Preface

This essay is an attempt to express an idea which has grown to a conviction. It arose out of my teaching at Heythrop College, in the course of which I became increasingly dissatisfied with existing treatments of the covenant theme. The first fruit of this rethinking was a short article entitled ‘The Covenant theme in Bible and Church’ (The Clergy Review 65 [1980], 196–203). Two years later, the essential idea of this essay was interwoven with the argument of an article, ‘Prophecy and the Cult’, contributed to the Fest-schrift for P. R. Ackroyd (Murray, 1982, esp. pp. 207–14). In the next few years the thesis was tried out, in whole or part, in lectures or seminars in several universities and also at summer schools. Finally, having been honoured by election as President of the Society for Old Testament Study, I proposed the thesis in my Presidential Address in December, 1986, by which time this fuller form of it was already in preparation. During work on the book I became increasingly convinced that this work could make a contribution to theological thinking about the world ecological crisis, and aspects of the thesis were sketched with this in mind in two articles in The Month, ‘The Bible on God’s World and Our Place in It’ (Aug.–Sept. 1988, twice reprinted elsewhere) and ‘The Relationship of Creatures within the Cosmic Covenant’ (Nov. 1990). During this time the World Council of Churches meetings in Basel and Seoul created the formula ‘Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation’, which precisely sums up the group of biblical ideas that this book is about.

This history has meant that I now owe thanks to many for stimulating discussion and criticism: colleagues and students at Heythrop and many friends in the Society for Old Testament Study, especially Margaret Barker (our respective writings show how much we have shared ideas) and Professor Wilfrid Lambert, who has generously helped me with Mesopotamian texts beyond my linguistic competence, and made his own unpublished translation of the Erra epic available to me. It would be fitting if I dedicated this work to the Society, but my intention from the first has been to dedicate it to the memory of Dennis McCarthy, SJ, a
sadly-missed friend, and one whose contributions to covenant studies will long keep his name in honour.

A tragic irony brought it about that I was putting the last touches to this study of themes of ‘Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation’ on the day that the Gulf War came to its terrible climax and the sky over Kuwait became black in daylight. My thoughts turn again and again to Saint Isaac of Nineveh, who was born in Qatar and became a bishop in northern Iraq, and to his wonderful words on compassion for all creatures, quoted below on p. 147.