

which from beginning to end is dominated by one undeviating Divine purpose, of which the Abrahamic covenant is the operative expression, and the advent of Christ the ultimate objective.

III

THE NOTE OF PROGRESSION IN OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY IS PROGRESSIVE TO CHRIST. EACH successive stage brings forth some divine activity, unparalleled in previous experience, and so requiring new vehicles of praise. When, therefore, we hear the recurrent burst of song from Israel's minstrels, "O sing unto the Lord a new song; for He hath done marvellous things," we know that it heralds some unique and amazing and hitherto unheard-of happening. The former things are forgotten; a new thing springs forth: who but must declare it? The events celebrated are new, not simply in the sense of having newly occurred—which might mean nothing more than bare repetition—but new in the sense of each being without precedent, new in itself, original. Not of the circumstances of Sinai alone, but of all other milestones in the national history could the words be spoken:

"Ask now of the days that are past, which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and from the one end of heaven unto the other, whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it?" (Deut. 4: 32).

For throughout the entire history creative activity breaks in upon the course of events, and situations arise which to human experience are bewilderingly new and different.

Though original and unique, these "mighty acts of the Lord" are not unrelated to each other, the later being fresh developments of the earlier. As it is written, "Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare: before they spring forth I tell you of them. Sing unto the Lord a new song" (Isa. 42: 9-10). These "wonderful works of the Lord" are, each and all, part of one preconceived plan, the details of which are hidden from man, but known to God. Acts 15: 18 speaks of "the Lord who maketh these things known from the beginning of the world." There is thus no contradiction between the originality of each new event and the continuity of the whole series, and scope is provided for orderly development and

planned progression. New situations are linked with previous history, but form an advance upon it. In each fresh crisis are disclosed both fulfilment and creative energy.

Over against the Biblical interpretation of history may be set the basic conception of pagan nature-mythologies, namely, the idea of endlessly-recurring cycles of events without any point of departure or arrival, and therefore in their movement without dynamic progression. With such heathen philosophies the revelation of God's action in history has nothing in common. The prophets faced with unflinching opposition all naturalistic world-views, such as those expressed by the cult of Tammuz denounced by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 8: 15-16), represented in later times by such pagan figures as the Scandinavian Baldur. These mythical heroes and goddesses symbolized processes of nature, and in particular the natural cycles of the seasons. Transferred as a thought-form to collective human experience they also express mythologically the rise and decline of successive generations as the ultimate norm of human history. So expressed, history moves onward by a sort of natural necessity in an endless chain of perpetually-repeated events, having no fixed point of beginning, and leading up to no conclusive ending. Human life upon earth becomes a vicious circle from which there is no escape, and man, created in the image of God for the enjoyment of eternity, settles down to a futile natural existence, seeking the fulfilment of life in the ordered changes of the little turn of the wheel in which he finds his earthly existence moving. All deeper hopes of a more satisfying environment for his true being become doomed to perpetual frustration.

In the book of Ecclesiastes we have a reasoned exposition of this naturalistic philosophy, worked out to its logical conclusion. Not that Ecclesiastes is a divinely-authenticated world-view of things! Rather is it a formal presentation of a fallacious creed of life considered on its own principles. The viewpoint under discussion is not endorsed but described. But because justice is done to it, and its supporting facts presented soberly and accurately, we may be assured that the uncompromising attitude of Christian faith to all rival philosophies does not spring from ignorance or prejudice.

