MIRACLE AND MYTH

THAT miracles have a place and a significance in the pages of the Old Testament will be denied by none, but the precise definition of their place and significance has long been a matter around which much theological controversy revolves. There have never been lacking those who are altogether unwilling for various reasons or for none to countenance anything that appears to be at all abnormal or supernatural or out of the ordinary, and who are prepared to regard the Old Testament stories as but the picturesque folk-lore of an ancient people, comparable to the sagas and traditions which have been preserved in the primitive annals of other races, and possibly of some value in the realm of religious allegory.

The leading religious philosophers of the present time take up the position that miracle in the Old Testament has no place in the objective sphere of history (though they speak with varying emphasis on this point), but assert that it has significance " mythologically ". They maintain, indeed, that the historicity or otherwise of the miraculous element in the Old Testament is in itself of no ultimate consequence, and that a too literal approach to it is actually destructive of its inner or "mythological" significance. It is also worthy of note that these same religious philosophers are not quite comfortable with respect to the term " myth ", as used in their particular sense, because they are not unaware of its ancient and almost automatic association with stories which are fanciful and unhistorical. Therefore the introduction of this term is frequently accompanied by disclaimers of one sort or another to the effect that they have no intention of questioning the historical reliability of the Biblical stories—for that, they say, is neither here nor there: this, however, is exactly what they proceed to do !

Now, it is necessary that we should take this "mythological" school seriously and make an effort to assess the worth of their point of view. For them, objective history is, as it were, merely the shell or outer crust behind which and through which must be sought an esoteric truth and a reality which are cosmic and supra-historical in import. Thus the *credo* of Berdyaev :

> " I believe that history and the ' historical ' are not merely phenomena, that they are—and this is the most radical hypothesis of the philosophy of history —noumena. . . . The ' historical ' is by its nature not phenomenal but deeply ontological. It has its roots in some deep primal foundation of being which it makes available for our communion and understanding. The ' historical ' is a sort of revelation of the deepest essence of universal reality, of the destiny of the world focused in that of man. It is a revelation of noumenal reality " (*The Meaning of History* [London, 1945], p. 16).

He expounds his position further in the following terms :

> " History is not an objective empirical datum: it is a myth. Myth is no fiction, but a reality; it is, however, one of a different order from that of the so-called objective empirical fact. Myth is the story preserved in popular memory of a past event, and transcends the limits of the external objective world, revealing an ideal world, a subject-object world of facts. According to Schelling, mythology is the primordial history of mankind. But myths are not peculiar to the remote past; various more recent epochs have been rich in the elements of myth-creation " (*ibid.*, p. 21).

" Myth " is thus an important ingredient in Berdyaev's philosophy of history. Moreover, his is essentially a religious, and, in its way, a Christian, philosophy of history. " The metaphysical and the historical ", he affirms, " are really brought together and intimately fused only in the Christian philosophy of history " (*ibid.*, p. 26) ; and this is the chief burden of his remarkably interesting and penetrating book.

But, while I am an admirer of Berdyaev as a profound thinker and savant, I cannot fail to notice that his philosophy leads him to adopt an antiquated dualistic view of the Old and New Testaments; indeed, in his book *The Destiny of Man* (London, 1937) he expresses distinct respect for the dualistic sincerity of Marcion and the Gnostics (see pp. 33, 55), and he follows Marcion in depreciating the Old Testament, whose God is, supposedly, quite other than the God of the New.

> " The religious content of the ancient traditions and myths does not constitute a science or objective knowledge. Nor can it compete with the latter. But it does represent the revelation of far deeper truths bearing upon quite different spheres. The great truth of the Bible . . . ought to be approached both philosophically and religiously in the light of the New and not the Old Testament. . . . Christian anthropology and cosmology, the doctrine of man's origin, all display in their most predominant form the stamp of the limitations peculiar to man in the Old Testament. These limitations are likewise apparent in Christian dogma and its metaphysics of history, since they are founded upon the limited Biblical anthropological and cosmological doctrines. The consciousness of the Old Testament is therefore an obstacle to the foundation of the true metaphysics of history. . . . A change and transformation of man's interior history was imperative in the light of the New Testament, of the New Adam and of the new man, who had thrown off the yoke of natural necessity and the wrath of God. . . .

> This inner spiritual change is what distinguishes the whole of Christian history from that of the pagan and Biblical world. As a result, man began to liberate himself inwardly, on the one hand, from the power of the natural demons and, on the other, from the Jewish subservience to God as a remote, menacing and wrathful power which it was terrifying and dangerous for man to meet" (*The Meaning of History*, pp. 83–85).

The quotations which I have given are sufficient to illustrate the contention that Berdyaev's attitude to the Old Testament is strongly derogatory, that man is at the centre of his philosophy and God at the circumference, and that truth and reality are, according to his thought, to be perceived by means of human insight, and not through Divine revelation. In point of fact, a good term for describing the leaders of the "mythological" school would be that of "insight" philosophers, for they are truly men of profound insight, but, be it remembered, still *men* of insight, that is, of human and mortal insight, which can never penetrate unassisted into the kingdom of the Divine and eternal reality.

