



# FAITH AND CONDUCT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper I will not discuss the *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang* on which much has been written.<sup>2</sup> Instead I will try to show that the individual's behavior corresponds to his belief in Yahweh. The same topic is also discussed in the New Testament in the Epistle of James. Therefore this essay also wants to be read as background information for this New Testament letter.

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1. This paper is based on a lecture in Old Testament Theology I delivered in the summer of 2003. I will not investigate the different Hebrew words for faith or belief in the Old Testament, since that would take us well beyond the bounds of the present essay. In addition, the different dictionaries give different meanings for the principal Hebrew word אֱמוּנָה and also for the usage of the *hiphil*. See E. Pfeiffer, "Glaube im AT," *ZAW* 71 (1959): 151ff.; J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 161–205; Jepsen, *TDOT* I:298–309; H. Wildberger, "Glauben im Alten Testament," *ZTK* 65 (1968): 129–59 and "fest, sicher," *ThWAT* I:178–210; G. Wallis, "Alttestamentliche Voraussetzungen einer biblischen Theologie geprüft am Glaubensbegriff," *TLZ* 113 (1988): 1–13; Jepsen, *ThWAT* I:332, states: "Es dürfte kaum möglich sein, die ganze Fülle at.licher Gotteserfahrung aus einer Exegese des אֱמוּנָה zu entwickeln." ("It is hardly possible to develop the fullness of experience of God in the Old Testament merely through an exegesis of אֱמוּנָה.")
  2. Of fundamental importance is K. Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament." *ZThK* 52 (1955): 1–42. For an overview see K. Koch, ed., *Um das Prinzip der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht des A. T.* (Darmstadt, 1972), and H. D. Preuß, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Leo G. Perdue (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 184–94. See also B. Janowski, "Die Tat kehrt zum Täter zurück: Offene Fragen im Umkreis des 'Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhangs.'" *ZThK* 91 (1994): 247–71.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the years I have learned that Christians do not always correlate faith and behavior as the Bible does. Therefore I have undertaken this study in order to show that the entire Old Testament teaches that behavior cannot be separated from faith and faith cannot be separated from behavior.

Christians often seem to think that, during Old Testament times, individuals could have a relationship with Yahweh only through the cult. On the other hand, many others think that God designed the sacrifice during Old Testament times as a minor observance to be kept, since God wanted not sacrifice but obedience. Therefore, if a person wanted to live a righteous life, he could do so only outside of the sacrificial system. However, in the Old Testament, obedience and a personal relationship with Yahweh cannot be separated from the cult. Indeed, the cult is vital for the faith of ancient Israel, vital for Yahweh, and vital for the message of the prophets who demanded it. This is the case because Yahweh revealed himself through the demands of the sacrifice.

## REVELATION OF YAHWEH AND CONDUCT

In order for humanity to believe in Yahweh, he had to reveal himself to the human race in a way that would be understood. Revelation was necessary because God existed prior to everything and independently of everything and everyone. Therefore, on the Bible's first pages, Yahweh revealed himself as a God with an ethical will. The God of the Old Testament is a God of morality and morals.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, he gave Israel commandments and prohibitions (Gen. 2:16–17). A mere formal fulfillment of his cultic instructions was not enough. Such externalized obedience was not in accordance with the revelation of his character, although many Israelites believed it was (Isa. 1:10–17; Jer. 7; Amos 4:4–5; 5:21–24; Mic. 6:6–8). In order to be blessed by Him, unconditional confidence and wholehearted obedience was necessary, even with regard to the cultic instructions and regulations. God showed that he was the ruler over his people. He wanted to be the free choice of the people. Their choice of him was demonstrated by their dedication to him and recognition of all he revealed to them. He made demands not only with regard to himself, but also with regard to the neighbors of the individual Israelite and to the nation of Israel. Therefore, faith in Yahweh was from the beginning a practical faith corresponding to Yahweh's rules of life and resulting in religious and ethical decisions that would reflect his character.

The Decalogue in its entirety portrays rules of conduct with regard to God and fellow countrymen. As early as the introduction to the Sinai event and again in the introduction to the Decalogue, Yahweh makes it very clear that faith and behavior are closely connected and interrelated (Exod. 19:5; 20:2–3). Faith in God without godly behavior in daily life is for the Old Testament an empty delusion. Faith consists

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3. G. Fohrer, *Theologische Grundstrukturen des Alten Testaments* (Berlin, 1972), 164.

in neither a mere recognition or affirmation of religious teaching nor feelings of sympathy or concern for religious and moral values. Faith is rather unconditional trust in God that involves awe, dedication and love (Deut. 6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 26:16; 30:2; Josh. 22:5; 2 Kings 23:3,25) as well as submission to his will and the continuous practical exercise of what all those terms include. A life under God's rule and in fellowship with him aims at the realization of qualities in human beings and in their environment as an essential part of their faith. In the Old Testament, correct behavior is not a second step long after one has trusted Yahweh. Action and behavior according to God's rules cannot be separated from faith in Yahweh. Faith and behavior are not parallel concepts that never cross each other's path; rather, they constantly intersect. Therefore, they should never be studied in isolation. Faith is behavior, and right behavior is only possible for the believer.<sup>4</sup>

### **FAITH AND CONDUCT IN THE PRESENCE OF A LIVING GOD**

That Yahweh, the God of Israel, is a living God can be seen in the fact that he continuously reveals his will to his people at all times and in all circumstances. Even in his rest, God remains active (Ps. 121:4). He is not a God who dies at a certain season and comes alive again at another season. He is not subject to the highs and lows of life cycles; otherwise the prophets would not have spoken out vehemently against this kind of ideology. His power, might and authority never diminish (Gen. 21:33; Exod. 15:18; Deut. 33:27; Isa. 40:28; Jer. 10:10; Pss. 29:10; 90:2; 102:13,27-28); they are always fresh, new and active, even when they are not recognized by humanity as such. Since God is ever-living, his power, might, and authority are not subject to change. Whatever one's shortcomings, to live with such a God in harmonious fellowship requires one to be devoted totally to him. What counts is the alignment of one's entire life to his will.