The Preacher, assuming the position of natural scepticism, asks in open challenge, "Is there anything whereof it may be said, See, this is new?" "No," he continues, "there is no new thing under the sun. Consider the movement of human history. One generation passes away, another takes its place; nevertheless, the face of things on the earth remains very much the same. The sum total of life now is not very different from what it was in

former days, is it? True, the figures may have altered a little, but do they not add up and give practically the same result? Take, again, the world of nature. This is bound by a law of constant change, but is it not a change which simply takes things back to where they were before? The great circuits of the sun, the wind, and the rivers, these illustrate what I mean. Their movements are no real progressive development, only a fixed round in a beaten track. Or if the appeal is made to human experience, see how the even succession of events rouses in man only a dreary sense of futility and frustration. What profit hath a man of all his labour? What, indeed, but the oppressive drudgery of the treadmill? History—what is it but human situations, endlessly repeated, in inevitable cycles of time? Individual life—what is it but the slow fulfilment, already expressed in a thousand other lives, of an inevitable natural process? Everything moves on a dead level: nothing is leading anywhere: as things have been, they remain. I ask, therefore, what profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? Nor does the outward world around offer him any hope. Everything seen and heard strikes eye and ear with an impression of incompleteness. There is no break in the monotonous regularity, no ultimate objective. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing. Things travel, indeed, but arrive nowhere. Thus by the inexorable logic of facts we are forced to the conclusion that nothing is, in a real sense, worth while: everything is vanity and vexation of spirit."

The Preacher, however, is not content with abstract speculation, but puts his theories to the proof by certain experiments in living. For this discussion is no dilettante intellectualism, but a passionate search after the reality of things. In modern parlance, it is existential thinking. The naturalistic position must be tested in actual practice. Would it yield a vital solution of the riddle of life? The results were disappointing. Experience only confirmed philosophic reflection, and although his ultimate pessimism is modified by the recognition of the homely pleasures of everyday life and by the perception of the excellence of wisdom over folly, yet in the end of his book, as in the beginning, he sadly confesses, *Vanity of vanities; all is vanity* (Eccles. 12: 8).

The decision, however, is not wholly unqualified: another and disturbing factor is present to his mind. View life as a natural process, and the conclusion is undoubtedly final: but the Preacher is inwardly aware that life is bound up with realities which lie beyond those of nature, that natural realities are not the final conditions of human existence. Moral consciousness

of God is as real to him as perception of the phenomena of nature. Men have their being in moral responsibility to God as Creator, and will for every action be accountable to God as Judge. Creation and Judgment—these are the two points, then, between which history completes its movement.

"Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth . . .

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil" (Eccles. 12: 1, 13 f.).

In other words, man is more than part of the great process of Nature: he is a personal being, directly related to God, and exists in a world above that of nature. Although it is true that man has relations with the natural universe, being formed of the dust of the ground (Gen. 2: 7), yet the fundamental fact in the constitution of man's being is that God created man in His own image (Gen. 1: 27), and that God breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life, and that man became a living soul (Gen. 2: 7). It is in God that "we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17: 28). This relationship it is that gives us our consciousness of the supernatural.

Our true nature, then, is one of personal being, not one of natural existence merely; so that for us life has a moral quality and moves in a higher dimension than that of the beasts of the field. We are capable of personal decisions: we possess a free will, and are conscious of personal responsibility: we live in the isolation of self-consciousness into which no other save our Creator can enter. Within these unplumbed depths of personal being move spiritual energies which liberate themselves in incalculable ways. Is not this the very stuff out of which history is made? Is not this that which makes possible, nay, inevitable, the emergence of historical situations completely new and unprecedented?

This spiritual consciousness of true personality and selfhood is conditioned absolutely by the existential relationship established between God and man in the act of creation. This fact makes certain a future act of judgment, final in character, when the supremacy of the Creator over the whole field of history will be made manifest. Of these morally-related facts of Divine creation and Divine judgment the Preacher is profoundly conscious, and though in his treatise he does not work out their implications, yet he does recognize that in them are determined the final values of human existence upon the earth, and therefore of all history. With this he reaches the conclusion of the whole

matter. The works of man are not vain and empty; on the contrary, they are full of potentialities for good or evil; and every one of them shall be brought into judgment. Everything, therefore, is of tremendous significance: nothing is vanity.

