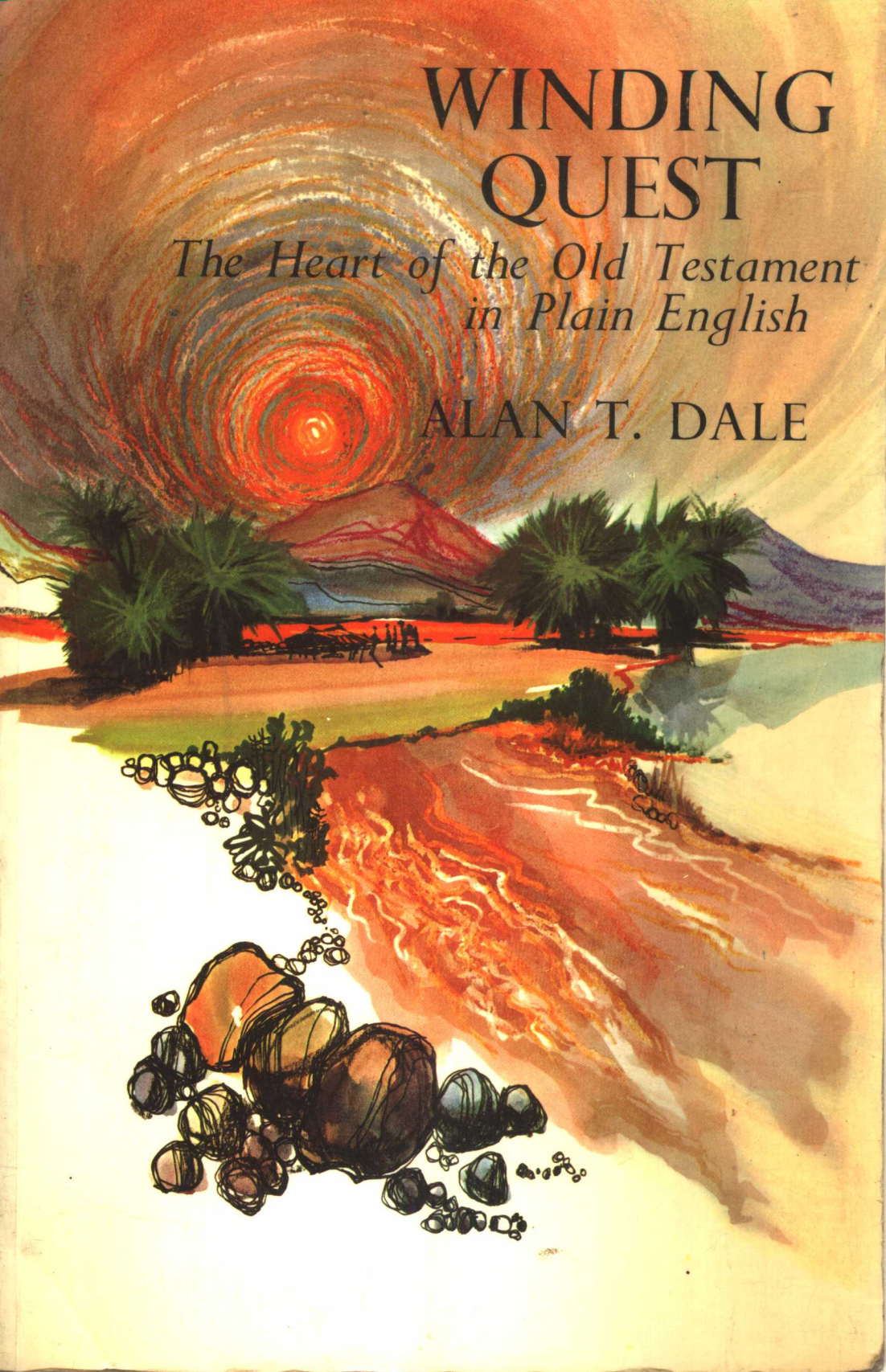


WINDING QUEST

*The Heart of the Old Testament
in Plain English*

ALAN T. DALE



Winding Quest sets out to enable ordinary readers — and especially young people — to read the Bible with pleasure and understanding. Hence it is written in plain English; its selection and arrangement follow the work of the best modern scholars to make clear what is the heart of the Old Testament, its variety of literary form, its living situation and its present relevance. The book tries to help the reader to approach the Old Testament with both critical awareness and imagination, and is intended to be an introduction to the admirable translations of the full text.

Also by Alan Dale:

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'The book is almost complete delight. The language is simple, and simply right; although it is modern, it leaves one with the genuine feeling and flavour of the original. The illustrations, too, are excellent; the maps clear and uncluttered; photographs well chosen and striking; paintings which convey the same feeling of life and excitement as the text.'

The Tablet

'*New World* may be designed for young people but many adults will find themselves reading the New Testament and understanding it, without needing to reach for a commentary. Of course, we still need accurate translations, we need commentaries, but we also need a New Testament written for us and for our children.'

View Review

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Church of England Newspaper



Winding Quest

*The Heart of the Old Testament
in Plain English*

by

Alan T. Dale

Oxford University Press

1 3

Oxford University Press, Ely House, London W.1

GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON
CAPE TOWN IBADAN NAIROBI DAR ES SALAAM LUSAKA ADDIS ABABA
DELHI BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI LAHORE DACCA
KUALA LUMPUR SINGAPORE HONG KONG TOKYO

© Oxford University Press 1972

Colour Illustrations by Geoffrey Crabbe

First published 1972
Reprinted with corrections 1974, 1975

Filmset by BAS Printers Limited, Wallop, Hampshire
and printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Oxford,
by Vivian Ridler, Printer to the University.
Colour plates printed in Great Britain
by Colour Reproductions, Billericay

Foreword

