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The Pictorial and Dramatic Aspect of Biblical Truth

THE mother city of our religion is neither Athens, nor Rome, but Jerusalem. The thinking of the Jew is not abstract or analytical but dramatic, pictorial, poetic. He does not speak of omnipotence but presents a dramatic picture which opens with the words: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." The deep-rooted evil in the heart of man is told in the form of the story of Adam and Eve. The deliverance of the Children of Israel from Egypt, the Covenant in the wilderness, and the conquest of the Promised Land set forth a living picture of God's redeeming purpose and power, and of the gratitude and love which is rightly demanded of His children. When he faces the problem of suffering he produces the Drama of the book of Job. His history books are not primarily concerned with an accurate record of events but rather to show forth God's dealing with men and nations. It is in poetic form that the prophets set out the challenges and promises of God. In the book of Psalms there is a collection of fine devotional poetry which often rises to sublime heights of simple dramatic imagery, e.g. in the 23rd Psalm. An exception must be made concerning the Levitical laws (whoever found poetry and romance in rules and regulations!) but even here we may see the same influence at work in the book of Deuteronomy. The famous Shema (*Deut.* vi. 4-9) quoted by our Lord as the first commandment is poetic in its form, and is put into the setting of the home, where such natural interests as teaching, talking, daily work, plans and neighbourliness, make their contribution of colour to the demonstration of deep loyalty to the Lord. In Apocalyptic the dramatic element has taken the bit between its teeth and become fantastic.

In the New Testament this dramatic element is even more clear. The Parables of our Lord are truth presented in pictures. The Gospels themselves are dramatic in form, and in the Lord's Supper the drama of the broken body and poured out wine are perpetuated and re-enacted. In the case of Paul's Epistles there has been so much argument about them on the part of Greek and Latin scholars and their successors that the dramatic element has been overlaid and it needs to be remembered that it was a Jew who wrote them. In *Romans*, which is the most logical of them all, the thought proceeds by rhythmic stages until at the lyrical

climax at the end of chapter 8 the reader feels impelled to stand up, wave his arms about, and shout with joy.

Recognition of this dramatic aspect of the Bible should be a help both to its interpretation and to its exposition. In the first place it means a recovery of the Old Testament from its neglect in the pulpit in recent days. For the preacher trained in the critical school there is apt to be an unconscious hesitation in the handling of some great passages owing to a sense that there may be a variety of sources or a corrupt state of the text. The thought of progressive revelation also suggests that much of the teaching of the Old Testament is outmoded by the New. But these considerations are seen to be secondary when the dramatic quality of the teaching is recognised. The bloodthirsty background of such stories as those of David and Goliath, or Elijah on Mount Carmel should not be allowed to spoil the appeal of these vivid pictures of a servant of God who is bold in his confidence that he has been called to be a champion for God against odds. Even some of the miracles which the modern man finds difficult to swallow may be accepted as stage scenery without a qualm.

This view of the style of scripture puts a new weapon into the hands of the interpreter. Modern scholarship may help him to know the historical background and to use it in order to realise the significance of the particular story. But he will realise that while the interpretation grows out of the actual situation it need not be circumscribed by it but may be applied on a wider field and to other and more recent situations. In this he will be saved from becoming academic because it is a feature of the dramatic that it never loses touch with the personal and dynamic. Again there are some types of Christian truth which by their very nature do not yield up their treasures to a logical or scientific approach but which may be perceived by the dramatic eye. In particular eschatology offers a rich field for research and re-statement along this line. This sense of the value of the dramatic style as a vehicle for the presentation of some aspect of truth which cannot properly be conveyed by logic is represented by Luther in words quoted or summarised by Aulen in his book *Christus Victor*, p. 125 :

