before the changes and chances of events. The harshness and chanciness of necessity are accepted by the Greeks, whereas the Hebrews, in her view, persisted in regarding the turn of events as the design, albeit inscrutable, of a Providence which bore their interests at heart. That she herself

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1. Cahiers II, p. 140.
  2. L'Enracinement (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), pp. 236-241.
  3. Op. cit., p. 241.
  4. Ibid., p. 236.
  5. Cahiers II, p. 194.

would rather accept the reality of chance than speak of a designing Providence is illustrated by words that she uses when describing a chance experience of her own:

Le hasard - car j'aime toujours mieux dire hasard que Providence ...<sup>1</sup>

It would not be true to say, however, that she dismissed the possibility of seeing significance for oneself in events. To this same incident, the meeting with a young lay Catholic at Solesmes who introduced her to the English metaphysical poets, she does attribute a personal "mission" to her, but one that she could read into a random event, not one that she would ascribe to a scheming deity:

Le hasard ... a fait de lui, pour moi, vraiment un messenger.<sup>2</sup>

Necessity, when accepted as hazardous and mechanical, can then be regarded as mediating the good, but it must not be considered as manipulated by a designing Providence.

The fifth objection made by Simone Weil to the providentialism of the Old Testament concerns the element of time. Her criticism of the role of history, the succession of events in time, in Hebrew religion is particularly important, since it lies behind her attack upon modern notions of progress. The way in which the Old Testament relates past and future is unacceptable to her. Time, being one aspect of the mechanism of necessity, cannot contain the eternal without contaminating it with evanescence. Even if the eternal itself is invulnerable to time, any event, institution, or artistic form which grows out of an experience of the eternal has the fragility and

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1. Attente de Dieu, p. 37.

2. Ibid.

corruptibility of the temporal.<sup>1</sup> She writes:

Ainsi il y a plus d'éternité dans le passé que dans le présent, même toutes choses égales d'ailleurs, ou plutôt moins de temporal et par suite une proportion plus forte d'éternité. Valeur de l'histoire bien comprise, analogue à celle du souvenir dans Proust. Ainsi le passé nous présente quelque chose qui est à la fois réel et meilleur que nous, qui peut nous tirer vers le haut, ce que l'avenir ne fait jamais.<sup>2</sup>

Here Simone Weil is not denying any value to the recollection of past events, but she is implying that they can be rightly and wrongly understood. Events, thoughts and institutions of the past lie in a sense between the present and eternity, and are thus to be contemplated with respect and readiness to learn. However, they are not to be regarded as grounds for great expectations of the future, since the link between past and future is a structure of necessity, which is less than good and therefore not productive of good. She writes that there is a good and an evil use of history, the former being to seek therein what is more pure than ourselves, and the latter being to seek something to exalt the imagination.<sup>3</sup> The particularist providentialism of the Old Testament would come for her in the second category, since it sees past events not as the veil over the purity of God, who is behind creation, but as evidence of the will and power of God within creation.

In the idea of progress the flow of time is seen as taking men toward the good rather than away from it. For Simone Weil, however, time partakes of the ambiguity or neutrality of necessity. The course

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1. See Cahiers III, p. 49.

2. Cahiers III, p. 49.

3. Ibid., pp. 49,50.

of time cannot be linked with a developing degree of perfection. The idea of such an equation is "la superstition de la chronologie."<sup>1</sup> She writes, "... et cette notion devenue le poison du monde, l'a déchristianisé. Il faut l'abandonner."<sup>2</sup> A similar position is taken in the Cahiers:

L'idée athée par excellence est l'idée de progrès, qui est la négation de la preuve ontologique expérimentale; elle implique que le médiocre peut de lui-même produire du meilleur.

This passage is the clearest expression of Simone Weil's objection to the idea of progress. The idea is ultimately atheistic, because it denies the reality of a transcendent good by making the realm of necessity capable of producing the good out of itself. Progress, thus defined, is incompatible with her conception of God, to which she herself here refers. The tenor of her remarks on progress, as a whole, suggests that she is not thinking of the simple idea of evolution, in the sense of the development and complexification of physical and biological phenomena. She is thinking rather of any notion, in the physical, biological or social realms, of development towards the good. She is concerned with the idea not of change, but of change for the better.

For Simone Weil, the providentialism of the Old Testament is an example of the belief that the mediocre can produce the better. The expectation of an ultimate improvement in the state of the world permeated the religion of the Hebrews, for whom events were steps

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1. L'Enracinement, p. 50.

2. Ibid., p. 50.

3. Cahiers III, p. 36.

forward in the realization of God's purpose. Modern schemes of thought, such as those of Hegel and Marx, which she attacks, exhibit for her the same basic notion of improvement within the realm of necessity that the Old Testament has in religious terms. Both seek a simple equation between the succession of events in time and the fulfilment of man's aspirations after good. However, the changes which are brought about in the realm of necessity can only be mixtures of good and evil, not good in themselves. In one of the infrequent passages in which she does use the word "nature", meaning necessity in both its historical and physical aspects, she writes:

Et si tout bien procède du bien, tout ce qui est bien véritable et pur procède surnaturellement de Dieu. Car la nature n'est ni bonne ni mauvaise, ou l'un et l'autre à la fois; elle ne produit que des biens qui sont mélangés de mal, des choses qui ne sont bonnes que sous condition d'un bon usage. Tout bien authentique est d'origine divine et surnaturelle.

Her criticism of the notion of progress, in both the biblical and modern contexts, thus harks back to her basic conception of the contradiction between necessity and good. Good is realized only supernaturally, through recognition of its transcendence over necessity, not naturally, through expectation of its emergence out of necessity.

The question then arises, "If Simone Weil does not accept the notion of progress, how different does she think that society could be?" This raises the whole issue of her social and political thought, which would require in general a major study in itself, and in

particular a detailed analysis of L'Enracinement. The briefest answer would be that she can envisage many changes in society, none of which could be expected to produce itself anything nearer to the good, but one of which would at least achieve a structure that would recognize the distance between good and necessity. Thus the change towards a society, which is broken down into small social units (sharing work, culture and religion), is one which she envisages hopefully in L'Enracinement. Such a society would not be oriented towards territorial expansion or material aggrandisement, but would see its daily round of work and suffering, culture and contemplation, as offering a milieu in which the individual's quest for the good could be conducted without being misdirected towards the society itself.

Simone Weil's attack on revelation and providence, as conceived in the Old Testament, leads to her attack on election and covenant. As her criticism of the former themes is based on an objection to the direct relation between history and the absolute good, ~~so~~ her criticism of the latter themes is based on an objection to the direct relation between the social element (which she calls "le social") and the absolute good. Thus before her remarks upon election and covenant are considered in themselves, it is important to understand her negative evaluation of the place of the social element in religion. This evaluation is found at many points in her religious speculation; in both the French and American notebooks, and also in the writings sent to Père Perrin. For example, she writes in the essay, "Formes de l'Amour implicite de Dieu":

Le piège des pièges, le piège presque inévitable est le piège social. Partout, toujours, en toutes choses, le



sentiment social procure une imitation parfaite de la foi, c'est-à-dire parfaitement trompeuse. Cette imitation a le grand avantage de contenter toutes les parties de l'ame. Celle qui désire le bien croit être nourrie. Celle qui est médiocre n'est pas blessée par la lumière. Elle est tout à fait à l'aise. Ainsi, tout le monde est d'accord. L'âme est dans la paix.

The most pernicious aspect of the social experience is that it produces a perfect imitation of the religious, in terms of feeling, touching man at the point both of his desire for good and of his bondage to necessity. A happy concord in the satisfaction of both of these parts of his make-up prevents man from seeing the real shallowness of the experience, and its real source. She continues:

Il est presque impossible de discerner la foi de son imitation sociale. D'autant plus qu'il peut y avoir dans l'âme une partie de foi authentique et une partie de foi imitée.<sup>2</sup>

Not only does the social element produce a spurious experience of religion, but it also confuses the distinction between necessity and the good by shedding upon the relative the colour of the absolute. In a passage in the Cahiers Simone Weil writes of two goods: the absolute, which is the good-in-itself and has no opposite; and the relative, which is the limited good found in necessity, and is the opposite of evil.<sup>3</sup> The generally satisfying nature of the social feeling, although caused by the relative good of the social realm, leads man to treat the experience as one of absolute good. She writes:

C'est le social qui jette sur le relatif la couleur de l'absolu. Même l'amour, même la gourmandise, sont sous l'influence sociale (mode ...). Le remède est l'idée de

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1. Attente de Dieu, p. 152.
  2. Ibid.
  3. Cahiers III, p. 271.

relation. La relation sort violemment du social. Elle est le monopole de l'individu. Les biens sociaux sont des biens de convention.<sup>1</sup>

The monolithic nature of the social experience precludes the possibility of real relation. Referring to Plato's allegory, Simone Weil says, "La société est la caverne. La sortie est la solitude."<sup>2</sup> Similarly she writes in La Connaissance Surnaturelle:

Le Diable est le collectif. (C'est la divinité de Durkheim). C'est ce qu'indique clairement l'Apocalypse par cette bête qui est si visiblement le Gros Animal de Platon.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to see Simone Weil, in the writing of L'Enracinement during her last months, returning to a recognition of the importance of the social element, but still acutely aware of the disastrous possibility of its abuse. Although her experience of the war had shown her the monstrous error in giving a collectivity an absolute and unconditional value, her consideration of the fundamental needs of a new society to be built after the war brought her to acknowledge a limited obligation to a human collectivity as one of the "besoins de l'âme".<sup>4</sup> A community provides indispensable nourishment for the individual, although it has no eternal value or destiny in itself. What Simone Weil consistently rejected in both the Hebrew and the modern manifestations of "le social" was the unconditional nature of the individual's obligation to the collectivity, which is in one way or another made directly commensurate with the desire for good.

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1. Cahiers III, pp. 271, 272.
  2. Ibid., p. 272.
  3. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 272.
  4. L'Enracinement, Part 1, Section 1.

