OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY: ITS NATURE AND UNITY

I

BIBLE history is the record of a chain of circumstances binding God's original purpose in man with the advent of Christ. This gives inward significance to the historical books of the Old Testament. These histories are something more than a cross-section of human experience, such as one may find in any other history book: they are the record of a unique divine process, of which the Lord Jesus Christ is the full expression. Outwardly, indeed, they move within the orbit of general history, but inwardly they concentrate upon a particular history, a divinely-conditioned series of " things determined beforehand to be done ". The materials of the common history of Scripture are actual events, which in themselves are perfectly normal and common to human experience, but are afterwards seen to have had a divinely-guided issue, a predisposition to a definite end. This predisposition is found in God's original purpose in man: this definite end is found in the advent of Christ.

The form of these histories shows strict fidelity to historical truth. The objectivity of the writers, the unforced references to known geographical sites and to actual chronological periods, and, in addition, the natural way in which the facts are set down, go far to create a presupposition in favour of the traditional Christian belief that these books record events which have actually taken place. Furthermore, the events of the common history of Scripture, as distinct from what is supernatural, accord so perfectly with human experience and with civil history as to give the immediate impression of being a straightforward narration of facts, based upon the personal knowledge of the writers or upon reliable sources of information. They are, upon the surface at any rate, true to life, and, as far as one can judge, true also to fact.

The naturalistic approach to the writings of the Old Testament, however, has led to other conclusions. It has been assumed that the methods employed by the ancients in compiling their chronicles were such that historical accuracy is not now to be expected in their works. A substratum of historical fact certainly

underlies the general narrative, but large sections of the material, it is said, are conditioned, wholly or in part, by the individual outlook of the authors, or by the vital necessities of the periods in which they wrote. Nor is this all. Accretions are held to have gathered, in the course of time, around the original narratives, and the religious consciousness of later transcribers, living under quite different circumstances, to have contributed materially to the final form of the documents. In order that these subjective elements may be distinguished from those of objective fact and a reconstruction of the actual history made possible, the methods of modern historical criticism are called into use. Thereby, we are told, an irreducible core of reliable tradition has been laid bare; and we are assured that, whatever may have been destroyed in the process, no injury has resulted to the spiritual authority of the writings. Indeed, on the contrary, it is affirmed that the critical process has elucidated their true spiritual values, and relieved these of the need of any strict dependence upon historical accuracy.

The normal Christian reaction to this has been one of deep-grounded suspicion, and that for two reasons. The first is that, by a sound spiritual instinct, the Christian man senses in it an underlying negation of the divine authority of the Scriptures, and consequently a danger to the heart of his spiritual life; the second, that, through discoveries in other fields of human knowledge, the findings of the critics upon the historicity or otherwise of certain Scriptures have repeatedly been proved untrustworthy: consequently, an attitude of reserve has been induced toward speculative critical reasonings.

All are agreed that the Old Testament is a vehicle of spiritual truth for mankind. These truths are mediated through stories of one kind or another. "What matters it", says the critic, "whether the truth is mythological in form or whether it is historical? Either is only the external mode of presentation. The truth itself is neither invalidated nor certificated by the literary dress in which it has come down to us. That literary fashion is determined by the age in which it was written, and is only relative and temporal: the truth which it clothes is eternal." Superficially, this appears irrefutable. Do not the very Scriptures themselves affirm that the Old Testament narratives were written with ethical and religious purposes in view? For after enumerating some of the incidents in Israel's journey through the

wilderness, Paul, in his epistle, goes on to say, " Now these things happened unto them by way of example; and they were written for our admonition " (1 Cor. x. 11). This seems to favour the view that even historical incidents were primarily written in order to convey spiritual teaching, and the critics draw the conclusion that this value can exist equally well in mythological as in historical narratives. While this does not absolutely rule out historicity, it leaves an open door for religious mythology. This concept of the nature of Bible history puts the Bible into the same category with the sacred books of other world-religions, even if upon a higher level within that category. If mythological truth or spiritual teaching is the final value of the Bible, the Christian may well on this issue capitulate to the critics; but if, on the other hand, we accept the truth that the Bible not only shows us a way of life, but that its supreme purpose is to reveal a divine process in history, then the question of its historicity becomes acutely vital.

