

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

REVELATION AS EVENT

Although the Old Testament has no technical term for revelation,¹ the basic ideas of revelation as the unveiling of something that was previously hidden² is verified in the data of Scripture. It is the fundamental presupposition of the Old Testament that God is a hidden God whom man knows only because of the divine initiative.³ God is infinitely above human thoughts and words. As God said to Job, compared to the Creator, man is one who "darkens counsel with words without knowledge". (38,21) In Isaiah, the nations declare that the particularity of God's identity with Israel hides his universality from them.⁴ "Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour." (45,15) In Proverbs, because of the obscurity of God who directs his steps, man cannot understand his way. "A man's steps are ordered by the Lord; how then can man understand his way?" (20,24). He can only turn towards the One to whom "the secret things belong" (Deut. 29,28) and who "reveals deep and mysterious things" (Dan. 2,22).

The Plan of God

Moreover, God is a hidden God because to man the plan of God is a mystery. The plan of God means that the events of human history do not occur according to the impulses of a blind destiny but as a result of the will of God for the salvation of all men in Christ.⁵ Because of this design of God, the past history of Israel has a religious intelligibility. That there is a plan of God is expressed already in an early cultic confession of Israel's faith (Deut. 26,5-10), a passage that has been termed the heart of the Pentateuch and the Hexateuch in miniature.⁶ Here the events of history, Jacob's migration to Egypt, the subsequent servitude of his descendants there, their eventual deliverance and settlement in Canaan, are all presented as occurring according to a deliberate pattern of God's activity in Israel.

¹ P. van Imschoot, *Théologie de l'Ancien Testament I*. Paris-Tournai: Desclée, 1954; p. 142.

² Walter Bulst, *Revelation*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965; p. 64.

³ "Revelation," in *Vocabulaire De Théologie Biblique*. Paris: Les Editions Du Cerf, 1964; col. 925.

⁴ Douglas R. Jones in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*. New York: Thomas Nelson, 1963; p. 522.

⁵ "Dessein De Dieu," in *Vocabulaire De Théologie Biblique*, cols. 208-215.

⁶ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding The Old Testament*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1957; p. 7.

The Plan of God in the Prophets

In the prophets this design of God pertains also to contemporary history and to the future. In 597 the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and deported its king Joachin and some nobles. When Zedekiah succeeded Joachin as king of Judah, a pro-Egyptian party counseled rebellion against Babylon. But, through the prophet Jeremiah, God gave warning that Nebuchadnezzar had been able to establish dominion because he was a divine instrument for the punishment of culpable peoples. "Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and grandson, until the time of his own land comes . . ." (Jer. 27,6f.) When the Persian Cyrus subsequently conquered Babylon in 539 and issued an edict which allowed the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem, it was because he was an agent of the divine will to effect the deliverance of Israel. Through Isaiah God says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd and he shall fulfill all my purpose; . . ." (Isa. 44,28).

In the eschatological oracles of the prophets, this plan reaches likewise into the future. The end to which God leads history is salvation which all nations will share with Israel. The mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains. All nations shall come to Jerusalem for instruction. Swords and spears shall be turned into plowshares and pruning-hooks, for nations shall not learn war anymore. (Isa. 2,1-4)

The Mysterious Nature of the Divine Plan

While the Old Testament recognizes that the events of history occur according to a divine design of salvation, at the same time, it understands that this plan is a mystery to man, a secret thing.⁷ This idea of the secrets of God is found in Deutero-Isaiah. There the history of Israel is presented as corresponding to a divine plan that must be revealed in advance to be known. It is this revelation that guarantees the coming of salvation at the end of time. In Isaiah 41,21-28, all non-Israelites are challenged to a disputation concerning the ability of their gods to know the events of past and future history as compared with the same power of the God of Israel.⁸ They are required to show that their gods were able to provide revealed insights into "the former things" such as the Call of Abraham and his military victory over the Mesopotamian

⁷ "Mystere," in *Vocabulaire De Theologie Biblique*, cols. 664-670.

⁸ For an explanation of this passage confer Douglas R. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 518.

overlords of Canaan (Gen. 14). Abraham's coming "from the north" foreshadowed the victory of Cyrus who also came from the north. The fulfillment of the prophecies of judgment in the fall of Babylon guarantees the realization of "the things to come", the prophecies of salvation as exemplified in the new redemptive act of the Return of the Israelites from exile through the intervention of Cyrus.