Clearly, such an analysis of the place of the social element in human experience, resulting perhaps from the author's own recollections of social enthusiasm in French labour unions and leftist groups, prepares the way for a very far-reaching judgment upon the Old Testament. For her the Old Testament stands as the greatest example in history of a social form of religion.<sup>1</sup> She writes:

En établissant le monopole du temple, les prêtres hébreux ont voulu faire de la religion une chose purement sociale. Israël a commerce avec Dieu, et non pas tel, tel et tel Israélite.<sup>2</sup>

and later in the same passage:

Il était bon que le temple fut détruit.<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis upon the nation itself as the unit of religion, rather than the individual, is not one that is alien to Old Testament scholarship. It is found especially in the idea of the corporate personality of ancient Israel, elaborated by such writers as Wheeler Robinson and Johannes Pedersen.<sup>4</sup> This idea was already current in Europe in Simone Weil's time, but there is no evidence that she had encountered it. Unlike the proponents of the idea, she regards the subsumption of the individual's identity into the community's as the loss of any possibility of supernatural religion. An exclusively social medium for religion eliminates the individual's quest for the transcendent good, and results in conceptions and forms which can only

1. Cahiers III, p. 106.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 221.

3. Ibid., p. 222.

4. H. Wheeler Robinson, Religious Ideas of the Old Testament, Revised Ed., (Duckworth, 1952), pp. 89-91. J. Pedersen, Israel, Vols. I and II, p. 476.

be natural. Israel had as much a part in God as was possible for a collective structure, that is, a purely natural part:

Mais il fallait pourtant qu'Israël eût quelque part à Dieu. Toute la part à Dieu possible sans spiritualité, sans surnaturel (il n'y a pas de vie surnaturelle sans l'Incarnation). Spiritualité exclusivement collective.<sup>1</sup>

The verdict of "exclusively collective spirituality", meaning for Simone Weil virtually no spirituality, is an over-simplification of the evidence, of which she is on other occasions aware. She does mention exponents of personal religion, such as Jeremiah, though not appearing to treat them as integral to the tradition in the way that she treats Moses, for example.<sup>2</sup>

There is also a problem in her identifying the temple and the priesthood as the centre of this collectivizing of religion. The temple as an institution and the priesthood as a system symbolize for her the erroneous social orientation of the Old Testament. However, the neighbouring religious traditions, which she regards so much more favourably, all had their temples and priesthoods. Indeed it is admitted in the Old Testament that the hieratic element in Hebrew religion was largely an imitation of Canaanite practice.<sup>3</sup> At no point does she attempt to distinguish between what for her was the pernicious aspect of the Jerusalem temple and, for example, Egyptian religious institutions, of which she approved. Certainly it can be argued that Israel exhibited tribal self-consciousness and nationalism

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1. Cahiers III, pp. 231,232.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 221.

3. See, for example, Ezekiel 16 & 23, and B.W.Anderson's Comments on p. 367 of Understanding the Old Testament (Prentice-Hall, 1957).

to a greater degree than her neighbours, but these traits made little difference to the main function of the temple and priesthood.

As can be expected, Simone Weil's remarks upon the particular traditions of election are extremely critical. The idea, as she sees it, runs completely contrary to man's basic knowledge of God:

La notion même de peuple élu est incompatible avec la connaissance du vrai Dieu. C'est de l'idolâtrie sociale, la pire idolâtrie.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of election the religious endeavour becomes not the individual's cultivation of union with the transcendent through discipline and devotion, but the community's cultivation of a favoured relationship with a provident deity in the hope of earthly well-being. In the latter situation the virtue of humility is impossible:

La vertu d'humilité est incompatible avec le sentiment d'appartenance à un groupe social choisi par Dieu, nation (Hébreux, Romains, Allemands, etc.) ou Église.<sup>2</sup>

Election is regarded by Simone Weil not simply as a mistaken idea but as an evil. As with the conception of God, she suggests that the misdirection of the idea leads not to some sort of neutral error, but to the demonic. Yahweh's promises to Israel are the same as Satan's to Christ.<sup>3</sup> Israel's election was an election to evil. The Hebrews were a "Peuple élu pour l'aveuglement, élu pour être le bourreau du Christ."<sup>4</sup>

As the idea of election is central to the Old Testament, so Simone Weil's criticism of it underlies her rejection of the Old

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1. Pensees sans ordre ..., p. 51.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 264.

3. Ibid., p. 46.

4. Cahiers III, n. 237.

Testament. Her aversion to the "doctrine", which it surely can be called since it was the kernel of the teaching passed on from generation to generation,<sup>1</sup> is fundamentally an aversion to the particularisation of grace. For her there are no adoptive sons of God, if that implies partiality. There are adoptive sons, if that means that all people, in their common endowment with the desire for good, have a divine germ within them that, through the elimination of the self which stands between them and God, can grow into sonship. Thus she writes:

Il n'y a pas d'"enfants adoptifs". L'unique adoption c'est que, comme un parasite pond ses oeufs dans la chair d'un animal, Dieu dépose dans notre âme un sperme qui, parvenu a maturite, sera son Fils ... Notre âme est séparée de toute réalité par une pellicule d'égoïsme, de subjectivité, d'illusion; le germe du Christ déposé par Dieu dans notre âme se nourrit d'elle; quand il est assez développé, il brise l'âme, la fait éclater, et entre en contact avec la réalité.<sup>2</sup>

Moeller cites this passage to show the complete lack of rapport between the Old Testament idea of adoptive sonship and Simone Weil's, which it does indeed do. He accuses her of not understanding the Old Testament doctrine, but offers no attempt to make it understandable himself.<sup>3</sup> Her account, however, suggesting that the scandal of election lies in the partiality of grace, does offer a view of divine sonship which is consistent with the universality of grace.

A more substantial criticism of Simone Weil's view of the Old Testament doctrine of election is made by Marie-Magdeleine Davy.

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1. See, for example, Deuteronomy 6.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, pp. 253, 254.

3. Moeller, op. cit., pp. 128, 129.

Following Kierkegaard, she suggests that the election of Israel was, at least to a considerable extent, an election to misfortune. According to this view, affliction was an integral part of the destiny of the chosen people. In being elected from among the nations as the representative recipient of divine grace, Israel was also the representative sufferer, showing in her experience the extremes of divine mercy and human oppression. Such a view would be in accord with the biblical and post-biblical history of the Jews, and also with the depiction of vicarious suffering in the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah. Simone Weil's neglect of this aspect of the Old Testament justifies Mlle. Davy's remark:

C'est peut-être l'aspect du malheur du peuple élu qui a plus échappé à Simone Weil.<sup>1</sup>

In the Old Testament the idea of a chosen people is set within the context of covenant. Israel is chosen, in the sense that the initiative of election is understood as coming from Yahweh, but the relationship into which the nation thereupon enters is covenantal or contractual. The privilege entails responsibility, and the fulfillment of divine promises depends upon human obedience. It might be thought that the existence of covenantal requirements, particularly ethical ones, would mitigate the charge of national egoism and pride which is laid by Simone Weil. However, this is certainly not the case, and although she rarely mentions the covenant specifically, there are points where she expresses a general objection to the idea. For example, she writes:

L'inconditionné seul transporte en Dieu.

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1. Introduction au message de Simone Weil, p. 126.

(Une messe "offerte pour ...," une prière, une souffrance "offertes pour ...", ne constituent pas des contacts avec Dieu.)

L'inconditionné est contact avec Dieu. Tout ce qui est conditionné est d'ici-bas.

(Ex. Jacob: Si ... si ... si ..., ti auras été mon Dieu.)

L'inconditionné est l'absolu.<sup>1</sup>

Here she maintains that the element of contract in religion, whatever form it takes, is a falsification because it represents the unconditional in conditional terms. The "good for something" or the "good on such and such terms" is not the absolute good. Contractual devotion to God, whether by a Hebrew patriarch or a present-day Catholic, is not contact with God at all, because the sense of the unconditional nature of the absolute is eliminated.

Again Simone Weil's critics blame her for misunderstanding, and seek to counter her criticism along lines which would have no validity for her. Mlle. Davy, who writes, "Simone Weil ne semble avoir compris la notion d'alliance entre Dieu et Israël",<sup>2</sup> claims that the collective covenant of the pre-exilic era must be understood from the perspective of the personal emphasis after the exile and of the new covenant in the Gospel.<sup>3</sup> However, Simone Weil's objection concerns personal as much as collective covenant. Even an individualistic covenant relation with God derives from the realm of social relations on the human level. Watkins and Levinas in different ways make the point that election and covenant imply responsibility as much as privilege, but it is the very inter-dependence of responsibility and

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1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 75.

2. Davy, op. cit., p. 124.

3. Ibid., pp. 124, 125. See also B. Hussar in Réponses aux questions de Simone Weil, p. 138.



privilege that constitutes the conditional element, to which Simone Weil objects.<sup>1</sup>

All her criticism of the socio-historical dimension of the Old Testament comes together in the charge of idolatry, which must now be investigated. This charge seems on the surface most ironical, since few religious traditions have contained such a strong and consistent denunciation of idolatry as does the Old Testament. For Simone Weil the Hebrews were most guilty, among all the ancient peoples, of the practice which they condemned more than any other nation. The irony of the charge is explained, though not removed, by the fact that two different applications of the idea of idolatry are involved - the Old Testament's and Simone Weil's. They both share the basic notion of idolatry as that which regards as divine what is only meant to be a representative or token of the divine. However, whilst the Old Testament sees this danger only with the religious use of representational images and natural objects, Simone Weil sees it in the very social and national structure which in the Old Testament is the medium of religion. Furthermore, she regards images and symbols as healthy and necessary in religion, on the basis of man's own nature, and considers them as not so likely to become mistaken for the divine itself as is the nation or social group. Such is the main direction of her discussion of the Old Testament in terms of idolatry, which is evident from many points in her writings.<sup>2</sup>

Simone Weil's distinction between the good and bad senses of

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1. Watkins, op. cit., p. 465; Levinas, op. cit., p. 11.
  2. e.g. Pensées sans ordre ..., p. 72; La Connaissance Sur-naturelle, pp. 64, 67, 171; Lettre à un Religieux, pp. 13, 14.

idolatry needs to be made clear. In her view, the word "idolatry" has come to have a good sense, or to indicate something laudable, because, largely through the influence of the Old Testament, it is applied to the wrong thing. It is applied indiscriminately to every use of images in religion, and to whole religious traditions in which devotion through images is central. Where this is the case, Simone Weil claims, one is dealing with so-called idolatry ("soi-disant idolâtrie"), which is not really idolatry at all.<sup>1</sup> She writes:

Ce que nous nommons idolâtrie est dans une large mesure une fiction du fanatisme juif. Tous les peuples de tous les temps ont toujours été monothéistes. Si des Hébreux de la bonne époque ressuscitaient, et si on leur donnait les armes, ils nous extermineraient tous, hommes, femmes et enfants, pour crime d'idolâtrie. Ils nous reprocheraient d'adorer Baal et Astarté, prenant le Christ pour Baal et la Vierge pour Astarté.<sup>2</sup>

Simone Weil here contends that behind the use of images and the pluralistic apparatus associated with them there has always been a consciousness that the divine reality represented by them is ultimately one, as for example in Catholic devotion. Only Old Testament fanaticism has condemned images outright, thereby denying both the ultimate monotheistic consciousness of other religions, and also the very constitution of human nature, which needs to convey desire and devotion through symbolic actions and objects.<sup>3</sup> Simone Weil thus does not regard the use of images as idolatry. Indeed she sees it as a positive safeguard against real idolatry, that of the society or

1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 67.

2. Lettre à un Religieux, pp. 13,14. cf. Cahiers III, p. 237.

3. For her justification of symbol and sacrament in terms of man's nature see her "Théorie des Sacrements" (from a letter to Maurice Schumann, 1943) in Pensées sans ordre ..., pp. 133-145.

institution itself. People, she claims, are not likely to forget that the sculptured piece of wood did not really create heaven and earth, but they are less likely to forget that they themselves, or their collective soul, did not.<sup>1</sup> Her distinction between so-called and real idolatry is further illustrated in a passage from the Cahiers, where she writes:

On peut supposer deux rapports distincts et contraires entre Israël et l'"idolâtrie".

D'abord Israël, à qui manquait une révélation, était très au dessous des prétendus idolâtres.