Myths may mediate moral truths: they do not document circumstances of fact. And the Event of Christ in history is linked up with certain antecedent circumstances of fact. We cannot dismiss these without dismissing Christ. If these are without historical truth, Christ, as the sum and substance of them, has no real meaning. The chain is broken. For it is not merely a question of abstract religious truths handed down through successive generations, but of a personal action of God within history: an action initiated from the beginning of the world, carried on in unbroken sequence throughout Old Testament times, and consummated at the end of the ages by the appearance of Jesus Christ. It is not even a question of Old Testament incidents *prefiguring* events in the life of Christ, true also as that may be, but that the very incidents themselves are historical links in a chain of circumstances binding, as already said, the original purpose of God in man with the advent of Christ. This fact is postulated by the genealogies both of the Old and New Testaments, which are careful to link the promised Deliverer with the first man, Adam. Faith in Christ, then, is more than the acceptance of His teachings: it is the acceptance of Himself as He is presented to us in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament; the Son of God come down from heaven, the Messiah promised through a particular human ancestry, Who, in the circumstances of His death and

resurrection, has fulfilled the prophetic Scriptures. Faith is rooted in fact.

Now the Fact of Christ includes the reality, not only of His own death and resurrection, but also the whole preparatory series of events and situations comprehended in Old Testament history. The whole great development stands or falls together. That events are recorded which appear to have no connection with the Messianic history does not affect the argument. The divine process referred to is embedded in the common history of Scripture, and if the latter is discredited, the former is scarcely likely to be trustworthy, and the whole process falls to pieces. If faith in Christ is not securely grounded on matters of fact, then, as Paul points out in his argument upon the resurrection, our faith is futile. These things being so, we see how impossible it is to effect a compromise between the findings of destructive criticism and faith in the divine origin of the Scriptures. The two are mutually incompatible. To the one, the Old Testament histories mediate religious truths, and nothing more: to the other, they document the circumstances of a divine intervention in human history. We conclude, therefore, that the prejudice of the Christian is not without reason, and that his spiritual intuitions, when the facts out of which they arise are examined, are shown to be justified.

All along the dispute has been something more than a difference of opinion on minor interpretations, but has risen out of radical and strongly-opposed differences of judgment on the fundamental nature of Bible history. It is not that critical investigations have been characterised by constant changes of opinion, or by lapses of judgment—in all human studies mistakes are inevitable, and scientific method allows for correction, through experiment, of a working hypothesis. Nor is it that traditional orthodoxy has always been able or willing to abandon mistaken interpretations of Scripture, or that it has never advanced unsound arguments in support of its convictions—good causes sometimes have indifferent advocates. Nor, again, is the quarrel with the Higher Criticism as such: for, in the same way as much valuable information has been made available for students by the work of textual criticism, so also may much valuable information be gained from knowledge of the conditions under which a particular book came to be written. To join issue on such points is merely to beg the main question, which has to

do with the divine inerrancy, or otherwise, of the Scriptures, and their consequent historical reliability or unreliability. For the Christian this will be determined by the Fact of Christ.

II

The unity of Old Testament history is a presupposition of New Testament thought and teaching. This is due in part to the consciousness in the Jewish mind of the historical destiny of their nation. The inherited conviction of being called by God to serve His purpose in the earth gave every Jew a strong sense of history. The local and temporary was ever taking on a universal significance for him: he was vividly aware both of past and future.

This feeling of historical continuity had been fostered from generation to generation. The great leaders of the nation, from Moses onward, had based their declaration of policy upon the facts of national history: and frequently presented these facts in panorama before the people, as their recorded speeches show. The Psalmody used in public worship, too, had, by the force of constant usage, confirmed this habit of mind. Not a few of the Psalms were outlines of the nation's history. Such impressions, moreover, were made when the religious mind was most open to receive them: and, being often repeated, became permanent.