In coming to Niebuhr we may observe in his approach to Scripture similar characteristics, but underlined, in his case, with an excessively confident dogmatism. Thus he informs us that "religion is involved in myth as a necessary symbol of its faith" (*Beyond Tragedy* [London, 1944], p. 304), and he speaks of "the necessary and perennially valid contribution of myth to the Biblical world view" (*ibid.*, p. x). He further asserts that "the Christian religion may be characterised as one which has transmuted primitive religious and artistic myths and symbols without fully rationalising them" (*ibid.*, p. 7). We are warned against "the wooden-headed literalism of orthodoxy" (p. 28), whereby the "primitive error" is committed of regarding "the early form in which the myth is stated as authoritative" (p. 9). This attitude leads him to reject *tout court* any literal interpretation of the primitive "myths" of Creation and the Fall. "The fall", he bluntly affirms, "is not historical. It does not take place in any concrete human act." And, of course, together with the Fall, what he calls "the extremism of the historic doctrine of total depravity" is jettisoned. All that is left to us is the symbolism of these "myths" (pp. 11–13). This also applies to the story, for example, of the tower of Babel, where, we are told, "we have another mythical profundity which is not literal truth and yet is profoundly true. The peoples of the earth", he assures us, "never had one language, unless we regard the babbling of children as a universal language from which the diversity of tongues springs" (p. 42). This asseveration, however, is not quite in line with the findings of up-to-date linguistic research, which is inclining more and more to the Biblical viewpoint that all languages ultimately are the offshoots of one mother stem. A literalistic view of the miracle of Babel may not be so fantastic after all!

With the "mythologists" I make so bold as to classify Karl Barth. He, too, like Berdyaev and Niebuhr, is a thinker of insight, and in that most stimulating volume of his, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (London, 1935), he propounds an attitude to Scripture which tallies very well with that of the "mythological" school.

> "The Bible is the literary monument of an ancient racial religion and of a Hellenistic cultus religion of the Near East. A human document like any other, it can lay no *a priori* dogmatic claim to special attention and consideration. . . . And when now we turn our serious though somewhat dispassionate attention to the objective content of the Bible, we shall not do so in a way to provoke religious enthusiasm and scientific indignation to another battle against 'stark orthodoxy' and 'dead belief in the letter'. For it is too clear that intelligent and fruitful discussion of the Bible begins when the judgment as to its human, its historical and psychological character has been made and *put behind* us. Would that the teachers of our high and lower schools, and with them the progressive element among the clergy of our established churches, would forthwith resolve to have done with a battle that once had its time but now has *had* it! The special *content* of this human document, the remarkable *something* with which the writers of these stories and those who stood behind them were concerned, the Biblical *object*—this is the question that will engage and engross us . . ." (pp. 60, 61).

What are these—the special content, the remarkable something, the Biblical object—but another way of speaking of a certain "mythological" import of Scripture? Such a conclusion is confirmed by Barth's assertions to the effect that "Biblical religious history has the distinction of being in its essence, in its inmost character, neither religion nor history—not religion but reality, not history but truth", and that the truth of religion is "its other-worldliness, its refusal of the idea of sacredness, its non-historicity" (pp. 66, 69). If this is indeed the case, well may we exclaim with Barth, "What matters it whether figures like Abraham and Moses are products of later myth-making!" (p. 65).

What, then, of the miracles of the Old Testament? What may we believe about them? What significance have they for us? To such enquiries Barth replies that "they illustrate what

the resurrection illustrates supremely, that it is beside the point even to ask whether they are historical and possible. They make ", he continues, " no claim to being either. They signalise the unhistorical, the impossible, the new time that is coming. Least of all are they relative miracles, exceptions to or rare special cases of the laws we know " (p. 91). Such language is altogether typical of the terminology of the " myth " school.

Now, lest I should be misunderstood, or should be accused of misinterpreting the meaning of the " mythologists ", let me declare without further delay that, up to a certain point, I feel myself to be very much in agreement with the intention of the " mythological " school. Who will deny that there is indeed a deep, mysterious, inner, timeless significance within the stories of Holy Scripture ? For some time past Evangelicals have in truth been somewhat " wooden-headed " in their orthodoxy, and as a whole have failed to penetrate far behind the outer shell of the event to the rich spiritual substance which is undoubtedly there. I do not say that others have succeeded in doing so, even to the small extent that Evangelicals have; but the " mythologists " to-day are setting us an example in this respect that we need to emulate and to improve upon. As Evangelicals we need to recover our " insight " into Scripture, especially in the light of events of the present day, and to attempt to see the truth of God with a perspective that includes, as far as is humanly possible, all the fullness and grandeur of its sweep.

