

A stylized, high-contrast illustration of a human face in shades of blue and yellow. The face is composed of bold, geometric shapes, with large, expressive eyes and a simple, smiling mouth. The background is a solid yellow color, and the face's features are defined by thick blue outlines.

**WILLIAM NEIL**

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MODERN MAN LOOKS  
AT THE BIBLE

# MODERN MAN LOOKS AT THE BIBLE

William Neil



Association Press • New York

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THE PLAIN MAN LOOKS AT THE BIBLE

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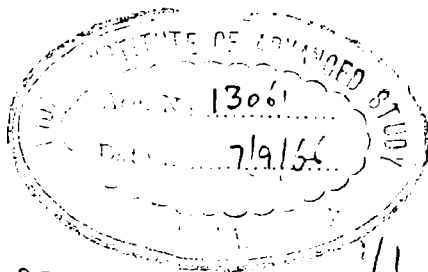


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## Chapter I

### WHAT THE BIBLE IS NOT AND WHAT IT IS

#### *The Bible Is Not a Scientific Textbook*

If we want to know about how the universe came into being, or how life developed on this planet, let us ask the astronomers and the biologists. They will tell us the answers as far as they know them, if anyone indeed will ever know them. There is no conflict between the Bible and modern science, but it is quite wrong to regard the Bible as a textbook of science. Science is concerned with *how* things happen; the Bible suggests *why* they happen. If the biologist can show us that man has developed through millions of years from primitive organisms, well and good. The Bible is more interested in why man is here at all. If the astronomer can lead us to see something more of the wonder of a vast and mysterious universe let us sit at his feet and listen. The Bible asks us—and the astronomers—why there is a universe for us to marvel at.

We are not asked in reading the Bible to believe in serpents\*<sup>1</sup> and asses<sup>2</sup> that talk, ax heads that float,<sup>3</sup> and suns that stand still.<sup>4</sup> The biblical writers were not morons. They knew as well as we do that these things do not happen. But they were Orientals who were not cursed by having literal Western minds. They told incredible tales. They used poetry, imagery, symbolism, hyperbole. They knew that truth can at times be conveyed only by a myth, and that a legend can sometimes tell us more than a bare fact. For what they were concerned with was to make a point of some sort, to teach some moral or religious lesson.

It did not matter very much to the writers of the Old Testament whether the tales they told were farfetched or not. The reaction of the listener would invariably be: What is the point of the story? What is it supposed to mean?

Let us, however, be quite clear as to what we are doing. We are not simply going through the Bible with a fine-tooth comb, ridding it of all incidents which might be described as unscientific, and classifying them as myths, legends, or fairy tales. On the contrary, we are approaching the Bible from a different angle. We are looking not for scientific truth but religious and moral truth. We

\* Notes for all chapters appear at the end of the book.

are recognizing that this may be, and sometimes can only be, conveyed by story, fantasy, image, or allegory. We do not therefore dismiss Adam and Eve, Noah and Jonah as old wives' tales but we look at these stories again and ask ourselves what the writers of them were really trying to tell us.

### *The Bible Is Not a Textbook of Ancient History*

By the same token we should not turn to the Bible if we want an accurate textbook of ancient history. Archæologists and ancient historians can give us this sort of information much better. The writers of the Bible were not interested in the economic conditions and military prowess of their neighbors, and the last thing they wanted to be was impartial historians. Their concern was not to give a recital of world events but to show how the hand of God could be seen in these events.

This does not by any manner of means imply that we must, therefore, regard the Bible as un-historical. On the contrary, it professes to be, and in fact is, a record of certain things that happened to a tiny group of people in the Middle East between about 2000 B.C. and about A.D. 100. But the writers do not consider it to be their prime function to give us a painstaking factual narrative, complete with maps and dates, of the political, economic, and



military fortunes and misfortunes of the group. These aspects occur, but they are incidental to the main purpose of the writers, which was to show that from the things that happened to this group, collectively and individually, certain conclusions could be drawn which were of vital importance for the whole of mankind. As in the case of its scientific data, the Bible does not stand or fall by the accuracy or inaccuracy of its historical information. Its writers did not aim to provide either science or history. They were writing theology. The Bible is primarily a book about God and ourselves.

### *All Parts of the Bible Are Not on the Same Level*

But these ideas did not drop from the clouds. They were hammered out in the agonizing struggle for existence in the cockpit of the Middle East where the Hebrews found themselves.

In the early days views were held of God and man which were later discarded. The moral standards and religious insights of these barbaric tribes who swept through Palestine before making it their own, were on a different level from those of their descendants after the prophets had shown them more of the nature of God and his purpose for man. Later on, the teaching of Jesus was to transform their ideas still further. We must expect to find,

therefore, primitive beliefs and low moral standards within the covers of the Bible, because it is the record of how people slowly came to learn the truth about God and about themselves. The early stages of that process are not glossed over but faithfully recorded.

We must not make the mistake, however, of talking about the Bible as if it were the unfolding of the story of man's quest for God and standards of right conduct, and of the successful end to his search. The Bible is not the record of a steady progress in religious development, from belief in the demons and beneficent sprites of the woods and rivers to a high and lofty faith in One God, or of a gradually rising standard of behavior. Much more is it the record of certain moments of illumination, of certain periods of history which were of supreme significance because in them the meaning of all history became apparent.

It is the account of how certain men were privileged to see more deeply than their neighbors into the mystery that surrounds us and into the nature of our obligations. To describe this the Bible uses the simple metaphor, that the Word of God came to them. It suggests that through certain events and certain people, as recorded in its pages, flashes of light shot across the shadowy stage on which the human game of life is played. These moments of

illumination, it would appear, might as readily come at the beginning as at the end of biblical history, and as readily to a shepherd as to a philosopher or a statesman.

### *The Bible Is an Interpretation and an Invitation*

If the Bible is not to be regarded as a textbook of science or a handbook of ancient history, if it is neither a consistently reliable guide to religion and morals, nor a record of man's advance from savagery and superstition to altruism and enlightenment, then what is it? Perhaps it may best be described as an interpretation of life and an invitation to creative living.

It offers first of all an interpretation of the universe, not in the sense of telling us how the universe came into being, but the purpose for which it exists and the nature of its Creator. It shows us our place in that universe and our proper relationship to its Author. The Bible likewise offers us an interpretation of history, in which it sees all the events of the past and the present not as a series of accidents but as part of a purposeful process leading to an ultimate end. The Bible also suggests an interpretation of life, not as a mere brutish struggle for existence, far less a meaningless sequence of

sleeping, working, and eating, or as a dismal imitation of Fabre's caterpillars crawling round and round their dish until they die, but as a battleground of moral principles. It sees us as being constantly summoned to take the side of right versus wrong, good versus evil, not like romantic Sir Galahads, who see everything as either black or white, but as sober realists who know that their choices are always at best between shades of grey. It suggests that in that battle we are not called on to fight alone but on behalf of the Creator, whose will it is that right should triumph and who lends us his powerful aid. The Bible extends to us an invitation to co-operate with God in changing society and shaping future history.

This invitation, challenge, summons to decision, call it what we will, is not put forward by the biblical writers as a philosophy of life, one among many theories, or represented as a matter of taste so that we can either take it or leave it much as we do with tomato ketchup. Both the interpretation and the invitation are put forward as reasonable deductions based on certain hard facts of history of which the Bible provides the record. We are to consider what happened in a small community lodged precariously on a section of the Eastern Mediterranean seaboard between about 2000 B.C. and A.D. 100 and to ask ourselves whether the con-

clusion that the Bible draws from these events is justified, and if so what it means for us to-day.

We may if we choose reject the conclusion that the Bible comes to, but in all fairness we must first consider the evidence.

## *Chapter II*

### A NATION WITH A COMMONPLACE RECORD

#### *The Background*

Two thousand years before Christ the center of civilization was the Middle East. The ancient city states of Mesopotamia had in succession dominated its fortunes. North of them circled the mountains, the home of warlike tribes who from time to time threatened the security of the plains. Only to the south lay the old lion, Egypt, in control of the Nile and nominally of the Levant. Together, thanks to the irrigation of their rivers, and including Palestine, because of its high rainfall, Mesopotamia and Egypt constituted a Fertile Crescent, which swept from the top of the Persian Gulf through modern Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Jordan, down to the Sudan. To the Semitic Bedouin of the neighboring desert and steppes, this rich agricultural land proved a constant temptation. Living often on the borderline of starvation, and scraping together a bare existence

for themselves and their sheep, these tent-dwelling nomads might well look upon any part of the Fertile Crescent as a land flowing with milk and honey.

From time immemorial they had been pressing into this rich area, driven by famine or war, and wave after wave of migration had poured in, filling the Levant with a mixed but mainly Semitic population. These new arrivals had through the centuries assimilated with the original native stock and remnants of past invasions. By the time the biblical period began about 2000 B.C. Palestine was an amalgam of racial groups, dominated by the latest wave of Semitic migrants, the Canaanites, under the titular sovereignty of Egypt.

Looked at from the point of view of world history, the Bible begins with the record of how a particular Semitic tribal group, the Hebrews, who appear to have drifted in from the desert and settled for a time near Ur in Mesopotamia, moved on from there in the normal manner of Bedouins, and for several centuries lived a nomadic life in the uplands of Palestine. Stories have been handed down of these early days, of the struggle of these immigrants to find a foothold, their relations with the established population, their tribal laws and feuds. The tribal chiefs of this period—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—are vividly depicted in the narratives of the Book of Genesis. Doubtless many of the stories

told of them have grown in the telling, and we have no outside confirmation, so far, of the existence of any of these patriarchs, but there is no reason to doubt the general biblical picture of this period, which shows the Hebrews as peaceful shepherds free of political ambitions, ranging among the hill pastures of Palestine and having little contact with the established civilization around them.

As so often happened in these parts, famine spurred them to further migration, and some at any rate moved out of Palestine into Egypt, the granary of the East. The success story of one of them, Joseph, who made good in the land of his adoption, is recorded at length in the Bible. This migration into Egypt might well have synchronized with the century and a half from 1700-1550 B.C. when the Hyksos, fellow Semites, had gained control of Egypt and might be expected to be more tolerant of the settlement in the delta of some of their kinsmen than the native Egyptians would have been.

With the reversal of the fortunes of the Hyksos, and the re-establishment of an Egyptian dynasty, the conditions of the Hebrew immigrants changed. From being privileged settlers they became a cheap source of labor for the ambitious projects of Rameses II, who found them useful as slaves in the building of his new capital at Tanis. The amazing outcome of what must have seemed to a



proud and independent Bedouin strain the worst fate that could befall human kind made an impression on their minds which was never forgotten. Against the background of world history all that it amounted to was that the most virile elements of the Hebrew tribes which had been enslaved in Egypt escaped under the leadership of Moses.

### *The Birth of a Nation*

In the Bible, however, it is regarded as much more than that. We cannot now say what lies behind the saga which surrounds the Exodus. Taken separately, most of the details—the plagues, the crossing of the water, the pillar of fire—can be rationally explained. That the basic facts have been embellished by the storytellers there is no doubt at all. But we are left with the impression that the escape of the tribes must have been accompanied by some unusual natural phenomena, whether volcanic or climatic, otherwise it would be difficult to account for the fact that on looking back upon this event, which they regarded as the real beginning of their national life, the Hebrews never spoke of it as merely an escape or an exit. It was to them a Deliverance. They were snatched from a living death and put on the road to a new life. What seemed to be the end proved to be only the beginning. It was to them

not something that had been achieved by their own boldness, or by good leadership, but by supernatural intervention.

As a result of this new impetus the tribe, presumably with the more robust element at their head, transformed themselves into a sufficiently well-knit national group to proceed to the occupation of Palestine. In the course of time, partly by conquest, partly by assimilation, they became the leading nation on the Mediterranean seaboard. By about the year 1000 B.C. we find them as an independent monarchy under the popular and effective rule of David, in possession of a large tract of territory from beyond Damascus down to the Gulf of Aqaba.