A long tradition lives in, and influences, the mind of a people. And when that tradition receives powerful support from the facts of experience, it becomes unconsciously part of the very fibres of racial thought. Israel's mission in history was such a tradition. Was not God's mercy upon Israel unto all generations? The truth of this tradition had stood the test of time and experience. The great nations of antiquity, one after another, had built themselves up, and then crumbled into decay. Egypt, Nineveh, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece—the Jewish nation had seen them all rise to the zenith of their power and pass away into oblivion, but she lived on; and, wonderful as her past had been, she looked forward, despite long-continued calamities, to a still more wonderful future. Not for her the cycle of natural historical evolution, but the grand outworking of an ordered plan with beginning and end: the beginning, a divine call whose workings could be traced back to the foundation of the world; the end, a lofty consummation in which the purposes of the history

would be fulfilled and preserved. Until that end was reached, the nation was indestructible. Little wonder that the Jew has a profound sense of the unity of historical movements, and of his own in particular! The writers of the New Testament shared in this consciousness, and the unity of Old Testament history thus became a starting-point of their thought and teaching.

But an influence much more potent than tradition lies behind this acceptance of Old Testament history as one. The writers of the New Testament manifest a sureness in interpreting the Old which can only mean that some new co-ordinating factor has come to their knowledge. Hitherto the sacred narrative had been a subject of enquiry and of diligent investigation: now it had suddenly become one of conclusive interpretation (1 Pet. i. 11–12). A position had been reached from which the Old could be elucidated and explained.

The interpretative point of Old Testament history is Christ. Until He appeared, the final bearing of much that had happened aforetime could be but dimly apprehended: but once events had fulfilled themselves in Him, the ancient history was illuminated by the facts of the Gospel. The knowledge of these facts gave the apostles fresh insight into the sacred writings, and from the number of Old Testament passages quoted by them in the Gospels and elsewhere we can see how their knowledge of Christ shed light on the dark sayings of Scripture. Their treatment of prophecy is, in principle, applicable also to history. For Christ is the interpretative point of the one as of the other.

Who, in Abraham's day, would have thought that the call of Rebecca to be the wife of Isaac had a divine intention beyond that of the moment? Although Isaac had already been named as the vehicle of God's purpose in history, the far issue of that purpose was, at that time, one of the " things not seen as yet ". But now that Christ has been manifested, the call of Rebecca is seen in its determinative value for the line through which the Saviour was to come. Somewhat after this fashion must the writers of the New Testament have come to interpret the Old. Christ was the great criterion by which they tested and discovered the relevance of Israel's history to God's world-plan. This method of interpreting the history of the Old Testament is without point or meaning unless that history be an organic and vital whole.

Also, it is upon this principle that we are to understand

the passage in Hebrews which speaks of Moses as "esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt". Now Moses' choice was not influenced by any direct knowledge of Christ, but by his conviction that God's purpose in history was identified with the children of Israel, then suffering in Egypt. It was an act of faith. Doubtless he looked for a divine Prophet yet to come, but the manner and circumstances of His coming must have been beyond Moses' power to anticipate. Even in a later day, when the Lord Himself was present with them, the disciples could not recognise the central event of His coming until it had actually taken place. How much less, then, Moses in his day? Nevertheless, the writer to the Hebrews, viewing things in a later time, when the full development of events had come, tells us that Moses' choice was one which, in its final issues, was set upon Christ. When Moses identified himself with Israel, and thereby chose to incur reproach, he was really associating himself with the whole divine process consummated in Christ, the reproach of which was, in principle, the reproach of Christ. The use of the word "Christ," therefore, in such passages as Heb. xi. 26 and 1 Pet. i. 11 is to be accounted for by the fact that He is the interpretative point of Old Testament history. Such passages teach us that it is in Israel's relation to Christ that the nation has significance within the purpose of God. Sever Old Testament history from Christ, and though it may still have currency as religious experience, it has lost its primary value.