But I find myself in strong disagreement with the " mythologists " in the matter of their view of God and of Scripture. They reject out of hand the claim of and for Scripture to be in itself a revelation from God to man. They refuse to approach Scripture objectively, and the very subjectivity of their judgment of it is automatically divested of any settled authority, inasmuch as, even if they disavow the depravity of human nature (as some of them do), it is based upon the probing opinions of a finite and imperfect intellect. If Scripture is itself the very Word of God, then human reason, no matter how perspicacious, is by no means its arbiter. It is true that man should not be denied the right of private judgment, but this, if it is directed towards what is in fact the Word of God, should be exercised, not arrogantly or as it were sovereignly, but submissively and expectantly and in consonance with the spirit and claim of Scripture itself.

A low view of Scripture involves a low view of God ; and a humanistic interpretation, for all that it may contain many excellencies, can only result in a perversion of the true perspective and the removal of Almighty God from the throne of His supremacy. Moreover, to maintain that what may be, and perhaps often is, externally false is the vehicle of what is intrinsically true, is beyond doubt not only a very unsatisfactory attitude towards Scripture, but also a most insecure premiss for a philosophy of any sort.

To assert, as we have seen Barth does, that it is beside the point even to ask whether miracles are historical and possible, is surely to misunderstand the earnest purport of Scripture itself, which treats the historicity of its history with the utmost seriousness, and whose miracles are intended, as serious, veracious historical events, to emphasise and illustrate the grand theme which informs and overrules every part of Scripture, namely, that God omnipotent is supreme in and over all human history. That the miracles of the Old Testament are themselves actual interventions of the power of God in the course of human history is undoubtedly the view of Christ and His Apostles, as it is also the view of the Fathers and the Reformers; and they could scarcely be described as defective in spiritual insight !

Scripture always puts forward its miracles as *signs* (σημεῖα) —that is, as *significant* for the very reason that they testify, as remarkable and unusual interventions in the course of human history, to the concern, the potency, and the sovereignty of God, and to the creatureliness of man. Remove the place of the Old Testament miracles in history, and you remove their significance also, and render them but a fantastic jumble of this and that, compounded of the immature gropings and speculations of a primitive people. But assign them the historicity which they demand, and at once the regenerate mind at least finds them invested with a vital inner as well as an outer significance, with a " mythological " import, if you like, which gives coherence to the whole, and is itself a persistent testimony to the veracity both intrinsically and extrinsically of Holy Scripture as indeed the very Word of the Living God, and by no means a mere " human document, like any other ".

Anyway, what after all is there to cavil at in the miracles of the Old Testament ? Belief in God renders belief in miracles not

only possible but reasonable. Man, who is constantly and purposively intervening in the course of the affairs of subordinate nature in a manner which, analogically speaking, can appear as nothing short of miraculous and supernatural to the lowe creatures which experience the remarkable and, to them, un accountable effects of his interference, should not be so foolhardy as to reckon it inadmissible for the sovereign Deity to intervene in the course of human affairs, no matter how inexplicable such interference may appear to be to his confined perception. Furthermore, if the Old Testament is, as some would have us believe, a volume of propaganda for miracle-mongering, it is rather noticeable that in its 800-odd pages, purporting to cover a period of history extending over some three to four thousand years, only about sixty miracles are recorded, and many of its outstanding characters, such as Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, and David, are never spoken of as having performed a single miracle. This is not particularly good propaganda ! It is more fitting that we should notice reverently the lack of ostentation, the sobriety, the economy, and the naturalness even, with which the Old Testament miracles are described. Moreover, we should observe that, so far from being fantastic and aimless, they are interventions full of purpose and quality.

Now let us turn our attention to what is the basic miracle—that of Creation, which is the threshold, not only of all history, but also of all Scripture. The rejection of God the Creator has led Bertrand Russell and others like him in our day to a place of deep pessimism in the face of " omnipotent matter " and " omnipotent death ". Yet it should be obvious to all that matter of every sort, because of its mutability, its disabling limitations, its unspirituality, and its utter contingency, is entirely lacking in the properties of eternity. Since it does not exist necessarily, it does not exist eternally. As Aquinas says in a famous passage :

> " If everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist some being the existence of which is necessary " (*Summa Th.*, Part I, Q. 2, Art. 3).

In this and other ways it is possible to demonstrate the reasonableness of the miracle of Creation as the prime event of history.

But, had they but exercised deeper insight, our *quondam* optimists and anti-creationists, now turned pessimists, might have learnt that God who is the supreme Creator of the whole natural realm is also the source of all spiritual life, and that the Creation of Genesis i is not only laden with historicity, but is indeed a signpost pointing forward to the great miracle of the New Creation in Christ Jesus, which is no less a supernatural work of Almighty God. They would have found the perception and application of such inner truth a sure preservative against despair.