In apocalyptic and sapiential writing, *mystery* becomes a technical religious term. The Book of Daniel is an apocalypse because it is a revelation of divine "secrets". When Daniel tells king Nebuchadnezzar "there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries (2,28) and "he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be" (2,29), he expresses the essence of apocalyptic. *Mystery* is the divine purpose behind history which cannot be learned from the magicians the king consulted. This mystery means that time is real and not illusory and that God's intervention is to be looked for "in the latter days". In the Book of Wisdom, mystery or "the secret purpose of God" (2,23) is the salvation accorded to the just and an interior knowledge of God that discloses the origin of divine wisdom (6,22).

THE GRATUITY OF REVELATION: THE ELECTION OF ISRAEL

While the Old Testament does not make any explicit distinction between natural and supernatural revelation,⁹ the idea that, over and above the natural knowledge of God given in creation, God has made himself known by a special intervention is expressed in the biblical concept of election.¹⁰ Election¹¹ means that by reason of a gratuitous initiative on the part of God, among all other nations, Israel stands in a unique relationship to him. In paganism the bond which united a people with their gods, was considered to be rooted in the nature of things. In the Old Testament, the relationship between Israel and God arises as a result of an act of the will on the part of God.¹² In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people, "the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth" (7,6). This divine choice is not due to the merits of Israel, nor to its numbers, but solely to God's love for Israel and its forefathers. "Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land. . . . It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his

⁹ van Imschoot, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

¹⁰ Bulst, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹¹ "Election," in *Vocabulaire De Theologie Biblique*, cols. 265-272; van Imschoot, *op. cit.*, pp. 259-270.

¹² van Imschoot, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

love upon you and choose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you . . ." (Deut. 9,5; 7,6f.). This election of Israel by God is then an essential element in the originality of the religion of Israel and differentiates it from all other religions in the ancient orient. By reason of this election, Israel enjoys an intimacy with God unique among all nations of the earth, for God "knows" Israel. To know is, in some way, to take possession, to receive into one's self, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3,2).

THE FORMS OF REVELATION

With regard to the forms of revelation, as presented in the Old Testament, revelation does not consist exclusively in physically spoken words as mere vehicles of the communication of truth. It is also contained in historical events and visions.¹³ That revelation in the Old Testament was accomplished through a variety of forms was early suggested by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in his opening summary statement that God of old spoke to Israel "in many and various ways".¹⁴

REVELATION THROUGH THE ACTS OF GOD IN THE EVENTS OF HISTORY

The Old Testament understands the acts of God in the events of history as themselves the means whereby God manifested himself to his people and through them to the Gentiles. The idea of a revelation through history was in contrast to the view of the pagan world.¹⁵ The pagan concentrated on nature, the realm of the superhuman; the forces of nature were the gods the pagan worshipped. Since there was a plurality of such powers, order was established through an integration of divine wills and a hierarchy of authority. Thus the pagan found security by fitting himself into this harmony by participation in the cyclic rhythm of the season. But for Israel, since all nature was a creature of God, man existed in a unique history which was significant because it revealed God as redeeming all of man's time. This view did not arise from philosophy but from the events of the time of Moses and of the deliverance from Egypt. This biblical interest in history does not, of course, mean that the Old Testament purports to be simply a book of secular history or culture. It is sacred history because in these historical experiences, as interpreted by faith, is disclosed God's activity for Israel.

¹³ Bulst, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-103.

¹⁴ On this point confer Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology I*. New York: Harper, 1963; pp. 115-120.

¹⁵ G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts*. Chicago: Allenson, 1953; pp. 19f; 28.

The Pentateuchal History

In Exodus there is found a passage which may be the oldest formulation of the Crossing of the Red Sea.¹⁶ "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." (15,21). Probably cultic in origin, this brief canticle, which is attributed to Miriam, begins with an invitation to the assembled worshippers to praise God on the basis of what had been experienced at the sea. Thus the Exodus was early viewed as an act by which God intervened in history and manifested his power and will to save Israel so that even the Egyptians "shall know that I am the Lord, . . ." (Ex. 14,18). That it was this historical experience of the Exodus which made Israel a self-conscious community is expressed in the primitive cultic confession cited above. This little liturgy, which may go back to the time of Joshua, is a confession of faith which the worshipper is to make when he presents the first fruits of the harvest at the sanctuary. It contains a reference to Jacob in the patriarchal period, dwells on the time of the deliverance from Egypt, and concludes with an act of gratitude for the land of Canaan.

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O Lord, hast given me. (Deuteronomy 26.5-10).