In order to attain Yahweh's blessing, unconditional trust and total obedience to his revealed will is necessary. Since Yahweh revealed himself in the cultic laws and since those laws were part of his covenant with the people, to obey them was a mark of an obedient and trusting Israelite. In all areas of the people's life, God commanded conformity to his rules. He desired humans to lead lives that acknowledge him as the only true God, lives dedicated wholly to him. God commanded this acknowledgement and dedication not only with regard to himself but also with regard to all Israelites, to both the community as a whole and its individual members. Therefore, in the Old Testament, faith means not only dedication to Yahweh but also dedication to his people and his world; and it cannot be separated from correct thinking and correct behavior. The entire Decalogue portrays this kind of trust and dedication, even in the way it is arranged. Already in the prelude to the Sinai-event and again in the prelude to the Decalogue, God makes clear that belief and behavior are interrelated and interlocked. Faith in Yahweh is empty mania if it does not lead to behavior and action

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4. Ibid., 165.

in daily life in accordance with the revealed divine will. True faith is not merely acceptance of and agreement with religious doctrine and its teaching. It is not a certain kind of religious feeling or experience; nor is it a regular performance of cultic acts. Rather, faith is trusting Yahweh, his person, his character. This trust is characterized by reverence, dedication and love (Deut. 6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 26:16; 30:2; Jos. 22:5; 2 Kings 23:3,25) as well as submission to his revealed will in the constant practical exercise of that which trust and acknowledgement involve. People are expected to live their daily lives according to his rule and in fellowship with him. In the Old Testament, right behavior is not a second step long after the first step of belief has been taken. Action according to God's rule of life and behavior cannot be separated from faith and trust. Belief acts; and the right kind of action is possible only for the believer.<sup>5</sup> So to act, according to the Old Testament, is "to walk with God" (Gen. 5:22,24; 6:9; 48:15; Micah 6:8) or "to walk in his presence" (Gen. 17:1; 24:40; 1 Kings 8:25; 2 Kings 20:3; Ps. 116:9).

Yahweh's revelation cannot be separated from his personality. The revelation of his will reveals him himself. Hence, the Torah is never a lifeless construct with an immanent authority. It cannot be properly understood as a mere piece of literature. It cannot be properly understood apart from the divine lawgiver. The approach often advocated by Old Testament scholars of isolating the different laws from God as its original source and then discovering insurmountable contradictions is mistaken, because it fails to recognize that Yahweh in his sovereign freedom revealed his will as he saw fit.<sup>6</sup>

## FAITH AND CONDUCT IN PRIMEVAL HISTORY

The unity of faith and behavior is nowhere so obvious as in the primeval history and the patriarchal narratives.

The primeval history shows clearly that human beings paid no attention to their God-given identity because they emancipated themselves from God. They did not believe God and behaved accordingly (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:1-5). So they could not live the lives that God had ordained for them. They wanted to plan and shape their own future and control their own lives (Gen.4:1ff). They thought they were independent, not knowing that they were driven by their moods and feelings (Gen. 4:5,23-24). The human race wanted to be autonomous and took its fate into its own hands (Gen. 6:1-8). No longer was God and his revealed will the yardstick of life, but the will of the individual (Gen. 6:5; 8:21). They released themselves from the relationship with God. But only through belief and trust in God could they decide not to pursue their own vision of the future life but to follow the divine plan. In reality, only God can assure a secure future and thereby fulfill any future plan. Human beings, with their limited power and might, are not capable of doing that, although they often think otherwise. If humans believe

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5. Ibid.

6. B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 677.

God, they receive a life in compliance with God's nature and become a blessing to the entire world; if they do not believe God, they alienate themselves from their creator, from a secure future, and from their real selves.

The lives of two personalities in the primeval history and in the patriarchal narratives illustrate this. Noah believed God when he started in a seemingly absurd manner but on divine orders to build a gigantic, ship-box deep in a landlocked region. Abraham believed, obediently leaving his home, family, relationships, and business connections and setting out to an unknown country. His trust in the impeccable leadership of God Almighty was tried by God himself when he commanded the patriarch to sacrifice his only son and the heir God had given him. Both Noah and Abraham became a blessing for mankind: Noah in that Yahweh makes a covenant with him and all of nature promising never again to destroy the surface of the earth through a massive flood; Abraham in that he had faith in God Almighty and therefore became a model of faith for the people of God in the Old and New Testaments. The presence of God was for both individuals a deep reality that determined their belief and actions.

### FAITH AND CONDUCT IN THE PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES

Since Abraham is seen in Scripture as the father of faith,<sup>7</sup> it seems appropriate to give special attention to his life. His kind of faith stands in sharp contrast to that of primeval people and humanity in general. Primeval humans were presumptuous, haughty, and overbearing (e.g., Lamech, Gen. 4:23ff). They shaped their lives after their own principles. They wanted to take their fate into their own hands. Abraham stands in contrast to them. He did not decree his own future because he trusted God, who called him, and put his future into Yahweh's hand. He recognized that he could not secure his future, that only God Almighty could do so. Abraham believed Yahweh and acted accordingly; he opted not for a life of his own planning but for one divinely planned. If one compares him with primeval humanity, one finds not just two epochs, but two kinds of behavior. In Genesis 1–11, humanity is almost exclusively portrayed as being separated from Yahweh. Because they no longer have any connection to God, humans have alienated themselves from their original state, estranging themselves from the image of God. Only by believing Yahweh, which entails behaving accordingly, do they recover their God given image.