Their rise to power had been attributable to a number of causes, among them the weakness of Egypt, the lack of cohesion among the older inhabitants of Palestine, and the natural virility of these Hebrew warriors, toughened by their desert campaigns. So much was this so that when a new threat to the existence of all the peoples of the Levant, in the shape of Philistine sea rovers, appeared on the horizon, the Hebrews established their position as the military aristocracy of the region and put the Philistines in their place.

But in the course of their rapid rise to nationhood they had lost many of the qualities of their earlier days. Under Moses, however barbaric their customs,

they had lived the simple and austere life of desert warriors. After their settlement in Palestine they fell a prey to the lures of a commercial civilization. They learned from their neighbors not only the arts and crafts of a more cultured existence but also the sensuous and corrupt practices that went with it.

### *Decline and Fall*

Their decline began with Solomon—who was much less wise than tradition gives him credit for—and it was as spectacular as their ascent. The nation split in two and a succession of incompetent rulers, who did nothing to stop the inner decay, left them easy victims for the marauding enterprises of Assyrian and Babylonian war lords who swept down from the north upon the Levant and included the Hebrews and their lands among their spoils of war. The end of the nation came when in 586 B.C. Jerusalem was sacked and its leading citizens carried off to exile in Mesopotamia.

Once again came a chance for a new beginning under different auspices. After fifty years the remnants of the exiled Hebrews were allowed to return to Palestine, and there for the next six centuries they formed a tiny vassal community in and around Jerusalem, at first under the Persian world-empire, then in subservience to the empire founded by

Alexander the Great, and finally under the Romans. For a short spell during this period they snatched at a brief independence under the patriot Judas Maccabeus, but his successors proved to be more concerned to retain power than to use it wisely. In A.D. 70 as the Arch of Titus in the Forum at Rome records, the future Emperor took Jerusalem, exhibited its treasures in his triumph, and the last vestiges of the Hebrew people were scattered to the four corners of the earth. That despite this, followed by centuries of persecution, the Jews survived and multiplied, with, it would seem, an indestructible racial consciousness, and proceeded, after millions of them had been exterminated by the Nazis, to refound a state of Israel in recent days, is as a historical phenomenon more remarkable than the biblical record.

For no one could claim that judged as a purely factual record of events the rise and fall of the Hebrew Kingdom is in any way impressive. With the exception perhaps of its dramatic début at the Exodus, its story repeats the motifs which are familiar in other nations: virile beginnings holding promise of future greatness, but giving place to intrigue, injustice, and the abuse of power. Nothing appears to have happened on the historical plane from the time the tribes entered Palestine in the thirteenth century B.C. until the last remnants of

them were dispersed in the first century A.D., which was in any way remarkable or essentially different from what happened to these other tiny states in the Middle East.

The Old Testament tells the story of a people who were, compared with the great powers of their day, historically unimportant, economically weak and militarily negligible. They were not distinguished as the builders of monuments; they produced no paintings, sculpture, or ceramics by which later ages could judge their artistic bent.

For one thing only were they remarkable, their religious beliefs and their moral standards. This is their contribution to history.

### *Chapter III*

## A NATION WITH A UNIQUE FAITH

We have learned a great deal in recent years through the labors of the archæologists concerning the religious beliefs of the Middle East in biblical times. The picture is not vastly different from what we know from elsewhere. All tribes and nations had religious beliefs of some sort. In village communities these tended to be simpler than in the cities, and where there was a variety of racial groups through trade and migration each group brought its own brand of religion with it. But by and large the type of religion was polytheistic, ranging from belief in nebulous good and evil spirits to a fully developed pantheon where each god and goddess had a particular function. There were gods or goddesses of war, agriculture, law, love, the weather, and so on. The pattern is familiar to us from the legends of Greece and Rome.

As befitted communities which were basically agricultural, much of the religion of the Middle

East consisted of fertility cults where the supposed marriage of the god and goddess produced the crops, and on the well-known principle of imitative magic, sacred prostitution of both sexes formed part of the worship. Sacrifices—sometimes human—placated the gods, who were regarded as rather more powerful men and women, with passions and habits of the same order. A multiplicity of idols, shrines, and temples reminded the votaries of their religious obligations. Morality had obviously little place in such a conception. Personal ethics were divorced from religious practice. Since the gods and goddesses had no standards except those of their absolute power, their devotees had nothing to fear except their displeasure, which would be aroused by failure to perform the ritual correctly, not by wrong conduct. Since there were also so many gods it was impossible to feel responsible to any one in particular. Private behavior and public standards had thus nothing to do with any transcendent norm of right or wrong.

### *YHWH*

When we turn from this general picture of Middle Eastern religion in biblical times to examine the beliefs of one particular group, as recorded in the Old Testament, we find something so radically

opposite as to constitute a real difference in kind. There we encounter not a pantheon of diverse deities but belief in one God. To this unique Being the Hebrews gave a name which they regarded as so sacred that they would not use it in ordinary speech but employed alternative synonyms. They wrote this sacred name in letters which are reproduced as YHWH, were probably pronounced as Yahweh, and so far as we can judge meant something like "He who causes to be." With such a concept of a single Creator, it was therefore impossible for the Hebrews to condone worship of the sun, the moon, and the stars, like so many of their contemporaries, for it was their belief that YHWH had created all these. Unlike their neighbors, who worshiped their gods in the form of idols, the Hebrews were forbidden to make any images to assist their devotions, for YHWH was not only invisible but in their view could not possibly be reproduced in stone or wood.

Since YHWH was the sole God, and not one of a pantheon, or even the father of the gods, the sexual element was completely ruled out of worship. There were no goddesses, no mother of the gods, no marriages or amorous adventures among the deities as in the polytheistic cults. One of the commonest features of neighboring religions was to represent the gods as animals, as lions, crocodiles, dogs, or



even as birds. This had its roots no doubt in totemism, but for the ordinary man it meant the worship of beasts. The Hebrews however never regarded YHWH as less than personal. The divine Being could not be an "it."

Other peoples might choose which gods they would adopt, they might decide what their gods looked like, and if the existing gods were not satisfactory they could make new ones. These courses were not open to the Hebrews, because it was their conviction that they had neither chosen YHWH nor made him their god. He had chosen them and made them his people. They saw the whole world and its nations as there by the permission and purpose of YHWH, and themselves as the particular group chosen by him to bring this truth home to the rest.

Naturally this conviction about the nature of God, his will for the world, and their own role as his interpreters did not come to the Hebrews as a sudden revelation. It was a conception that grew and deepened as their experience was enriched. We shall find many places in the earlier stages of the Old Testament where YHWH is regarded as at best supreme above the gods of other nations, or where Israel's conception of its own role is that of his favorite protégé destined to lord it over the rest of mankind. But even in its more primitive expression there is a clear discontinuity between what was

believed before Old Testament times, or what was believed by their neighbors during Old Testament times, and the faith of the Hebrew people.

It is fairly certain from the evidence of the Bible that the point at which this radical break took place was the Exodus.<sup>1</sup> The period of the patriarchs that went before it is, for all the detailed narratives of Abraham and his successors, an extremely shadowy one. In view of later editing and idealization of the past it is likely that the religious beliefs of these early days were little different among the Hebrews from what they were elsewhere. Allusions to ancestor worship and household gods seem to suggest this, and to point to the Exodus as the moment when a new type of belief came into being. If this is so, the figure of Moses stands out not only as that of the man who led his people from slavery to freedom and gave them the foundations of nationhood, but as the channel through which came a new conception of God and of our relationship to Him.

### *Moses*

It has been suggested that there is a possible connection between the faith of Moses, brought up in the cultured atmosphere of the Egyptian court, unlike his less fortunate compatriots, and the short-lived attempt of Akhnaten to reform the corrupt

state religion of Egypt not very long before. Akhnaten's monotheism was however the exaltation of the sun as the supreme power on which all life depended. Moses' conception of God, although primitively understood in those early days, was more basic in that it held even then the possibility of eventually being seen to include Akhnaten's god among the works of His hands. When we have discounted the dubious elements in the stories of the Exodus, and made allowances for the limited horizons of life in the Middle East over a thousand years before Christ, the figure of Moses completely dominates the first stage of the biblical period.

However germinal his insight into the mystery of the being of God may have been, it was a new insight and one which was capable of infinite enrichment. The concept of God as a personal creative power, actively concerned in the lives of men and nations, was one which had not appeared in previous history. Whatever modifications have to be made to the Ten Commandments as an ultimate standard of human behavior, they too—for we have no reason to suppose that Moses was not the author of at least a simple form of the Decalogue—mark him out as a pioneer in the field of morals. At a time when, as we have seen, the divorce between religion and morality was complete, this basic code, where duty to God and duty to one's neighbors are

inextricably bound together, and where inward motives are linked with outward actions, is a vast step forward in the field of human relations. Moses emerges as one of the great makers of history, a religious statesman-warrior of the caliber of Mahomet but with a much deeper grasp of ultimate truth.

The evidence is then that this unlikely insignificant group of Hebrews slaves, undistinguished in every other respect, reached a type of religious faith which was radically different from that of their neighbors. If we say that this was merely a step forward in the evolutionary progress of man's religious instincts we have said nothing that sheds any light on the problem of why this should be so. To substantiate the theory that it was a natural development we should have to establish the chain of evidence from godlets to God, from nameless jinn or even full-blown gods like Rimmon, Dagon, and Marduk to YHWH, and there is a large missing link.

Was it then perhaps because the Hebrews had a genius for religion, as the French have a flair for cooking, or the English for cricket? We have only to turn the pages of the Old Testament to see how remote that is from the truth. Far from acclaiming the new moral and religious insights of Moses, it would appear that the majority of his followers

at the time of the Exodus sought to evade them at every opportunity. From then until almost the end of Old Testament times, the Bible reveals a sorry story of how the mass of the Hebrew people consistently turned their backs upon the demands that a monotheistic faith made upon them and took refuge in astrology, sun worship, and animal worship with an accompanying lowering of standards of behavior.

### *The Prophets of Israel*

The truth is rather this, that from Moses onward there was a series of men unique in the history of any nation, who proclaimed the same high doctrine of God and drew the consequences for moral conduct. Whether they were semibarbaric figures like Nathan<sup>2</sup> and Elijah,<sup>3</sup> of whose utterances we know little, or men whose ample writings reveal their inmost thoughts like Jeremiah, these Hebrew prophets were the molders of Israel's faith and morals. What Moses had begun they continued. Where he had seen dimly, each one of them added his quota toward the final conception which the best minds in Israel reached of the nature and purpose of God and of man's obedience to him.

Amos, the forthright shepherd of Tekoa, saw and stressed the justice of God, Hosea empha-

sized the complementary element of mercy in the divine character. Isaiah, the statesman of Jerusalem, grasped more clearly than the others the moral holiness of God, and the greatest of them, the unknown prophet of the Exile, saw Him as the Lord of all history. These and the other prophets whose words are preserved for us were the architects of Israel's faith. Yet not one of them claimed to be the author of the thoughts which he expressed. Always they spoke as men who were impelled to speak—sometimes against their will—by a power stronger than themselves. They regarded themselves as spokesmen of God, men to whom God had disclosed certain truths about himself and man, truths about which they could not be silent.

Whether the prophets delivered themselves of denunciation or encouragement, warning or comfort, they prefaced their words with "Thus saith YHWH." It was no private opinion they were expressing, but words which they were convinced they had to utter. It was their task not only to deepen men's understanding of God, as their own understanding had been deepened, but to call for reform in society and in private life. If the God who had revealed himself to Moses, and who had since shown himself to be greater than even Moses dreamt, had chosen this tiny people, what was his purpose? That he had selected them there could be no doubt, why

otherwise had they been saved from extinction in Egypt and enabled to establish themselves as a nation?