The story is told that once, Oscar Wilde heard someone utter a witty remark and said 'I wish I could have said that'; to which Whistler replied 'You will, Oscar, you will'. I suspect that many an Old Testament scholar will find himself in a similar position if he reads this book by Mr Dale. For the task of the scholar is twofold. He must first understand what the Old Testament speakers are saying. This requires a knowledge of the ancient language, of the thought-forms of the speakers and their background, of the way in which their words were recorded and transmitted over the centuries, of the strange history of those to whom the Word of the Lord was given and of the way in which their response to that Word enabled them to overcome disasters which ought to have destroyed them. But when he has done all that he can to understand, there remains a further task, and that is to share this with others.

There are books that do this, and do it well. They are like bridges across the Jordan from the desert into the Promised Land. But no one will get into the land by studying the bridges. Perhaps after all we need a Joshua to take us across the Jordan into this unknown land and to say to us: 'Look! Here you are. This is yours. Now enjoy it.'

Mr Dale would not claim to be a Joshua. But he has that gift which many a teacher will envy, which belongs especially to the poet and dramatist. Having this gift, he has also the mind of a scholar. He knows moreover that what he has seen in the Old Testament is as important for life today as it was for Israel of old. He has brought to the writing of this volume an enthusiasm and a reverence for life of which the Old Testament is full. But there is also what I can only describe as a love and sympathy for young people with whom he would share what he has received from the Old Testament.

Winding Quest is incomplete. It is meant to be. It will succeed if it stimulates the reader to go on to read the Old Testament as a whole, preferably in a form such as the New English Bible. I can only add that I am grateful for the many occasions on which Mr Dale and I have talked about this work, and for all that I have received from reading it.

A. S. Herbert *Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham*

Preface

Here is protest: the protest of a small highland people against the 'beasts' of brutal military empires; the protest of individual men against a baffling and apparently meaningless universe.