Faith in Yahweh and everything for which he stands must always be tested; frequently, Yahweh's plan and efficacy receives no place in the thinking and affairs of humanity. Abraham was no exception. He was not always an unwavering believer, but he had a permanent relationship with Yahweh. His faith was neither a timeless religious quality nor a religious habit. His belief was not the bare affirmation that God exists; it was rather a life lived before and in the presence of God (Gen. 17:1; 24:40). Faith means living with human doubts and contradictions,

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7. Rom. 4:11–12.

even with a sense of resignation, because the momentary reality does not always seem to agree with Yahweh's character and promises.

Genesis 15 makes it evident that faith is the only appropriate behavior, the only right manner of existence corresponding to the divine request. God's promise (Gen. 15:2ff) was at first questioned rather than believed. Nevertheless, Abraham ventured out on God's promise (15:5-6) not because he believed a mere promise in and of itself, but rather because he believed and trusted Yahweh.<sup>8</sup> That involves more than believing a word or sentence that Yahweh has uttered. For Abraham, this promise was not to be separated from the person of Yahweh. His belief was an act of trust, not a generally devout feeling. Faith in Yahweh is dependence on him, on the God who confronts humans with his word despite all their doubts.

The impressive reference to uncountable stars in the sky was no support to belief; rather, it intensified the challenge of trust. Faith must be content with what God says. Abraham received no sign of the veracity of the promise. The theophany in 15:8ff. can be viewed as a sort of confirmation of the promise Abraham received *after* he had believed God.<sup>9</sup> Faith must be content with what God says. Faith need not prove itself by bringing about the impossible. The believer is not expected to perform miracles, but rather to take Yahweh seriously and fear him for whom nothing is impossible, the only one who can secure the future of the human race (Gen. 17:1ff.).

He is expected to get involved with this God, devote his life and all situations—including the most personal ones—to him. The story of Isaac's sacrifice (Gen. 22) makes this point emphatically. It is not primarily the sacrifice of Isaac that is in focus here, but the sacrifice of a future already assured by Yahweh. God expects Abraham to return to him everything he had already given the patriarch in order that Abraham may receive it anew. Abraham had to learn that even the continued existence of an already realized promise depends on Yahweh. Abraham had set out to trust God and follow his orders. In Genesis 12:1-3, these orders are coupled with promises. In Genesis 22, they are not. If therefore God's commandment were obeyed, there would no longer be for Abraham an assured future. Hence, Yahweh's dependability was at stake. This event is not primarily about a promise Yahweh had given, but about Yahweh's credibility, dependability, and faithfulness—or, more simply, about his character. When the New Testament reflects on this event, claiming that God makes the dead to live again (Rom. 4:17; Heb. 11:19), the authors of the New Testament speak not of something desirable but unrealizable; rather, they speak of a genuine ability of God. Abraham thus trusted God's ability. He

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8. It is to be observed, that the Hebrew text reads, "to believe someone," instead of, "to believe a message" (and therefore accept it as true). Cf. R. W. L. Moberly, *NIDOTTE* 1:427-33; H. Wildberger, *ThWAT*, 1:188ff.

9. The same principle can be observed in Joshua 6. For, of course, Joshua and the people received a confirmation of their faith in Yahweh *only after* they performed the, humanly speaking, pointless actions of walking silently around the city and blowing the shofar.

believed Yahweh, not simply a promise. Therefore, the angel says after the indirect sacrifice (22:12): "Now I know that you fear God." The focus here is on acknowledging God as God. Significantly, the promise has not been revoked, though its realization has been called into question. That does not mean that the promise is being spiritualized; rather, it means that Yahweh, as guarantor of the promise's realization demands trust in himself.<sup>10</sup> Faith is not the inclination arising in a moment of crisis; it is a manner of life.

Abraham demonstrated through his willingness to sacrifice Isaac that faith and behavior should not be separated. Restriction of belief only to the inner life of man, according to which one might conform one's conduct to other principles and standards, is incompatible with faith in Yahweh. A faith that distinguishes between belief and behavior is either artificial or dead.<sup>11</sup>

The Abraham story shows that faith originates not in a conviction that God exists and a resulting deeper familiarity with his nature but in a personal encounter with the living God. One can only live in community with him if one devotes one's entire life to him.

## CULT AND DEDICATION

Not only the Decalogue belongs to the covenant from Sinai but also the many cultic rules. The Israelite cult was unthinkable without sacrifices. Even before the Sinai-event, the giving of sacrifices belonged to the most basic components of human life.<sup>12</sup> Sacrifice as the expression of a relationship with God already appears in the fourth chapter of Genesis as something quite obvious. It is also Noah's first action when he disembarks from the ark (Gen. 8:20). So it is not surprising that each Israelite had to offer sacrifices—even if only small ones—when he appeared before God (Exod. 23:15; 34:20; Deut. 16:16). The cult was the only possible answer of the people to the noble presence of Yahweh in their midst.

All sacrifices had to be perfect—i.e., only the best was accepted for sacrifice.<sup>13</sup> Animals without infirmities had been used for breeding from antiquity in order to secure a healthy livestock, so this may have been seen as a way of securing humanity's continued existence. But Yahweh demanded that the best animal be given to him, a true sacrifice for the people. Through this command, Yahweh makes clear that he secures the existence of his people. Faulty sacrifices were therefore an insult to Yahweh, an abomination to him, because they didn't correspond to his character (Mal. 1:8,13–14; Lev. 22:18–24; Deut. 15:21; 17:1).