Après avoir appris en Perse à concevoir un Dieu universel et spirituel, il était au dessus des peuples où la religion, dans l'intervalle, se corrompait vraiment jusqu'à l'"idolâtrie"; et cela de plus en plus jusqu'au Christ.

Without considering again the complexity and peculiarity of Simone Weil's historical assertions, one can see here her two senses of "idolatry", together with the implicit admission that the so-called idolatry of image-centred religion can give way to real idolatry.

In a sense Simone Weil thus agrees with Durkheim and the French school of sociologists in their social account of religion. It is true of much human religion that its God is but the deification of a social group. It is just not true of real religion, nor of the true God, whose role, far from being that of identification with any structure in the realm of necessity, is in fact infinitely small and infinitely distant.<sup>3</sup> Thus for Simone Weil real idolatry is the adoption of an exclusively social and national structure for man's aspirations after the absolute. In the essay, "La Personne et le Sacré", she writes:

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1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 171.

2. Cahiers III, p. 254.

3. Écrits de Londres ... (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 103.

L'erreur qui attribue à la collectivité un caractère sacré est l'idolâtrie; c'est en tout temps, en tout pays, le crime le plus répandu.

The charge of social idolatry is laid against Israel in specific terms:

La véritable idolâtrie est la convoitise (Pleonexia hétis estin idolatreia, Col.III, 5), et la nation juive, dans sa soif de bien charnel, en était coupable dans les moments même où elle adorait son Dieu. Les Hébreux ont eu pour idole, non du métal ou du bois, mais une race, une nation, chose tout aussi terrestre.

On ne faisait pas de statue à Jehovah; mais Israël est la statue de Jehovah. On a fabriqué ce peuple, comme une statue de bois, à coups de hache.

Simone Weil thus sees a positive link between Israel's real idolatry and the condemnation of so-called idolatry. She argues that most tribes and nations at a certain stage have a communal idol or fetish, and believe in the divine without ultimately identifying it with the fetish. However, if a tribe wanted to make absolute and universal claims for its own representation of deity, the use of a little graven image would certainly not help to further the claims. On the other hand, to see in the nation's own historical destiny and social identity the sign of God's supremacy is to find a large enough image for such claims.<sup>4</sup>

According to Simone Weil's analysis, Israel was in an ambiguous position with regard to idols. Although for the aspirations of a leader like Moses graven images were an inadequate and irrelevant sign,

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1. Écrits de Londres ... , p. 18.
  2. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 15.
  3. Cahiers I, p. 167.
  4. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 171.

the mass of people were loath to forego them. The people's demand for an idol and Moses' eventual concession to them, are seen by her in the paradox by which there is the condemnation of the golden calf on the one hand and the use of the brazen serpent on the other. She writes:

Moïse avait senti que les Juifs ne pouvaient pas se passer d'une bête en métal.<sup>1</sup>

With a few exceptions, such as that, Simone Weil's discussion of idolatry in the Old Testament is in general terms. However, it can be applied with little difficulty to certain recurrent themes, such as the jealousy of God. The analysis also raises problems. One such is the denunciation of image-making by the prophets. Here the condemnation of physical idols reflects not a concern for the nation itself as an idol, but rather a reaction against the imitation of the purely cultic and chthonic religion of neighbouring communities and a plea for the channelling of religious devotion into individual and social morality.

A problem arises as to how one should understand the subject of Simone Weil's charge - that is, the nation. In her claim that the nation itself becomes an idol, she clearly has in mind the historical community. In such a sense, the charge of idolatry, understood in her terms, would not be difficult to appreciate. However, several of her critics, including Martin Buber, have suggested that in Israel's own self-understanding, as reflected in the Old Testament, there is a distinction between the historical nation and the nation of

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1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 236. Ref. Exodus, 32 and Numbers, 21: 9.

God's will, between what Israel was and what it should have been.<sup>1</sup>

Simone Weil's failure to consider this aspect of the tradition has already been noted in Chapter One. Buber, in his essay, "On Henri Bergson and Simone Weil", points to a further implication of this negligence:

The religious character of the people consists emphatically in that something different is intended for it from what it is now, that it is destined for something different - that it should become a true people, the "People of God". Precisely in the religion of Israel is it impossible to make an idol of the people as a whole, for the religious attitude of the community is inherently critical and postulative. Whoever ascribes to the nation or to the community the attributes of the absolute and of self-sufficiency betrays the religion of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Such a point of view represents a more comprehensive exegesis of the Old Testament and renders Simone Weil's charge <sup>of</sup> idolatry more complex than she conceived it to be. However, the charge can still be made on the basis of her central philosophy. Even if it is to the community of God's intention rather than to the historical nation that "the attributes of the absolute" are ascribed, Simone Weil can still claim that society is a structure within the realm of necessity and therefore cannot sustain such idealization. Simone Weil's own French patriotism after 1941, and her qualified return to the importance of the social element in L'Enracinement, show that there still can be a sense of community without the idealization of the community. She did not think that France, even a theoretical and postulative France, had a divine destiny. But she did think that the members of any community had

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1. E.g. also Peter Watkins. See Chapter One, p. 22.

2. Herberg (ed.), The writings of Martin Buber, p. 310.

obligations towards it as an entity that could provide an environment for, but not the object of, their aspiration after good.

The investigation of Simone Weil's criticism of the social and historical dimensions of the Old Testament would be incomplete without at least a brief consideration of the positive alternative view that she offers. In her writings there appears a doctrine of providence, in the sense of a conception of the relation between God and the world, which avoids the idolatrous identification of necessity and good that she finds in the Old Testament. Her analysis of what she considers to be the right and wrong approaches to the idea of providence can be seen in a series of notes in La Connaissance Sur-naturelle:

Trois rapports doivent être distingués dans cette description de Dieu.

Le rapport de Dieu à lui-même. C'est là qu'intervient la Trinité.

Le rapport de Dieu à sa création dans la conduite des événements du monde. Cette conduite est l'enchaînement des causes secondes. La volonté de Dieu dans ce domaine est étrangère à toute morale.

Le rapport de Dieu à sa création dans l'inspiration communiquée aux créatures pensantes. La volonté de Dieu dans ce domaine ne peut jamais contredire le sens de l'obligation essentiel à toute conscience.

C'est ce que le Christ voulait dire en disant: je n'ôte pas un iota à la loi.

La volonté de Dieu au premier sens peut être rapportée au Père - car on rapporte au Père l'acte d'abdication créatrice - la volonté de Dieu au deuxième sens peut être rapportée au Saint-Esprit.

Il semble qu'Abelard ait aperçu cela.

Les Hébreux se sont représenté la seconde sur le modèle de la première.

Of concern for this study are the relations between God and creation in the conduct of events in the world, and between God and creation in the

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1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 83.

inspiration of individual reflective beings. The former relation concerns the mechanism of necessity, the realm of natural laws and the pressures of "pesanteur". Here no event more than any other can be ascribed to God's will or can be called in itself good. In the latter relation, however, when a thinking being directs his attention and desire towards the good, then one can begin to speak of the moral will of God and to call the event good. In writing of "the will of God" Simone Weil is certainly using language which belongs more to the Hebrew than to the Greek tradition, but for her it means not so much "intention that event X should happen" as "how event X should be judged in the light of God's nature". "Will" for Simone Weil in this context must mean the direction in which events would have to go to be in accordance with God's nature, viz. absolute good. She is saying then that no one part of the whole network of necessity, more than any other part, can be thus equated with God's "will" and called unconditionally good. For her it is not the case that certain events are good because they derive from God's particular intention, but that where the good is attentively and patiently sought, there it is found. The Old Testament providentialism, however, in her view, spoke of God's relation to events in the natural and social spheres in a way in which it should only have spoken of the reflective individual's experience of inspiration. Her own theory of providence thus seeks to maintain both the impersonality and non-partiality of the former relation and the possibility of the latter, without confusing the two. Such a judgment appears quite legitimate in the light of the Old Testament's numerous ascriptions of particular natural and political events to



the active intention of deity.

For Simone Weil the relation between God and necessity can still be called providential, if everything is included. The order of the universe, the totality of the conditions of existence, is itself providential:

La Providence divine n'est pas un trouble, une anomalie dans l'ordre du monde. C'est l'ordre du monde lui-même.<sup>1</sup>

L'ordre du monde<sup>2</sup> est providentiel. Il ne nous instruit que de Dieu.

Any plan discernible in events is providential, but so is every other.<sup>3</sup> There is an order in things as a whole, which is necessity. It harks back to God's act of abdication in creation, and the right attention and desire can make it translucent to the reality which it veils. The idea of some sort of universal order is found by Simone Weil in the Chinese tao,<sup>4</sup> the Greek nemesis, and the Indian dharma.<sup>5</sup> The Old Testament, however, sees the ordering of events not so much in and for the world as a whole, but more often in and for one nation's history. Order is primarily not impersonal and impartial, in the Old Testament, but personal and partisan. For one nation's victory the sun stands still.<sup>6</sup> Thus Simone Weil writes, "L'idée de dharma, de Némésis, manque

1. L'Enracinement, p. 241.

2. Cahiers III, p. 103.

3. Cahiers II, p. 247; La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 16.

4. For her use of the idea of tao see, for example, Cahiers II, p. 68.

5. Cahiers I, p. 162.

6. Cahiers I, p. 167.

absolument (?) dans l'Ancien Testament."<sup>1</sup> This comment can be compared with Max Weber's remark on the Hebrew law to the effect that it "was no eternal Tao or Dharma but a positive divine enactment."<sup>2</sup> Whereas the Old Testament's providentialism is analagous to the legislation of a king or the management of a father, Simone Weil's theory relates to the universal conditions of existence within the realm of necessity. The idea of "the conditions of existence" is one which she considers to be basic to religion.<sup>3</sup> Providence concerns not the vindication of one's existence, as participation in the Hebrew nation or the Christian Church, but the basis of one's existence, as participation in humanity and subjection to the bondage of necessity. The idea of providence for Simone Weil clarifies the limits imposed by la condition humaine; it does not push them back from time to time. The conditions of existence are the order through which a man can encounter that which transcends order and from which order derives. At one point she states that the idea of "conditions of existence" is clear, whereas that of providence is vague.<sup>4</sup> Chance is one of the conditions of existence, for example, and for Simone Weil it is better to accept it as such than to ascribe chance events to particular divine intention.

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1. Cahiers I, p. 162. S.W. takes Nemesis to be an aspect of necessity (Ananké). It is necessity in terms of the mechanical self-balancing of events. It is an order within events but not providential in the Old Testament sense. It is more like "fate", grim, mechanical, and impersonal. As S.W.'s concept of "necessity" expresses her idea of the "natural world", so Nemesis for her is part of nature.

2. Max Weber, Ancient Judaism (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), p. 132.

3. e.g. Cahiers II, p. 157. Her remark on the study of religion.