This passage combines rite and creed, history and harvest festival. "In these verses history is being added to the harvest festival, Israel's gospel is being joined with harvest to explain harvest and bring the harvest within the orbit of Israel's historical faith."¹⁷ This creed is a disciplined celebration of the divine acts of the saving history from the time of the patriarchs down to the conquest, a sequence of events that may be regarded as "canonical" for the faith of Israel.¹⁸

The Deuteronomist History

In the course of time, however, especially after the Exile, Israel came to realize that God's activity in history did not cease with the conquest of Canaan. God had raised up the Judges as charismatic leaders and established the throne of David. Thus the Deuteronomist history

¹⁶ Martin Noth, *Exodus*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962; pp. 121f.

¹⁷ G. Henton Davies in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, p. 280.

¹⁸ von Rad, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-128.

(Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, sometimes referred to as "the former Prophets") is led to trace the history of Israel with God from the conquest to the catastrophe of the fall of the monarchy. But this extension of the pattern of divine activity is not a simple prolongation of the "canonical" sequence of the acts of God from the patriarchs to the conquest. This second stage in the history of Israel is conceived from a different theological viewpoint.¹⁹ The first stage was a saving history in which God made good his promises in spite of Israel's failures. The second stage is presented in accordance with the principle of Deuteronomy that observance of the Covenant is rewarded, non-observance is punished. "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods which you have not known" (Deut. 11,26ff.).

In the Deuteronomist history this means that obedience to God's command will be rewarded with victory and prosperity; disobedience will bring the divine judgment of suffering and failure. Thus it is the general infidelity of the kings of Israel that brings about the downfall of the monarchy.

The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, till the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, till there was no remedy. Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, . . ." (2 Chronicles 36.15-17)

With the Exile, the thread of the history of Israel with God was broken. In that period, there was no saving history because, in the view of the Deuteronomist, God had passed judgment on Israel's continued, apostasy.

The Chronicler's History

After the Return from Babylon, a theological link with the pre-exilic history of Israel with God is provided by the Chronicler's history. This view is based on the prophecy of Nathan to David, and the interest of David, who is now presented as having been the ideal king, in the building of a temple. The oracle of Nathan (2 Sam. 7,13-17) contained a promise of an eternal dynasty of David and authenticated the temple to be built by David's son. "He shall build a house for my name" (7,13). In 1 Chronicles David is represented as making elaborate

¹⁹ *ibid.*

preparations for a temple to be built by Solomon. In Ezra 1,1-3 the Return of the exiles and the restoration of the temple are seen as revelatory acts of God in fulfillment of prophecy.

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord the God of Israel. . . ."

In Judith 5,6-21, when Achior advises Holofernes that the Jews are invincible as long as they keep God's law, he recites the history of Israel with God from the patriarchal period to the Return from exile. "But now they have returned to their God, and have come back from the places to which they were scattered, and have occupied Jerusalem, where their sanctuary is . . ." Thus the Chronicler's history carries the thread of the history of Israel with God down to the present time. The contemporary event of the restoration of the temple is a revelatory act of God in history.

The Prophetic History

The theme of God's self-manifestation in Israel through what he has done in Israel's past history, noted already in the cultic confession of Deuteronomy, is found also in the Prophets. After condemning surrounding nations for their excessive cruelty to enemy nations in time of war, Amos suddenly confronts the Israelites with their record of social injustice to fellow Israelites and with their false worship in violation of the Covenant. The prophet then contrasts these sins of Israel with what God has done for the nation in the past through the Exodus from Egypt, the wilderness wandering, and the invasion of Canaan. "Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorites." (2,10)

But apart from such references to the "canonical" pattern of God's self-manifesting activity in the past, the prophets interpret the cessation of the history of Israel with God in the Exile differently than the Deuteronomist and the Chronicler. For the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and especially Deutero-Isaiah, the former stage of the history of Israel with God is done away with. God's revelation through acts in the events of history is something that is to be looked for in the future when there will be a new Exodus, Covenant, and Moses.

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise; they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold I am doing a new thing: now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert . . . for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people . . ." (Isaiah 43.16-20)

Here the Exodus, and in particular, the Crossing of the Red Sea, are contrasted with a new redemptive act, a new Exodus, in which blessings, as precious as water in the desert, will be bountiful. The Israelites are not to remember the former Exodus but look to the new redemptive act in the history of Israel with God that is to come.