The truth is that the miracles of the Old Testament possess a significance or " mythos " which is pregnant with prophetic and eschatological force—but always a significance that is closely dependent upon the historical veracity of the miracles for its validity. Every miracle is a reminder of the mighty power of God ; a denial of its historicity is at the same time a denial of the power of God in it, and the narrative is thereby eviscerated, and degenerates forthwith into a foolish and powerless fable.

The miraculous raptures from the earth of Enoch and Elijah, so far from being fanciful, speak to us of an eternal and otherworldly inheritance of the saints in the presence of God's perfection, and are corroborative of that great subsequent miracle of our Lord's ascension into heaven, and testify to the ability of God to perform His promise concerning the rapture of all His people at the glorious appearing of Jesus Christ.

In like manner all miracles of judgment, such as the Deluge, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the swallowing up of Korah and his followers, besides having an immediate and terrible significance for the people upon whom they were enacted, also declare the inevitability of the final judgment by a just and holy Deity of all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

Those miracles whereby people were raised from the dead indicate the power of God as the fountain of all life, and look ahead to that pivotal miracle of all history, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and beyond that to the ultimate general resurrection of the dead at the conclusion of this world's history.

The remarkable miracles of deliverance are an abiding witness of the ever-present ability of God to save and preserve His creatures, not just, if it pleases Him, from the most overwhelming physical perils, but even more so from the clutch of the great

Adversary, from the enslaving grip of sin, and from the surrounding forces of evil which assail the soul.

So, too, the miraculous birth of Isaac, and those of Samson and Samuel, were signs intended by Almighty God in their deeper significance to prepare the way for the credibility of that still greater and more intimate miracle whereby the Eternal Son became a partaker of our humanity. He who could open a dead and barren womb (Sarah in particular having been not only barren, but also long past the age of child-bearing) could also open and impregnate the womb of a virgin so that she might become the mother of our Saviour's humanity.

The true insight into the significance of the Old Testament miracles is thus a *Gospel* insight; the true key to their timeless secrets is to be found in the Person and work of the Saviour Jesus Christ. With this insight and this key we may penetrate to the very heart of God ; without them, we can probe only as far as the coloured spectacles of our prejudice will permit our weak eyes to peer. That it is an evangelical insight that is needed is confirmed by the New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament miracles. Thus, for example, the brazen serpent in the wilderness was symbolical of the manner and purpose of Christ's atoning death on the cross :

> " As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life " (John iii. 14, 15).

The giving of the manna was symbolical of God's sending of His Son to earth from heaven, and of Christ's giving of His own body as a ransom for many :

> " Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but My Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world. . . . I am the bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world " (John vi. 32-5, 48-51).

Jonah's grim adventure was symbolical of the burial and resurrection of our Lord :

> " An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign (*σημεῖον*, i.e., a significant miracle); and there shall be no sign given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah: for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth " (Matt. xii. 39, 40).

The Flood and the fate of the cities of the plain are symbolical of the awful judgment of the last day :

> " As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of Man. They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot: they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even so shall it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed " (Luke xvii. 26-30).

St. Paul interprets the miracle whereby the waters were caused to gush forth from the rock in the wilderness as symbolical, in a spiritual sense, of Christ, who is the source of the waters of life :

> " Our fathers . . . did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock which followed them: and that Rock was Christ" (1 Cor. x. 4).

This is the spirit and attitude which pervades the whole of the New Testament; and it is a fact beyond dispute that our Lord and His Apostles based their insight into the Old Testament miracles, and the validity of their interpretation of them, upon the literal historical veracity of those miracles. If they were in error in this, then the authority of some of their most solemn teaching and admonition is undermined, and a shadow is cast over all their words. Yet, if we are wise, and especially if we are Christ's, we shall accept the mind of Christ and of those who were instructed of Him, rather than the fickle mind of their humanistic critics.

Modern " mythologists ", if only they had this evangelical insight, might not have found the miracles of the Virgin Birth and Resurrection of Christ so unpalatable as historical facts. Thus Niebuhr asserts that " men may be deceived by the primitive myth of the Virgin Birth and seek to comprehend as a pure historical fact, what is significant precisely because it points beyond history " (*op. cit.*, p. 17). Again, he declaims: "The idea of the resurrection of the body can, of course, not be literally true " (*ibid.*, p. 290).

Barth befogs the resurrection of Christ with a haze of sophistry :

> " This tomb may prove to be a definitely closed *or* an open tomb; it is really a matter of indifference. . . . Of all that the New Testament says we need not, in fact, believe a single word, if we do not want to, but we must at least realise that it speaks of appearances of the *risen Christ*; we must at least grasp and respect this idea, and realise that what pertains to this idea, even if we cannot make anything of it ourselves, is not to be counted, weighed, and measured, as if it related

to the conception of the historical Jesus, His closed or open tomb, which, in fact, the 'sources' dispute with all their power" (*The Resurrection of the Dead* [New York, 1933], pp. 135–7).