4. Cahiers III, p. 62.

Only along the lines of Simone Weil's conception of providence can there be reached a solution to the problem of religious and political institutions which is raised by much that has been considered in this chapter. If society is indeed a "gros animal", is there any alternative to appeasing its appetites? Is there a way back into the ordering of politics and religion after such an analysis? Could Moses have acted otherwise? Simone Weil's observations suggest that such questions can begin to be answered when it is recognized that the human collectivity in history is not an adequate framework for the ordering of man's existence. Man is individual as well as social, and is a part of nature as well as of history. In her view nature, or necessity, is a more fundamental category than history, the story of man's deeds, and includes it. Human collectivities are so to be ordered through political and religious forms that<sup>a</sup> society can become a stable unit of the cosmos, accepting the limits of necessity rather than seeking to extend them in history. The political forms that such a view dictates are discussed in several of Simone Weil's writings, particularly in L'Enracinement, and the complexity of that discussion warrants an examination of its own that cannot be attempted here. The form of religion resulting from such a view, especially as it is contrasted with the Old Testament, is the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE OLD TESTAMENT AND OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

The examination of Simone Weil's theory about ancient East Mediterranean religion has already shown that her critique of the Old Testament included an unfavourable comparison with other religious traditions. In her writings this judgment extends into the realm of world religions as a whole. In her discussions of both the conception of God and the form of religion the Old Testament is severely criticized and alternative approaches are held up in favour against it. It is now necessary to consider this act in the comparative evaluation of religions, and to trace its implications. The first stage of the task will be an examination of what Simone Weil considered "religion" to be. This examination will lead to a consideration of the apparently syncretistic tone of many of her observations. Attention will also be given to the comparative judgment itself, and to the tension between it and the apparent syncretism. Finally, a preliminary investigation will be made into the criteria for the study of religion which arise from her observations.

Pre-occupation with the nature of religion and with the great, as yet unrealized, possibilities in religious studies characterized the whole period of Simone Weil's life in Marseilles, New York and London, from 1941 to 1943. For example, she writes in a notebook from early in the period:

M. Pouget. "La science des religions n'est pas commencée." Certes.<sup>1</sup>

Other remarks from approximately the same point in the notebooks also suggest the opinion that the world of religion is one that men have ceased to understand, and that a whole new investigation of it could be undertaken.<sup>2</sup> Such were the thoughts which are found in the notebooks entrusted by Simone to Gustav Thibon at their last meeting at the beginning of 1942.<sup>3</sup> These thoughts must therefore have immediately preceded her most explicit comparative evaluations of religious traditions, which occur in material sent to two priests, Pere Perrin and Pere Couturier (who later became the pioneer of Roman Catholic concern for Christian unity).<sup>4</sup>

Simone Weil's conception of religion could itself be the subject of a major study. For the purpose of this chapter only its principal features will be mentioned. Although on occasions she writes of "religions" in the plural, or of a "religion" as one among others,<sup>5</sup> the direction of her thought as a whole is towards the conception of religion as a single activity, whose several forms contain different

1. Cahiers II, p. 130.

2. Cahiers II, p. 157, where she refers to the "étude historique, sociologique, etc., d'une religion ..."; and p. 165, where she writes, "La science, l'art et la religion se rejoignent par la notion d'ordre du monde, que nous avons complètement perdue."

3. See Thibon's Introduction to La Pesanteur et la Grâce, or the English translation, Gravity and Grace (London: Routledge, 1952), p. XII.

4. "Formes de l'amour implicite de Dieu", sent to Perrin from Casablanca in May 1942, and published in Attente de Dieu, pp. 99-166; and Lettre à un Religieux, addressed to Couturier in New York in the autumn of 1942.

5. For examples of these uses of the word "religion" see Attente de Dieu, pp. 138, 139.

emphases and fulfil their function with varying degrees of success. Thus she writes of "la religion au vrai sens du mot",<sup>1</sup> of "la religion vraie" and "la vraie religion",<sup>2</sup> and also, using a different word but with much the same significance in its context, of "la spiritualité authentique".<sup>3</sup>

The study of religion is, for Simone Weil, "la science du surnaturel dans ses manifestations diverses à travers les diverses sociétés humaines".<sup>4</sup> Religion, as an activity of thought and culture, results from man's attention to the reality beyond this world. Simone Weil's conception of it derives directly from her conception of God. As the idea of God is reached through the consideration of man's desire for good and of the contradiction between the good and necessity, so religion begins with the orientation of attention towards the transcendent reality of absolute good, the supernatural:

Les pratiques religieuses sont<sup>5</sup> entièrement constituées par de l'attention animée de désir.

This attention is explained at one point by the analogy of reciting the name of God. Recalling a Buddhist tradition, she writes:

La religion n'est pas autre chose que cette promesse de Dieu. Toute pratique religieuse, toute rite, toute liturgie est une forme de la récitation du nom du Seigneur, et doit en principe avoir réellement une vertu; la vertu de sauver quiconque s'y adonne avec le désir.<sup>6</sup>

Thus two themes fundamental to her conception of religion are

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1. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 173.
  2. Attente de Dieu, p. 106; and Lettre à un Religieux, p. 89.
  3. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 89.
  4. Cahiers II, p. 130.
  5. Attente de Dieu, p. 151.
  6. Ibid., p. 138.

attention and salvation. Through the direction of attention and love towards God the individual loses his identity as a creature of necessity in the experience of union with or invasion by God. "Le regard est ce qui sauve."<sup>1</sup>

Another distinctive emphasis in Simone Weil's conception of religion is that which differentiates it from philosophy. Philosophy may enable a man to understand and express the nature of ultimate reality and of the human condition, but it does not of itself provide man with a sphere of activity, a total human environment in which a man can with his own life achieve a relation between the two.

Religion, on the other hand, is the environment in which man's quest for the good can take place. Philosophy is the intellect-aspect of that quest, and leads man to the true thought of God. It is the "pensée" which Simone Weil found at so many diverse points in ancient tradition.<sup>2</sup> It is revelation as thought. Religion is the form of activity which is dictated by the thought, and the form of experience which accompanies the thought. It is revelation as experience. That revelation for Simone Weil is both thought and experience has already been shown. Religion, but not philosophy, is "un milieu humain".<sup>3</sup>

In attempting to understand this phrase, which occurs more than once in the letter to Déodat Roché, the English reader is at a disadvantage in not having at his disposal anything like an exact equivalent of the French "milieu". However, Simone Weil's own account helps to clarify

1. Attente de Dieu, p. 147.
2. See Chapter Two, pp. 25, 26.
3. "Lettre à Déodat Roché", in Pensées sans ordre ..., p. 65.

her use of the word:

... par milieu j'entends quelque chose d'ouvert au monde extérieur, qui baigne dans la société environnante, qui est en contact avec toute cette société, non pas seulement un groupe fermé de disciples autour d'un maître.<sup>1</sup>

The example of which she is here thinking is the Albigensian sect of the Twelfth Century A.D.. Here, in her view, religion was the very atmosphere which men breathed. It was the total human context in which the thought that philosophy produced could become incarnate and achieve the fullness of existence.<sup>2</sup> Not only was there the small circle of the cathari or perfecti, but around that everyday existence was conducted, so to say, under the inspiration of the consecration and piety at the centre.<sup>3</sup> Such a communal conception of religion may appear to contradict the severe criticism of "le social". However, Simone Weil's view of the Catharist society can be fairly interpreted by the observation that in this case the "gros animal" is domesticated, not humoured.

Simone Weil's conception of religion thus exhibits a polarity of emphasis, upon the supernatural source and upon the total human context of religion. Religion is the manifestation or embodiment, in the world of men, of a relation between man and the supernatural, or divine, through the direction of man's attention and desire. Its unity derives from the unity of the divine, and its multiplicity from

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1. "Lettre à Déodat Roché", in Pensées sans ordre ..., p. 65.

2. Ibid., p. 65.

3. The historical problems concerning her interpretation of the Albigensian movement require a major investigation, which cannot be included in the present study.



the variety within man's world. The existence of different forms of religion in different countries and social contexts is to be expected, but man's philosophical activity should provide the followers of a particular religious tradition with a conception of the relation which their religion is trying to achieve. If religion derives its multiplicity from the varieties of the human situation, philosophy provides it with its unity by expressing in conceptual terms the one reality with which it seeks to relate. From this idea of the unity of religion beyond its multiplicity come the ideas which have caused several of Simone Weil's critics to accuse her of syncretism. The charge is made, for example, by Perrin,<sup>1</sup> Watkins,<sup>2</sup> and Moeller.<sup>3</sup> Before an opinion can be reached on the justice of this allegation, and on the real nature of Simone Weil's view of religion if it is not syncretistic, the ideas in question need to be considered in detail.

One feature of Simone Weil's discussion of religion is her fondness for the analogy of language. She writes:

Toutes les religions prononcent dans leur langue le nom du Seigneur. Le plus souvent, il vaut mieux pour un homme nommer Dieu dans sa langue natale plutôt que dans une langue étrangère ...<sup>4</sup>

Un changement de religion est pour l'âme comme un changement de langage pour un écrivain.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Perrin and Thibon, Simone Weil telle que nous l'avons connue (Paris: La Colombe, 1952), Chapter VI.
  2. Peter Watkins, op. cit.. The whole article.
  3. Charles Moeller, "Simone Weil devant l'Église et l'Ancien Testament", Cahiers Sioniens (June 1952), p. 114.
  4. Attente de Dieu, pp. 138, 139.
  5. Ibid., p. 139, cf. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 34.

The analogy of language lends itself to two principle emphases in her view of religion. One is the emphasis upon particular religions as distinctive primarily in form, rather than in content. They are "ways of saying" rather than "what is said". A religion, as a total human "milieu", is a potential vehicle for carrying the truth, or as much of the truth as its understanding and attention allow it to bear. This emphasis leads to a second, that upon the difficulty and inadvisability of changing one's religion. If a religion is a whole human environment, capable of sustaining man's quest for truth, and is a medium of expression analagous to language, it is dangerous to move from one religion to another without very good reasons. The complexity and depth of a man's lifelong relation with his language or with his total environment mean that a change of either as a medium of expression would severely limit his expressive ability. It is difficult, though it can be done.<sup>1</sup> It is inadvisable on the whole, though there are situations in which it is legitimate.<sup>2</sup> To change one's own religion is a grave enough matter, but to encourage other people to change theirs, especially in a country which yours has conquered, is graver still.<sup>2</sup>

Not only Simone Weil's use of the analogy of language, but also her remarks on the way to study religions may be considered as grounds for the charge of syncretism. For example, she writes:

... une religion se connaît de l'intérieur.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 34.
  2. Attente de Dieu, p. 141.
  3. Ibid., p. 139.

La comparaison des religions n'est possible dans une certaine mesure que par la vertu<sup>1</sup> miraculeuse de la sympathie.

A religion can only be known from within, and the comparison of religions is almost impossible, requiring a miraculous degree of sympathy. What appears in such statements as a very high personal doctrine, or point of conscience, about the knowing and judging of a particular religious tradition will be recalled when the unfavourable comparative judgment of the Old Testament is discussed.

In statements of a more sweeping nature the same note is struck.

In Lettre à un Religieux occurs this passage:

Toutes les fois qu'un homme a invoqué avec un coeur pur Osiris, Dionysos, Krishna, Bouddha, le Tao, etc., le fils de Dieu a répondu en lui envoyant le Saint-Esprit. Et l'Esprit a agi sur son âme, non pas en l'engageant à abandonner sa tradition religieuse, mais en lui<sup>2</sup> donnant la lumière - à l'intérieure de cette tradition.