Surely it must be because God needed an instrument for his purpose that all men should know him as Israel had been privileged to know him. They were to be a pattern and an example to the rest of the world of the difference it made to a nation when it knew that YHWH was Creator and Lord of all. It was through Israel that the whole world must come to know the truth about God and the laws by which life must be governed.<sup>4</sup>

However impressive this may sound to us today it was less than impressive to most of the people who had to listen to it. It was in fact highly unpopular, and most of the prophets paid the penalty of reformers of society in all ages. They met with opposition, obloquy, and personal violence. This was not what people wanted to hear at all. High theology was tolerable so long as it had no effect on a man's private affairs. If YHWH had chosen Israel, as all agreed he had, clearly it was for Israel's benefit and not for some uncomfortable mission to set the world a good example. But if what the prophets said was true, then comfort suggested that allegiance to some other god was preferable. As a face-saving device most of the people, including many of the official representatives of

religion, professed their loyalty to YHWH but behaved exactly like their pagan neighbors. Thus the prophets went largely unheeded; and, as we have seen, the nation went progressively to pieces.



## *Chapter IV*

### DISILLUSIONMENT AND HOPE

It would be quite misleading, however, to suggest that no one paid any attention to those molders of the distinctive beliefs of the Hebrews and keepers of their conscience. If they had not made some impression their views would not have been recorded at all. What happened was rather that they influenced a small number of people directly, and eventually indirectly raised the whole tone of society and at certain points changed the course of history.

If Moses had not been able to persuade a certain number of the emancipated slaves that they had been saved from an ignominious end because YHWH had intervened in their affairs and summoned them into a new relationship with Himself, and that this meant that their first task was to establish themselves as a coherent national group in Palestine, it is unlikely that the Exodus would have ended in anything but disaster.

Four hundred years later, when servitude in Egypt, the hazards of the desert wanderings, and the struggle to establish themselves as a nation had been mostly forgotten, YHWH meant so little that the attempt of Queen Jezebel to supplant Him and remove the discomfort of being constantly reminded of the moral standards which YHWH worship imposed, was well on the way to succeed. Her native deity Melkart of Tyre would have been a more accommodating master. Against this attempt Elijah seemed to be fighting a lonely battle; yet, as he discovered, there were seven thousand more who shared his conviction.<sup>1</sup>

Two illuminating examples of the way in which prophetic voices were listened to are recorded in the Old Testament. When King David was captivated by the charms of Bathsheba, and in order to possess her had her husband killed, it was one of those prophets of Israel who confronted the king with his crime. That David did not behave like the normal little oriental potentate and have this meddler in his private affairs beheaded on the spot is not only a tribute to the magnanimity of the king, but also to the power which was wielded by a man of YHWH.<sup>2</sup>

Later, when the nation was divided, the kings of the two states proposed to make a joint attack on Syria. The official ecclesiastics gave the enterprise

their blessing. Yet neither king believed them and sent to the local prison where a certain prophet Micaiah was paying the penalty of opposing the royal will. Despite this the king recognized that from this genuine man of YHWH he would get the only opinion he could trust.<sup>3</sup>

Even in the early days, therefore, the prophets at worst commanded unwilling respect for the beliefs they held and the moral standards they represented, and at best formed the nucleus of a minority movement within the nation which upheld the distinctive type of religious faith and ethical behavior introduced by Moses.

### *Interpreting History*

Similarly in the great period from the eighth to the sixth century B.C., when from Amos onward the prophets proclaimed the truth about God and man and declared it to be Israel's vocation to make this truth known, they were instilling a philosophy of history which had a cumulative effect. If YHWH was indeed Creator of the world, and Lord of all nations, men must expect to find a moral order in the universe. Right and wrong, determined by the will of God as it had been progressively revealed to them, was not simply a criterion for private behavior but for the conduct of society as a whole. In

so far as the community observed these standards imposed by God it would prosper, and in so far as it did not it would come to grief.

By dint of saying this often enough, and illustrating its truth from past history, the prophets brought it about that when the crash came, and the Hebrews after a progressive decline found themselves in 586 B.C. with only the shattered fragments of what had once been a proud and independent nation, they did not despair. In the eyes of the ordinary man YHWH had failed, He had been unable to protect His people. Marduk, god of the Babylonians, who had ravaged Israel and carried off its leaders into captivity, was obviously a more useful god to cultivate.

The message of the prophets, however, hammered home again and again during the years of the nation's decline, and presented afresh by the three great figures at the time of the Exile, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the unknown author of Isaiah, chapters 40-55, persuaded a sufficient number of people to make a fresh start possible. Thus while much of what was left of Israel in Palestine had drifted back to paganism, and some of those who had been exiled in Babylon transferred their allegiance to the gods of their captors, there was once more a sufficiently large minority who did not do either of these things but responded to the leadership of the prophets.

They accepted the view that what had come to them was no more than they deserved and no worse than they should have expected. They had been summoned into existence from a living death in Egypt and given a country which should have been a pattern to the rest of the world of what a people of YHWH should be. Instead of that they had been guilty of the same crimes as their neighbors—worse, indeed, since they ought to have known better. Instead of establishing social justice they had tolerated corruption, oppression and luxury. In their political dealings they had been no better than their enemies. They had dishonored God by the practices they had allowed to creep into their religious life. Both in private and in public affairs they had done everything to deserve extermination.

Yet, although this was their just due, it was not, said the prophets, in accordance with the will of God that they should disappear from history. He had selected them in the days of Moses to fulfill His purposes, and despite their failure they would be given another chance. The Exile would be a discipline—and a necessary one—but after that was over the mercy of God would enable them to make up for their sorry past.

Isaiah of Babylon went further, however, and with stark realism held out no hope of betterment even if exile were succeeded by a return to the

homeland, but summoned his compatriots to recognize it to be the will of God that they, through their sufferings, should yet be his instruments to bring the whole world into his service.<sup>4</sup> In the sequel Isaiah's call went unheeded, and Israel chose to interpret its vocation in a different way.

It was due largely to the prophets, therefore, that when Cyrus declared his general amnesty in 538 B.C. and allowed the various minority groups of displaced persons to return to their respective homelands, the drift back of one of these groups was infused with a specific purpose. They had been schooled into believing that God had still work for them to do, and they were still to be his people. They recognized their past mistakes and they were determined not to make them again. They would go back to Palestine and there in the tiny area that was left to them, Jerusalem and its environs, they would build up a community that would show the world what it meant to be the people of YHWH. Paganism and corruption would be things of the past. Government would be in accordance with the law of God.

This to a large extent was what they put into practice. They framed laws for the conduct of daily life even to the kind of food they should eat, in an attempt to create a pattern for the rest of the world. It was a unique type of society, con-

trolled by priests and regulated by ecclesiastical lawyers. The rebuilt Temple was the focus of their activities. They had no ambitions other than to live in accordance with the will of God.

### *Bad Leadership*

Unfortunately their leadership at this time had none of the deep wisdom of the prophets. Men like Nehemiah and Ezra construed the will of God in narrow and nationalistic terms. If God's people ought to be different from all others, then let it be seen to be different. In Exile they had tried to keep their identity by being ostentatiously distinguishable from their conquerors. Back in their old homeland this involved a frenzied attempt to achieve racial purity. All contact with non-Jews must be avoided. Mixed marriages must be dissolved, Gentile parentage must be disowned. This heartbreaking policy, against which the books of Ruth and Jonah are skillful protests, was enforced with fanatical rigor. YHWH was believed to have rested on the seventh day from his work of creation, therefore his people must rest and be seen to rest, and so the whole corpus of pettifogging regulations for Sabbath observance came into being. Certain foods must be ostentatiously avoided, circumcision must be obligatory.

This frantic and pathetic attempt to persuade themselves and the world that this was how people should live who recognized what was meant by the obedience of God ended in frustration and disillusionment. The Pharisee of the New Testament, who is the logical successor of this mixture of racial exclusiveness, narrow nationalism, and external codes of behavior, avoided all the obvious vices but committed, as Jesus pointed out, the greater sins of intolerance, self-righteousness and spiritual pride. The more he tried to live up to the impossible standards imposed on him by what he considered to be the laws of God, the more impossible he found it to do so. Whatever was meant by living as people of God, this could not be it. Clearly something had gone wrong somewhere. The ordinary man gave up the attempt in despair and left it to his spiritual betters. A double standard of morality crept in whereby the proper obedience of God was acknowledged to be beyond the reach of normal people. The good life had become a matter for professionals and not for amateurs.

But apart from the failure of this policy within the community there was the more distressing outward failure. Had not the prophets said that the downfall of the Hebrew nation had been the result of its deep-seated paganism and refusal to obey God's laws, and had they not been right? The nation



had paid the price and suffered deservedly. But the prophets had also looked forward to a time when God's people would live as he wanted them to live and then, they had said, the whole world would know that YHWH was indeed the only true God and would turn to Israel to learn from them how they must serve him.

Yet what was happening? They were now, as far as they could see, living as a community which was setting an example to the world. Every law in the statute book was a religious law. Public and private life were governed to the last detail by what their religious leaders told them were the implications of the Mosaic laws and the obligations of God's people. Yet far from the Gentiles being attracted, they were repelled. Far from admiring the people of God and wanting to share their type of life they appeared to be unmoved or antagonistic. The world powers under which the Hebrews had to live in the centuries after the return from Exile treated them with scant ceremony. They were vassals like the rest of the subject peoples; obliged to produce tribute and troops on demand. They were at the mercy of invading armies; famine and poverty haunted them.

Even their most cherished religion was threatened with extermination. When in the second century before Christ their foreign overlord, in a well-

meant desire to make these backward Jews more progressive, tried to introduce some of the features of Greek culture such as the theater, the gymnasium, and the language, he was resisted tooth and nail. To punish them he forbade Sabbath observance and circumcision, put an altar to Zeus in the Temple, burned the scriptures, sacrificed swine, and made the priests drink the broth. This to the Jewish religious leaders was the end of the world. Nothing worse than this had ever happened or could happen.

### *God Must Act*

What had become of the glowing future that the prophets had foretold when God's people lived as God's people should? They could not see that the kind of legalistic, exclusive community which they had built up was a travesty of what the prophets had advocated. They had grasped the essential principle that the obedience of God must be the hallmark of his people, but they had interpreted obedience in the wrong way. Narrowness, bigotry, intolerance, and self-righteousness were far removed from the wide humanity of Hosea and Jeremiah. Micah had summed up the obedience of God as to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly.<sup>6</sup> If the first precept was being observed, the second and third had become casualties.

But the conclusion the Hebrews came to was startling. Although they could not see that they had strangled the living faith and broad sympathies of the prophets, they did acknowledge that part of the reason that things had not turned out better was their own fault. In their annual Day of Atonement they confessed that the whole community had failed to live as God's people and they asked for forgiveness. The practice of animal sacrifice, which occupies such a large place in the Old Testament and which after the Exile culminated in the Day of Atonement, was fundamentally based on a recognition that men could not by themselves get right with God. It rested on a primitive conception that the life of the animal, which was believed to reside in its blood, became, when it was sacrificed, a neutral third factor uniting the god and the worshiper. It was a blind groping after the idea of a Mediator, who would somehow bridge the gulf between man's failure and God's demands.

Nor did they accuse the prophets of having misled them. What they did say was that the power of evil in the world was stronger than the prophets had realized, and that the Golden Age which they had foretold when the nations of the world would, under the guidance of God's people, live in harmony and peace, when justice, mercy, and truth would reign supreme, could not happen without a direct

intervention by God himself. It would not come about in the natural course of events, as apparently the prophets had believed, but only by God stepping in, as it were, and introducing some new element which would produce a new situation and new possibilities. God must do for man what man was unable to do for himself.