Do we discern here some suggestion of a distinction between "the historical Jesus" and "the risen Christ"? This, at any rate, is a distinction positively made in a recent book, *The Meaning of Existence* (London, 1947), by Charles Duell Kean, who is an adherent of the "mythological" school. This author demands a "winnowing" which, he says, "of course, first of all requires a rejection of Biblical fundamentalism, because no appreciation of mythology is possible if the myths themselves are literalised" (p. 150). His historical *credo* concerning Jesus stops short of the Resurrection. He sums it up for us in the following terms: "There was once a man named Jesus, who lived in Palestine during the rule of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was the imperial procurator. Jesus became a wandering teacher, and eventually was arrested and condemned in Jerusalem. He was put to death by crucifixion. The foregoing", we are assured, "is history, not mythology" (pp. 152, 153). He further tells us that, if we are not "misled" by "fundamentalist views" which would give Jesus "advance knowledge that everything would turn out all right in the end", we shall "see the Cross for what it is—the crucifixion of a man" who was able "to believe that his action would be a positive contribution to the lives of other men" (p. 163). As for the Resurrection, it is not an historical fact, but a "myth" only, whereby in some mystic way the crucified Jesus continues his good influence as the Christ in the lives of men. "The Resurrection myth", he says, "declares that the crucified Jesus continues to be a living, positive personality" in the lives of those who have "accepted him as the Christ" (p. 154). We are informed that "the Christ was . . . much more influential after the crucifixion than the historical Jesus had been beforehand" (p. 170). After pursuing this "mythological" Christ, it would appear that the writer is after all clutching futilely at some wraithlike myth, for he ultimately confesses that he "can find no evidence one way or the other about life after death", and is therefore submissively "prepared to accept what happens"! (p. 193).

Herein is indicated the fundamental folly and heresy of the "mythological" school, that, in striking, as they clearly do, despite all their smoke-screens, at the root in history of the

miracles of the Old Testament, they are also striking at the root in history of the cardinal miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and are in reality cutting away the very ground of all Christian hope and confidence. "It is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak; knowing that He which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus" (2 Cor. iv. 13, 14). If Jesus be not literally raised from the dead, our faith is vain, and we are yet in our sins! As Evangelicals who value the soundness of our faith and the integrity of the Scriptural revelation, let us pay solemn heed to the dangers threatening us through this revival of rationalistic Docetism; let us beware of the very word "myth" which is itself instinct with unbelief; let us return to expository preaching that is truly profound and Scriptural; and let us proclaim boldly by lip and life a God who is absolutely sovereign over all the affairs of men.

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BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY :
1. THE INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY[1]

THE TITLE is not to be taken as indicating the equivalence of prophecy with prediction. It does assume that prediction holds a central place of interest in prophecy. Such an assumption would have been contested a generation ago ; in the reaction from the old view of prophets as predicters of events that had nothing to do with their own age, scholars focused all attention on the historical significance of the prophets, particularly in the spheres of politics, ethics and the cultus. It is now felt that the spokesmen of Jehovah were more interested in the supra-temporal than the temporal, in the coming vindication of the sovereignty of Jehovah rather than the movements of current politics. To the prophets, " the temporal concerns of men, struggling to assert themselves in a world of conflicting claims, were curiously unimportant ", declares Professor Norman Porteous. " On all that the prophets have to say of the relations between God and history lies the eschatological accent. For them each moment of time is significant, not primarily because of what preceded it and what is to follow it, but because of that immediate relation to God which may at any moment mean the coming of His kingdom with power."[2]

In the light of that Great Day judgments were pronounced on individual nations, including Israel, for Jehovah was a God of holiness. But the Day was also to initiate the coming of the Kingdom of God, for Jehovah was also a God of grace. At one time the judgment of the Day was stressed, at another its redemptive aspect, according as circumstances required. Despite, however, all that has been written about prophets of weal and prophets of woe, we find it hard to believe that any of the great succession of Biblical prophets can be confined to either class ; they looked for both judgment and mercy at the revelation of the day of God, but they naturally chose the right moments for declaring either aspect. In no prophet is this more clearly seen than Ezekiel, whose first years of ministry are almost wholly

[1] The first of two papers read at a Conference of the I.V.F. Theological Students' Fellowship, December 1947.

[2] Essay on " Prophecy " in *Record and Revelation* ed. H. Wheeler Robinson (1938), p. 240.

taken up with unrelieved denunciation ; even so, there are one or two indications that, for the sake of Jehovah's Name, there would be a restitution of the disgraced nation, and the latter part of his ministry is almost entirely taken up with this theme. In what follows no attempt will be made to expound the teaching of the prophets as to the nature and issues of the Day of the Lord ; instead we shall restrict ourselves to considering principles that should govern all such exposition.