The Gospel contains two genealogies. These show how the influence of inherited tradition, and that of illuminative fulfilment, moulded each in its own way the currents of apostolic thought. Although bearing common witness to Christ, and concurring in the Messianic lineage, they are written from quite different viewpoints. That in St. Matthew carries forward the authority of a duly authenticated divine tradition, and traces it to its end in Christ. That in St. Luke recognises the authority of a dynamic event in history, and traces it back to its origin in God.

The Matthæan is the sequel to the genealogies of the Old Testament, and accords with their spirit, being based upon accepted records from the past. It differs from them only in that it records the final issue of the series. Abraham and David are conspicuous therein as the acknowledged ancestors of the

Messianic line, and it is by His descent from them that the claim of Jesus of Nazareth to be the Christ is here established. This way of looking at Old Testament history presupposes dynastic unity.

In the Lucan genealogy, on the other hand, everything is dominated by the Fact of Christ Himself, Who forms the grand point of departure. The interest is created in and from Him. In this, the genealogy accords with the spirit of the New Testament, which, though interpretative of the past, is energised by the dynamic power of a present event. The way in which the line is worked back to the act of God in creation suggests that Luke saw in Christ the divine purpose which accounts for and justifies the creation of man, and the real cause which gives individuals such as Enoch and Noah, Abraham and David, their place in the scheme of Hebrew history.

It is in retrospect from Christ that the common genealogies reveal their primary spiritual value. When being written, the exact course and issue of the divine purpose could not have been foreseen. True, here and there, a particular branch was singled out for special notice, and, as time passed, a main interest developed, but in general no one could say certainly from which line the Messiah would come. The documents were a plain straightforward transcription of genealogical data: it was only afterwards that God's action therein began to be seen. Thus the genealogy of Christ was not isolated as such from the common genealogical tables, but was embedded in the general register of names. This accounts for the seeming irrelevance of a large mass of names in these genealogies, and proves beyond question that the Messianic element is there, not through human foresight, but through a dispensation of divine providence. This hidden development in the long succession of Hebrew generations is that from which Old Testament history derives its substance and completeness.

We now have knowledge, through the Gospel, of Him in Whom are co-ordinated the wide scope and complex relations of Old Testament history. Surface diversity now yields to an underlying unity. Not that there had not been in former times indications of system and order. For even as events were taking place there could be traced signs of a balanced and harmonious scheme. From the beginning there had been unbroken continuity of purpose and a progressive development of working,

which demonstrated that things were being carried forward and fulfilled within the circumference of a predetermined plan. But the full scope of the movement was not apparent until Christ came. Even now its manifold connections elude our grasp in part, but we have what believers in Old Testament times had not, the key to the perfection of Scripture, namely, the knowledge of Christ manifested. While the vastness of this divine plan is beyond the power of human minds to comprehend, flashes of its reality break in upon our consciousness and make us aware of a divine unity holding all things together in the Person of Christ.

But the Old Testament narrative is something more than a self-contained scheme within history. Though primarily concerned with the Messianic development, it ultimately extends into a world-view of things (a *Weltanschauung*), covering all time. The activity of God in Israel always took a universal standpoint. Even of the temple service it was written, " My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people " (Isa. lvi. 7). If it be asked therefore what contribution the Messianic stream has made to the main tide of history, the only possible reply is that, in a very real sense, it *is* the main tide of history: all others are tributary.