History, viewed thus, is the product of active personality, with infinite possibilities of creative action. The Old Testament Scriptures emphasize the free activity, both of God and man, in the sphere of time. That of God is not limited by the automatic reign of natural law. During the long interval between His mighty acts of Creation and Judgment, God does not remain passive. Were this so, God's presence in history would be purely pervasive. His laws indeed would operate, but He Himself would be, save at the beginning and end, inactive. So far from this being the case, the personal intervention of God breaks ever and anon into the field of human history, taking the form of transcendental energy, redemptive in purpose, yet fulfilling itself on the plane of natural circumstance. Therefore, even when it has the form of common history, it transcends nature in its final issues, as is evident when the far objective is reached. The call of Rebecca to be the wife of Isaac, the adoption by Ruth of Bethlehem as her home town, the rise to kingship of David the shepherd lad, in their connexions with the still undeveloped Messianic purpose, illustrate the point. God thus for a time hid His wonders under the normal circumstances of everyday life until later developments disclosed the fact, hitherto unsuspected, of a personal Divine action. God also revealed His presence through events which were miraculous in form as well as in destiny. When it is considered that such events proceeded from One who in His Being is above and outside Nature could it well have been otherwise? Should not the exercise of supernatural powers be expected from Him who in His Godhood is essentially supernatural?

The Old Testament Scriptures likewise recognize man's freedom from the fatalism of natural law, and base this freedom upon the true nature of man's being. Powers inherent in personality, even if circumscribed in their field of action because of creaturely limitations, are of necessity free. Accordingly, man's history is here presented to us as something more than the inevitable out-working of fixed laws; rather is it the free operation of spiritual responsibilities. It is therefore full of surprises. This it is which makes history progressive, either for good or evil.

But while man is under no compulsion in his personal course of life, we must keep in mind that God reserves to Himself the right of judgment and sovereignly controls the final issues. The end of all things abides in His power. Man's liberty of

choice and God's sovereignty in judgment are complementary truths.

If it be asked what actual illustrations the Old Testament provides of such historical progression, reply is not difficult. The great Flood in Noah's day introduced a new dispensation in God's dealings with man. Hitherto, nothing like it had ever happened; from henceforth, also, nothing like it would again occur. Original to human experience, it was, until actually taking place, deemed impossible—as also will be the fiery destruction of the great day of the Lord (II Pet. 3: 4-10). Without precedent in the past, and not to be repeated in the future, it stands out as a unique event in Old Testament history. In token of this a covenant was made by God promising that never again should a similar flood of waters destroy the earth. Moreover, the fresh laws then made to regulate man's future upon the earth (Gen. 8: 21 f.; 9: 9-17) show that history had been switched on to a new level, and that another and different world had dawned.

The rapid development of the post-diluvian world—with its organization of the world into political systems and God's counter-movement in the call of Abraham—reached a new crisis in the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. Once again singular events began to take place, culminating in the extraordinary experiences of the Passover night and of the passage of the Red Sea. A nation was born in a day. And such was the impact of this rush of events upon the people of Israel that for them it dated the beginning of a new period of time.

“This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you” (Ex. 12: 2).

The past was superseded, and in the significance taken on by the present, the future opened out as a completely new dispensation. O.T. history had again moved forward.

The chapters in Isaiah's prophecy which speak of the return from the Babylonian captivity (40-49) disclose the unparalleled circumstances under which that deliverance was to take place. God's redemption of His people was to be an occasion of triumphant originality, and the prospect awakes all the enthusiasm and jubilation which such circumstances always call forth.

“Sing, O ye heavens; for the Lord hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the Lord hath redeemed Jacob, and will glorify himself in Israel” (Isa. 44: 23).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, with the historical portion of that of Daniel, show that this was indeed the course that events took. The overthrow of Babylon produced a world crisis, and

thereby, in the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem, was accomplished in history the overruling purpose of God. The depth of the impression made upon those who passed through the crisis of those days is reflected in the Psalms of the Restoration.

“When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them unto that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the nations, The Lord hath done great things for them. The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad” (Psa. 126: 1-3).