I

A primary canon of interpretation, applicable equally in the prophetical writings of Old and New Testaments, is that *a prophet always sees the Day as close at hand, impinging on his generation.* This principle has been vigorously contested by conservative scholars but it seems a futile fight. Isaiah, e.g., set the deliverance of the Messiah in the context of the overthrow of the Assyrian empire (Isa. vii–ix ; x–xi, etc.). Habakkuk saw it as following on the destruction of Babylon (Hab. ii. 2–3). In Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as in Isa. xl–lv, the establishment of the Kingdom of God in glory is presented as the concomitant of the end of the exile of 586–536 (e.g. Jer. xxix–xxxi ; Ezek. xxxvi ; cf. Isa. xlix ; li). Haggai, writing after the return from the exile, foretold the advent of the Kingdom after the building of the temple, then in course of erection (Hag. ii). The same phenomenon appears in the New Testament. The Day of the Lord has now become the Day of Christ, when He shall be manifested in glory from heaven. Everywhere that Coming is viewed as near (e.g. Rom. xiii. 11f., 1 Cor. vii. 29f., Heb. x. 37, 1 Pet. iv. 7, Jas. v. 8, Rev. i. 3). Even our Lord has not excepted Himself from this principle : in the eschatological discourse He sets His parousia in such close connection with the fall of Jerusalem as to make it difficult to disentangle them in the versions given by Matthew and Mark ; there is, perhaps, no need to try to disentangle them; our Lord views the one as the precursor of the other and gives no hint of any interval between. This can mean nothing less than that God, in His inscrutable sovereignty, has been pleased to disclose to man the certainty and nature of His final judgments and Kingdom but not the time of their accomplishment ; this certainly our Lord explicitly stated to be true of Himself (Mark xiii. 32). Whatever else be

adduced in explanation of this phenomenon, whether it be an accommodation to psychological processes whereby man tends to view as immediate things that come to him with overwhelming conviction, or whether there be other factors as yet dimly understood by us, we must take account of it in all our endeavours to understand the word of prophecy.

II

A second postulate, directly dependent on the first, is that *all descriptions of the Day of the Lord and the age it initiates are given in terms of the prophet's circumstances and environment.* This holds good in regard to the *historical setting* in which the prophet places the Day. He declares its effect on nations with which he is in contact, both smaller states like Edom, Moab, Ammon and the like, and great empires like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. These nations are singled out for mention because they are the historical powers bounding the prophet's horizon, the constituent elements of the world of his day. The attempt of some modern expositors to show that they must be reinstated at the End-time, whether the smaller tribes of Syria or the empires of Rome and Babylon, is a fantastic procedure, due to ignoring the first canon of exegesis that we have laid down.

The principle has a further application in respect of the *nature* of the Kingdom proclaimed by the prophets. They saw that the Kingdom was to triumph over every form of social tyranny and false religion. True to their type, they did not present this truth in the abstract ; they described the day when every man shall possess his own vine and fig tree and none shall make him afraid ; Jerusalem is to be the centre of earth and all nations will go up to its temple and pay homage to the one true God, keeping feasts and offering sacrifices (e.g. Isa. ii. 1–4, lxv. 21–3, Zech. xiv. 16–21). Contrary to tenets popular to-day, these visions will never be fulfilled in the letter, but we believe that they will be fulfilled in principle, in the overthrow of all social tyranny and the conversion of the world to the one true Faith. A striking example of the necessity of this mode of interpretation is seen in the elaborate description of the Kingdom of God contained in the closing chapters of Ezekiel. In the triumphant Kingdom he sees a new temple wherein is perpetually enacted a revised form of the sacrificial system of his day. Some

expositors accordingly believe that the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem at the end of the age and the sacrificial system reinstituted for the whole period of the Millennial Kingdom. To many of us, such an interpretation comes in no way short of nullifying the Epistle to the Hebrews, in particular making nonsense of Heb. x. 1–18. With the New Testament in one's hand, it is impossible to look for the fulfilment of Ezek. xl–xlviii except in the sense that revealed religion shall be purely followed in a world cleansed from evil, a prospect, however, enough to rejoice the heart of any child of God ! In passing, it may be noted that this seems to be John's method of handling Ezekiel in the New Testament Apocalypse : in his vision of the consummated Kingdom, Jerusalem is measured and described somewhat as in Ezekiel, but it is no earthly city ; a river of water of life, and trees of life lining its banks as in the earlier prophet, find a place here, but they are spiritual, not sensual realities ; the enemy that seeks to overthrow the City is still called Gog and Magog, but they no longer originate from the Middle East but symbolise the anti-God forces of the whole world (Rev. xx. 7–8). The picture of Ezekiel has thus been lifted out from the temporal world of his generation into the realm of the spiritual and universal.