“He has some very significant words in a passage where he is expounding the Descent into Hell. If, he says, one were to speak acutely and cleverly of the subject as it is in itself, even so one would never thoroughly explain the truth of the matter; but by using imagery one can describe how Christ went down with banner in hand, and smote the devils and chased them away, and stormed hell's citadel. It would now be easy to ask, with a smile, what sort of a banner He had when He took hell's castle, and what it was made of, and why it was not burned up in hell's fire, or what sort of a gate there could be in hell, and so to ridicule as simpletons the Christians who believed such things. But this would be a fool's game, such

as a swine or a cow might join in! So one might make allegories of it and explain what the banner, the flag, and the gate of hell signify. Christians could hardly be so coarse as to believe or say that it happened so in outward appearance, or that hell were a structure of wood or iron; rather they left such speculations on one side and spoke in a simple way of such things, just as always the doctrine of Divine things is set forth in crude outward images; as also Christ used images and parables in speaking of the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven."

This view also suggests the recovery and development of a technique in preaching by which the listener is not invited to follow the logic of a reasoned argument so much as to see the logic of a situation dramatically presented. This is the technique of our Lord in His parables. It is a technique which all great preachers have possessed but which needs to be recovered, and especially in this day when the appeal has to be made to a cinema-going people. And it can very well be applied to children's addresses.

Such an approach to Scripture opens up a rich mine for those who know how to use the right tools. The suggestion may also be put forward that those who are preparing a modern translation should not only enlist the talents of scholars and theologians but also of dramatists and poets.

These are solid gains. But there are also dangers and temptations. It has already been suggested that in apocalyptic literature the dramatic element took the bit between its teeth and became fantastic. Such a danger does not present itself to the modern matter-of-fact mind. What is more likely today is the tendency to suppose that the dramatic form establishes the truth instead of being a vehicle to convey it. The truth must be there first in its own right and must be ready to submit to examination both from reason and from analysis. These must not be dismissed but rather must be taken into partnership, so that we might even say (without any irreverence being intended): "and now abideth reason, research and poetry, but the greatest of these is poetry."

Now the Greeks were well aware of the value of poetry and drama and gave them artistic expressions which profoundly shocked the orthodox Jew. The trouble was, however, that for the Greeks the drama was humanistic in its impulse and artificial in its expression with the result that development was in the direction either of burlesque or of stark tragedy. Dramatisation in itself is not enough and may easily degenerate into mere entertainment. It is then no more than the delineation of the follies and the antics of homo sapiens. The Jew, however, was naturally dramatic because he saw life as a huge drama being shaped by God Himself, a drama in which every man was compelled to be an actor. For him

God is alive and active. It is this dynamic view of God which is characteristic of the Bible and which confronts every age with a message clothed in dramatic form. Both for the writer and the reader the proper attitude is summed up in the words of Elijah: "As the Lord liveth before whom I stand."

E. H. DANIELL.

Now Children! by J. R. Edwards. (Carey Kingsgate Press, 3s. 6d.)

Here are thirty-three talks to boys and girls by one who over the years has given abundant proof of his love for children, his understanding of their minds and his gift for speaking to them. Ministers and others will find these pages helpful.

Billyhoe, by William J. May. (Independent Press, 3s. 6d.)

In what appears to be Mr. May's 49th publication we are here supplied with twenty-five talks for young people, including four for special occasions and six based on popular phrases. This little book will be found useful by those who have to speak to children.

Scottish Journal of Theology, March, 1954, has articles on the priesthood of believers, Luther's doctrine of the Ministry, on Baptism, an R.C. interpretation of Barth, and Anglicanism and the Ministry.

Mennonite Quarterly Review, Jan., 1954, includes an examination of testimonies by early Anabaptist martyrs, an appeal to Lutherans to reconsider their evaluation of Anabaptism, an article on modern evangelism, and some bibliographical and research notes.

For having, in our April issue, p. 242, located the South-Western Baptist Theological Seminary at Louisville, Kentucky, instead of Fort Worth, Texas, the Editor offers apologies. Louisville is the location of the Southern Baptist Seminary.