Such a statement can be seen as consistent with the author's conception of God and of the basic pattern of the individual's experience of God. The purity of desire and attention, together with the subsequent revelation and mystical union, is for her the essence of religion. The context of this experience, and the various names used for its object, are of secondary importance. The language of the Christian Gospel can be used equally well of any other religious tradition which observes the fundamental pattern.

Among Simone Weil's statements on the relation between different religions two are of special interest, because they indicate

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1. Attente de Dieu, p. 139.

2. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 30.

how she herself would begin to answer the charge that her view is syncretistic or synthetic. In the Cahiers she writes:

Chaque religion est seule vraie, c'est-à-dire qu'au moment qu'on la pense il faut y porter autant d'attention que s'il n'y avait rien d'autre; de même chaque paysage, chaque tableau, chaque poème est seul beau. La "synthèse"<sup>1</sup> des religions implique une qualité d'attention inférieure.

Any particular religious tradition should be studied with that degree of attention before which superficial idiosyncrasies of expression disappear, and the one fundamental pattern of religion remains. The very idea of synthesis implies a shallowness of attention. Unless one conceives of a religion as the only religion, one is not knowing it from within - similarly with a picture or a poem. Only thus is the maximum of attention given to any object. When several religions are regarded with this degree of attention, each as if it were the only one, what is found at such a depth within them is already one. This is not synthesis or syncretism. A syncretistic approach makes many into one, by effecting a synthesis, whereas Simone Weil's approach finds that the many are one, anyhow, at the deepest level which attention can reach. Thus, in a second statement, concerning Plato, she writes:

Des idbts parlent de syncrétisme à propos de Platon. On n'a pas besoin de faire de syncrétisme pour ce qui est un. Thalès, Anaximandre, Héraclite, Pythagore, c'était la même doctrine, la doctrine græcque unique, à travers des tempéraments différents.

What she says here of Plato's philosophy can be applied to her conception of religion. To that which is fundamentally one anyway, you cannot apply the notion of syncretism.

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1. Cahiers II, p. 134.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, n. 324.

A more just account of Simone Weil's view of religion can be given with the use of the epithets "radical" and "relativistic". "Radical" invokes a favourite image of Simone Weil's, that of "roots", which she employs when speaking of a society's stability. She generally uses it from the negative point of view, speaking of the dangers of "uprooting" ("le déracinement").<sup>1</sup> Although she does not directly and elaborately use the process of "taking root" as an analogy for religion, such a use fairly represents her view. A people's religion is the growing of its roots, the establishment of contact with the source of its life and the extraction of nourishment from that source. The source is one, and the phenomenon of "taking root" is one, but the actual forms of racination are many, varying with the species of plant, the soil, the climate etc.. What is true of a plant and its roots is true of a people and its religion, the varying factors being geographical, cultural, temperamental etc.. For Simone Weil, a bad or false religion, as will be seen below, is one which has the opposite effect, that of uprooting people.<sup>2</sup>

The "radicalism" of this view causes its "relativism". In judging the different instances of the one phenomenon, allowances must always be made for the varying factors. The form of religion will be different for an Indian and for an Anglo-Saxon, although the function of religion should be the same. The analogy of language, which has already been considered, is similarly relativistic. The different situations and cultures, and degrees of attention, cause religions to

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1. e.g. L'Enracinement, especially Part II, pp. 43-158.

2. Cahiers III, pp. 246, 247.

emphasize different aspects of the truth. What is explicit in one religion is implicit in another, and vice versa.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, an implicit adherence to a truth is not necessarily less valuable than an explicit adherence.<sup>2</sup> The mixture of the two could well be part of a particular religion's "language". Thus the radical "monism" of Simone Weil's conception of religion is by no means synthetic. The adding together of all the "languages" of religion into some sort of religious Esperanto would certainly represent a misinterpretation of her view.

If Simone Weil's conception of religion is regarded as syncretistic, the question arises as to why then the Old Testament is to such a degree excluded from the synthesis? If it is maintained, as in this study that the ideas which have provoked the charge of syncretism are more justly described as radical and relativistic, her criticism of the Old Testament still raises an acute problem. The criticisms which have been considered in the previous two chapters, far from suggesting that the Old Testament corresponds to the true religious pattern and that its peculiarities of form arise from its peculiar situation, suggest rather that it represents a basic misconception of religion. Furthermore, some of Simone Weil's remarks appear as a definite and unfavourable comparison with other religions. For example, she writes:

Si on prend un moment de l'histoire antérieure au Christ et suffisamment éloigné de lui - par exemple éloigné de cinq siècles - et qu'on fasse abstraction de la suite, à

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1. Attente de Dieu, p. 140.

2. Ibid., p. 141.

ce moment Israël a moins de part à Dieu et aux vérités divines que plusieurs des peuples environnants (Inde, Égypte, Grèce, Chine).<sup>1</sup>

Here the radical and relativistic note seems to have ceased.

Religious traditions are compared for their truth-value, and judgment is passed. Admittedly, the so-called syncretistic statements generally include the acknowledgement of exceptions. However, the exceptions are so far-reaching, as described by her, that the question arises as to whether the basic religious function has been fulfilled at all:

Il faut que la religion d'Israël, par exemple, ait été un intermédiaire vraiment très imparfait pour qu'on aurait pu crucifier le Christ. . La religion romaine ne méritait peut-être même à aucun degré le nom de religion.<sup>2</sup>

Thus there are several statements of Simone Weil's about the Old Testament which seem hardly reconcilable with the radical relativism of other statements about religion in general.

Two features of her thought, already encountered, suggest how this contradiction in fact resolves itself. The first appears in her analogy between religion and language. Although the various religious traditions are different forms of expression, and different intermediary environments through which individual men approach the absolute, it has to be admitted that some are more suited to the purpose than others:

Toutes les religions, il est vrai, ne sont pas également aptes à la récitation correcte du nom du Seigneur. Certaines sans doute sont des intermédiaires très imparfaits.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 11.
  2. Attente de Dieu, p. 139.
  3. Ibid., p. 139.

The imperfect intermediaries, notably the Old Testament, start with a misconception of the religious enterprise and constitute a misdirection even of practices that have been borrowed from more enlightened neighbours. Israel's misconception of religion, as examined in the previous two chapters, puts it in the category of an imperfect intermediary or an unsuitable language, because its central aspiration is, in Simone Weil's sense, natural and not supernatural. Although she does not explicitly say at any point that individual Jews should have changed their religion in the past, or should do so in the present, it is a reasonable conjecture that statements such as the following are applicable, in her thought, to the religion which is her principle example of an imperfect intermediary:

Si l'imperfection de la religion natale est trop grande, ou si elle apparaît dans le milieu natal sous une forme trop corrompue, ou bien si les circonstances ont empêché de naître ou tué l'amour de cette religion, l'adoption d'une religion étrangère est légitime. Légitime et nécessaire pour certains; non pas sans doute pour tous.

Simone Weil's view of the comparative suitability of different religions as means of expressing the one basic religious pattern thus tends to resolve the contradiction between her relativism and her criticism. Inasmuch as differences are simply environmental and cultural, and are merely variations of potential expression, no comparisons of value or truth can be made. But inasmuch as differences arise from misconceptions of what religion is, and thus reflect limitations of potential expression, comparisons of this kind can be made, and actual change is legitimate.

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1. Attente de Dieu, p. 141.



A second feature of Simone Weil's account which tends to resolve the contradiction is her notion of "déracinement". Inasmuch as different religions differently express and allow for the individual's and the community's growing of roots, her relativism applies. When, however, religion is fundamentally misconceived, to the point of being a phenomenon of "déracinement" rather than of "enracinement", then criticism can be made. For Simone Weil the religion of the Hebrews, a people without geographical and political roots, became an apparatus of social and territorial "enracinement", seeking the good in the nation's own history, and missed the more fundamental and spiritual "enracinement", which accepts the distance between necessity (including history) and the good, and contemplates the very conditions of existence that separate human history from the good. The use of history, rather than the conditions of existence in the universe as a whole, as the area for conceiving a relation between necessity and good, leads to "déracinement", to the violence and tragedy that result from expecting more from the world than it can give. Furthermore, the uprootedness of a tradition contaminates with the same malaise all traditions which come under its influence. As Simone Weil says, "Qui est déraciné déracine. Qui est enraciné ne déracine pas."<sup>1</sup> She writes in the Cahiers:

Les Juifs, cette poignée de déracinés, a causé le déracinement de tout le globe terrestre.<sup>2</sup>

The Old Testament, in teaching a people to direct its expectation of good towards history, contained the seeds of the modern idea of progress,

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1. L'Enracinement, p. 49.

2. Cahiers III, p. 246.

and Israel's deracination became the disease of the twentieth-century world. Thus runs Simone Weil's argument, which, terrible though it is, bears a remarkable relevance to events both of her own life-time and of subsequent years.<sup>1</sup>

The "déracinement" of religion, which Simone Weil sees as one of the misfortunes of the modern world,<sup>2</sup> and which she blames at least partly on the Old Testament, is a contradiction. Her use of the image of roots shows that the apparent inconsistency between her relativistic approach to religion and her criticisms of the Old Testament concerns not what she considers to be of the essence of religion at all, but its opposite.

Before attempting, in the final chapter, a judgment on her idea of true religion, as revealed in her criticism of the Old Testament, it is necessary to bring together the criteria for the recognition of true religion which have emerged from the material discussed in this chapter. Although she confesses that a hierarchy of religions is almost impossible, perhaps completely impossible, to discern,<sup>3</sup> certain characteristics are treated in her discussion as the hallmarks of truth.

In the first place, underlying her comparative judgments is the New Testament principle that a tree is known by its fruit. In

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1. An examination, on the historical and philosophical levels, of the influence of the Old Testament on modern political theory and practice, in the light of Simone Weil's claim, is eminently desirable.

2. See Ivo Malan, "L'Enracinement" de Simone Weil (Paris: Didier, 1956), Chapter V, "Déracinement de la religion", pp. 118-144.

3. Attente de Dieu, p. 139.

expressing this, she uses another image, that of pregnancy. One has proof of an individual's or a community's relation with God when it bears visible fruit, just as one knows that a young woman is no longer a virgin when she is pregnant. Through this analogy Simone Weil sees, for example, the difference between the Old Testament and the Iliad.<sup>1</sup> Of what the fruit consists is indicated in the essay, "Israël et les Gentils". She writes:

Le seul enseignement direct sur la divinité contenu dans l'Illiade est le tableau de Zeus prenant sa balance en or pour y peser les destinées des Grecs et des Troyens, et obligé de laisser la victoire aux Grecs, quoique son amour aille aux Troyens à cause de leur piété.

Cela met l'Illiade infiniment au-dessus de tous les livres historiques de l'Ancien Testament, où il est répété à satiété qu'il faut être fidèle à Dieu pour avoir la victoire dans la guerre.

Whether or not such remarks contain a just interpretation of the Iliad, at least they show that for Simone Weil the fruit of true religion, and one of its criteria, is an uncompromising sense of justice, which places deity in the last resort above favour and partiality toward particular men and nations. Even if many of the lesser deities in the Iliad had their rivalling partialities in the Trojan War, Zeus himself does not allow his judgment to be swayed by personal preference.