Jew and heathen alike recognized that God had broken in upon history. The times had changed, and that not by the natural evolution of historical processes, but by a direct intervention of Divine providence. That is to say, there was a prophetic fore-view of a future end toward which earlier beginnings had already moved, and toward which present events had bent the direction of history. This dispensational change had been foretold by Daniel in his prophecy of the seventy weeks, which were to run their course “from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem” (Dan. 9: 25). The writing on the wall was now history. God’s purpose in Israel had again risen above the dead level of natural causes, and now stretched out toward its destined goal.

Of what that goal was even the prophets in Israel were but dimly aware (I Pet. 1: 10-11). But that there was a goal was never in doubt. This consciousness of a destiny in time and history for God’s prophetic purpose had deepened with each successive crisis. Without such ultimate destiny historical progress would have been meaningless, a mere wandering out into the darkness, and as empty of spiritual values as were the recurring processes of nature. But with such ultimate destiny historical progress is full of spiritual reality, and guarantees a worthy meaning for human existence.

The form in which that destiny was to be realized began to take shape as time went on. God’s eternal purpose, in the beginning vested in man as man, had, in the course of the development, gradually narrowed down in its field of action. For, in due succession, a race, a nation, a tribe, and, later still, a single household, had become its sole repository. And whenever the chosen line showed signs of natural expansion, this restrictive principle was again seen at work. In this narrowing the far end toward which God was working became more and more evident: it was narrowing toward one Man. The flame of destiny was to burn in a single lamp, which God would ordain for His servant David (Psa. 132: 7). So in the writings of the prophets, when

national hopes were burning low, this note of the advent of a personal Messiah lightened the growing darkness and became the strong consolation of the faithful in Israel.

The advent of this coming Redeemer was to be accompanied by unmistakable signs of the Divine presence and power, so marvelous and many-sided that they would be declared by unbelievers to be not only incredible but impossible.

“Behold ye among the nations, and regard, and wonder marvellously; for I work a work in your days, which ye will not believe though it be told you” (Hab. 1: 5 with Acts 13: 41).

“Like as many were astonished at thee . . . So shall he sprinkle (startle) many nations; kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they understand. Who hath believed our report?” (Isa. 52: 14-53: 1).

The fulness of the times would come. And the events associated therewith would in freshness and originality, in volume and richness, and in direct Divine initiative, completely surpass anything that had preceded them.

According to the confession of Christian faith the Saviour, in His birth, “was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary.” This credal statement is in perfect harmony with Holy Scripture (Matt. 1: 18; Luke 1: 30-35). That we are required to believe in the uniqueness of this birth is plain. The words “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise” stand over against the regular formula of the earlier part of the chapter “Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob . . .” and indicate that the birth of Christ was otherwise than was the birth of these. In Matthew, therefore, the emphasis is laid upon “was conceived by the Holy Ghost.”

The passage in St Luke underlines the mystery contained in the words “born of the virgin Mary.” Such an event, indeed, was “a new thing in the earth,” though anticipated beforetime (Jer. 31: 22). Were it not that the prophetic Scripture had intimated, both by guarded phraseology and by direct statement, that the coming Redeemer should be born of a virgin, we might well have found it difficult to accept the facts; but with such indications given beforehand it becomes equally difficult now to reject them (Gen. 3: 15; Isa. 7: 14). Moreover, unless we discredit the duly authenticated testimony of the Gospels (Luke 1: 1-4), the belief in the virgin birth was not a judgment formed *after* the event, but the response to a revelation received *before* it took place, by those most intimately concerned therewith, namely, Joseph, Elizabeth, and Mary herself. This but strengthens the case. But why

should it be thought incredible that the birth of Him who before His birth had Divine pre-existence should in its manner differ from that of those who before their birth had no existence? The miracle is accounted for by this one great fact, that the Word, who was in the beginning, who was with God, became flesh and dwelt among us. The incarnation makes the Virgin Birth intelligible, but also, we must confess in reverent worship, only deepens its mystery.