It is fundamental for the Old Testament that obedience and sacrifice always belonged together.<sup>14</sup> Sacrifice without obedience was for Yahweh a scandal. He abhorred it. The sacrificial ritual's having a magical effect (*ex opere operato*) was rejected by God's spokesmen, the prophets,

10. H. J. Hermission and E. Lohse, *Faith*, trans. Douglas Stott (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 36.

11. Fohrer, *Grundstrukturen*, 165.

12. R. Rendtorff, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 2: *Thematische Entfaltung* (Neukirchen, 2001), 104.

13. Voluntary sacrifices were allowed to have minor infirmities (Lev. 22:23).

as was the pagan principle of *quid pro quo*.<sup>15</sup> The sacrificer could not see the personal effects of the cultic action: he had to believe without seeing. He had to believe that reconciliation and communion with Yahweh were achieved through the offering. By putting the victim on the altar, he also acknowledged the sacred character of Yahweh (Lev. 21:6). From the people, who sacrificed as a mere cultic duty, obedience and conduct conforming to the character of Yahweh were demanded (1 Sam. 15:22; Jer. 7:21; Hosea 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8). The sacrifice maintained its significance only through obedience and appropriate conduct (Ps. 51:18–19).

The connection between sacrifice and conduct are to be seen in the offering of a *זָבִיחַ* sacrifice. Whenever an Israelite brought such an offering, he demonstrated that he was acting in conformity with the will of God (Lev. 21:6). Similarly, he demonstrated subjection to God's will if he lived a life visibly in harmony with God's commands. Leviticus 19:2 and 20:26 introduce pericopes that expound the manifold aspects of a godly life.<sup>16</sup>

But Israel often deviated from such life, especially when they thought that a purely external performance of the cultic ritual or a rigid outward obedience to the law was sufficient to express the godly life that God demanded. These attitudes, as well as the human aspiration for protection before and from God, become visible in humanity's religious tragedy, which runs through both Testaments. The focus in both Testaments is on life before and in the presence of God. But humanity reduced it to a formal keeping of religious rituals. Thus, they lived visibly in accordance with the ordinances of Yahweh, but in reality they could, without guilty consciences, live as they wanted, according to their own rules and regulations. This kind of attitude showed that they did not really trust Yahweh and did not understand what Yahweh's goal was in his relationship with them. Sacrifice instead of obedience is as false an alternative as obedience instead of sacrifice. The prophets did not call the people back to the cult or to a renewed belief in Yahweh's promises, but to Yahweh himself (Jer. 3:12,14,22; 4:1; Ezek. 33:11; Hosea 12:6; Jo. 2:12).<sup>17</sup> Whoever believed Yahweh participated with the right attitude in the cult. He knew that Yahweh had demanded the sacrifices, and that they are therefore an outward expression of personal faith and obedience. Hence, even the cult of ancient Israel reveals the inseparable unity of faith in Yahweh and the corresponding behavior.<sup>18</sup>

14. J. S. Feinberg, "Salvation in the Old Testament," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honour of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. J. S. Feinberg and P. D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 39–77.

15. R. Wakely, "זָבִיחַ," *NIDOTTE*, ed. W. A. VanGemeren (Carlisle, 1996), I:235; W. J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: Its Expression in the Books of the Old Testament* (Leicester, 1989), 116.

16. See Rendtorff, *Theologie* II:119–21.

17. See also Feinberg, "Salvation," 56.

18. In this connection it should be pointed out that Christ's sacrificial death on the cross is the visible sign of his obedience to God (Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:7–8; Rom. 5:19).



The cult prescribed by God makes it clear that belief and behavior of its participants should form a unity. Visiting sanctuaries and participating in cultic ritual do not show that one seeks God. Only a life demonstrating the inseparable unity of faith and conduct reveals that one wants to live in the presence of a holy God (Amos 5:21–24). Only in the context of such a God-fearing life does visiting the sanctuaries and participating in the cult make sense, since this believer will bring sacrifice with a right attitude and worship in a manner worthy of a holy God (Isa. 6; Ps. 51:21; Eccles. 4:17–5:6).

If faith and behavior form such a strong unity and are fundamental to the Israelite cult, it is to be expected that this unity could also be observed in other parts of the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, then, the inseparability of faith and conduct is also apparent in Old Testament law.

### FAITH AND CONDUCT IN OLD TESTAMENT LAW

The emphasis on the unity between faith and behavior is also manifested in the Decalogue, in the form of apodictically formulated sentences.<sup>19</sup> These apodictically formulated sentences in the Decalogue are not laws according to which one could pronounce sentences on certain offences. They are not devised as legal statute but recommend to the individual a certain conduct.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, one does not read of any legal sanctions for an offence already committed. Hence, strictly speaking, the apodictically formulated sentences could not be used in a court proceeding.<sup>21</sup> They were rather intended to influence the individual so that he shapes his life in accordance with the divine will. Therefore, the Decalogue does not contain law in today's sense of the word. Law in our sense of the word can be found in the book of the covenant (Exod. 21–24) formulated in the casuistic sentences.<sup>22</sup> A comparison of the Decalogue with the book of the covenant makes it apparent that the Decalogue was never viewed as law. The latter contains rules of behavior for the daily life of the ancient Israelite. It contains the basic stipulations for the covenant people of ancient Israel.<sup>23</sup>

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19. Liedke, *Gestalt und Bezeichnung alttestamentlicher Rechtssätze* (Neukirchen, 1971), 138, note 3; G. Fohrer, "Das sogenannte apodiktisch formulierte Recht und der Dekalog," *Studien zur alttestamentlichen Theologie und Geschichte (1949–1966)* (Berlin, 1969), 148.