Simone Weil compares unfavourably the Old Testament's relating of divine favour to human piety with the subordination of partiality to justice and order, which she finds in the Iliad.<sup>3</sup> Thus the principle

1. Pensées sans ordre ..., pp. 56, 57.

2. Ibid., p. 56.

3. For Simone Weil's original and controversial interpretation of the Iliad, in greater detail, see the essay, "L'Illiade ou le poème de la force", in La Source Grecque (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), pp. 11-42.

of knowing a tree by its fruit, applied to the truthfulness of differing religious traditions, becomes a moral criterion. "Ce critérium est certain, car 'on connaît l'arbre à ses fruits'".<sup>1</sup> In addition to justice, goodness and love are words which would describe the theology and practice of true religion.<sup>2</sup> The true religion is that of love ("la vraie religion, la religion d'amour"),<sup>3</sup> and the false is any that is incompatible with a movement of pure charity.<sup>4</sup>

A second area in which Simone Weil finds the hallmark of true religion is that of motive. Why do people embrace a particular form of religion, and what does it give them? Here her great concern is that true religion does not offer consolation and comfort to its adherents, or in any way make affliction and bondage to necessity more palatable. She writes:

La religion en tant que source de consolation est un obstacle à la véritable foi, et en ce sens l'athéisme est une purification.<sup>5</sup>

If man's pronounciation of the name of God gives him comfort, and a refuge from human affliction, then it would be better for him not to pronounce it. The extreme greatness of Christianity, for Simone Weil, lies in the fact that it seeks not "un remède surnaturel contre la souffrance", but "un usage surnaturel de la souffrance".<sup>6</sup> True religion

1. Pensées sans ordre ..., p. 57.

2. See Pensées sans ordre ..., p. 47, and Lettre à un Religieux, pp. 11, 45 and 68.

3. Lettre à un Religieux, p. 45.

4. Ibid., p. 68.

5. Cahiers II, pp. 148, 149.

6. Ibid., p. 369.

plants man firmly in necessity, with all its affliction, leading him through it, not away from it, to the reality beyond.

Two more criteria of truthfulness emerge from Simone Weil's discussion of religion in general, both of which have already been considered with regard to the conception of God. They are impersonality and negativity. About the former she writes:

Dans toutes les formes authentiques de la vie religieuse il y a de même quelque chose qui en garantit le caractère impersonnel.

Because true religion is fundamentally a phenomenon of the supernatural and transcendent, it cannot be conceived or conducted wholly on the level of personal and social identity, which is part of necessity or the natural. Personality is transcended in the basic religious pattern of attention and union with God, as conceived by Simone Weil. For the same reason true religion must contain in some way the negation of all concepts and structures, which are borrowed for its construction from the realm of necessity. Thus in a passage, quoted in Chapter Three, in which she stresses the idea of the absence of God, she says that the religions which have this conception are "la religion vraie, la traduction en langage différent de la grande Révélation."<sup>2</sup>

The examination of Simone Weil's general discussion of religion has shown that, although it raises a difficulty when placed alongside her critique of the Old Testament, it suggests substantially the same criteria of true religion as those by which the religion of Israel is judged erroneous. Indeed there is a mutual

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1. Attente de Dieu, p. 154.

2. Ibid., p. 106.

clarification between the general discussion of world religions and the particular critique of the Old Testament. For example, what is meant in the general discussion by a language unsuitable for the pronunciation of God's name, is illustrated in her criticism of the Old Testament's theological themes. Conversely, what lies behind her complaint that within Israel God spoke to no man's soul before the Babylonian exile, is made clear by her general discussion of religion as the individual's quest for the absolute, prompted by desire and leading to salvation. This chapter has attempted to show that, in spite of the apparent contradiction between her radical relativism and her comparative criticism, Simone Weil's general theory of religion and her objections to the Old Testament are consistent. In the final chapter an attempt will be made to answer the question, "Are they right?"

## CHAPTER SIX

### ASSESSMENT

The aim of this study has been to reach a judgment upon Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament through an examination of the relevant writings. The final task of assessment can be conveniently performed by raising the double question: Of what value is the critique for the study of both the Old Testament in particular and religion in general?

As a preliminary to the first part of the question the problem of how her critique can be characterised must be considered at some length. To begin with, is it right to speak, as Charles Moeller does, of Simone Weil's "rejection" of the Old Testament, "le rejet de la Bible juive"?<sup>1</sup> Certain basic elements of the tradition are, without doubt, rejected: in particular the conception of God as powerfully active in the world, and the adoption of the nation and history as the media of religion. These notions she regards as erroneous, and such a judgment constitutes a rejection. However, it can be argued that Simone Weil rejected what she considered to be the error of the Old Testament, without dismissing as false all its constituent elements. For example, in her view only one aspect of Yahweh, admittedly the overwhelmingly prominent one, is false, and the other aspect, the single transcendent and eternal reality, is true.<sup>2</sup> She does not reject Yahweh himself, but only inasmuch as he is conceived as powerful

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1. Moeller, op. cit., p. 115.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 273.

rather than good. After all, belief in one God was not only Israel's "obsession", but also Israel's "mission".<sup>1</sup> Among the world's ancient religious traditions, Israel had a peculiar theological contribution which, in Simone Weil's view, it abused. The abuse, and not the contribution, is rejected in her critique.<sup>2</sup>

Any word that is used to describe her attitude to the Old Testament must certainly be to a very large degree negative, but should not bear the connotation of wholesale dismissal. The idea of condemnation or antagonism on the basis of certain criteria would more justly characterise her critique, conveying the mood and direction of most of her remarks, whilst avoiding the finality which a few of her remarks deny.

At this point another problem arises. Is the condemnation, with its selection and criticism of evidence, just - or is it prejudiced? In Chapter One Simone Weil's choice of certain areas of the Old Testament, and her neglect of others, were seen to fortify apparently pre-conceived notions on the subject, which a greater and more even knowledge would have qualified. Thus many of her critics have regarded both the asperity and the partiality of her remarks as the result of prejudice against Hebrew thought and spirituality - in other words, as intellectually and spiritually anti-Jewish.<sup>3</sup>

Biographical evidence, such as her letter, written in November 1940 to M. Carcopino, the Minister of National Education in the Vichy

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1. Cahiers II, pp. 184-185.
  2. Ibid., cf. Écrits historiques et politiques, pp. 76ff..
  3. E.g. Watkins, Lunel, Fiedler, Moeller, opera citata.



government, suggests that she did not regard herself as Jewish, and questioned the religious and ethnic applicability of the term.<sup>1</sup> As Cabaud writes:

Insofar as she was concerned personally, if there was any tradition that she regarded as her patrimony, it was the French tradition, Hellenic and Christian.<sup>2</sup> The Hebraic tradition was utterly alien to her.

Although in her letter to the Minister she questioned the possibility of and the grounds for labelling certain people as "Jews" in the twentieth century A.D., she certainly in her other writings assumes that such a label can be given to the people of the Old Testament many centuries ago. Her own view of the Old Testament has been interpreted in varying degrees as prejudiced and anti-Jewish. A brief account of some of these interpretations reveals some pertinent observations, but leaves more to be said on the matter.

The strongest construction of Simone Weil's writings as anti-Jewish is made by Fiedler, who writes of her "passionate anti-Semitism that upsets for once her cherished method of honoring contradictories",<sup>3</sup> and describes her as "a Jew and an anti-Semite, the anti-Semitic Jew, both sides of our most desperate cleavage in a single body."<sup>4</sup> Fiedler bases his judgment on such passages as that which calls the Jews "A people chosen for blindness, chosen to be the executioners of Christ" and that which groups religious persecution, capitalism and totalit-

1. "Lettre à M. le Ministre de l'Instruction Publique", Études matérialistes, Cannes (A.-M), no. xvii (décembre 1947), pp. 2-4. An English version appears as "What is a Jew? A Letter to a Minister of Education", Politics, New York, vol. VI, no. 1 (Winter 1949), p. 40. See also J. Cabaud, Simone Weil, pp. 202, 203.

2. Cabaud, op. cit., p. 203.

3. L.A. Fiedler, op. cit., p. 43.

4. Ibid., p. 44.

arianism as the legacy of Israel.<sup>1</sup> Such passages certainly merit the strongest objection and qualification. However, Fiedler's protest is deficient in not seeking to give an account of Simone Weil's antagonism in terms of possible influences behind it and of its intellectual substance (such as is found in the articles of Lunel and Watkins respectively). Although Fiedler makes it clear that he uses "anti-Semitic" only as an attitude to the beliefs of Jews, the phrase, with such an emotional history, serves only to cloud the real issue.

Whereas Fiedler's article portrays Simone Weil's antagonism to Israel as something which arises essentially from the complexity and intensity of her own psyche, Armand Lunel convincingly demonstrates the possibility, at least, of a substantial intellectual influence, through Jules Lagneau and Alain.<sup>2</sup> It appears that, in contrast to certain strongly pro-Jewish French intellectuals in the early Twentieth Century (such as Bloy and Peguy), Simone Weil's teacher, Alain, and his teacher, Lagneau, were antagonistic toward the religion of the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> Lunel poses the question, "Faut-il conclure: Lagneau genuit Alain qui genuit Simone Weil?"<sup>4</sup>

Peter Watkins, seeking a possible intellectual account of her antagonism, suggests that the life-affirmation of the Hebrews, and their idea of blessing as worldly prosperity, lay behind her discomfort. He suggests "that an important root of her hostility to the religion

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1. Ibid., p. 44, ref. Cahiers III, pp. 237, 240.

2. Lunel, op. cit..

3. Ibid., p. 49 including footnote.

4. Ibid., p. 49.

of Israel was her very pre-occupation with suffering, weakness, and the cross, and that this made her uncomfortable with the Old Testament conception of blessing ...", <sup>1</sup> and concludes:

In brief, when we have recognised the taint of life denial on Simone Weil we have gone far in understanding the nature of her antisemitism.<sup>2</sup>

This judgment goes some way in describing the nature of her antagonism. However, it does not exhaust the problem, as is shown by the fact that even when Simone Weil most nearly approaches a positive attitude to the world, in L'Enracinement, she is still as far as ever from any sympathy with the Old Testament. It was not merely the fact of Israel's life-affirmation, but its manner and degree, which alarmed her - its direct relation between prosperity or security in the world and the favour of God.

Another pertinent observation on Simone Weil's antagonism is shared by Père Perrin and Charles Moeller, who suggest that in her mind the Old Testament became the focal point of opposition to her own apprehension of truth. Thus Perrin writes, "Israël était vraiment la citadelle de toutes ses oppositions, le noeud de toutes ses résistances",<sup>3</sup> and similarly Moeller, "l'anti-sémitisme de Simone Weil est une pièce maîtresse de sa pensée, une de celles, sinon la seule, qui commande les autres parties du système."<sup>4</sup> This suggestion is helpful in showing that the passionate tone of her critique can be explained in part at least by the fact that the Old Testament was a kind of symbol

1. P. Watkins, op. cit., pp. 471, 472.

2. Ibid., p. 473.

3. Perrin & Thibon, Simone Weil telle que nous l'avons connue, p. 69.

4. Moeller, op. cit., p. 109.

in her more general opposition to ideas which she considered to be wrong.

