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The Concept of Time in the Old Testament¹

Hans Walter Wolff

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In the Old Testament we find abundant evidence for the view that man lives out his life within time, that he lives within times that change. By examining characteristic Old Testament texts, we shall attempt to gain a picture of how the Old Testament's understanding of time relates to its understanding of man.

I. THE YAHWIST

The Yahwist does not yet exhibit a theoretical concern for the problem of time. What he has to say about man's life in relation to time is therefore all the more remarkable. Before he tells us about the creation of man at the beginning of his narrative in Genesis (2:7), he notes that it took place on the "day when Yahweh God made heaven and earth" (2:4b). Here the Yahwist does not use the word "day" in the sense of a "calendar day." This is,

therefore, not a physical concept of time but rather a period of time exclusively in the sense of an *event*, especially an event in which God is at work. To this he adds a negative aspect (v. 5): "There was yet no plant and no herb in the earth, for Yahweh God had not yet caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground." After this the course of time is experienced as a sphere of activity in which divine and human actions begin to effect changes. The era in which conditions and relationships change begins when God forms man and breathes into him the breath of life (2:7). With a minimum of abstractness but with a maximum of vividness, the Yahwist portrays how man originally used his time.

In the Paradise story man primarily spends his time with the cultivation, protection, and enjoyment of the garden which has been provided for him and entrusted into his care (2:15 f.). However, his lifetime will be ended by punishment of death in the event that he distrustfully oversteps the boundaries placed on his existence in the garden (2:17). This he in fact does by haughtily assuming the prerogatives of the divinity (3:1 ff.). Yet nothing is said about the aforementioned death. Man must only be subjected to the affliction of one who godlessly and recklessly takes his life into his own hands (3:15-19). But his lifespan, which was determined when he was created from the earth (3:19)² and which he can never exceed (vv. 22, 24), will not

¹ Translated by Gary Stansell. Bibliography: W. Vollborn, *Studien zum Zeitverstaendnis des Alten Testaments* (1951); C. H. Ratschow, "Anmerkungen zur theologischen Auffassung des Zeitproblems," *ZThK*, 51 (1954), 360-87; W. Eichrodt, "Heilserfahrung und Zeitverstaendnis im Alten Testament," *ThZ*, 12 (1956), 103-25; J. Muilenburg, "The Biblical View of Time," *HTbR*, 54 (1961), 225-71; J. Barr, "Biblical Words for Time," *StBTh*, 33 (1962); M. Sekine, "Erwaegungen zur hebraeischen Zeitauffassung," *VT Suppl.*, 9 (1963), 66-82; T. Boman, *Das hebraeische Denken im Vergleich mit dem griechischen* (1968, 5th ed.), 104-33, 140-42, 209-12; J. R. Wilch, *Time and Event* (1969); G. von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (1970), 182-88, 295-306; Gerhard Delling, "Chronos," *TbWNT*, 9 (1972), 576 ff.

be shortened. He is merely driven from the garden (3:22-24). But God clothes him with a garment of skins which provides much better protection than the fig-leaf aprons he himself had made (3:21; see v. 7). Thus, against the background of man's deserved death penalty, the time he is allowed to live appears as an undeserved gift in which he finds protection.

The same is true for Cain. The blood of his brother cries out for vengeance, and Cain fears that whoever finds him will slay him (4:10, 14). But Yahweh Himself safeguards the already forfeited life of the murderer by placing a protective mark on Cain and by threatening his potential enemies with a sevenfold vengeance (v. 15). Even the one who murders his brother is given the gift of time in which he finds protection.