20. The apodictically and casuistically formulated sentences are part of the covenant stipulations. Therefore it is not surprising that obedience to the voice of God is the same as obedience to the covenant stipulations (Deut. 27:26; 28:15).

21. This is supported by the usage of such sentences in decrees and edicts. For examples, see Liedke, *Rechtssätze*, 120–25. An extensive compilation of "apodictic law" can be found in W. Schottroff, *Der israelitische Fluchspruch* (Neukirchen, 1969), 95–112 and M. Weinfeld, *ThWAT* I:801–804.

22. See Fohrer, *Grundstrukturen*, 166. Regarding the casuistic and apodictic formulated sentences, see G. Liedke, *Rechtssätze* (Neukirchen, 1971). A complete comparison of all the laws in the Pentateuch appears in G. Lasserre, *Synopse Des Lois Du Pentateuque* VT Suppl. 59 (Leiden, 1994).

23. Fohrer, *Grundstrukturen*, 166.

Furthermore, it should be observed that the legal material in the Pentateuch is frequently interspersed with narratives. These stories are illustrations to show how these commandments should function and how they should shape the life of the individual. Therefore, no distinction was made between cultic and ethical imperatives, but both imperatives were intended to mould the life of the community. Israel was expected to mirror God's holiness and show his character to others (Lev. 19:1ff). The specific laws that follow these verses are derived from this directive (Lev. 19:3ff). Finally, the frequent summaries that sum up the law with regard to the love of God (Deut. 6:5) and to one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18) serve the same function. They were intended to prevent the law from being followed only in its letter and not also in its spirit.<sup>24</sup> Yahweh, however, has revealed himself not only through the cult-ordinances and covenant stipulations but also again and again through miracles. Therefore, the question arises, in what way do the reported miracles contribute to the theme of faith and conduct?

### MIRACLES AND FAITH<sup>25</sup>

In its history, Israel experienced miracles of God from the beginning. The ten plagues meant suffering for the Egyptians, but for Israel they meant deliverance by Yahweh. These and all other deeds of God were designed to lead Israel to an understanding of Yahweh. Divine revelation via miracles comes before the perception of Yahweh. It is unimportant whether one witnesses the miracle oneself or gains knowledge of it from others.

The miracles during the Exodus should have led the people to knowledge of Yahweh's character. (This explains the many statements about the knowledge of Yahweh within the miracles reports [Exod. 7:17; 8:6,19; 9:14,29; 11:7].) The passage through the sea of reeds, the annihilation of the Egyptian army, and the provision of his people with food and water suffice to show the diversity of his miracles. When Jethro, a Midianite priest, heard about the mighty deeds of Yahweh, he acknowledged that Yahweh is greater than all other gods (Exod. 18:11). Moreover, he also tolerates no deities besides himself in the life of his people (Exod. 20:2,5). He demands absolute allegiance, undivided obedience.

It thus becomes clear that Israel's existence as a people was itself a miracle of God (Deut. 7:7f). But something else also becomes clear: man can deny the fact and purpose of miracles (Num. 14:11). Such denial comes despite the fact that signs and miracles seen and experienced by Israel were done in his favor and served as Yahweh's credentials as God (Exod. 34:10; Ezek. 20:1-31). Through the miracles Yahweh revealed his ability and willingness to lead his people out of bondage to Egypt, the world power of that day. Furthermore, he was able and willing to look after his people, to protect and keep them safe, and to fulfill his promises. Yahweh's historical acts demonstrated his unique-

24. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 680-81.

25. See also F. E. Wilms, *Wunder im Alten Testament* (Regensburg, 1979).

ness (Deut. 4:39; 7:7–15; 11:2; 29:4f.). The recognition of Yahweh as God based on his miraculous deeds motivates the Israelites' obedience (Deut. 5:15; 15:15; 24:17,22). Non-observance or misapprehension of the intent of the miracles amounts to rejecting God.<sup>26</sup> Yahweh's actions, particularly at the beginning of ancient Israel's history, were past events, but they were nonetheless of the utmost importance for the present (Exod. 17:14; Deut. 5:31; Jer. 36:2–3; Ps. 22:5–6,20–22; 78:5ff; 106). What happened yesterday still has its effect today because the very existence of God's people arises from his past actions. Israel had become God's proprietary-people and was therefore devoted to him (Exod. 19:5; Deut. 7:6; 14:2). Not only the event of the Exodus and their wanderings in the wilderness, but also the acquisition of land and other events were to lead to an appropriate knowledge of Yahweh (Josh. 3:10; 4:24) and to bring about corresponding behavior by both the nation and the individual. Further, Israel was obliged to obey Yahweh in the future (Deut. 5:3; 9:4–6; 11:29,32). However, the recognition of Yahweh as the only true God could not be coerced by miraculous signs. One who wants neither to believe nor to trust God will refuse to recognize these signs as Yahweh's actions. Israel's history is marked by this indifference, which amounts to faithlessness and disobedience. For many in Israel, Yahweh was a mere stopgap, a fill-in (Jer. 2:27b). In everyday life, the people paid him no attention. He had no place in their plans and considerations (Jer. 18:15).

Whoever forgets God's deeds in the past cannot adequately serve him (Hosea 5:4)—hence, the oft-repeated invitation to remember and consider the nation's history with Yahweh (Exod. 13:3; Isa. 46:8–9; Mal. 3:22; Ps. 105:5; 1 Chron. 16:12,15). However, Israel's history was one of disobedience to God (e.g., Ezek. 20:8) because they had forgotten his deeds in the past on their behalf (Pss. 78:10–11,17–19,32,41–42,57; 106:7,13,21). Israel replaced her God, who had legitimized himself through signs and miracles and whose fidelity and reliability Israel had experienced throughout its history, with other gods (Deut. 32:15–18).