Naturally there was a variety of ways in which this hope was expressed and there were some differences in detail. But it is important that we should recognize the two basic convictions that lay behind all the variations. The first was that if the will of God was to be done on earth, if men were to be shown what it meant to live in the proper relationship to God, there must be a community to point the way. There must be a "people of God." The second was that although the people of God might be poor advertisements for him, and although the world at large showed every reluctance to acknowledge their responsibility to him, human folly and the power of evil could not have the last word. In the end God's will must prevail. He had created the world and only in accordance with his laws could it properly function.

Thus in the last few centuries of Old Testament times, as disillusionment grew within the community and the world seemed to grow darker around them, they came more and more to pin their hopes on

some dénouement. As the Persian world empire was displaced by the empire of Alexander the Great, and that in its turn was followed by the Roman Empire, the plight of the Jews in Palestine grew more pitiable. There was peace throughout the Roman Empire except in that one spot. The Jews were like no other people the Romans had had to deal with, and what they could not understand they tried to repress. Civil war, mass crucifixions, unemployment, and starvation were the order of the day.

### *Messiah*

The particular form that expressed the basic hopes of the Jews revolved round the Exodus. That was the event that in all their history had made an indelible impression on their minds. As we have seen, they looked on it as a deliverance by YHWH from what amounted to death, the stretching out of his hand to rescue them and set them on a new road to life. What they hoped for now was a new Exodus, for what they seemed to be facing was once again extinction. Over the years the view had grown that when deliverance came it would be brought about by someone sent by God to achieve it, a Saviour, a Messiah. Somehow through his anointed representative, God would inaugurate a New Order

where the prophetic dreams would come true. Justice and mercy would reign among God's people. They would live in peace, in perfect obedience to him, and through them the whole world would come into a proper relationship with him.<sup>6</sup>

This was of course a strictly religious picture, based on the prophets' desire, which was to see the nations of the world living in harmony with one another as servants of the one God. It is not surprising, however, in view of the hardships which they suffered, to find that the more common expectation among the Jews in the last days of the Old Testament era was political and military. What most people wanted was deliverance from the Romans, and the proper kind of Messiah, they thought, would be one who would make it his business to deal with that problem first.

Every robust revolutionary who struck a blow against the hated Romans saw himself as hastening the coming of the Messiah. Every likely politician or soldier raised a query in people's minds as to whether this might be God's Anointed. The official attitude of the religious leaders was to discourage this excitement. They had their own ideas about what the Messiah would be like.

Accordingly when about the year A.D. 30 a group of Jews went out into the streets of Jerusalem, under the leadership of a Galilean fisherman,

claiming that the Messiah had come, it is not surprising that few of their countrymen believed them. For what they said was neither what people wanted nor what they expected. Their Messiah was neither a politician nor a soldier but a carpenter from Nazareth. Instead of being fêted and hailed as Saviour he had been crucified. To the average Jew, whether ecclesiastic or layman, a crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms.

## *Chapter V*

### THE CARPENTER OF NAZARETH

Apart from the evidence of the Bible itself, reference to Jesus in contemporary records is as sparse as we should in the nature of things expect. Imperial Rome was not interested in yet another religious upheaval among these crazy Jews in their little backwater. It would be only when any movement impinged upon the life of the Empire generally that officials and historians would take note. Thus we find references to Jesus and his followers in dispatches from a Roman provincial governor to the emperor, and in the histories of Tacitus, both about A.D. 110. Casual mention of the pseudo-Messiah is made by Josephus, the Jewish historian, who wrote in the first century A.D.<sup>1</sup>

The biblical records are, however, ample in scope and rich in detail. It is generally agreed that the earliest Gospel, Mark, was written in approximately A.D. 65 and that the other three were produced before the end of the century. Each Gospel



was written to meet a particular need—Matthew, for example, is written specifically for Jews, whereas Luke is clearly designed for non-Jews. Mark's Gospel is basic and the other gospel writers make use of it in their own works. It is highly probable that a fair amount of Mark's material came from Peter.

From the contents of the book of The Acts, and Paul's letters, it is certain that from very shortly after the Crucifixion the followers of Jesus conducted an increasingly intensive religious campaign, and that in the course of it his words were quoted and his actions referred to, so that we have an unbroken chain of historical evidence between the events in the life of Jesus and the writing of the First Gospel. When, principally owing to the gradual dying-out of the first generation of men who had been eye witnesses of the course of events in Galilee and Jerusalem, it was decided to make a permanent record, there were still enough people alive who remembered these events to refute any major errors in the narrative.

Thus although we can never say with absolute certainty that this or that is precisely what Jesus said, we may take it that in the normal manner of Eastern teachers Jesus repeated his more striking sayings many times, and that the better-trained memories of Eastern listeners remembered them

accurately. In the case of the narratives we must allow for the occasional exaggeration, or misunderstanding, and for the element of legend creeping in in places, but by and large we are justified in taking the basic record of the first three Gospels as a substantially true account of what happened. The Fourth Gospel is not so much a factual record as reflection on the significance of the facts.

### *Revolutionary, Reformer, or Prophet?*

What sort of person, then, emerges from these records and why was he hailed by his followers as the Messiah? It is an indication of the complexity of the answer and the enigma of the personality of Jesus that he has been represented in so many different ways. He has been described as a political revolutionary, a social reformer, a disappointed martyr, a mystic, a kindly teacher, a megalomaniac. It has sometimes been said that he never existed and, sometimes, that if he did exist we can know nothing about him except that he was born and died.

All these conclusions are marked by a disregard for the available evidence and a failure to recognize the essentially Jewish background. Whatever we say about the significance of Jesus for the twentieth century, we must begin by seeing him as a historical figure whose closest kinship is with the Old Testa-

ment prophets. The view of God which Jesus taught was the view of Jeremiah, Hosea, and Isaiah and the kind of behavior he commended was basically what the prophets also wanted to encourage. There were, however, certain significant differences.

The life of Jesus could be baldly summarized in a few words. After about thirty years of obscurity as the village carpenter of Nazareth, he emerged into public life and for three years or less carried out a teaching and healing mission. Although acclaimed at first by the crowds his message proved too demanding for most people. Even the small group of disciples that he gathered round him and to which he gave special attention, found him difficult to understand and impossible to emulate. Progressively by his activities he aroused the opposition of the religious authorities, who concluded that the only way to stop his unorthodox teaching was to have him condemned by the local Roman representative. The suspicion of treason was enough to ensure that this would be achieved. Accordingly Jesus was tried and condemned to death by crucifixion.

Such a pocket biography might have been written of any Old Testament prophet in similar circumstances. It would not be sufficient, however, to account for either the claim on behalf of Jesus that he was the Messiah, or for the establishment and growth of the Christian church. We must,

therefore, turn back to the evidence of history contained in the Gospels. However much we allow for the fact that what happened in Galilee and Jerusalem is recorded by men who are convinced that Jesus was no mere prophet, we have to ask ourselves the sober question, Why did they come to that conclusion? It was not something that they invented out of nothing, but a conclusion they came to as a result of what had happened.

If we take the earliest Gospel as our most reliable guide we are brought face to face with someone who defies description by any ordinary category, who does things that no normal person can do and says things that no normal person would say. We cannot escape the conviction that here was someone who although he ate, walked, talked, and slept and was in every respect a full human being was in some indescribable and mysterious way something more than that. Perhaps the simplest way of putting it would be to say that the primary reaction of his earliest followers was that when they were with him they did not feel they were in the presence of a holy man but in the presence of God.

What they had been brought up to believe about God as the Old Testament prophets had depicted him, his love for all men, his hatred of evil, his understanding of human weakness and his readiness to forgive it—all this, they found, came to life in

Jesus. What they had believed in theory they saw now working out in practice. They felt that only since they had been with Jesus had they really come to know God. Later on, Paul was to try to put this into words by saying that "God was in Christ" and, considerably later, less happy attempts were made to describe the two aspects of Jesus' personality in the creeds.

Creeds are necessary but unsatisfactory. They are always an inadequate attempt to express in cold words what is essentially inexpressible. In a way the Gospels are trying to do the same thing, but in a more attractive and less tidily logical way. They give us rather an impressionist picture of Jesus, but one which quite clearly preserves the elements in his personality which from the beginning made it impossible for his followers to regard themselves as his boon companions.

It is perhaps worth reflecting at this point that if the intention of the Gospel writers had been to persuade first-century readers that Jesus was a visitant from another world, who simply looked like a man, their obvious method would have been to see to it that the record was studded with enough black magic to convince the unscientific minds of the time. The sober reliability of the New Testament Gospels is best seen when contrasted with the apocryphal gospels that competed with them, where

history is replaced by fantasy. Certain elements in Matthew's Gospel would seem to indicate the beginning of the process even in the canonical records.

### *Jesus and God*

The basic difference between Jesus and his followers—or for that matter between Jesus and anyone else—was his relationship to God. It is the mark of a saint to be conscious of his own shortcomings. The more of a saint he is, the more keenly he will feel his failure. The holiness and goodness of God will always be separated from his own imperfections by a great gulf. His approach to God will always be marked by this sense of sin and need for repentance.

There is no indication anywhere in the Gospels that Jesus ever experienced this universal feeling of being separated from God. On the contrary, his whole attitude is marked by a unique sense of being completely at one with God. The normal man has occasional moments when he seems to pierce the mystery that surrounds life and catches a glimpse of ultimate reality. For the rest of his humdrum existence of work and leisure he holds on to these moments as being times when he was really alive and knew what life at its best could be. Jesus however, lived on that plane all the time.

When he described in words his own relationship to God it was always as that of Father and Son. All men are children of God in the sense that God is Father of all, but Jesus was conscious of a unique Sonship. He spoke of God as "My Father," but when he spoke of God to his followers it was always as "your Father" and never, unless when he taught them how to pray, was it "Our Father."

This aspect of Jesus, however, was one which would make most impression on those who lived closest to him. There were other aspects more obvious on an occasional encounter. Perhaps the attribute most generally noticed was his authority. People in those days in Palestine were accustomed to religious teachers who spoke with authority, but it was the authority of a system. The rabbis had the whole power of the Law behind them, the elaborate structure of regulations for the conduct of private and community life, as it had been built up since the days of Moses.

The pronouncements of the rabbis, however, were always second, third, or fourth hand. These venerable figures in the synagogues could give no better guidance than that Rabbi A had once said this, and Rabbi B had once said that. And, if their verdicts differed, Rabbi C was brought in as a third opinion. This arose naturally enough because the Old Testament had simply laid down the gen-

eral principles, and it had been left to successive generations to interpret them in accordance with changing times and situations. It was also an inevitable consequence of trying to legislate for every human activity.

Jesus, however, did not merely brush aside the interpretations of the rabbis; he even shook the Old Testament foundations. He did not set out to supplant the Law, but he insisted on drawing out its deepest meaning. This he did in two ways. There were said to be 613 Old Testament commandments which according to the current teaching were equally valid. They ranged from the saying of prayers to the kind of clothes to wear when saying them. Jesus singled out two of these as the heart of the matter: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Jesus put these multifarious religious obligations in their proper perspective, and insisted that they were not of equal value.

More than that, however, he even criticized the sacred Decalogue for its externalism. It was not enough to avoid committing murder or adultery. The root sin was hate or lust. He was thus setting himself up as a greater authority on the Old Testament than the professional ecclesiastics, and, more startling, passing judgment on the founder of the Law, Moses himself. When he did this he made no



secret of the fact that he considered his own verdict on these matters to be final: "You have been told up till now . . . but I tell you. . . ." <sup>3</sup> The "I" was underlined.