III

A third important principle involves the so-called conditional element in prophecy : *the Day of the Lord is certain, but its effects, both for judgment and blessing, depend on the attitude adopted by the subjects of prophecy, whether it be repentance or hardening of heart.* The principle is stated with all desirable clarity by Jeremiah :

> At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up and to break down and to destroy it; if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; if it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them (Jer. xviii. 7–10).

The prophet immediately applies it to his own people with an exhortation to repent, that the prophecies of woe might be averted (Jer. xviii. 11 ; cf. also xxvi. 12–13, Ezek. iii. 18–21, xxxiii. 13–20). Since many utterances of the prophets concern the doom of unrighteous peoples, one could say that such prophecy

was given in order that it might not be fulfilled. The Book of Jonah was written with this thought in mind : Jonah's message was one of unrelieved gloom, without even an appeal for repentance, " Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown ". His chagrin at the non-fulfilment of the prophecy is the whole point of the story ; he was sent to preach a doom that God wished to be averted through the repentance of the people concerned ; and that is what God always wants when He sends His messengers with a note of warning.

But the principle works in another direction. God's promises are made, whether specifically or tacitly, on the assumption of the faithfulness of those who should receive the blessing. The promise to Abraham is given in Gen. xii. 1–3 apparently as an unconditioned statement ; yet Gen. xviii. 17–19 implies that the covenant will be carried out because God knows Abraham will be faithful (" I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment ; to the end that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him "). The institution of circumcision was a recognition of this principle; if it was neglected, as was deliberately done on certain occasions in Israel's history, the offending parties cut themselves off from participation in the blessings of the covenant. The Law was given at Sinai as the overt expression of this principle of God's dealings with His people : " Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me from among all peoples : for all the earth is mine : and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation " (Exod. xix. 5–6). The covenant with David was a means of bringing to pass God's side of the covenant made at Sinai. When it was announced to David, no explicit condition was laid down (2 Sam. vii. 8–16, though cf. *vv.* 14–15) ; when, however, David repeated the terms of the covenant to Solomon he made a significant addition, " If thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail thee (said he) a man on the throne of Israel " (2 Kings ii. 4). A similar condition is laid down by Jeremiah when addressing King Zedekiah (Jer. xxii. 4–5). It is instructive in this connection to read Ps. lxxxix. 30–45, where the psalmist quotes the prophecy concerning David's seed and is bewildered by its apparent lack

of fulfilment. Jeremiah declares that it shall find its perfect enactment in the Messianic Kingdom (Jer. xxiii. 5f.).

From these data we deduce the important conclusion that the promise to the Jews that they should be the people of God and heirs of His Kingdom is conditioned by obedience to His will as embodied in the Law and declared by the prophets. Their refusal to keep the covenant resulted in the dispersion of the Northern Kingdom (721 B.C.) and afterwards of the Southern (586 B.C.). When the Messiah finally appeared to the Jewish nation and was rejected by them, they paid the penalty of forfeiting their status as the peculiar possession of God and the promises regarding their possession of the Kingdom of God. Our Lord declared it in unequivocal terms : " The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof " (Matt. xxi. 43). The " nation " is, of course, His Church, composed historically of a Jewish nucleus, the " remnant " so frequently mentioned in the Old Testament, and expanded to contain in one all peoples of earth ; so that Peter can apply the promise made to Israel at Sinai to the Church (1 Pet. ii. 9–10), which is now the Israel of God (Gal. vi. 16) in contrast to Israel after the flesh (1 Cor. x. 18), Jews being now unworthy even to bear the name of Jew (Rom. ii. 28–9). The Kingdom of God, both now and in its future glorious state, belongs to the Church (Rev. v. 9f.: xx. 4–6).

This line of interpretation has, from apostolic times, been the normal view of the Church, despite notable exceptions. It still is the view of the Church, in face of vehement assertions to the contrary on the part of dispensationalist teachers, who for long have regarded themselves as possessing a monopoly of sound instruction upon prophetic truth. Their protest is based on the understandable conviction that God must fulfil His word, but it ignores God's clear statements that the fulfilment of that word has conditions which man is responsible to carry out ; if those conditions are not observed, then God finds another channel for the performance of His word. Note, He does not abrogate prophecy, He fulfils it in another way.

IV

This prompts us to lay down a further proposition : *descriptions of the Day of the Lord and its issues are subject to*

modification by fuller revelations given to subsequent generations. Such modifications are not cancellations of the prophetic word but amplifications, glimpses of broader streams of grace than the narrower rivulets of former days. This again may best be illustrated by developments in Scripture of the terms of the Abrahamic covenant. In Gen. xii and xiii its blessings are stated to involve the greatness of Abraham's seed, its prosperity and its possession of the land of Canaan ; i.e. they are mainly material blessings. In the New Testament exposition of this covenant, its spiritual implications are drawn out and the other elements ignored (see Rom. iv. 3, 6–12). On the other hand, instead of the inheritance consisting of a small stretch of territory, the land of Palestine, Abraham's seed is to inherit the world, i.e. the universal Kingdom of God (Rom. iv. 13). And the seed is no longer the Jewish nation but Christ and the Church of all nations (see Gal. iii. 16, 28–9, where the term " Christ " almost certainly indicates Jesus and His Church, the Messianic Community).