The signs and miracles of Yahweh in the Old Testament should have been sufficient for Israel to recognize her God's divinity and care for them. So also they should have concluded that, given Yahweh's mighty acts and deeds on their behalf, their faith and trust in him must show itself in corresponding belief and conduct. No group within ancient Israel tried harder to make that clear to the nation than the prophets.

## FAITH AND CONDUCT IN THE PROPHETS

The inner and outer expressions of the unity of faith and conduct ground all prophetic preaching. In all their preaching, the prophets addressed the conflict or rupture between faith and behavior. Even the early prophets censured this fatal rupture (1 Kings 18:21; cf. Josh.

26. B. S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London, 1985), 45, states: "The disclosure of who God is emerges from his activity. To know his deeds is to understand who he is. There is no hiatus between his acts and his being."

24:15; 1 Sam. 15:22). The prophet's main critique was aimed at those who claimed to believe but whose conduct indicated otherwise. This critique arose from the observation that human action and behavior are at variance with belief in Yahweh (Jer. 7:21–23; Ezek. 5:5ff; Mic. 6:6–8). Faith must affect all areas of life, even the political realm. This seems nowhere more obvious than in the Judean king Ahaz's preparations for the Syro-Ephraimitic war. When Isaiah confronts his king at the beginning of the war in order to stop him from making further preparations for it and looking to the Assyrians for help, he admonishes him: "If you do not believe you will not remain" (Isa. 7:9).<sup>27</sup> Thus, faith becomes a question of conduct. The Judean king should behave differently than other kings. Instead of preparing Jerusalem for an attack and siege by the enemy forces and trembling like a leaf in view of the superior strength of his foe, he should trust Yahweh. Instead of asking the Assyrians for help, and thus becoming their vassal and losing the freedom that Yahweh was ready to defend, he should undertake nothing.<sup>28</sup>

The prophetic word in Isaiah 7 addressed to King Ahaz at the time of the siege of Jerusalem by troops from Syria and Israel begins and ends with a warning (vv. 4,9).<sup>29</sup> The two warnings are related. Between them there is a verdict regarding the enemies besieging Jerusalem (vv. 5–9a). This verdict does not depend on the king's faith in Yahweh. However, the continuance of his kingdom *does* depend on his belief and action. So what should a believing king do? The answer seems absurd: He should be calm and not fear the superior power of the enemy, believing that only clouds of smoke will remain of his enemies. Belief requires fearlessness, though not reckless bravado.<sup>30</sup>

The continuance of the Davidic dynasty, and therefore the prolonging of the king's own house, rested in Yahweh's promise to David (2 Sam. 7:16).<sup>31</sup> If the king were to believe God's promise, he and his dynasty would remain. Since it is not God's character to leave his promises unfulfilled (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29), the promise of 2 Samuel 7 is timeless. For, of course, Yahweh stands behind it. So the invitation to remain quiet and wait for the intervention of the Lord is well-founded. The king should let Yahweh act, for Yahweh's action will save the Davidic dynasty.

The passivity demanded of the king cannot be equated with sweet indolence. It is for him politically questionable and a most difficult demand to accept. Indeed, the king refuses to yield. But the prophet

27. A similar expression is found in Isaiah 30:15.

28. Fohrer, *Grundstrukturen*, 169–70.

29. For the Hebrew syntax of Isaiah 7:3–9, see M. Sæbø, "Formgeschichtliche Erwägungen zu Jes. 7:3–9," *StTh* 14 (1960), 54–69; O. H. Steck, "Rettung und Verstokung: Exegetische Bemerkungen zu Jesaja 7, 3–9," *EvTh* 33 (1973), 77–90; and A. J. Bjerndalen, "Zu Einordnung und Funktion von Jes 7,5f," *ZAW* 95 (1983), 260–63.

30. Hermission, *Faith*, 79.

31. See E. Würthwein, "Jesaja 7, 1–9," *Theologie als Glaubenswagnis*, Festschrift für K. Heim, ed. Evangelische Theologische Fakultät Tübingen (Hamburg, 1954), 47–63.

gives him a second chance. Ahaz should demand of Yahweh a sign that Jerusalem will not be taken and his dynasty will continue. However, the king rejects this second chance with devout and pious words (7:11–12). In the end, he decides against Yahweh. The choice between belief and unbelief was a public decision because it became visible to everyone via the king's politics. His choice to opt against Yahweh meant that the king was not prepared to base the continuance of the Davidic dynasty on Yahweh's promise rather than his own diplomatic and military skills.<sup>32</sup> No earthly king controls the history of this world. Ahaz was asked to act in accordance with this fact; instead, he opted for political and military means, seeking to mobilize human strength and wit.<sup>33</sup>

In a similar manner the prophets called again and again for harmony between faith and conduct. They did not call the people to return to old circumstances but to align all areas of life to the power of the holy God (Isa. 6). It was not enough to intensify the cultic ritual superstitiously or to increase the number of sacrifices out of an allegedly hypersensitive conscience (Mic. 6:1–8).<sup>34</sup> Increased cultic ritual cannot forestall the judgment of the Lord; only a life lived in harmony with Yahweh's character can do so (Isa. 1:10–17; Jer. 7; Amos 4:4–5; 5:21–24; Mic. 6:6–8). Isaiah demanded that Ahaz trust Yahweh despite a seemingly hopeless situation. Wisdom literature and the psalms also demand such trust.