This note of authority was more strikingly exemplified in Jesus' acts of healing. From occasional summaries which appear in the Gospels it would seem that the cures which are described in detail were only a handful of those which Jesus effected. We are given, as it were, specimen cases of blindness, deafness, paralysis, and insanity being cured by a word or a touch. It should be noted that this has nothing to do either with the patient healing himself or with modern medical practice. Auto-suggestion, careful diagnosis, prolonged treatment, and convalescence do not feature in the healing stories of the Gospels.

Jesus clearly regarded disease and mental derangement as contrary to the will of God and was as concerned with men's bodies as with their minds. Life in Jesus' understanding of the word meant not only living in the right relationship to God and one's fellow men, but also the enjoyment of perfect health and mental vigor. The evidence of the Gospels is that where the power of God, working through Jesus, encountered pain, deformity, and even death, it destroyed them and made men and

women capable of becoming what God intended them to be.

The killing of Jesus at the instigation of the religious authorities was the inevitable end of his activity. In crucifying him they acknowledged the substantial truth of the Gospel record. Any man who claimed to know more than Moses about the true obedience of God, who usurped the power of God in healing men's minds and bodies and forgiving their sins, must be either mad or the Messiah. Jesus could not be the Messiah, because God's Anointed could never mingle with the scum of society, with Gentiles and harlots, as Jesus did, or break the Sabbath and behave in every way unlike the traditional holy man. He must therefore be regarded as a dangerous charlatan and summarily disposed of.

Those who were closest to Jesus, the dozen men he had gathered round him, who had seen him in public and private and shared his experiences, took a different view. There was a dramatic moment in the course of Jesus' mission when he asked these men who they thought he was.<sup>4</sup> Peter, more apparently with a flash of insight than with studied judgment, answered for them: You are the Messiah. It is not certain that at that point we can quite know what he meant, because the word Messiah stood

for different things to different people, from a political revolutionary to a supernatural visitant.

But we can be sure of this at least, that to a first-century religious Jew, brought up on the Old Testament, Messiah was the highest category within his horizon short of God himself. When the Messiah came he would be greater than the most revered figures of the past, above Moses, David, and all the prophets. He would be God's representative on earth, acting on his behalf, invested with his power, and in a special sense related to him.

### *What Kind of Messiah?*

Jesus welcomed this attribution of Messiahship, coming as it did from someone who at least had a glimmering of what it meant, but in general he discouraged the use of the word Messiah in connection with himself. He had no political ambitions, and too many of those who hailed him as Messiah—and they were many—had more interest in seeing the end of the Roman occupation than the beginning of a new way of life.

If we are to make sense of the Gospel records we must assume that the years of obscurity in Nazareth had been a period in which Jesus progressively realized that he was gifted beyond his fellows. There must have been a deepening sense

of his unique relationship to God, the realization that unlike anyone else he knew, he lived constantly in perfect communion with his Father. Added to this was his power over men and nature which must have become increasingly apparent to him. It is possible that he may have guessed to what vocation God was calling him before he left Nazareth, but certainly the experience of his Baptism confirmed it.<sup>5</sup> The Temptation in the solitude of the Judaeen desert is a pictorial way of describing the various types of Messiah which he might have become.<sup>6</sup>

In the end he chose to identify himself with a role that had been outlined for Israel by the greatest of the prophets, that of the Servant of God who through his suffering would bring the world to the knowledge of the truth.<sup>7</sup> Isaiah of Babylon had perhaps hoped that in the days after the Exile the remnant of the people of God might have accepted this as their vocation. But it remained an empty dream until Jesus wove it into his own purpose. The Servant motif is the key to Jesus' ministry and death. His interpretation of the role to be fulfilled by God's Anointed was that of the Servant, who seeks to win men's allegiance to God not by power but by love, not by a mailed fist but by a Cross.

The Servant gives himself in a ministry of healing, compassion, sympathy, and friendship, which is the perfect service of God, and crowns it by giving

his life. Jesus did not meet his death as a disappointed prophet who had failed, but in the conviction that by dying for them he would bring men to God.

The third of the Old Testament figures which Jesus adapted to express his vocation was that of the Son of Man. This was the phrase he most commonly used to describe himself. As we can see from the Book of Daniel where it originates,<sup>8</sup> it implies the head of a community which would be governed by a different set of rules from the normal national or imperial unit. It would be a community of people dedicated to the service of God instead of to the service of power, prestige, or prosperity. Jesus founds this community on the twelve disciples.

We may sum up Jesus' sense of his own mission therefore in this way. He regards himself as called upon by God to act on his behalf among men (Messiah) by giving himself in their service to the uttermost (Servant), confident that through his self-sacrifice the new community which he has founded (Son of Man) will be the means of bringing the world to God.

What Jesus looked for beyond the Cross is uncertain except that he clearly did not regard his death as the end. His judgment on his countrymen was that they had failed to fulfill their mission as the people of God, and he regarded himself as doing

on their behalf what they had been unwilling and unable to do themselves. Their task had been to lead the nations to God if not by their example, then by their suffering. In taking this burden upon himself, Jesus summoned into existence a new people of God, represented at the Crucifixion by himself alone, but based upon the twelve men he had chosen. This would be a new Israel and he was confident that beyond the Cross lay the fulfillment of God's purpose to bring the whole world into his service.

Whatever Jesus hoped for beyond the Crucifixion it is certain that it came upon his followers as a crashing deathblow to everything they had expected and believed in. They fled for their lives in despair and complete disillusionment. The Master's plan to change society by bringing men into the right relationship with God had proved an empty dream. Evil had been too strong for him. He had died like the prophets before him, a nine-days' wonder of a Messiah whom all except a handful would soon forget. That was on Good Friday. On Easter Day the Christian church was born.

## *Chapter VI*

### THE NEW COMMUNITY

The Resurrection of Jesus has been called one of the best attested facts in history, and the evidence for it has been said to come dangerously near proving Christianity to be true. According to the New Testament record, the body of the crucified Jesus was laid in the normal type of cave-tomb on a Friday. On the following Sunday morning the tomb was open, the graveclothes were lying in position, but the body was no longer there. Beginning on that day, however, and for some weeks, Jesus appeared among his followers, singly or in groups, and convinced them that death had no power over him, that he had risen from the tomb.

His message to them was that the new community which he had founded, the reconstituted people of God, was to go on under his leadership and strengthened by his presence, until the whole world had heard of the love of God and had been given the opportunity to come into the right relationship with Him. The narrative suggests that while Jesus was

clearly recognizable, his risen body was of a different order and was not subject to normal bodily limitations.

When the Resurrection appearances ceased there was no despondency among the followers of Jesus. They knew that he was alive, and in the symbolic description of his Ascension they expressed the conviction in the only way open to them that he was now exalted to his proper place in the presence of God and able to be spiritually at one with his people everywhere, freed from the restrictions which physical existence on earth had imposed upon him.

The Resurrection is a fitting climax to the ministry of Jesus. As Peter said later, it was impossible that a personality such as that of Jesus could be terminated by death.<sup>1</sup> If the Cross had been the end it would have meant that the most perfect life of which the world has any record ended in agony and futility because of human bigotry and stupidity. Yet the Resurrection is an event which in the nature of things is difficult to imagine. Consequently other solutions have been sought in order to explain the empty tomb, such as that the disciples stole the body, or that Jesus had not really been dead. Suggestions of this kind raise more problems than they solve.

Equally unsatisfactory are the attempts to explain the Resurrection appearances as hallucinations. Men



of the caliber of Paul do not face martyrdom for hallucinations. Nor is it credible that the disciples invented the appearances and then proceeded to build a Church upon a conscious fraud. The Gospel records show just enough discrepancies to guarantee the trustworthiness of the witnesses. A faked story would have agreed in every detail.

In the last resort the best evidence for the Resurrection is the change that took place in the followers of Jesus. It is clear that the Crucifixion had been a deathblow and that humanly speaking the cause for which Jesus had given his life was finished. Within a few days, however, these same men were cock-a-hoop and within a few weeks they had set out to turn the world upside down. The only explanation is that after a first reaction of incredulity, one after another became convinced that they were no longer dejected disciples of a dead master but followers of a living Lord. They came now to understand many of the things Jesus had said about his future triumph; they read again the Messianic passages in the Old Testament with new understanding.

The climax of this period of deepening realization and increasing exhilaration came in a communal religious experience of such intensity that they could only describe it in terms of the winds of God sweeping across them and his living fire kindling

each one of them.<sup>2</sup> So they went out into the streets of Jerusalem to begin the mission of the Christian church. They spoke as Jews and their message was to Jews, but the essence of it was of universal application.

### *The Preaching of the Gospel*

The burden of their preaching was that the face of the world had changed, as it were, overnight. The new order that the prophets had looked for and hoped for had now begun. The power of evil had been dealt a mortal blow. Jesus of Nazareth, whose actions had shown that the power of God was mightily at work in him, had been proved to be the Messiah in that God had raised him from the dead. His victory over death meant that in principle all the evil that death epitomized—pain, disease, sin and suffering—had likewise been overcome. This victory could be shared by all who acknowledged Jesus as Lord and entered the fellowship of his followers.

Within this new community, men would be enabled to live in the right relationship to God, to view life in the right perspective, and to come nearer to the proper obedience of God which is the only true freedom. The standards of the new community would be those of the Law and the Prophets as

reinterpreted by Jesus, and the power of the Risen Lord, who had promised to be with his people wherever two or three of them were gathered together in his name,<sup>3</sup> would make all this possible.

Thus it was no invitation to step out of the world into an exclusive society but a guarantee to all who were prepared to turn their backs upon the futility and failures of the past, and put Christ in the center of their lives, binding themselves in loyalty to him, that they would begin to experience a new quality of living, life as God meant it to be. They would remain in the world, carrying on with the jobs they had always done, but in them they would be conscious all the time of being bound to Christ, doing the kind of things that he had commanded and, because of the presence of his Spirit in their lives, conscious that neither death nor this world was the limit of their horizon. They would be living in a new dimension, citizens of this world charged with the task of doing Christ's work in it, but citizens also of the world beyond space and time where God reigned supreme.

This message, proclaimed at first to the Jews, made a much greater impact when it extended its scope beyond Palestine and began to spread through the Roman Empire. To those Jews who responded, it came as a liberation from the stranglehold of Pharisaism which had made the good life a joyless

effort to comply with its endless restrictions and prohibitions. For most Jews, however, a thousand years of tradition and racial pride proved too strong. The claim of this new sect that their countrymen had forfeited their right to be called the people of God, that they had crucified God's Messiah and perverted the truth that God had revealed to them through Moses and the prophets, made it inevitable that their appeal was largely rejected.

### *Men Ready to Listen*

Far different was it outside Palestine. The Roman Empire was spiritually and morally in the doldrums. The old gods of Greece and Rome were discredited, new and exotic faiths from the East were competing for favor. Men were looking for something that would prove an oasis of stability in a rapidly changing world. Moral standards whether in the home, the theater, or the arena were at a low ebb. Luxury and profligacy among the well-to-do topped the crazy structure of a society built on the living death of slavery. Astrology and black magic pervaded a superstitious age, where the voice of Stoics and Epicureans commending the good life was barely heard.

In this hotchpotch of religions, philosophies, and

sheer quackery, the message of the Christ, which was the Greek form of Messiah, made rapid headway. It combined the moral standards of the philosophers with the power to put them into practice, and offered at the same time an intelligible faith based on a historical person, and liberation from the despair and fear of the unknown which filled the pagan world.

The courage and obvious sincerity of the missionaries, who by this time were called Christians, coupled with the new quality of life which existed in the little communities they founded all over the Mediterranean world, were the best advertisement for the new faith. The New Testament does not gloss over the failings either of the missionaries or of the congregations, but it does present a picture of a pitifully small but heroic band of convinced Christians battling against opposition, indifference, and superstition, and making a remarkable impact on the teeming cities of the Empire. Travel was relatively easy along the great imperial military roads, and the universal use of Greek as a common language made communication no problem. That does not, however, lessen the achievement of establishing what was in origin a Jewish faith throughout Asia Minor, Greece, and in the capital of the Empire itself in the short space of thirty years.