Here is the protest of a small people—far enough away for us to look at what was happening with clear eyes and to see in their experience a parable of the total human situation; yet brought close to us by the magic of enduring speech, the speech of men who had their backs to the wall and their lives at stake, who had once been slaves and who, after several hundred years of political independence, saw their city lie in ruins, a mass of debris—and survived.

Here is the protest of individual men—

What does a man get by endless toil,
sweating under the hot sun?
Families come and families go,
only the earth goes on for ever . . .
What has been will be,
what's done must be done again,
there's nothing new under the sun!

and—

Our enemies have thrown us back
plundering to their heart's desire—
we are butchered like sheep,
scattered over the world . . .
a byword and a laughing-stock
to everybody.

and—

Why should a man be doomed
to grope his way blindfold
shut in by God's unceasing No?

and yet (one can say of God in spite of everything)—

I shall lack nothing—
he lets me lie down on green grass,
leads me by quiet streams,
makes me a new man.
He guides me along right tracks
because he is what he is;
when I go through the pitch-black gorge,
nothing frightens me . . .
God's home is my home
for ever!

Whatever else may be said of the Old Testament, nobody who has really read it would ever call it dull. It is crowded with colour—little, tidy, dogmatic minds may think too much colour. A man can speak his mind—paint even his king in earthy colours. Here is rebel—and ‘establishment’. The Old Testament is a bewildering book largely because so many voices are speaking. They are asking ‘Why?’—speaking for themselves, and speaking for obscure men and women all over the world and in every century. The very variety ensures that everybody somewhere will hear his own voice.

The Old Testament is a lively book; it is also an important one. It is a pioneering book, asking, for the first time in human history (before the Greeks to whom we owe so much) and in language that can still speak directly to men’s imagination, ultimate questions about the meaningfulness—or meaninglessness—of human experience, questions which serious men and women have been asking ever since and which they—especially young people—are asking today.

There are no short answers to such questions—it sometimes seems that all we can do is to get the questions straight. Everybody, anyhow, has to ask his own questions and seek his own answers in his own way—learning from others but doing his own thinking, ‘listening to all but giving his soul to none’. Here is a living introduction to this perennial enquiry.

The Old Testament is an important book for a further and more impressive reason: this is no academic debate. Men speak from a threatened country or from exile in a foreign land; they speak frankly and directly—even brutally—with a contempt for conventional cant. There are questioners and doubters among them, but their profoundest minds believe they have found both the secret of living as human beings in a dehumanizing situation and the clue to the making of a genuinely human world. They are searching for a new world and they speak to those in every generation who care. Here is a community of men and women—

‘growing not as any collective urge
would have them
(in its own placable image) but into
their own more wayward value—strong,
untidy, original, self-possessed.’¹

It is the *reading* of the Old Testament that matters—not just *reading about* it. I offer this version of the heart of it to all who care. I once thought it was a book of little significance today—until I started to read it again for myself. I had to learn how to come to terms with it the hard way, and I owe an immense debt to the Old Testament scholars who helped me; I made this version in the light of their discoveries and insights. This is how

¹Alan Brownjohn, from *For my Son* (Penguin Modern Poets).

I read it and I offer it as first steps to the reading of the splendid modern translations of the full text.

But there is one thing to remember. I have spoken about the Old Testament as if it were a book in the ordinary sense of that word. It is not, of course. It is more like a library of books, written at different times by different authors. The collection and editing of these books was carried out by many editors over a period of many centuries; the final discussion about what books should be included did not take place until the year 90 of our era. The books themselves are very varied in style and contents. Here is prose—history, biographies, diaries, tracts for the times, short stories, legal documents; here, too, is poetry—ballads, love lyrics, dramatic poetry, hymns, prophetic poems.