After the great flood, the character of man's mind and will³ is said to be "evil from his youth"; thus the grounds for God's intention to destroy human life remain unaltered (compare Gen. 8:21 with 6:5). Again Yahweh changes His decision for the sake of man; He will never again strike every living creature but declares instead:

While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease. (8:22)

An agricultural society depends on the recurrence of the different hours in the day and the varying seasons of the year. Man takes pleasure in the benefit of changing periods of time. In the passage just cited the Yahwist makes a fundamental statement concerning "all the days of the earth." These days are man's time, an unalterably decreed gift of

the One who saves from the last judgment. Unalterably they provide the changes in time and season which make it necessary for man to work and to rest, to exert himself at seed time and to take delight in the harvest (Ps. 126:6 ". . . sowing with tears, reaping with shouts of joy"), to go into the fields and to return home.

Beyond this unalterable cyclic change the Yahwist with absorbed interest focuses on the beginning of new things which had not existed before. If we consider the Yahwist's history as a whole, one of these new beginnings is already mentioned in Gen. 8:22, where the promise of un-remitting seasons and times nullifies the curse. And it is most remarkable how often the Yahwist speaks of the "beginning" (*chalah*—hiph.) of something as yet unmentioned, as may be seen in the following examples: Gen. 4:26—"At that time men *began* to call upon the name of Yahweh"; 6:1—"When men *began* to multiply upon the face of the earth. . ."; 9:20—"As a tiller of the soil, Noah *began* to plant vineyards"; 10:8—"The mighty men on earth had their *beginning*" with Nimrod; 11:6—the building of the city and tower for security and self-praise, an expression of mankind's unity, is said to be the "*beginning* of what they will do" (see 13:3; 43:18, 20); Num. 25:1—at the conquest the people of Israel "*began* to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab" and to yoke themselves to the idol Baal of Peor. The close attention the Yahwist pays to the changes in the course of events is shown by the catchword "new" (*chadash*) at the beginning of Israel's history, where it is said that "a *new* king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Ex. 1:8). Highly characteristic of the Yahwist's interest in the ordering of events which take place together is his preference for the word *terem* ("not yet, before"), which otherwise occurs rarely in the Pentateuch and which we already met

² See 2:7 and H. W. Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1973), pp. 172 f.

³ *Ibid.*, 84

in Gen. 2:5.⁴ For example, Gen. 24:15 reports that when Abraham's servant had gone to seek a wife for Isaac, Rebecca came out to him even *before* he had ended his prayer for Yahweh's help (see 19:4; 27:4, 33; 37:18; 45:28; Num. 11:33). Worthy of special attention is the relationship of successive events marked by *terem* in the plague narratives which prepare for the exodus from Egypt. During the plague of hail Moses says to Pharaoh in Ex. 9:30: "I know that you do *not yet* fear Yahweh." During the plague of locusts Pharaoh's servant asks him (Ex. 10:7): "Do you *not yet* understand that Egypt is ruined?" Finally, as the people hurriedly departed, they characteristically and logically took their dough *before* it was leavened (Ex. 12:34). But the Yahwist can completely dispense with temporal adverbs when he presents the great historical developments of mankind and of Israel in their reciprocal actions and decisive changes. For example, the promise of blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3b) at the beginning of the Abraham stories he places *after* the narratives of God's judgment upon and patience with mankind. This promise is then realized in a series of preliminary fulfillments which, on the whole, are still proclaimed as a kerygma of hope and motivation for Israel and the surrounding peoples.⁵

Thus for the Yahwist history is a changeable, changing, goal-directed succession of events which, understood as time, above all offers the possibility of life to all men. Yet the Yahwist seldom employs the word "time" (*et*). It is found occasionally in the expressions "evening time" (Gen. 8:11; 24:11) or "tomorrow at this time" (Ex. 9:18), where it is used to fix

chronologically the date of an event.⁶ Or—and this is more indicative of his basic understanding of time—he speaks of the "time for the animals to be gathered together" (Gen. 29:7), or of the "time of [a woman's] delivery" (Gen. 38:27), whereby "time" has the sense of "the appropriate occasion."⁷