The book of The Acts of the Apostles, to give

it its full title, was written by Luke the author of the Third Gospel, as a companion volume to his account of the ministry of Jesus. He regarded it as part of the same story, since it was a description of the activities of men who did what they did through the power of the Risen Christ. The chief character in the book is the Spirit of Jesus. Luke tells a fascinating story of the expansion of the Church, and shows how these first Jewish missionaries were forced, generally reluctantly, to venture out into wider commitments, to tackle new situations, and to face tougher problems.

In all conscience they were ordinary enough men, with neither learning nor wealth to assist them. Their sole weapon was their dedicated purpose. Even that was sometimes barely enough, for they had not only to battle against tangible foes like pagan superstition and physical violence, but also against their own Jewish upbringing, which made them often question whether they were in fact doing the will of God. Not only did this new Christian freedom present problems for conduct which had not emerged in the carefully regulated daily program of the devout Jew, but the complete breakaway from all the traditional marks of the people of God—circumcision, the Sabbath, the food laws, and racial exclusiveness—was not only difficult but also questionable.

*Paul of Tarsus*

Guidance on this, as indeed on every other problem in these early days, was given by a man with the ablest mind in the whole history of the Christian Church, Paul of Tarsus. This brilliant and forceful personality was not only the architect of the structure of the first-century Church, but the molder of its thought and the prime mover in its future development. More than anyone else he grasped the full significance of what Jesus had said, what he had done, and what his coming had meant for the world at large. Trained as a rabbi of the strictest type, against the cosmopolitan background of the great city in Asia Minor where he was brought up, this rigorous and intolerant Jew found himself in Jerusalem just at the time when the followers of Jesus began their task of persuading their countrymen that they had crucified the Messiah.

To Paul their views constituted a heresy which had to be denounced, and, as it seemed to be gaining ground, suppressed with violence. No Jew was more vehement in his opposition to what appeared to be pernicious nonsense. As the new movement spread, repressive measures were taken by the religious authorities, and the ringleader in the persecution was this remorseless Pharisee who spared no energy

in trying to root out the new teaching and destroy its advocates.

It was while he was at the height of this vindictive enterprise that he was suddenly, as he himself describes it, "arrested by Christ."<sup>4</sup> His conversion to Christianity is one of the great moments, perhaps the greatest, in the Church's history. From that day the whole course of his future was changed. In an agony of remorse this once cruel and passionate man dedicated the rest of his life to the Christ he had denounced and despised. His vast endowment of energy, courage, and intellect became consecrated to the task of bringing men face to face with the Christ who had made him a new man.

To attribute Paul's conversion to an epileptic fit, or to dismiss him as a neurotic, subject to hallucinations, is to trifle with religious psychology and the evidence of history. His letters, as they are preserved in the New Testament, and which were often dashed off in odd moments of hectic missionary activity, are the products of a supremely sane and incisive mind. They are the result of his rethinking of the faith of the Old Testament, on which he had been brought up, in the light of his conversion experience.

Many of the problems with which he deals in these letters were of local and temporary interest, and occasionally his rabbinical training affects



adversely his Christian thinking, but in his writings as a whole he has left answers to the great questions of Christian faith and conduct which have satisfied the best minds in the Church through the centuries. His insight into the mysteries of God, man, and the universe in the light of the fact of Christ is still in the twentieth century original and profound.

The key word in Paul's assessment of the significance of Jesus is reconciliation. His great summary of the meaning of Christianity rests on this foundation: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."<sup>5</sup> For Paul, as indeed for all the New Testament writers, however they expressed it, the only way for men to come into the right relationship with God and with one another was through Christ. He saw Christ, and the Church inspired by him, as the great barrier breaker. Men had put up barriers between God and themselves by their willful pride and self-interest. Only in the fellowship of the Church, the Body of which Christ was the Head, could they be helped to break these barriers down.

Similarly men had erected barriers between one another, barriers of race, color, social class. In Paul's view Christ had come to demolish these artificial divisions so that in his Church Jew and Gentile, men and women, freemen and slaves might live as children of the same Father.

The shortest of Paul's letters,<sup>6</sup> written to a patrician of Colossae, asking him to take back a runaway slave, illustrates how this new Christian concept was beginning to work out in practice. According to Roman law, the crime of the slave, which was aggravated by theft, was punishable by death. According to Christ's law the slave, who in the meantime had become a Christian, must go back to his master and accept what treatment was meted out. But the master, who is also a Christian, is told by Paul that the proper treatment in this case is forgiveness. Outside the Church, a Jew and a Gentile were at daggers drawn: patrician and slave were two different orders of being. Inside the Church, an ex-Jewish rabbi can write to an ex-pagan nobleman as his brother, and commend a slave to his mercy as the brother of both of them in Christ.

### *The Legacy of Paul*

This was one of the last letters Paul wrote. He was then in gaol awaiting trial after years of peril, hardship, torture, and imprisonment in the service of his master. None of them had deflected him from his purpose, rather did his sufferings bind him more closely to the Christ who knew all that suffering could mean. When Paul eventually met a martyr's

death, like so many of his fellow missionaries, he left as his memorial not only his letters or the affection of countless men and women whom he had brought out of darkness into light, but a Church which, though scattered in a host of tiny communities throughout the Mediterranean world, regarded itself as a united fellowship transcending all man-made barriers and acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord.

The story of the New Testament stops with the arrival of Christianity in the imperial capital and the tale is then taken up by the history books of how it became in time the established religion of the Empire, and spread from Christendom to every corner of the known world.

It is beyond our province here to deal with the growth of the Church in the nineteen hundred years that have passed since New Testament times. It is a story of glorious success and dismal failure, of cruelty and charity, bigotry and magnanimity. The Bible never leads us to expect it to be otherwise. The Church was never depicted as a fellowship of plaster saints but of sinners who can by the grace of God occasionally behave like saints.

In considering the evidence of history, however, it would not be fair to overlook what individual Christians have done in the cause of social reform, education, and the ministry of healing. Let us judge

the validity of the Christian faith by consecrated servants of Christ like St. Francis, Albert Schweitzer, Abbé Pierre, Grenfell, and Kagawa, to say nothing of the less spectacular stories of an endless procession of men and women down the centuries whose lives have been changed by their experience of Christian fellowship.

The evidence therefore appears to be that the Bible provides a record of a unique faith, on the part of Israel, a unique choice of the Hebrews to be the vehicle of a people of God, and a unique person, Jesus Christ, as the turning point of history.

It is on these hard facts that the Bible bases its interpretation of the world and of the life we have to live, inviting us to decide either for or against its conclusions and to draw the consequences for ourselves. We have now to look at that interpretation and its implications and to judge whether in this year of grace they can still be called in any sense relevant.

## *Chapter VII*

### KEEPING OUR FEET ON THE GROUND

What has all this to do with us today? What are these conclusions that the biblical writers came to? Are they still valid in the twentieth century, and, if so, how can we relate them to everyday life? What have the religious beliefs of Levantine nomads of over two thousand years ago to do with us, children of a different world, and what meaning for today have the strange and often cryptic utterances of Jesus, or his unaccountable power over men's minds and bodies?

We have moved so far in our modern Western civilization from the thought-forms and mental environment of an ancient oriental people that it requires a real effort to understand them. We must begin then by making use of all the assistance that popular commentaries and handbooks can give us, and fortunately there is no lack of simple aids to Bible reading well within the average person's purse and compass.

Armed with help of this kind we can tackle even the most unpromising sections of the Old Testament and a fascinating pursuit it proves to be. Because before we can ask the question about the relevance of this or that story or saying, there are two prior questions we have to ask. The first is, What did the writer intend to convey to the people of his own day? and the second, What medium did he use to convey his meaning? If we try honestly to answer these questions we shall find that in the course of our quest the true bearing of the passage on present-day life will become apparent.

We must keep our feet firmly planted on the ground in this business of studying the Bible. One of the great dangers in any kind of religious activity is that we become airborne so easily, which does not mean that we are in contact with heaven, but simply that our heads are in the clouds. It is important, therefore, in looking at the Bible, and trying to understand it, that we should aim at seeing every part of it first of all in its proper historical setting.

When for example Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is within you,"<sup>1</sup> he was not, as some modern writers assume, proclaiming the divinity of man. The kingdom of God meant for him, as for his contemporaries, the sovereignty of God. What Jesus was saying was that in his own ministry the sover-

eign power of God over men's minds and bodies was being progressively realized.

Paul was not at his best on questions of marriage or on women in general. But when he wrote to the church at Corinth, giving instructions that women should not say their prayers without wearing something on their heads,<sup>2</sup> he was not issuing an edict that all Christian women must forever after wear hats in church. The problem at Corinth was that the church services were sometimes thrown into confusion by frenzied women with streaming hair who claimed that they were possessed by the Spirit and proceeded to turn the normal worship into a revival meeting. Paul felt that if they had to keep their hair under control they would be less inclined to dramatize.

When Isaiah wrote, "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel,"<sup>3</sup> he was not forecasting the Virgin Birth of Jesus. He was addressing his countrymen in the eighth century B.C. who were depressed by the threats of their enemies. His message to them was one of hope. If a young mother were to conceive a child now, he said, and called him Immanuel—that is, God is with us—by the time the child was a few years old the mother would know that her faith had been justified, for Israel's enemies would be scattered.

The well-known principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" <sup>4</sup> is often taken to be a frightful example of Old Testament savagery and vindictiveness. At the time when it became part of the Hebrew code, however, the previous practice had been, and continued to be, outside the Hebrew community, that a whole tribe or any member of it however innocent was held responsible for any crime committed by one of its members. This law was in fact an enlightened attempt to limit indiscriminate blood-feuds and clan vendettas by making only the guilty individual responsible.

We cannot find any woolly theories of Christian communism on the practice of the earliest Christians who "had all things in common." <sup>5</sup> There is a vast difference between compulsory equalization, affecting a nation, and a small group of people practicing the voluntary sharing of their property after the manner of a modern monastic order, an experiment which was in the case of the early Church a short-lived one. Nor can we argue the case for pacifism on the basis of Jesus' injunction to "turn the other cheek." <sup>6</sup> As we all know there are ways of turning the other cheek which are more provocative and militant than hitting back. Jesus was talking to his disciples about private relationships, not to the world at large about the use and abuse of force, and was outlining the ideal type of



goodwill shown by men who lived in complete obedience to God. Such men, he points out, would not take offense at personal insults, just as they would be prepared to do the little extra beyond what was required of them.<sup>7</sup>

Many cases of this kind might be mentioned where we cannot simply take the biblical words and apply them to our modern situation without qualification. We must go even further and say that many biblical incidents and injunctions are so time-conditioned, so bound up with ways of life and modes of thought belonging to a particular stage in history, that they have no relevance whatever for us today and we must simply disregard them.

The measurements of Solomon's temple<sup>8</sup> may have some antiquarian interest, and the food laws of Leviticus<sup>9</sup> may be of importance for orthodox Jews, but for the ordinary citizen today they have neither an obvious nor a hidden meaning. Imprecatory psalms, bloodthirsty punishments, sub-Christian standards of conduct can have relevance for us only as indications of what we ought to avoid, and when we are dealing with passages of this kind we must always see them in the light of New Testament teaching.