The mildest judgment on Simone Weil's antagonism is found in Père Daniélou's essay, where he suggests that she has a legitimate preference for the Greek religious ethos over against the Hebrew, but a preference which she allowed to overshadow the altogether different question of true revelation.<sup>1</sup> Drawing a distinction between God's historical revelation and the religious ethos of the nation in whose life it chose to occur, he writes of Simone Weil, "Ce qui la gênait dans l'Ancien Testament n'est pas ce qui est divin, mais ce qui est juif." Such an observation is valid in her own terms, though not in Père Danielou's. Certainly, for her, the Hebrews' misconception of the nature of divinity is objectionable, though not the fundamental monotheistic belief. However, the elements of this misconception are precisely those which Danielou considers to belong to true revelation, "révélation de Dieu dans l'histoire, alliance et présence."<sup>2</sup> Much of what he calls "divin" she would have called "juif".

A conclusion on the applicability to Simone Weil of the charge of religious racial prejudice cannot be reached until the similarly sensitive question of "deicide" is settled. In fact none of her critics has been attracted by the problem, though it is raised by a few of her remarks. A fundamental factor in most Western and Christian anti-Jewish feeling has been some notion of the collective guilt of the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ. On at least three occasions Simone

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1. Réponses aux questions de Simone Weil, pp. 19-39, Jean Daniélou, "Hellénisme, Judaïsme, Christianisme".

2. Ibid., p. 23 (my italics).

Weil writes of the Jews' killing Christ. She says in the Cahiers:

Peuple élu pour l'aveuglement, élu pour être le bourreau du Christ.

Les Juifs ne devaient pas être "idolâtres",<sup>1</sup> parce qu'autrement ils n'auraient pas tué le Christ.

and in La Connaissance Surnaturelle:

Israël est bien le figure de l'Église telle que saint Augustin la conçoit, Israël qui a tué le Christ. En condamnant un infidèle qui nourrit un affamé, n'a-t-il pas péché contre l'Esprit?<sup>2</sup>

Les Juifs et les Romains ensemble ont crucifié le Christ. Mais ils lui ont fait pire quand le Christianisme est devenu religion de l'Empire avec le Vieux Testament comme texte sacré.<sup>3</sup>

Clear and inescapable in these remarks is the notion, "Israel killed Christ". However, certain features show the thoughts behind them to be different from the traditional charge of deicide.<sup>3</sup> One is a sense of the inevitability of the crucifixion, as an event which resulted not so much from the direct will of the people themselves as from the fundamental and longstanding misconceptions embodied in their religion. Institutional religion (as she sees it in the Augustinian dictum that a loving act does not mitigate an unbeliever's damnation and in the crucifixion of Christ), which subordinates charity to orthodoxy, is inevitably blind to the breakthrough of transcendent good in a life emptied of itself. Secondly, her association of the Romans with the

1. Cahiers III, p. 237. S.W. is here using the word "idolâtres" in (for her) the favourable sense, meaning those who use images and physical intermediaries in their devotion and are thus open to the idea of an incarnate mediator.

2. La Connaissance Surnaturelle, p. 67.

3. See introduction and footnotes to "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" in The Documents of Vatican II (New York: Guild Press, 1966), pp. 665-668.

Jews in responsibility for the crucifixion is distinctive. She saw the crucifixion as the rejection by the "gros animal", in its two supreme contemporary manifestations, of a figure which threatened its complacency and security. Thirdly, her charge lacks the particular horror and stigma of "putting-to-death", which are implicit in the traditional doctrine of deicide. For her, worse than the actual crucifixion was the subsequent institutionalization of Christ's gospel. Fourthly, her remarks do not mention explicitly or develop the idea of "collective guilt". Bitterly critical of institutional judgments and anathemas, Simone Weil would presumably have welcomed the Second Vatican Council's repudiation of the notion of collective Jewish guilt over the crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> Thus the statement that Israel killed Christ is an element in Simone Weil's antagonism to the Old Testament, but it is for her the condemnation of a false religious system rather than the involvement of individuals in a "collective guilt" through their membership of a particular race.

The application of the expression "anti-Semitism" to Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament is as misleading as that of the traditional charge of "deicide" to her view of Israel's relation to Christ. Although her writings are marked by bitter hostility toward the perpetrators of that misconception of religion, which she considered the Old Testament to be, the description of her as anti-Jewish hinders rather than helps the understanding of it. Not only does she not have the attitudes of personal and political "anti-Semitism", as her critics themselves concede, but also as an intellectual antagonism,

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1. Ibid., pp. 665, 666, text and footnotes.

hers was different in certain respects from that of her day, with which it must not be confused. The problem can be clarified by reference to Henri de Lubac's essay in Israël et la foi Chrétienne, published in 1942, a year before Simone Weil's death. The "anti-Semitism" of which de Lubac writes is of the kind associated with figures like Houston Chamberlain, and represented in France in the 1930's and 40's by M. Fayolle-Lefort, Charles Autrun and Jacques de Lesdain, among others. These writers shared with Simone Weil an emphasis on the contrast between Old Testament law and New Testament charity, the condemnation of violence and massacre done in the name of Yahweh, and the notion of "the curse of Israel". However, two significant differences separate the two positions. First, the "anti-Semitism" which de Lubac attacks had a strong racist, pro-Aryan tone. It included the idea of an Aryan-Indian spirituality, to which authentic Christianity belonged, in opposition to Judaeen spirituality. It contrasted a Semitic Old Testament with an Aryan New Testament, and attempted to demonstrate that Christ was not a Jew. First appearances might suggest that Simone Weil's thought did follow this pattern in a way. She did have the idea of a tradition of authentic religion among non-Semitic peoples, and she did presume that Christ's own teaching had a largely Greek and non-Semitic background.<sup>1</sup> However, the ethnological element in her theory does not imply a peculiar political or territorial destiny (the very thing for which she criticizes Israel) for a non-Semitic race, and she did not deny that Christ was a Jew, even though she showed little awareness of the cultural

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1. E.g. Lettre à un Religieux, pp. 18-29.

implications of the fact. Secondly, de Lubac shows that the French intellectual "anti-Semitism" of her last years depended partly on the thought of Nietzsche, particularly on his condemnation of the inhibiting effect of belief in a transcendent God, which denied man his power and justified his weakness. Such a criticism would certainly not be Simone Weil's, since for her Yahweh is conceived too much in terms of human power, and man in the Old Testament asserts himself too much.

Furthermore, as was shown earlier in this study, Simone Weil's criticism of the Old Testament's social idolatry is of such a kind as to include all totalitarian nationalisms, and Hitlerian anti-Semitism itself. Thus she writes:

Le totalitarisme, c'est Israël (notamment chez ses pires ennemis).<sup>1</sup>

Le capitalisme, le totalitarisme font partie de cette progression dans le déracinement; les antisémites, naturellement, propagent l'influence juive.<sup>2</sup>

The claim by any race or community to some peculiar global destiny is, for Simone Weil, idolatrous in its nature, and uprooting in its effect. It is an error of which, in her view, both Jews and anti-Semites are guilty.

The question of the value of Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament involves also the problem of the relation between her antagonism to the Old Testament and her refusal to be baptized into the Catholic Church. Moeller puts the problem thus:

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1. Cahiers III, p. 240.
  2. Ibid., p. 247.



Autrement dit, le rejet de l'Eglise est-il premier chez elle, le refus de la Bible n'en étant qu'une conséquence, ou, au contraire, le rejet de l'Ancien Testament serait-il le "premier moteur" de sa dialectique, le rejet de l'Eglise n'étant plus alors qu'une conséquence?<sup>1</sup>

Inasmuch as this question can be answered at all, as a biographical problem, the evidence of her writings suggests, as Moeller proceeds to observe, that the two refusals were simultaneous and inseparable. Certainly her criticism of the social and institutional factors in Catholicism is related to her diagnosis of the Old Testament. It is a just comment on her position regarding the Roman Church to say that she withheld herself from it because it was too Jewish.<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, she wrote to Pere Perrin:

J'ai peur de ce patriotisme de l'Eglise qui existe dans les milieux catholiques. J'entends patriotisme au sens du sentiment qu'on accorde à une patrie terrestre.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of the institution, subordinating the individual to the collective, inspiring purely institutional loyalty and generating purely social feelings, is for her the pitfall of both Israel and the Church. It is significant that the strongest statement of the obstacles to her joining the Church, Lettre à un Religieux, contains also many of her most critical remarks about the Old Testament. It must be added that Simone Weil did not on this account consider Protestantism any more favourably, since for her, although it did not have the Roman concept of the Church, it represented a secularisation of Old Testament collectivism and lent itself to nationalism.<sup>4</sup>

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| 1. | Moeller, <u>op. cit.</u> , p. 109.            | 2. | Fiedler, <u>op. cit.</u> , p. 45. |
| 3. | <u>Attente de Dieu</u> , p. 22.               |    |                                   |
| 4. | <u>La Connaissance Surnaturelle</u> , p. 174. |    |                                   |

So far the question, "What is the value of Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament?", has been approached through the consideration and qualification of certain descriptions of her position, as constituting for example "the rejection of a tradition" or "anti-Semitism". Another aspect of the matter must now be considered. The whole of this study has shown the critique to be the application to a particular religious tradition, and its scripture, of an account of religion and revelation of whose truth the author is absolutely sure. This account has been seen to be different from, almost opposite of, that which is implicit in the Old Testament, so that the critique is inevitably negative. The absolute certainty of Simone Weil's position goes a long way toward explaining for the reader, without his having to resort to the phrase "anti-Semitism", the intensity of feeling with which the critique is made. Thus the question of the critique's value remains.

Simone Weil's observations on the Old Testament are least valuable as an account of the history and literature of Israel. The first chapter of this study showed that her use of the literary evidence was selective, emphasizing the nation's violence and ambition, while tending to neglect evidence of its ethical conscience and self-criticism. The chapter showed that she did not attempt to understand the tradition in the way in which it understood itself. Watkins' implied description of her approach, though a caricature, is not unjust:

The Old Testament is not to be regarded as a heap of general propositions and edifying or savage tales, into which we forage for universal profundities or utterances of racial spleen.<sup>1</sup>

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1. P. Watkins, op. cit., p. 467.

It was noted that Simone Weil's neglect to see the tradition as it saw itself was supremely manifest in her insensitivity to the idea of Israel's moving to less crude and more moral concepts of God by learning the lessons of her violent and unhappy history. At one point Simone Weil ridicules the notion, with reference to the war and massacre accompanying the settlement in Canaan, without mentioning also the ethical conscience and piety of later times, which render the idea less ridiculous. She does not see that violence and ambition on one hand, and conscience and piety on the other, constitute the polarity within which Israel's religion is set. Thus when she writes, "Parler de 'Dieu éducateur' au sujet de ce peuple est une atroce plaisanterie", she refuses to acknowledge one possible way of regarding the Old Testament, which embraces both the poles of its tension, and which corresponds to its own self-understanding.<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament fails to satisfy her own principle that "a religion is only known from inside" ("... une religion se connaît de l'intérieur").<sup>2</sup> Her account of the Old Testament literature does not satisfy that principle, though it goes a long way toward proving its truth!