The Old Testament, in a word, is like a shelf of books, and there is no more need to start at the traditional beginning than to read a shelf of library books by beginning with the one on the left. So we shall begin to read, not at the traditional beginning which you will find in the editions of the full text, but at an important and dramatic moment in the story of the Hebrew People¹ (*Brief Hour of Glory*). We then look back over their past history as they remembered it (*Memories of the Past*). In *The Death of Two Cities* we see how they became the victims of powerful military empires. We then turn to see how they mastered their tragic suffering (*Making Sense of the Story*) and what they learned from it (*Enduring Convictions*). These, then, will be our first steps into the Old Testament.

¹ See John Bowden, *What about the Old Testament?*

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Note: 'GOD' translates 'Yahweh'; 'God' other divine names. 'South' translates 'Judah'; 'North' 'Israel' (see pp. 412-3).

Acknowledgements

The brief words on this page can be but a symbolic gesture of my indebtedness. Every page—indeed, every sentence—bears the marks of my borrowing. Every teacher is an incorrigible borrower; the shortness of the time and the nature of his work forces him to be so. And he is the more so when he is concerned, as I have been here, to help his students to read a great book in the light of the work of present-day scholars. I have made this version of the Old Testament in the light of the work of those Old Testament scholars to whom I myself have been most indebted. Those who know will recognise how shameless my borrowing has been everywhere—in the choice and arrangement of the material and in the interpretation of word and phrase.

I have kept before me the translations of the Old Testament which young people in school and the ordinary reader at home will be most likely to use or consult: the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible (which only became available after I had begun this version) and the Jerusalem Bible. What I have done is intended to encourage the reader, younger or older, to tackle these full translations and to read them with understanding and imagination.

But my chief debt is to Prof. Arthur S. Herbert who has guided me with his generous help (I fear to recall how often I intruded into his busy life) throughout the making of this book. To travel through the Old Testament with him—surveying the whole landscape or stopping to examine one small spot—was to widen my horizons and deepen my sense of the importance and relevance of the experience of the Israelite people. He encouraged me to go on and made innumerable suggestions. These I have gladly accepted; any mistakes and misjudgments that remain are mine.

I am again indebted to Dr. Francis A. D. Burns, Head of the English Department of Newman College, Birmingham. He has read through *Winding Quest* and helped me with many comments and suggestions about vocabulary and idiom.

Much of this volume has been read aloud to groups of young people and adults in various parts of the country. I am greatly indebted to them for their comment and questions.

I must thank Mr Geoffrey Crabbe for his paintings. He has painted what excited his imagination as he explored this volume. It was illuminating to talk it over with him and to look at it through his eyes.

And I must thank the staff of the Clarendon Press whose untiring help has been so generously given to me at all the stages of the making of this book. I am indebted to them for many comments and suggestions—and not least for drawing my attention to Henry Vaughan's poem *Man* from which the title of this book, *Winding Quest*, has come.

Finally, I must thank my wife for her encouragement, insight and comment—and not least for carrying the burden of the typing and re-typing that the making of a book like this involves.

Alan T. Dale

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Prelude

How can they live in GOD's Way?

Farmer

ploughing the field, proud of his goad,
driving his oxen, lost to the world,
talking, talking of cattle,
following the furrow by day,
fattening the heifers by night?

Blacksmith

sitting by his anvil in a world of pig-iron,
scorched by the forge, fighting the furnace heat,
deafened by hammers' din, rapt in his pattern,
firm to finish his work, fashioning it into the night?

Potter

working at his wheel, turning it with his feet,
lost in his task of making up his tally,
slapping and puddling the clay,
engrossed in his glazing,
staying awake cleaning out his kiln?

These men trust their hands;

their craftsmanship is their wisdom.

Without them cities would be empty—

nobody living there,

nobody coming and going.

You won't hear them in the City Council

or see them sitting in the Assembly;

you won't find them among the judges—

they can't make head or tail of the Law;

they don't talk like scholars—

they can't quote the critics.

Yet

they hold the world in their hands;

their worship is in their work.

Brief Hour of Glory