We must beware, however, of reading this kind of developed teaching into the first utterances of prophecy. When God spoke to Abraham He spoke of Israel, the Jewish nation, not of the Catholic Church. So also the prophets had no idea of the Church in the New Testament definition and they never described it ; that was " the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it hath now been revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit " (Eph. iii. 5). In this respect the literalist expositors of the Old Testament have just cause to complain against the tendency to read the Church of God in places where it is not thought of ; what they do not seem to grasp, however, is that the promises to the old Israel have been engulfed in the greater promises made to the New Israel ; not annulled, we repeat, but enlarged. By the grace of God, the old Israel shall yet find its place in the purpose of God, but not on the old terms ; it can only be within the sphere of the New Israel wherein distinctions of race are forever abolished.

We cannot stay to discuss further the principle of development. It can be observed throughout the whole gamut of eschatological thought in the Bible. Its recognition would have saved the Church from many pernicious teachings on immortality which are widely current to-day ; men would have seen that it is a wrong principle to make the square pegs of New Testament doctrine fit into the round holes of Old Testament phraseology ;

the only way it can be done is by mutilation of the former, a procedure which men have not hesitated to do, with disastrous results. The same observation, however, may be made regarding views of the Kingdom of God. Evangelical scholars have yet to recognise that the process of explication and development is still going on within the New Testament to its culmination in the Book of Revelation ; the process is paralleled in all other doctrines and is accorded recognition in them, but not so in this department of theology. Its result is seen on the one hand in a hesitation to admit the doctrine of the Millennium and in another direction in a fear of recognising clear hints as to the nature of the intermediate state ; on both doctrines conservative scholars are neither clear nor happy.

V

Lastly, a word must be added about the use of symbolism in prophecy. There is no universal principle that can be laid down, though we may venture to suggest that symbolism in the Bible is meant to help and not to muddle its readers ; our exegetes have all too often turned the tables for us in this matter ! The poetry of the prophets is the spontaneous expression of their feelings, it is not a complicated language drawn up by code experts. The idea has somehow got abroad that the prophets used a scale of symbols with a fixed meaning ; e.g. earth, sea, floods represent peoples in a settled state, convulsed state, and in motion respectively ; a mountain is a large kingdom, an island a small one ; geography thus takes on a quite unexpected significance ! And of course we must not omit that a day equals a year ! By this means any prophetic passage can be provided with a kind of Moffatt's translation for the uninitiated ; unfortunately such " translations " differ widely, resulting in the prophets being made to declare exactly what men have wanted them to say ; prophecy has thus been reduced to buffoonery and its serious study discredited in the minds of people of a more sober cast of mind.

The most able discussion of this question that the present writer has seen occurs in A. B. Davidson's *Old Testament Prophecy*.[1] He lays down three principles for interpreting prophetic language, which I shall recount.

Firstly, *prophecies are to be read with the literal meaning in view*. That was how they were intended to be read. Making due

[1] Pp. 159–241, but see especially pp. 167–83.

allowance for the poetic and parabolic elements that are freely used, the language of prophecy is not obscure. This opposes the view that prophecy is not intended to be understood before the event ; such a notion has only been concocted in opposition to the adherents of a literalistic interpretation who exercise no caution and ignore the principles outlined above. The dictum " prophecy is pre-written history " is untrue, but neither is it a corollary of taking the prophet at his word.

Secondly, *if there is reason to think that the prophet speaks in figurative language, we are to find out the basic ideas which he is expressing through this means*. Especially does this apply to descriptions of the extraordinary phenomena of the Day of the Lord and of the glories of the consummated Kingdom.

Thirdly, *we have to be prepared to separate, where necessary, the content of a prophecy from its form*. This applies to all those descriptions of the consummated Kingdom given in terms of the Old Testament dispensation. It is unwarrantable to interpret them as adequately fulfilled in this age ; it is equally contrary to the teaching of the New Testament to apply them without change to the age of the triumph of the Kingdom of God on earth. The essential prophecy is to be separated from the form in which it is given, the latter being transient.

The fact that some prophecies have been fulfilled in a literal fashion is no argument against these principles ; there are many others of the greatest magnitude that incontestably have not been fulfilled literally and, in view of the bringing of the Church into being, never can be fulfilled in such a manner. Admittedly it is not easy to put these principles into practice ; it can only be done in the light of Scripture as a whole. But if the Word of God is seen to be greater than the measure of our particular intelligence, demanding the utmost of what we do possess, we surely should not complain. Such a realisation should inspire in us greater humility, together with a greater zeal to grasp for ourselves something of the treasures of the prophetic Word that lie hidden for every earnest student of Truth.

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