We must also recognize that at many points the Old Testament is tied to its background, and that we ought not to try to give it a false relevance by

finding in it what was never there. To read into some obscure prophetic utterance which clearly referred to the eighth century B.C. a forecast of twentieth-century events and personages, such as a third world war, a new Hitler, or a new Stalin, is a complete misunderstanding of the nature of prophecy. Many of the things the prophets said about events in their day have a relevance which is timeless. Many on the other hand were meant for the ears of their contemporaries and not for ours. The prophetic books are the record of men who spoke on behalf of God, and in dealing with the events of their time they have still much to say to us today. But much that they said holds nothing for us now and we must not try to make their words meaningful by looking for hidden prognostications of the future as if the prophets were veritable Old Moores with private sources of information about things to come.

### *History, Myth or Legend?*

The second question we must ask ourselves in dealing with any particular incident or saying in the Bible is equally important: What medium is the writer using to convey his meaning? Is he recounting what, as far as we can see, is a plain unvarnished fact, or is he saying something in the

form of a myth, or is he recording a legend? If he is quoting the spoken word, is he doing so as a reproduction of what was said, or as his impression of what the speaker meant, or what he thought the speaker might have said, or is it a saying at all?

If, for example, there is a matter-of-fact descriptive incident, like the death of King Saul and his sons,<sup>10</sup> we may take it that this is a piece of purely factual information, handed down by tradition, and soberly recorded.

On the other hand, if in the early chapters of Genesis, before the historical period properly begins, we come across a story like that of the Tower of Babel,<sup>11</sup> which at first sight appears to purport to give the reason for the variety of languages that exist in the world, we should ask ourselves if this is in fact what the story is about. A little closer examination will make it clear that the biblical writers are not asking us to believe anything so unscientific. They are using the same sort of myth as the Greeks, who have a story of how the Titans piled Mt. Pelion on Mt. Ossa in order to storm Olympus, the abode of the gods.

This mythical Tower of Babel was to be mankind's means of exalting himself to the level of God. It is the symbol of man's overweening pride. The point of the story is that this attitude on the part of man leads invariably to chaos and confusion, of

which the diversity of languages, which separate men from one another, is the symbol. The process is reversed in the New Testament story of Pentecost,<sup>12</sup> which does not mean that the early Christians were able to speak each other's languages, but that by the coming of the Spirit of Christ into the world the confusion of Babel was reversed and Christian men of all nations could now understand each other because they spoke the same language of love.

We are not asked to believe that Elijah departed this life in a fiery chariot which conveyed him by a whirlwind to his future abode.<sup>13</sup> But by a legend of this sort the Bible reinforces the impression conveyed by the rest of Elijah's story of a man who was himself something of a human tornado, and who left such a mark on the minds of his contemporaries that a story of this kind could be told about him. The stormy petrel of the reign of that ill-starred pair Ahab and Jezebel could not possibly pass meekly from the human stage by dying in his bed.

### *The Spoken Word*

When we come to the question of the spoken word in the Bible, once again we have to ask ourselves regarding any particular saying, what form the

writer is using to convey it. The difference between the short crisp utterances of Jesus in the first three Gospels and the involved discourses of the Fourth Gospel suggest that, in the main, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are recording words of Jesus which, probably in many cases often repeated, had impressed themselves on the hearers' memories. We may say therefore that a saying of Jesus which occurs in these Gospels is, as far as we shall ever get it, an actual reproduction of what he said.

In the Fourth Gospel it is sometimes difficult to know whether it is Jesus or the author who is speaking. The writer has so steeped himself in the thought of Jesus that by and large he tends to give us the meaning of what Jesus said. He is a portrait painter rather than a photographer, which means that he is often able to bring us into closer contact with the mind of Jesus than the other evangelists. That does not at all imply that the Fourth Gospel does not record actual sayings of Jesus, but simply that we should be prepared on occasion to allow for the author's own reflections being combined with them and presented as actual words of Christ.

When we are dealing with the early narratives of the Old Testament, the stories of the patriarchs and Moses, for example, the spoken word there is obviously the result of intelligent conjecture. In the nature of things, the best that a scribe could do, in

recording these stories after an interval of several hundred years, was to use his imagination. The basis of the stories was probably handed down by tradition, and what we have now in the Bible is a series of moral or religious motifs woven into them. The conversations will tend to be rather the kind of things that editors, influenced by the prophets, thought that their pious ancestors would have said.

It did not perturb these old writers to introduce God as one of the characters in these dialogues. Naturally they make God say the kind of things that accord with the conception of him at the time. On some occasions, what appears to be a conversation between God and one of the Old Testament characters is in fact the Hebrew way of saying that an oracle was consulted.<sup>14</sup> On other occasions, when God is represented as issuing verbal instructions, it is the more colorful Hebrew equivalent of what we mean when we say that someone became convinced that a certain course of conduct was the will of God.<sup>15</sup> The fact that God is represented as saying this or that does not necessarily make it binding on us today. It all depends on the particular circumstances.

At this point, if he has not reached exhaustion already, the patient reader may well be excused for saying that if he has to pick his steps in this painful way through the Bible, trying to decide for himself

on prior grounds which parts ought still to have relevance for us today, and which parts are superseded by later insights in the Bible itself, or are so much bound up with the past that they have no longer any relevance at all, he has only one lifetime in which to do all this and, as far as he can see, it would be barely sufficient.

Let us therefore try to look at the biblical canvas as a whole, because it is only when we have done that that we shall be able to see the various features that go to make up the picture in their proper perspective, and realize what is meant by saying that the Bible offers us an interpretation and an invitation.

## *Chapter VIII*

### THE DIVINE DRAMA

In talking about the Bible one of the most dangerous and misleading phrases that we can use is "The Bible says." When we remember how the Bible has been built up as the product of many minds over many centuries, it should be quite obvious that the Bible is bound to say different things in different circumstances. It is perfectly easy to find not only as between Old and New Testaments, but in the New Testament itself, and even within the same book, apparently contradictory statements of one kind or another. Jesus himself could be accused of not knowing his own mind.

The fallacy of course is to wrest sayings or incidents out of their context and to treat them as if they contained the whole essence of the Bible in themselves. The practice adopted in some editions of the Bible of printing certain verses in red is highly questionable. We could all devise a red-letter Bible in which we underline not necessarily the most important passages but those which we



consider to be the most important. The result would inevitably be biased and one-sided. By selecting those passages which agree with our own point of view and disregarding others which do not, we can easily make out a case for or against pacifism, capital punishment, divorce, polygamy, life after death, or teetotalism.

The proper reply to the man who maintains that "the Bible says" this or that is to point out that the Bible says just what we want it to say. Not only the Devil but his avowed opponents can quote scripture for their own purposes. It may be a disappointment for those who like to be told exactly what they ought to do or think about the big issues of our time or the small issues of our everyday experience to discover that the Bible gives no slick answers. It does, however, suggest what it claims to be the right attitude to life as a whole, and gives us certain signposts pointing in the direction we ought to be traveling. But it does not pick our steps for us. We have to do that for ourselves in the light of the general guidance the Bible gives us.

Let us then try to see what sort of picture the Bible paints of the world we live in. Underlying all the diversity of expression, the different backgrounds, and varying stages of history, the biblical writers share a common conviction. They maintain that amid the confusing issues of ordinary life, and

the perplexities of world affairs, we can plainly discern a Master Mind at work, a supreme Power on whom the universe depends for its existence, whose purpose for it has been disclosed, and in whose service alone nations and men can live in harmony with one another and with ultimate reality.

This view has, of course, certain affinities with that of some other religious and philosophical systems which are quite independent of the Bible. It would indeed be extremely odd if the biblical view had nothing in common with any other, for the Bible maintains that there is only one God and only one Truth. In so far as men have sought for both, their quest has been up to a point rewarded, and they have learned something about the mystery that surrounds us. We should not fail to recognize, however, at the same time that a view of God which sees him as a personal, creative, moral Being concerned with the day-to-day affairs of men and nations goes considerably further than that of any other religion or philosophy.

But if the Bible is unique, as has been claimed, there must be certain elements in it which are not found at all in other religions and philosophies. The two main differences are the place in history given to Jesus of Nazareth and the conception of a People of God. The Bible maintains that in the life and work of Jesus we see the expression in human

terms of the nature and purpose of the Mind behind the universe, and that in order that that purpose might be achieved in the world, a specific community—the Christian church—was created. In the light of this, the Old Testament becomes the story of the preparation for the coming of Christ and the rest of the New Testament after the Gospels, which tell of his coming, is the sequel to it.

It may be helpful to think of the Bible as a divine drama, the theme of which is the acts of God in history, played out against a backcloth of eternity. It begins with a Prologue, the first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis, in the form of myth and symbol, and ends with an Epilogue, the Book of Revelation, which is also mythical and symbolic in character. Between these are the three acts of the drama, the earliest part of the first act being in the form of legend with a basis of history, passing into a stage where history predominates over legend. The second and third acts are more or less factual, with the legendary element playing a minor role. Act I deals with the Call and Failure of a nation to be the nucleus of a people of God (The Old Testament). The theme of Act II (the Gospels) is the Coming of Christ, God expressed in human terms doing for man what man is unable to do for himself. Act III (the Acts of the Apostles and the New Testament letters) deals with the foundation of the

Christian church as the new and supranational People of God.

### *The Prologue*

The Prologue starts off by intimating the motif of the drama: "In the beginning God." This is followed by three assertions: one, that the universe exists only because God exists, that it is the creation of his mind; two, that man, unlike any other creature, has a point of contact with God and is able to respond to him in a different way from the other animals; and three, that the world means much to its Creator.

Naturally, the writers of the Prologue had no special information about the creation and nature of the universe. They reached their conclusions from their experience of God at work in the history of their own nation and in their own lives. It is quite immaterial that the form they choose to express this conviction is, as far as the framework is concerned, akin to the Babylonian Creation myth. They are not attempting to give a scientific account of how the world was made, and it would not perturb them to learn that our modern conception of the universe in the light of what the astronomers can tell us is vastly different from theirs.

They are primarily concerned to sketch in that

magnificent prose-poem, the first chapter of Genesis, a picture of the world as God intended it to be, a harmonious whole, with man as the crown of creation living in the right relationship to the Creator, using the resources of the natural world to enrich his existence, and sharing in his own sphere the creative activity of God. The biblical writers are inviting us to believe that this is the clue to the mystery of why we are here and the measure of our proper place in the universe.

Then follows, dramatically, a picture of the world as we know it. Mr. and Mrs. Everyman (Adam and Eve) do not choose to follow the path that has been mapped out for them. They want to go their own way. Self-will and pride, the biblical writers are saying to us, have dogged man's footsteps from the beginning of time. His fatal inclination to run the world in his own way (the voice of the serpent) without regard to the laws which God has imposed upon His creation, has consistently proved his undoing and led to disaster.

The Fall of Man was not something that happened in ancient history or before history; it is something that happens to us all every day. The mythical picture of the Tree of Knowledge, and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, is the biblical way of saying that when men refuse the proper obedience they owe as creatures to the Creator, as

they have always tended to do, they forfeit their right to enjoy the full life that God had destined for them. By putting himself instead of God in the center Everyman starts out on the downward path. Disobedience leads to murder (the myth of Cain and Abel), until the rake's progress of mankind, at odds with itself and with God, assumes demonic proportions.

Then for the first time the bell tolls for the Judgment of God. Again we are not dealing with history but with principles. The Bible is asserting God's condemnation of evil. We cannot play fast and loose with the rights of our neighbor and expect to escape. The myth of the Flood is the Bible's way of saying this. An old Babylonian folktale is given a distinctive slant, and Noah, who represents the ordinary decent man anywhere, is introduced to illustrate another biblical conviction that for the sake of the goodness of the one or the few, many are saved.