The Relation of Creation to the Acts of God in History

In the course of time, Israel gradually came to extend God's activity in the vents of history to his work as Creator. Israel did not come to know God primarily by reflecting on the world in a philosophical manner so as to rise from the physical universe or the nature of man to the ultimate explanatory principle of the universe. Rather, Israel discovered God by means of his intervention in history. It was on this basis of history that Israel arrived at the doctrine of creation.²⁰ In her history Israel saw God's power over the lawless powers of nature such as the Red Sea and the plagues of Egypt. In this history Israel saw, too, God's power over peoples. He could use them as his instruments and also punish them for their pride. Reflecting on her history, Israel could conclude that such sovereign dominion over nature and peoples, which she had experienced, could only be explained by the fact that God was Creator of all peoples and the universe.

Moreover, since the history of Israel with God was a redemptive history, a history of salvation, creation for Israel was the first of God's redemptive acts and the basis of confidence in salvation to come. Because God is the Creator of all things, he is continually at work in nature and in directing the history of Israel. "Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: 'I am the Lord, who made all things, who stretched out the heavens alone, . . . who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited.'"

In passages such as this, creation is not being considered for itself or independently, but in a manner subordinate to the prophet's message. The mention of creation is intended to reinforce confidence in the power of God. It is because God is Creator that he will be able to effect the Return of the exiles through the agency of Cyrus. In particular, for Deutero-Isaiah, the reason why the allusion to Creation is

²⁰ Latourelle, *op. cit.*, pp. 329-322; von Rad *op. cit.*, pp. 137-139.

considered to be calculated to strengthen confidence, is because the act of Creation is considered to be itself already soteriological. In Isaiah 51,9f., Creation and redemption practically coincide. "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab in pieces, that didst pierce the dragon? Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea, the waters of the great deep that didst make the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?" In ancient Semitic creation stories, Rahab was a mythical monster of chaos that was slain by the creation deity. Here the biblical doctrine of Creation is expressed by attributing this victory to the God of Israel. However, the prophet immediately passes to the salutary act by which he effected passage through the Red Sea for the benefit of "the redeemed".

In the comparatively late tradition of Israel, God's power over history is derived theologically from his sovereignty as Creator. It is because God is Creator that he is able to bring about the Babylonian exile by means of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 27,5f.) and the Return of the exiles through the instrumentality of Cyrus. "Thus says the Lord, . . . 'I made the earth, and created man upon it; . . . I have aroused him in righteousness, and I will make straight all his ways; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward'" (Isa. 45,11-13).

EVENT AND WORD

Although Israel considered events as acts of God in history, these events are not regarded as revelatory apart from an interpretative word. Events as acts of God in history do not become fully intelligible unless they are accompanied by a word which expresses the meaning of the divine activity. It is the word of God which explains the meaning of the event of the deluge.²¹ "So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them'" (Gen. 6,7). The Old Testament emphasizes that Israel lived through a certain number of events which were acts of God in history. But these events could not be understood as revelatory without the word God spoke to Moses in secret.²² It is the word of God which tells Moses "Come, I will send you to the Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel out of Egypt" (Ex. 3,10). Moreover, the deliverance from Egypt would have been nothing more than another migration of peoples without the interpretation of Moses.

²¹ John L. McKenzie, "The Word of God in the Old Testament," *Theological Studies* 21 (1960) p. 199.

²² Latourelle, *op. cit.*, p. 348.

If it be asked precisely in what sense event (or vision) can be called revelation, in Scholastic terminology the answer would be that event is the material and word the formal cause of revelation.²³

The process of revelation, in its totality, is thus made up of the following elements: A. Historical event. B. Interior revelation which provides the prophet an understanding of the event, or at very least the reflection of the prophet directed and illuminated by God. C. The prophet's Word, presenting the event and its meaning as objects of divine testimony. It is the complementary character of historical event and event of the word (God's word to the prophet, and the prophet's word to the people of Israel), that makes revelation grow.²⁴

The significance of word as the formal element in revelation has been aptly expressed by Charles Davis.²⁵

. . . revelation as reality calls for revelation as word. The action of God is addressed to us as persons; it is intended to lead us to a personal encounter with him. But if God approaches us as persons, he must not simply act for us or upon us. He must tell us what he is doing in intelligible discourse. Language is among the highest endowments of man. God's revelation would not be adapted to the dignity of man as a person and an intelligent being if it did not find expression in language. When we reflect on the role of language in establishing spiritual contact with men at the personal level, we see that the reality of God's self-gift must be offered through the medium of language if it is to bring man as a person into communion with God.

In the light of this and the above data of the Old Testament, it may be understood how, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, the deeds and word of revelation have an inner unity in virtue of which the words clarify the mystery contained in the deeds.

CHARLES J. GALLOWAY

Philadelphia

²³ Bulst, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

²⁴ Latourelle, *op. cit.*, p. 349.

²⁵ *Theology for Today*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1962; p. 48.