## FAITH AND CONDUCT IN WISDOM LITERATURE AND THE PSALMS

God's existence is generally not questioned in either the wisdom-literature or the psalms. Rather, it is a sign of faith even in the time of trouble and misery to believe in and to trust God.<sup>35</sup> Only fools say there is no God (Pss. 14:1; 53:2). They are actually the *Seins-Dummen*,<sup>36</sup> because they do not understand the basis of all existence. The praying person is different. He does not doubt the existence of God even in his greatest need. In the lament psalms, the psalmist expresses his need to a God whom he perceived to be distant but from whom he expected concrete help. The believer does not ascertain, but he asks: Why? How long? Should it last forever? Why do you leave me in the lurch? The complaints in the psalms are goal-oriented complaints. They are not directed toward a higher being in general, nor are they meant for one's own encouragement. Rather, they are directed to the God of Israel.<sup>37</sup>

These kinds of complaints are only possible with an attitude of trust. This trust is reflected in the language of the praying person. The most frequent expression is: "I trust in you" or something similar (Pss. 13:6;

32. Ibid, 60.

33. See also Exod. 14:14; Zech. 4:6.

34. See the analysis of this passage by E. C. Lucas, "Sacrifice in the Prophets," *Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. R. T. Beckwith and M. J. Selman (Carlisle, 1995), 65.

35. Hermission, *Faith*, 46–47.

36. Ibid. It is difficult to translate this idiom into English. Maybe it would be best to render it as "existentially inept."

37. Ibid., 46.

25:2; 26:1; 28:7; 31:14; 52:8; 55:23; 56:3–4,11; 62:2; 91:2; etc.). The psalmist also speaks of Yahweh as his place of refuge and as his part (Pss. 16:5; 62:8; 71:7; 73:26; 91:2,9; 94:22; 119:57; 142:6). God is near in the most severe trouble. However, some Psalms express a feeling of abandonment by God. When people suffer severely, they often feel forsaken by God. This subjective experience can aggravate into utmost fear and panic. Although the psalmist expresses this subjective feeling of horror, he does not stop there. The mood of utmost helplessness changes to expressions of faith and trust. Yahweh is able to deliver and his help is always available. That is the psalmist's confession.

This transformation from a feeling of abandonment, fear, and helplessness to a renewed trust in the abilities of Yahweh is not to be confused with the mistaken belief or misguided trust that the prophets so vehemently denounced (Amos 5:5,18–20; Jer. 7:3f; 23:10f; Mic. 3:11ff). An expression of trust not accompanied by corresponding conduct proves the expression a lie (Jer. 7:10f.). Such trust may seem genuine even to the one expressing it, but a discrepancy nonetheless exists between profession and reality.<sup>38</sup> Faith and trust without obedience is a lie. A confession not apparent in the way one lives one's life is a delusion (Jer. 6:13–14; Hosea 12:1).<sup>39</sup> Such trust is a groundless self-deception. This does not mean that the believer will never doubt. But the psalms show that doubt is never the final response to the difficulties in life. Their confession that Yahweh will eventually help—that he will ultimately deliver—rests on the secure ground of Yahweh himself. Since genuine faith manifests itself in action and conduct, they also know that faith and trust in Yahweh is not a purely private matter.

## THE EARTHY FAITH OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The focus of Old Testament faith is almost exclusively restricted to this life. Only in the later books of the Old Testament is a certain hope in the hereafter evident, but this life ends in death. When one passes away, one's life with God also passes away (Isa. 38:18; Ps. 115:17). The human self is insolubly tied to this life.<sup>40</sup> In the grave, one can neither thank God nor praise him (Ps. 88:11–13); nor does one remember his deeds. Nevertheless, the fear of death and the grave seems to motivate devout living on earth (Pss. 39, especially vv. 5–7; 90:12; Eccles. 9:10; 11:1–6; 12:13). The reign of God will be established on this earth and the land of Israel, with its capital Jerusalem, will play a central role in it (Isa. 2:2–3; 60–62; Mic. 4:1–3; Ps.48).

God wants to win the living for himself. They should serve him, recognizing and proclaiming his reign (Deut. 8:5–6; Isa. 43:10). For the ancient Israelite, faith in Yahweh and life on this earth belong

38. 1 Samuel 15:23 indicates that disobedience is idolatry.

39. The three Hebrew words שקר, כזב, and כחש which are translated "lie" are also being used in a metaphorical sense to designate false religious and ethical actions. See M. A. Klopfenstein, "Sqr," in *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (1997), 1399–1405. See also his *Die Lüge nach dem Alten Testament* (Zurich, 1964), 78, 147, 154, 158, 192, 230, 269.

40. Fohrer, *Grundstrukturen*, 174.

inseparably together. Therefore, faith and trust in Yahweh should determine the life of people on earth. Life as God's gift should be received gratefully from his hands. Only thus is it truly livable.

Man achieves his intended purpose only by unconditionally accepting God's revealed will and rule. Only then does life on earth reflect its full value. Nevertheless, life on earth is not glorified. The Israelite knew about the illness, evil and death that could come into his life suddenly and unexpectedly through no fault of his. Yet he neither considered life base nor looked pessimistically on it; he knew that it was given to him not for its own sake but rather to manifest God's reign. For this reason, he neither thought little of it nor considered it unimportant. Instead, he opened eyes and heart for everything this life had to offer.<sup>41</sup> Contempt of this world and escapism were therefore unknown to him. Even Kohelet, who views much of life as vain and striving after wind, seeks to understand what his role in life on earth and wants to enjoy it as long as it is granted to him (Eccles. 3:22; 5:17f; 9:8–10).