The Messianic purpose holds together the entire fabric of history, integrating all things in Christ. Through their contacts with Israel, the great nations of antiquity—Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and, in more ancient times, Nineveh and Egypt—fall into the general framework of Old Testament prophecy. Do not Daniel's visions symbolise human history as one vast organism, united in character and in destiny? The face of contemporary history may seem to wear another likeness, and to have no vital relation with Biblical times. We have moved into another age. The assumption, however, is superficial, for it overlooks the solidarity of mankind, and the consequent moral unity of history. The book of The Revelation, in depicting the final phases of world-history, employs the prophetic imagery of the book of Daniel, and teaches the spiritual identity of times future with times past. Indeed, the last great phase of Gentile world-dominion is there described as combining in one the characteristics of the four wild beasts of Daniel's vision; thus indicating that the moral features of these successive world-empires would be reproduced in this, the climax of the whole.

History is the active expression of spiritual forces. These, with the passage of time, may flow through new channels, but the tide-stream remains the same. Forms of civilisation change: the spirit of man is one throughout. The entrance of sin has resulted in outward disintegration: but God's action in history has brought everything into relation with itself, and therefore into one spiritual framework. The reaction of men to contemporary workings of divine revelation brings out racial as well as individual dispositions, and thus decisions made in narrow temporal circumstances have a universal and eternal significance. Ahithophel's betrayal of David was of a piece with the sin of Judas Iscariot (cf. Psa. xli. 9 with Acts i. 16). The rulers of Israel who rejected Christ were, with the persecutors of the prophets, a single brood of vipers (Matt. xxiii. 29–35). Enoch's prophecy has an application to the circumstances of the Second Coming as well as to its immediate context: the ungodliness of the last days is one with that of antediluvian times (Jude 14, 15). The sum total of this world's guilt will be found in Babylon the Great (Rev. xviii. 24). And as, from the death of Abel onward, a measure was being filled that ultimately in the death of Christ completed Israel's guilt, so even now the guilt of the whole race, in its continued persecution of God's people, is filling up the cup of wrath against the judgment-supper of the great God (Matt. xxiii. 35; 1 Thess. ii. 14–16; Rev. xix. 17).

God's purpose in Christ is the invisible thread around which the dissolving elements of history are being crystallised. This divine movement has been active from the beginning of time, and will continue so until the end. Its central point is the death and resurrection of Christ. From this divine Event is thrown out a spiritual energy, which fills the field of history and forms the basis of judgment for all the generations of time.

> "I am the First, and I the Last:
> Time centres all in Me."

In whatever age a man may have lived there has been in it a manifestation of the Messianic movement appropriate to the time. The letters B.C. and A.D. are not only convenient chronological symbols, but they convey a profound spiritual truth. Even in our day, remote from Christ, we live our lives *Anno Domini*. The Messianic movement, which is God's action in

history, has come down to us, and is now associated with the testimony of the Gospel, as maintained by Christian Churches, or witnessed to by individual believers. We can, if we will, publicly and decisively identify ourselves with Christ, and so become rightly related to God. This involves a personal acknowledgment of sinnership, and a serious repentance towards God through faith in Christ crucified and risen again.

A scheme of history so bold and comprehensive in design, so sustained and punctual in execution, is calculated to meet our inborn desire for an "explanation" of this vast world of affairs into which we find ourselves thrust. Meditation upon the meaning of human experience, and upon the enigmas of life, burdens us with a tragic sense of destiny, reaching beyond the narrow bounds of earthly existence: and though we feel ourselves but insignificant units swallowed up in the flood of the centuries, we crave for some assurance that there is an ultimate plan behind the general course of things. Where, except in Holy Scripture, do we find a philosophy of history, which, while rendering intelligible the phenomena of life, and binding together in one piece the fragments of man's long story, is also a Gospel for the individual soul? The historical process enshrined in the Old Testament is a structural unity in itself, but it is also the ground of a wider unity connecting all things, for weal or woe, with the purpose of God in Christ. Belief in this unifying principle behind the broken aspects of outward history gives purpose to life, and fortifies men against philosophies that make life meaningless and moral effort futile. It awakes the conscience, and bids us see to it that we, as individuals, take the right decision in regard to these final and eternal issues. For the response made to this divine revelation concerning God's Son determines the personal destiny of those to whom that revelation has come.

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