The public ministry of the Lord Jesus was one of intense miraculous activity. Supernatural powers were in active exercise. These miracles did more than impress the beholders' imagination; they laid a challenge upon heart and conscience, and called for spiritual decisions. To the Jew, with his knowledge of a new age to come—derived from Messianic prophecy—such visible tokens of God's power as now were seen proclaimed its advent. For the new age was to be inaugurated by an outpouring of the Divine Spirit, first of all upon the coming Redeemer (from which He takes His title of Christ or Anointed), and in due course upon those who came to be associated with him (Isa. 42: 1; 61: 1). The free action of God would fill men with amazement and so widespread would the effects of it become that eventually all flesh would share in the blessings it brought (Joel 2: 28 f.).

The baptism of our Lord, as all four evangelists testify, was the occasion when this anointing took place. The fulness of power characterizing His public ministry was the fitting sequel thereto. According to Mark this is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And Peter, too, seems invariably to have begun his testimony at this point, as is borne out by his recorded addresses in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 10: 37 f.; 2: 22). The dead were raised, the powers of darkness spoiled of their prey, the sick healed, and Nature made subject to laws higher than her own.

Kings and priests and prophets had been anointed to their several offices in Israel. Their anointing had been with oil, and therefore had a purely typical value: but this was with the very Spirit of whom oil is a symbol, and therefore has the value of absolute spiritual reality. Instances of supernatural anointings of the Spirit, resulting in mighty acts of Divine power, are met with but rarely in Israel's former history. In the book of Judges we read concerning Othniel and Gideon, Jephthah and Samson, that the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and that consequent thereupon notable deliverances were effected. Such effusions of the Spirit, however, were but temporary, and lacked the perfection and fulness of that holy chrism by virtue of which we recognize God's Christ. *They* belonged to history at a lower

level: *this*, by its unique fulness and permanence, proclaimed that Old Testament history had entered the Messianic Age.

The death and resurrection of Christ form one Divine event, never to be repeated. "For the death that he died, he died . . . once (for all)" (Rom. 6: 10). "Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more" (Rom. 6: 9). "Behold, I am alive for evermore" (Rev. 1: 18). Together, they constitute one great action, wholly unique, without precedent in history. The death and resurrection of Christ stand in an order of their own. Other deaths there have been; other resurrections there will be: these take their power from a necessity outside their subjects. "In Adam all die . . . in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15: 22). But this death, and this resurrection, take their power from Him who is their Subject. "I lay down my life, that I might take it again . . . I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (John 10: 17-18). The death and resurrection of Christ therefore transcend all human experience, being the outcome of His Divine nature and almighty power.

How misleading, therefore, may become the popular conception of Eastertide as the symbol of the resurrection of Christ if not safeguarded by Christian faith, as if *His* resurrection had anything in common with the nature-myths expressed in the re-birth of the Sun-god. No, the triumph of Christ is something other than the return of Baldur the Beautiful, or the reappearance of Spring, or the annual recurrence of one of the cycles of Nature. We search the Bible in vain for any such analogy—unless we take the abominations which Ezekiel saw (Ezek. 8: 13-16) as a sort of prolepsis to Christian faith! The season of harvest, it is true, is employed, both in the Old Testament and the New, as a figure of resurrection, but even here we must beware of using the analogy as a support for any idea of naturalistic necessity in the resurrection of Christ. To do so would be to lower the value of the death of Christ from being the final act of a long historical progression to being only one among the many expressions of the ebb and flow of natural processes, and to make Christ Himself a supreme figure merely among the gods many and lords many that provide an object of worship to the natural man. For what gives point to our argument is that, in their relation to the Divine purpose worked out in Old Testament history and in their bearing upon the future, the death and resurrection of Christ constitute the crisis of all time and bestow upon history in its widest aspect the element of dynamic progression.