However, the enjoyment of life is often undermined by pain and suffering (Job 30:27–31; Eccles. 5:16; Pss. 38:4–9; 88:4–10). The cold can rob one of sleep at night; the summer's scorching heat can dry up the body or make people pant like animals without water. Woman bears children only through intense pain; with sorrow and tears, she lays her children in the grave (Jer. 31:15; Gen. 37:35). The husband's work frequently fails to support his family. His field brings forth thistles and thorns; drought and locusts destroy his eagerly awaited harvest (Deut. 28:38; 1 Kings 8:37; 2 Chron. 7:13; Joel 1:4); carnivores ravage his herd. Rich and mighty men suppress the poor, widows and orphans (Deut. 10:18; Isa. 1:23; Ezek. 22:6–7). Corrupt judges pronounce unjust sentences and keep from the suppressed what belongs to them. If an enemy invades the country and besieges a city, cannibalism may result (2 Kings 6:28–29; Lam. 4:10). If an enemy conquers one's city, a harrowing and painful death is a real possibility (2 Kings 8:12; 15:16); if the conqueror shows mercy, one becomes a slave without rights.<sup>42</sup>

Even in such a life, however, one can meet God and experience his help.<sup>43</sup> If man experiences such things, he may doubt the power or willingness of God Almighty to come to his rescue. In retrospect, though, he may recognize that God is sublime and mysterious. From a human perspective, he acts in surprising and sometimes troubling ways. Things dreadful and terrible as well as good and pleasant come from his hand and are intended to encourage belief in the divine promises (Isa. 45:7; Job 1:22; 2:10; Ps. 119:65,67; Eccles. 7:14). Only the belief that God has not left this world, which he himself created, to fend for itself, but holds and sustains it enables one to endure suffering and pain (Ps. 8:4–7).

41. Ibid. 175.

42. I. J. Gelb, "Prisoners of War in Early Mesopotamia," *JNES* 32 (1973), 70–98.

K. R. Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Peabody, 2002), 236–37.

43. For an illustration, see Lamentations.

Although ancient Israel's faith concerns the here and now, it is not concerned with this world only. The Israelite knew of a future in which Yahweh has the final word. Nevertheless, the apocalypticist did not take refuge in a splendid future in order to escape the present. Rather, he sought to give solace in a time of suffering and trouble, to encourage the people to trust in almighty Yahweh (Dan. 3:6). Hence, the believer can endure distress from the godless and wicked with serenity. His suffering will not last long. The end of his oppression is never out of view. The power and reign of godless, earthly rulers are restricted by God's omnipotence (Dan. 4:14; 5:26ff). God's own reign is established already in the present; it is not only for the future, after the time of wrath (Dan. 2:21; 3:33; 4:31ff., 6:27). Thus, the apocalypticist's present action is determined by his belief in God's intervention in world-history. Faith can move mountains in the present because they will be made low in the future (Isa. 40:4; 49:11).

## CONCLUSION

Life on this earth presents a great challenge for the faith of any human being. One must face this challenge if one is to have a chance at succeeding in life; one cannot escape it by taking refuge in one's inner self or edifying oneself and thereby withdrawing from this world. To withdraw from life on earth and its challenges by preparing oneself for the new heaven and new earth does not signify unconditional trust in God. Neither does one signify faith in almighty God by disconnecting oneself from the God given responsibilities of this earth (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:15), seeking self-edification in the contemplation of so-called spiritual things. Everyone comes under the obligation imposed to trust Yahweh and in trusting him to withstand the manifold adversities of life on earth. This obligation should be taken seriously and carried out responsibly.

Israel was asked to lead an existence that was neither driven by her own goals nor empowered by her own will. She was asked to lead a life molded by God's will. For such was the only existence not doomed to failure. Israel failed, because she, like the people of the primeval history (Gen. 3:23-24; 6:13), lived apart from Yahweh despite her religiosity. Israel should have exemplified a new existence because of Yahweh and her relationship with him. She should have demonstrated to a world incapable of living spiritually, what it meant to be God's very own people (Deut. 4:6ff.).

Humans are not permitted to withdraw into the religious realm and to restrict God's reign to temples, priesthood and cultic rituals.<sup>44</sup> Man should use all his strength and wealth to acknowledge and realize the divine claim upon all areas of his life (e.g., Deut. 6:5; 10:12; 13:3; 26:16; 30:6,10; Josh. 22:5; 1 Sam. 7:3). His creator, the giver of all gifts, obliges him to dedicate his life to Yahweh in willing obedience. Only thus will he receive a new existence, the meaning and goal of which is Yahweh himself (Exod. 19:5-6). Only this mode of existence

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44. Fohrer, *Grundstrukturen*, 181.



promises success rather than failure. Only in this way can one experience God's continual presence, even in the darkest hours of the earthly life. Faith in Yahweh is not just *an* ingredient in one's recipe for making decisions. Nor is it simply one detail of life among others. Rather, it is the only true foundation of life, the only sure basis for decision-making. Such faith can never be a private matter.

The people of God belong not only to God but also, because they live on this earth, to the communities of which they are citizens. However, the question of what belief in God means to public policy cannot be answered here. Even so, the forceful reminder of the Old and New Testaments to consider this carefully and to refrain from rash political decisions must not be ignored. At the same time, we should realize that things and events can be truly seen—seen for what they really are—by faith alone. (2 Kings 6:17). Belief in oneself, in one's own power and strength, is also unbelief, blinding one to reality. In Isaiah 7, the focus is on the defense—conditions of the city, on her fortifications and their state of repair, not on Yahweh who had everything in hand. The incidental and superficial received priority. Faith gives one over to Yahweh, leading him to abandon trust in material defenses, in his own strength, and in his political allies (Isa. 30:8–17; Zech. 4:6). Faith which does not thus become visible in behavior and action is not at all faith in Yahweh.<sup>45</sup>

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