II. THE PRIESTLY WRITING

The Priestly Writing contains an understanding of time which exhibits a certain reflection and differentiation. For P, chronological-calendar dates above all provide a framework within which to place historical events. It is important to P that Israel lived in Egypt 430 years (Ex. 12:40 f.); that the people came into the wilderness of Sinai on the third month after the exodus (Ex. 19:1); that Abraham was 99 years old when Yahweh appeared to him and when he was circumcised (Gen. 17:1, 24); that Ishmael was 13 years old when he was circumcised (v. 25), but Isaac was 8 days old (Gen. 21:4); that Sarah was 127 years old (23:1) and Abraham 175 years old when they died (25:7). The genealogies actually provide the structure of the Priestly Writing's entire design: Note the divisions made by the *toledot* of Adam (Gen. 5:1), Noah (6:9), Noah's sons (10:1), Shem (11:10), Terah (11:27), Ishmael (25:12), Isaac (25:19), Esau (36:1), Jacob (37:2), Aaron and Moses (Num. 3:1).⁸ Placed before these generations is the *toledot*

⁶ M. Sekine, "Zeitauffassung," pp. 67 f., speaks of the framework of time as external time.

⁷ J. R. Wilch, *Time and Event*, p. 164: "The word *etb* was used in the OT in order to indicate the relationship or juncture of circumstances, primarily in an objective sense and only secondarily in a temporal sense, and to direct attention to a specifically definite occasion or situation"; see Is. 49:8 and 2 Cor. 6:1 f.

⁸ This is secondary according to M. Noth, *ATD*, 7, 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵ H. W. Wolff, "Das Kerygma des Jahwisten," *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament, Tbb*, 22 (1973, 2nd ed.), 345-73.

—the same catchword is used—of the creation history of heaven and earth. (Gen. 2:4a)

In P's creation narrative a further significant statement about time is made. On the fourth day of creation the lights in the heavens are made. Their first function is to separate the day from the night (Gen. 1:14a); their second is to order festivals and determine days and years (v. 14b). These lights provide a structure for time and make it possible to determine dates, thereby performing the function of a calendar. Thus the division of time is one of God's gifts of creation. (See Ps. 74:16 f.; 104:19 ff.)⁹

This theological understanding of divisions of time enables P to distinguish between the different qualities of time. P's creation narrative has not only placed the individual works of creation in a sequence of six different days, but above all has emphatically separated the seventh day from God's workdays, making the seventh day a day of rest.¹⁰ When God revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, Moses first waited six days on the mountain, concealed in the cloud; only on the seventh day did Yahweh call to him out of the midst of the cloud. Then Moses received detailed instructions from Yahweh. (Ex. 24:16-18)

For the Priestly writer, therefore, divisions of time are a gift of God's creation which enables them to give an order to history and to distinguish between different qualities of time. By numbering years and days he emphasizes in a new manner that God's way with His people is a way through history.

III. DEUTERONOMY

The preaching of Deuteronomy

⁹ G. von Rad, "Der Tag im AT," *TbWNT*. 2 (1935), 946.

¹⁰ See C. Westermann, *BK*, I, 235 and see Wolff, *Anthropologie*, 203 ff.

ponders carefully the relationship of the present to the past and future. It exhibits an intense interest in "today." In the framework of the Deuteronomic law alone (Deut. 4:4—30:20) the word *bayyom* ("today") appears 35 times, *bayyom hazzeh* ("this very day") 6 times; in addition, *bayyom* occurs 9 times in the Deuteronomic Code itself (chaps. 12—26), *bayyom hazzeh* once. In the entire book it speaks of "today" a total of 70 times. Used in a variety of contexts, the word emphasizes the validity and present reality of Moses' message:

Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances which I speak in your hearing *today*, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them! Yahweh, our God, made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did Yahweh make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive *today*. (5:1-3)

By distinguishing the present from the time of the fathers, the accent is placed on the newness of "today." But the decisive meaning of "today" derives from the actual presence of the God who makes a covenant with His people. To follow "today" the Word which is near—that means life and happiness for the one who hears. (30:11-20)

In order to recognize the absolute significance of the present hour, the listener must not, however, forget Israel's history:

Remember and do not forget how you provoked Yahweh your God to wrath in the wilderness, from the day you came out of the land of Egypt. . . . (9:7 ff.)