The essential points may be recapitulated. Israel's national history is a progressive series of original non-recurring events, moving steadily from a given beginning, through a measured

distance, toward a final crisis. It stands in contrast to the pagan view of life in which human existence is expressed in terms of endlessly-recurring processes. The opposing views, with their values for life, are considered critically in the book of Ecclesiastes, with full justice done to the naturalistic world-view. Granting the premises for the latter, everything below the sun is, in the end, without moral result. But if, on the other hand, as the Preacher finds out, God and not nature is to be accepted as the ultimate postulate for history, then life is charged with intense moral meaning. In this view, God controls the destiny of free-willed men and women, being revealed as Creator and Judge of mankind. History is thus brought within the sphere of existential personal relationships between God and men, and its movement is fulfilled in that field. The personal action of God is to be discerned in the course of Old Testament history, and moves forward in a pre-determined sequence of dispensations, each an advance upon those preceding it, and finally culminating in the dawn of the Messianic Age. The advent of Christ, with everything it stands for, completes Old Testament history.

All this goes to show that while history sometimes apparently repeats itself—thus lending colour to a naturalistic interpretation—it never does so in reality. In its course it always rises above and beyond itself, and may be thought of as moving spirally round and along a time-axis, of which Creation and Judgment are the two poles. The time-process is definite, not indefinite; dynamic and personal, not merely mechanical; moral and spiritual in its ultimate significance, not without Divine meaning or eternal consequence. In this fact we have the guarantee of all that makes life worth while, and gives solemn weight to the thought of eternity.

IV

THE NOTE OF CRISIS IN OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

THE FREE EXISTENCE OF EVIL IN A WORLD ORIGINALLY created good is the great contradiction within history. How and when did this situation of duality originate? Or is it one which in the nature of things always existed? Do good and evil reign with equal right, in eternal dualism? Or has the good an original primacy over evil? The answer will determine our conception of the basic meaning of history. If good and evil alike exist as first principles, the moral values of historical

action disappear. Why repudiate evil, if it be but part of ultimate reality? If, on the other hand, we acknowledge the original sovereignty of good—and therefore its eventual supremacy over evil—man's personal relations toward good and evil become full of consequence, and the goal of history a matter of first importance.

The Bible unhesitatingly proclaims the monism of good: it rejects the idea, developed formally in Zoroastrian thought, that in the nature of all things there exists an eternal dualism. Conflict, indeed, there is between good and evil, but in that conflict the good has divine right; evil is a usurper. Good is symbolized as light; evil as darkness. But the light is uncreated light; the darkness, created darkness. "God is light," we read, "and in him is no darkness at all" (I John 1: 5). All good dwells in God, or springs from God. In an absolute sense, therefore, there is none good save God (Mark 10: 18). And since beside Him there is no other god, it follows that good alone is eternal and all-sovereign.

The world, in the beginning, was, as the creation of God, pronounced very good (Gen. 1: 31). As seen now, it cannot be so described. Evil is present everywhere—evil, not as calamity only, but as spiritual darkness and moral apostasy. Whence, then, came evil, and how has it acquired such potency in the affairs of men? This is not told us in the Bible, except indirectly. A spiritual apostasy from God, within a sphere higher than our own, is darkly hinted at; and with it the existence of a dread being who, because of his pre-eminence in that revolt, came to be known as the prince of darkness. But what is told us—and told us plainly—is that which concerns us as men, namely, how sin entered human history. The story of the Fall is the account of that tragic event. The darkness had come. Hitherto, light, as eternal light, had been manifesting itself in time and space; now, a darkness alien to God's creation had intruded itself into the world of mankind.

The entrance of evil into the world was a direct challenge to the Creator, an open threat to the sovereignty of good; and as such it had to be met by decisive action on the part of God. The free will of man could not possibly limit the sovereignty of God. Although his initial freedom gave man the tragic power to accept God or deny God, this liberty of choice must not be construed as spiritual independence. Man's spiritual freedom was undoubtedly real; nevertheless, it was a freedom bounded by creaturehood. It is beside the point to say that man's spirit exists in abysmal depths of freedom, and that therefore, in the life of the spirit, it is not subject to external authority. Even if we postulate the existence of primordial depths of freedom, out of which man's