As was shown in the second chapter, her account of the religions and cultures surrounding Israel in the Old Testament era, though similarly selective, shares a little more ground with recent scholarship. Although problems arose concerning her ethnological and exegetical speculations, her recognition of the East Mediterranean

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1. Cahiers III, p. 240.

2. Attente de Dieu, p. 139. English translation, Waiting on God (London & Glasgow: Fontana, 1959), p. 137.

civilizations at the middle of the second millennium B.C. as a cultural entity, and her emphasis upon correspondences in mythology and ritual, pointed out a direction in which subsequent research has in fact been fruitful and can be expected in the future to throw more light on Biblical material relating to that era.

The examination, in the third chapter, of Simone Weil's criticisms of the conception of God in the Old Testament revealed their value as analysis of the moral and philosophical problems of belief in Yahweh. Of particular value is her pointing to the moral ambiguity of Yahweh's role in Israel's fortunes, as an indication that in the very notion of Yahweh there is a fundamental misconception of divinity. At least the approach to belief in God, which she advocates, does not compromise the common human sense of what is good and just, because it is founded on the discrepancy between man's achievements in the world and his idea of good. The conception of Yahweh, on the other hand, is seen to flounder at this very point, because he is seen as being himself somehow responsible for and sovereign over such achievements. The connection between the conception of Yahweh and the conception of his relation with the universe, as illustrated in the Biblical account of creation, is clarified in Simone Weil's criticism.

Thus follows the value of Simone Weil's criticism of the Old Testament form of religion, as examined in the fourth chapter. In a field of scholarship (that is, Old Testament studies at the present time), in which the propriety of history as a vehicle of divine revelation is not even questioned, her criticisms of the social and historical structure of Israel's religion are of pressing importance.

For example, the concluding statement of G.W.Anderson's essay on "Hebrew Religion":

... for the Old Testament does not contain a speculative religion, but bears witness to the acts of the living God ...<sup>1</sup>

begs the very question that Simone Weil raises. If her study of the tradition betrayed her own principle of knowing a religion as from within, a comment such as Anderson's suggests that modern Biblical theology betrays the complementary and equally important principle of questioning the theoretical and practical implications of a religion as from without.

A further value of her criticism of the social and historical form of the Old Testament lies in its relation to her attack on the modern faith in the progress of society in history. What she analysed and criticised in its secular and theoretical form in Marx, she analyses and criticises in its religious form in the Old Testament, namely the belief that the history of a human collectivity can produce a state of affairs wholly commensurate with man's idea of the ultimate good, or God. Political philosophy has not yet provided an answer to her criticism of Marx, and it remains to be seen whether Biblical theology can provide an answer to her criticism of the Old Testament. As a challenge to the presuppositions of present Biblical theology, her critique has a value that can scarcely be exaggerated.

The critique's value, therefore, for future Old Testament study is in its direction of attention to two neglected levels of enquiry. The first is the examination of the Old Testament in the light of

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1. H.H. Rowley (ed.), The Old Testament and Modern Study (London: O.U.P., 1951), p. 309. The italics are mine.

Ancient East Mediterranean culture, not to construct theoretical patterns of common liturgy, but to pursue the particular and often obscure evidences in the Old Testament of a wider religious background, and to examine the implications of Israel's breaking away from it. The second is the rigorous and objective comparison of the religious ethos of the Old Testament with that of other traditions, taking as subject to question its conception of God and its social-historical structure. Modern Biblical theology can easily enough point out Simone Weil's inadequate knowledge and exegesis of the Old Testament, but it can ill afford to ignore what still remains of this challenge to move out of its esotericism and complacency.

Every stage of this study has led sooner or later to Simone Weil's own certitude as to the true form of revelation and religion. The hallmarks, or criteria, of this truth are certain themes, which she looked for and on the whole did not find in the Old Testament. Inasmuch as she can be said to have had a fundamental and all-embracing perception of reality, an epistémé, these themes are the elements of that perception in the language of religion. Hitherto critics have given insufficient attention to her remarks on the Old Testament from that point of view. What is required is an attempt to sum up the general direction and implication of these themes, and to work out an opinion of them.

The formulation of themes which here follows does attempt to summarise the direction of her thoughts as a whole. It does not try to relate to particular remarks since, as was pointed out in the Introduction, single observations cannot be taken as necessarily

representative of the outcome of her thinking. The nine propositions are an exegetical construction, based on the whole body of material which this study has examined.

1. God is the absolute good.

2. The universe, including human society, is in its nature the realm of necessity, i.e. a complex of pressures directed towards the maintenance of its own existence as an entity.

3. There is an infinite difference between good and necessity, so that no identification or direct correlation between them can truly be conceived.

4. Creation is an act of abdication or self-denial by God who, so to speak, separated himself from himself, in order to allow into existence that which was other than himself.

5. Revelation is the birth of awareness, through contemplation and ecstasy, both of the reality and nature of God, and also of the way of union with him through the surrender of one's own identity as a creature of necessity.

6. Religion is the total human environment which derives from such a revelation, enabling men to use the structures of necessity as media through which to seek knowledge of and union with the good beyond it, without confusing necessity with the good.

7. Intellectual categories, physical forces, and social structures, arising out of necessity, thus play a negative and indirect, rather than positive and direct, role in the conception of God and the construction of religion.

8. For truly religious people necessity loses any reality

apart from God's, and in them the work of creation is "un-done" and God is all in all.

9. The possibility of a life thoroughly transparent to the reality of God and in perfect union with him, through identification with his own sacrificial self-separation, is ever-present and quite independent of any so-called plan in history.

The particular arguments and ideas by which Simone Weil developed these themes, as they concerned her critique of the Old Testament, were encountered in earlier chapters of this study. The task now is to evaluate them as potential criteria for the comparative and philosophical study of religion.

The question, "Is such and such true?", is at least as vexed in religion as in other fields of study. Although Simone Weil clearly believed these themes to be the hallmarks of truth in religion, there is no system of verification agreeable to all students of religion, as there is in empirical science and mathematics. Truth in religion is generally expected to be arrived at in a religious way. If religion is the milieu of relation between man in the world and what he believes to be the ultimate reality (often, as for Simone Weil, a reality beyond this world), the question of truth concerns the intellectual encounter with that reality. The dawning of truth on the individual is itself part of the religious relation between man and God. Truth in religion is received as much as attained. Religion speaks of revelation. Both the Old Testament and Simone Weil would say that the truth about God is revealed. For Simone Weil revelation was a personal experience of illumination and rapture, which could be



called "mystical", in the sense that revelation for Shankarācharya or St. John of the Cross was mystical. If the reality of God transcends the realm of existence in the world (necessity), and if there is the possibility of a union between man and God in which necessity becomes transparent to the good beyond it, then revelation will be mystical. It will contain some experience of the self being seized or invaded by a reality unlike any in the world. Revelation of this kind may also be termed philosophical, in the sense that the mind can formulate, through concepts like good and necessity, the elements of the relation which the revelation expresses. For the Old Testament, on the other hand, revelation was the announcement by God through national leaders and prophets of his own activity in the events of history, (war, exile, and so on). It was historical. If there were a simple way to judge between two such claims of revelation, the mystical and philosophical on the one hand, and the historical on the other, this study would not need to have been undertaken. As it is, one can but look for clarity and consistency in any claim of truth in religion - clarity in the account of revelation itself, and consistency between the account and the record of human experience which is related to it.

The point of Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament is that for her a religious tradition which is based on historical revelation cannot fulfil the basic function of religion, because it confuses the good with necessity. For <sup>her</sup> the Old Testament scriptures testify both to a people's quest for roots and to the tragic uprootedness to which the quest, wrongly conceived, led. The inconsistency

between the claim of divine revelation and the actual record of human rootlessness and "pesanteur", to which the Old Testament bears evidence, is precisely what Simone Weil saw as the starting-point of man's quest for God, but in the Old Testament it is what remains at the end of the record.

It is the contention of this study that the themes which are treated by Simone Weil as the hallmarks of truth in religion, formulated here in the propositions, possess both the clarity, and the consistency with human experience, to recommend them as a suitable starting-point in the search for further understanding in the comparison of religions. They are clear in the sense that they can be followed, from first to last, as an intelligible development of themes, with no break or contradiction. Although they concern a contradiction, that between good and necessity, they themselves are not contradictory. From the fundamental incommensurability of the good and necessity follow the three stages of the formulation: (a) The account of God's act of creation as abdication rather than assertion; (b) The account of revelation as the sense of union with God through the abandonment of individual identity as a creature of necessity; (c) The account of religion as the creation of an intermediary milieu in which necessity, accepted for what it is and not for what it may become, bears testimony to the divine reality to which it owes its existence.

The nine propositions can also claim some consistency with experience, both with general expressions of the human condition, and also with individual accounts of mystical experiences, among which is Simone Weil's own. The general experience of the harshness of the

human condition, which she finds expressed for example in the Iliad, and of the inability of social and material factors to satisfy man's desire for good, is firmly presented in her account. In fact, her most telling criticism of the Old Testament amounts to the observation that although Israel's history bears as eloquent testimony to "pesanteur" as any body of literature, the Israelites never admitted this as the nature of the human condition, maintaining the confusion of the divine will and the processes of world history. Simone Weil's criticism is similarly applied to the prevalent religious and political attitude of the twentieth-century, expecting as it does of the processes of history the development of a state of affairs commensurate with man's highest aspirations, inspite of the unprecedented traumata of world-wide, highly technologised injustice and violence. On the level of general experience, therefore, defined as man's unending servility to force and ambition, Simone Weil's account of religion is as close to a realistic appraisal of the human condition, as the accounts and attitudes which she criticizes are distant from it.

The particular human experience with which her account is consistent is the mystical, the event of rapture, ecstasy and loss of superficial identity, in which individuals of many eras and cultures have known encounter with what they have described as the ultimate and supreme reality. It is not necessary to raise the psychological or physiological aspects of the experience to recognize it at least as something which has happened to many people, and which is described by them in remarkably similar ways.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For studies of mysticism see, for example, William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience; Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism; and R.C.Zaehner, Mysticism, Sacred and Profane.

The principal themes, implicit and explicit in Simone Weil's critique of the Old Testament, do then present one clear account of the nature of God and the function of religion. The Old Testament itself represents another account. The merits of Simone Weil's account are that it does achieve philosophical clarity in itself, in the language of necessity and good, and that it is consistent both with the general experience of the harshness of the human condition, and with the mystical experience of some individuals. The challenge which she issues to the Old Testament account of religion is that in it the good and necessity are confused. The perfection of God, which the Old Testament wishes to maintain, is compromised by the depiction of his direct involvement and initiative in the realm of necessity. She thus raises and answers clearly and affirmatively the question of the very nature of religion. Does true religion, or does it not, start with the recognition of three things - man's bondage to necessity, the reality of absolute good, and the principle of mediation between the two?<sup>1</sup> While this challenge is taken up, the concept of the contradiction between necessity and good remains from her critique as a paradigm for the investigation and comparison of man's religions.

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1. She writes, in a letter to Maurice Schumann, of "le malheur des hommes, la perfection de Dieu et le lien entre les deux." Écrits de Londres, p. 213.

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