The history of Israel's rebellion, of Moses' intercession, and of God's renewed devotion should remain fixed in the memory of the present generation. Such a history is not thought of as "past," but as a given, as something perceptible, without which new obedience in the present cannot be attained. He who forgets to meditate upon his own experiences in history is denied the future already in the present:

If you completely forget Yahweh your

God . . . I solemnly warn you *today* that you shall surely perish. (8:19)

Because of Yahweh's trustworthiness, He is the God of history who, as the God of the present, also rules the future. Through the proclamation of His covenant will He forms the future in His dialog with man in the present:

Know therefore that Yahweh your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments, to a thousand generations, and requites to his face "him who hates Him"¹¹. . . . You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment . . . which I command you *today*. (7:9-11)

As a member of the people of God, the individual participates in the good gifts of the future; he who is disobedient cuts himself off from his people. The word which is proclaimed "today" expressly unites the present generation with the future generations to whom this word also applies:

Nor is it with you only that I make this sworn covenant, but with him who is not here with us *today* as well as with him who stands here with us *today* before Yahweh our God. (29:13 f. [14 f.])

The man who lives in complete awareness of the present is, as a member of the people of God, inseparably united by the Deuteronomic preachers with the events which preceded his own generation and also with future events. But it is by his mindfulness of the word spoken "today" and by his meditation upon the history of his fathers that he makes his decision concerning life in the future. Deut. 29:28 [29] develops and condenses this thought about the present, "past," and future with this didactic statement:

The secret things belong to Yahweh our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever.

¹¹ See BHK.

The expression "secret things" refers to the future; the "things that are revealed," however, are the proclaimed Word of promise and direction evident to Israel from her history.¹²

Here we find an understanding of the past and future which is different from our own. A large cross section of Old Testament texts makes this even clearer. For the Israelite the previous ages are a present reality which stands *before* him, whereas for us earlier times belong to the past and thus stand *behind* us. The psalmist says in Ps. 143:5:

I remember the days which are before me (*miqqedem*);
I meditate on all that You have done.

On the other hand, for the Israelite the future does not lie before but behind (*'achar*) him. In Jer. 29:11 Yahweh says:

I know the plans I have for you, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you an *'acharit* and a hope.

The word *'acharit* characterizes the future as that which is posterior, which follows behind me.¹³ A similar notion is found represented in the German language by the expressions *Vorfahren* ("ancestors") and *Nachfahren* ("descendants"). From the Old Testament's point of view man moves

¹² See E. Janssen, *Juda in der Exilszeit, or Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments*, 69 (1956), 74 f.

¹³ See E. Jenni, *'br*, 115 (*'acharit*="what comes afterward"); also see the discussion between Boman, *Denken*, pp. 128 f., 210 f., and J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 77 f. In a broader context R. Bohren's *Biblical and theological meditation on remembering (Predigtlehre, 1971, pp. 160 ff.)* is deserving of attention: "The act of remembering teaches us the language of hope. Remembrance is the enthusiasm for the old which is directed toward the future; it is narrative that points forward to prophecy, a step backwards that takes one forwards!" (P. 163).

through time like an oarsman who rows himself backward into the future: He reaches his destination by orienting himself on that which he observes before him, namely, history's disclosure of the Lord of the future; he looks at the face of the wheelman in his boat and listens to his call.

IV. DEUTERO-ISAIAH

From Deutero-Isaiah we gain further insight into the Old Testament's concept of time. Deutero-Isaiah puts the past and future into a new relationship. According to him, God is the One

Who declares the end (*'acharit*) from the beginning
and from ancient times (*miqqedem*)
things not yet done. (Is. 46:10)

Previously concealed from man, the end-time is now made known to him through the prophetic promises of ancient times. In the light of this the Hebrew language for the first time can now form a word to denote the future: *habba'ot* "that which is to come" (it occurs only in Is. 41:22, but see also 44:7b).¹⁴ The events of the future move first of all toward man; man himself is not headed in the direction of the future. Only he who hears the promise can turn in hope towards that which has previously lain unseen behind him. Now it becomes possible to speak of the future as "the new" (*chadashot*, 42:9; 43:19); it is the previously unknown and hidden (48:6) which—now proclaimed—lets the former things (43:18 f.) become forgotten. Thus the promises of the prophet further develop the Old Testament's concept of time by disclosing the turning point toward the future, toward the things that are new.

Let us note in this context how Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah heighten the theological significance of the ancient concept of *'olam*. This word

does not mean "eternity," either as timelessness (that is, as unchangeable time) or as time concealed for the present. Rather, *'olam* primarily denotes time that is extremely distant or remote, whether it be the past or the future.¹⁵ Ps. 93:2 says:

Your throne is established from of old (*me'az*);
You are from the most ancient of time (*me'olam*).

In Gen. 3:22 Yahweh states that man shall not live into the most distant future (*le'olam*); see Gen. 13:15; Ex. 14:13; 19:9. The phrase *le'olam* can also refer to death, the last point of time in man's life, and thus it comes to be used as a legal term meaning "conclusive" (Ex. 21:6; RSV="for life"). In this sense Deutero-Isaiah can characterize "the Word of our God" as conclusive (*le'olam* 40:8); likewise this is said of God's salvation (51:6), His deliverance (v. 8), His loyalty (54:8), and His covenant (55:3). Here this term, which denotes the most distant point of beginning or end conceivable, approaches the meaning of unending time. As the past is not without its painful experiences, so the unending loyalty and mercy of Yahweh provides "joy that is timeless" (Is. 51:11; see Ps. 118:1; Is. 55:12 f.; 61:7 f.).¹⁷ Thus is fulfilled the totally new time, the promised coming time.

V. LATER WISDOM

Later Wisdom was especially concerned with the problem of time. Deutero-Isaiah (40:6-8) had already pointed up the contrast between the transitoriness of all flesh and the permanence of God's Word. Job complained that

¹⁵ See E. Jenni, "Das Wort *'olam* im Alten Testament," *ZAW*, 64 (1952), 197-248; *ZAW*, 65 (1953), 1-35.

¹⁶ See Wolff, *Anthropologie*, 118.

¹⁷ See J. Moltmann, "Die erste Freigelassenen der Schoepfung," *Kaiser Traktate*, 2 (1971), 42 f.

¹⁴ See K. Elliger, *BK*, XI, 184 f., 238 f.

Man that is born of woman
is of few days, and full of
trouble.

He comes forth like a flower, and
withers;
he flees like a shadow, and continues
not. (14:1 f.)

But it is Ecclesiastes who makes the problem of time an independent theme. He emphasizes first of all that everything has its own time, its own season. Every "time" (*'et*) and every "season" (*zeman*)¹⁸ are not empty categories, but the opportunities provided at any given time for a particular event or even an aspect of that event.¹⁹ Eccl. 3:1-8 makes this clear:

For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under
heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;

A time to plant, and a time to
pluck up what is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal;

A time to break down, and a time
to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

A time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to cast away stones, and a
time to gather stones together;

A time to embrace, and a time to
refrain from embracing;

A time to seek, and a time to lose;

A time to keep, and a time to cast
away;

A time to rend, and a time to sew;

A time to keep silence, and a time
to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate;

A time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes' recognition that there are different times for contrasting activities grows out of man's experience that human life has its limitations.²⁰ Since the success or failure of an undertaking is dependent on its

¹⁸ See K. Galling, "Das Raetsel der Zeit," *ZTK*, 58 (1961), 1-15.

¹⁹ J. R. Wilch, *Time*, pp. 117 ff.

²⁰ G. von Rad, *Weisheit*, p. 183. On the personally involved "critical individualism" of Ecclesiastes as a "sharp eyed observer and independent thinker," see M. Hengel, *Judentum*

being done on the proper occasion, man is not able to do everything the same way at all times. Nor can man conduct himself the same way on all occasions, because he is confronted with hostilities. It is not man who determines the variety of times and occasions; they are a given, and he cannot change them.²¹ This brings him into the greatest of difficulties (3:9 f.; compare 8:6 f.). This is a plague which God has laid upon him (3:10), since it is He who has established the times and made man conscious of the changes of time as well. Because of this, man's dealings with time become extraordinarily complicated:

He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put the most distant time (*ba'olam*) into man's mind (*belibbam*), yet so that he cannot find out what God is doing from the beginning to the end. (3:11).²²

What is bewildering is that God has appointed a specific time appropriate for every activity. To man, however, He has given the ability "to look beyond the present moment and inquire about the past and the future."²³ But this ability, indeed, this urge to reflect upon more than the immediate hour proves to be burdensome toil. For man is able to comprehend neither God's work as a whole nor the significance of the changes in times and seasons. His difficulty in making proper use of his time lies in the fact that in

und Hellenismus (1969), 210-40, especially 214, G. von Rad, *Weisheit*, 305, on the other hand, has called attention to the loss of trust in Ecclesiastes, in which man's experiences not only take on a different "appearance," but do in fact change. Thereby the limits of man's knowledge become clearer.

²¹ See W. Zimmerli, "Die Weltlichkeit des Alten Testaments," *VR*, 327 S (1971), 54 f. The frequently occurring expression "in its time," means the "right" time, such as harvesttime or mealtime (Hos. 2:11; Ps. 1:2; 145:15, and so on).

²² See Wolff, *Anthropologie*, 80 f.

²³ W. Zimmerli, *Prediger*, *ATD*, 16/1 (1962), 172.

the present moment he broods over the past and the future, without being able to grasp that which unites everything; as a result, even the present moment given to him eludes him. With his eyes gazing into the distance, man, even in his wisdom, becomes blind to the dangers of the moment and is caught in a net like a fish or a bird (9:11 f.). (Jeremiah declared that the stork, the swallow, and other migratory birds are cleverer than the people of Israel—8:7.) But even when man recognizes the proper hour, he is nevertheless unable to change the fate of that hour; it has long been determined by One who is stronger than he. (Eccl. 6:10)

What are the consequences Ecclesiastes draws from all this? Neither those of a nihilistic hedonism nor those of a skeptical resignation, but Ecclesiastes keeps in his mind the God of Israel as the kind Creator of man and his time. Therefore man must be prepared to accept days of prosperity as well as days of adversity, recognizing them as inexchangeable opportunities (7:14). The first purpose of God's creation of times and seasons, like His creation of man's consciousness, is that man should "fear" God (3:14), that is, that he open himself up to divine destiny:

In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made one as well as the other. (7:14)

Here we find the second purpose expressed: Man should be thoroughly prepared for and receptive to prosperous times, by receiving as well as by

giving. This is most beautifully expressed in Eccl. 9:7-10:

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment,
drink your wine with a merry heart!
For God has already approved what
you do.

Let your garments be always white,
let not oil be lacking on your head.

Enjoy life with the wife whom you
love

all the days of your vain life
which He has given you under
the sun,

Because that is your portion in life
and in your toil at which you
toil under the sun.

Whatever your hand finds to do,
do it with your might.

By his understanding of divine providence and of man's need to be responsive to his favorable opportunities, Ecclesiastes shows the skeptic the only possibility for making effective use of his time. Here Ecclesiastes takes up a fundamental theme from older Wisdom:

All the days of the afflicted are evil,
but a cheerful heart has a continued
feast. (Prov. 15:15)

In the midst of the riddles of time's changes with which God confronts the wise man, it is, in the final analysis, God who makes it possible for man to accomplish what is necessary and, in spite of all adversity, to discover and enjoy the good.

The psalmist can exclaim in the midst of his complaint (Ps. 31:16a):
"My times are in Your hands."

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