Noah is neither a Jew nor a Christian; he is a type of ordinary humanity living according to its own elementary standards. The Bible would say to us, in the symbol of the Ark, that God considers there is enough goodness in this ordinary humanity to make it worth his while to save it. Punishment for wrongdoing there must be. God's Judgment is inevitable. But after the Flood comes the Rainbow,

the symbol of his Mercy. The story of the Flood has its climax in the first Covenant, which expresses the biblical conviction that there is a relationship between God and ordinary humanity. The nature of the relationship is that God cares for man whom he has created, gives him an ordered universe to live in, and natural resources to develop. In return He expects every man to concede to his neighbor the same right to life as he has himself.

This Prologue to the drama is highly important. It is in fact the beginning of the Gospel. It establishes the biblical fourfold pattern of our relationship with God and our fellow men. God's Judgment on man's misdeeds is inescapable, because the universe is run on moral principles. But his Mercy is equally certain, because he has brought man into being and loves him. Man for his part has his obligations. He is responsible to God for his behavior and he must guard the rights of his fellow men as he does his own.

What the Bible is giving us, then, in these first eleven chapters of Genesis is neither history nor science but theology. Since it is not dealing with things that have happened, or describing how they have happened, but suggesting the meaning of life as we have to live it, and painting a picture of man's place in the universe, it uses myths and

symbols as the best way of expressing truths that cannot be adequately dealt with in cold prose.

The Bible is showing us ourselves in a mirror and inviting us to acknowledge the reflection as true. This is what we are like, corrupt, sensual, murderous, violating even the elementary laws by which any society must live or else destroy itself. But we are also shown as an equally true part of our reflection, that we are made in the image of God. There is that in us which makes it impossible for us to be content with ourselves as we are. We know that the sorry spectacle we present to ourselves and the world is not what we were meant to be, or what we are capable of being, and the Prologue maintains that it is not God's will either that we should remain at odds with ourselves and with ultimate reality.

### *Plan for Rescue*

So the Bible goes on to proclaim God's remedy, what God did and does to make the world what he meant it to be. The Prologue has stated the theme, and set the stage. The twelfth chapter of Genesis begins Act I of the divine drama, the story of how a particular community, from its earliest beginnings as a nomadic tribe under the leadership of Abraham,



was used by God to educate the world at large in the principles by which men and societies must be governed if they are to live in harmony with one another.

The writers of the drama recognize that the obedience of God is not an abstract attitude but something which is woven into the texture of daily life. Mankind has to be shown the road back to God on the plane of history. So their interpretation of the story of Israel is that God chose this ordinary community for an extraordinary purpose. It was to be his means of bringing the world and its peoples to the knowledge of the true nature of reality, and to teach men how to live in the right relationship with ultimate reality and with each other.

Man must be taught by the bitter experiences and sharp lessons of life. He must learn the hard way that its inmost secret is that to find himself, a man must first lose himself in others. He must learn not only that tolerance, goodwill, and justice are incumbent upon him because they lead to the general well-being of society, but that they lead to the well-being of society precisely because they are reflections of the nature of reality. The world can therefore be run in no other way.

Obviously this is not the kind of truth that man can discern for himself. If he is left to himself his instincts lead him to obey the law of the jungle;

might becomes right, cruelty and cunning provide the steppingstones to success. In order to learn the truth about himself and the world he lives in, man must be taught by the Creator of both. He does not wrest the truth from God. God discloses it to him, as far as he is able to understand it, in the midst of the storms and tensions of life.

The claim of the Bible is that this illumination was given to a tiny and unimportant nation. The Hebrew prophets were granted unique insight into the nature of God and his will for man. On the basis of the insight that was given to them they tried to persuade their countrymen that it was their vocation to exhibit a pattern of society as it was meant to be. They were to be an example to the world. But the prophets failed. Their summons to the nation to be a People of God foundered on the rocks of men's sensuality, avarice, and spiritual pride.

Yet despite the general failure of the nation there was always a minority witness throughout the centuries. Though the great mass of the community behaved most of the time in ways which were little different from those of their unenlightened contemporaries, the line struck out by Moses and followed by the prophets always had its small following, which maintained a high standard of faith and conduct and acted as a leaven in society. This was in effect the true People of God, those who had heard

the call of God and tried to obey it. It was they who kept the flame of truth alive and paved the way for the rebirth of the People of God in the Christian church.

### *A Community with a Purpose*

According to the Bible, the Church is the instrument created by God to fulfill his purpose of recreating the world. It is the community which God uses to represent him among men. Its function is to maintain the truth about God which has been expressed decisively in the person of Jesus Christ and to spread that truth to the ends of the earth. Historically continuous with the minority within Israel, it has been reborn with the new power of the Spirit of God, which enables weak and shiftless mortals of all nations to do what of themselves they would be unable to do. With that help from God they are able to begin to live the kind of life that God has destined for all his children, and to transform the world into the kind of place God meant it to be.

Knowing only too well the intractable elements of human nature, and recognizing that although they see the light many prefer darkness, the biblical drama concludes with an Epilogue. God's will and purpose have been decisively declared in Christ in

Act II. Act III is still being played out, for the Bible merely sets the stage for the unfolding of the story of how the followers of Christ set out to transform and renew the life of the world in accordance with his purpose, bringing men into the right relationship with God and with one another. But the end of the act is not the end of the drama, for the Bible sees the completion of that task beyond space and time.

The imagery of the Book of Revelation, again the only way of stating truth that is beyond human experience, points to the final stage beyond history when the purpose of God, despite the recalcitrance of the human material, is accomplished, and those who in response to the biblical invitation begin their pilgrimage here reach its fulfillment in perfect fellowship with God and with each other.

The Church sees in the Bible its title deeds, the record of its growth, and the scope of its purpose. Church and Bible are therefore inseparable. There is no such thing as "Bible Christianity" outside the life of the Church, because the Bible came into existence as a result of the Church's faith and activity. It is therefore only from inside the Church that the Bible can be fully understood.

## *Chapter IX*

### THE NEED FOR RESTATEMENT

It is as pointless to ask whether Bible or Church comes first, or should come first, as to ask the same question about the chicken and the egg. Both Church and Bible derive from what God has communicated to men and done among them. They are therefore so closely related that it is impossible to grasp the deepest meaning of either of them in isolation from the other.

Although that is true, the Church's primary job is to bring men face to face with God through Christ, and unless it can do so in an intelligible way it may satisfy our emotional needs but will not persuade our minds. Ritual and pageantry, hymn singing and prayer meetings, church tradition and Christian doctrine must be shown to be anchored in history. The Church does what it does, says what it says, and is what it is because certain things happened at a particular time in a particular place, and of this the Bible contains the record.

It is therefore imperative that the Bible should be understood and that the intelligent man, both inside and outside the Church, should know what it is all about, otherwise the Church becomes a secret society, making its own rules and formulating its own beliefs, without giving ordinary people a chance to judge for themselves whether its rules and beliefs are justifiable or not.

But in making its claim for the allegiance of twentieth-century man, in presenting him with what it believes to be the truth about God and himself and in seeking to persuade his mind that the Christian faith is a reasonable deduction from the evidence of history, the Church is burdened by the tremendous handicap that the form in which the Gospel is recorded in the Bible, together with all that leads up to it, is utterly Jewish in character.

### *An Out-of-Date Currency?*

What could be more remote from our present way of thinking than the language and thought-forms of the Bible? What relevance for us now have the story of Israel, its Exodus and Exile, the Old and New Covenants, the Messiah and The Son of Man, Pentecost and Paradise? All that these words represent constitutes a legacy in an out-of-date currency. Not only are the terms unfamiliar but the ideas

spring from minds with a background entirely different from our own. The biblical message was addressed to people who knew nothing of the incredible horizons that have opened out for us today.

Their world was bounded by what we now know to be the mere gateway to the unfathomed recesses of the universe. Their knowledge of psychology, of medicine, of history, and of art was negligible. The junior schoolboy of today knows more science than the prophets ever dreamed of. A localized heaven in the skies and a hell in the bowels of the earth, an atmosphere pictured not in terms of hydrogen but of demons, who were responsible alike for bodily ailments and for natural disasters—how can all this be presented as meaningful to men and women who think in terms of mechanism, electronics, and nuclear fission?

It is not surprising that valiant attempts were made last century to bring the Bible up to date by eliminating its ancient Jewish features, and presenting the gospel in European dress, or that in our own day many continental scholars insist that we must "demythologize the Bible." Yet however much we may try to present the message of the Bible in ways that mean something to modern man, two points must be borne in mind.

The first is that it does not invalidate the message of the Bible in the slightest that it is embedded in

thought-forms which are no longer relevant. Human nature remains the same whether we talk in terms of depth psychology or evil spirits. Moral issues, social justice, and personal standards of behavior are independent of whether we view the earth as the center of the universe or as a tiny speck in interstellar space. The insights of Jesus are no more vitiated than are those of Socrates because neither of them knew anything about television or the internal combustion engine. Posterity will doubtless regard our own scientific outlook and achievements as part of the rudimentary equipment of a primitive age, but it may well judge that some of our advances in the field of social, industrial, or international relations have permanent value. Similarly what the biblical writers have to say about God and ourselves is on a deeper level than the form in which they express it.

### *An Anchor in History*

The second point is that when we have discarded, as we must, the time-conditioned thought-forms in which the biblical message is presented, we cannot at the same time discard the historical basis. In bringing the Bible up to date and making it mean for us today what it meant for its first readers we cannot sidestep its Palestinian setting. The evidence



of history and archæology, added to critical investigation of the biblical documents, points to the fact that the religious ideas of the Old and New Testaments do not simply form a chapter in the story of the evolution of man's religion, but that the Bible records a unique combination of certain events occurring within a particular period of history together with certain people being available at the time to interpret these events in a particular way. We cannot therefore divorce what the Bible has to say from its original setting.

Taking these two points together it would seem that what we have to do, in order to make the relevance of the Bible apparent, is to disentangle its message from the time-conditioned form in which it is expressed, but at the same time making sure that we do not lose touch with its historical basis. We have to restate the essential points which the Bible makes without being bound by biblical terminology.

In so doing we are simply following the practice of the biblical writers themselves, for the whole Bible as we have it today is the result of a continuing process of reinterpretation and restatement of its basic themes in the light of a changing world situation. If an early Hebrew settler in Palestine, in the period after the Exodus, had been asked what he believed, he would have replied that he

believed in YHWH, the god of Israel, who had delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, creating them as it were out of nothing, and had led them to Canaan, the Promised Land.

A few centuries later, when the Promised Land had apparently been lost forever, a Hebrew settling once more in the fragment of his former territory which the Persian Empire allowed him, would have expressed his faith in essentially the same way. He would say that he believed in the same YHWH, who had led his forefathers out of Egypt, who had enabled them to build up a prosperous kingdom, but who had punished them for failing to keep his laws and sent them into Exile in Babylon. He had however in his mercy saved them once more from extinction and delivered them from their enemies, leading them back to Jerusalem, the heart of the Promised Land.

Again the centuries have rolled past, and we are asking a Christian Jew in the early days of the Church about his beliefs. His reply would have been a restatement of the two confessions of faith made by his predecessors in the light of the coming of Christ. He would have said that he believed that YHWH, Creator of heaven and earth, God of all the nations, who had singled out Israel to be his people and had rescued them from Egypt and Babylon, had now, through his Messiah, rescued his people from the greater enemies of sin and

death, and had led them into the fellowship of his Spirit, which was the foretaste of the Promised Land, where they would live in his presence forever.

In a Palestinian milieu this deepening understanding of the meaning of belief in God could thus be expressed in Jewish terms for over a thousand years. The themes were the same: Creation, Providence, Judgment, Deliverance, and Fellowship with God, but the appreciation of what these ideas involved was something which was enhanced by the insights of the prophets and above all by the mind of Jesus himself.

### *Wider Horizons*

When, however, the Church moved out into a non-Jewish world, and sought to proclaim the same themes to men who knew nothing of Messiahs and cared less about what had happened in the checkered history of the Hebrews, it had to drop the Jewish thought-forms, and find new ones. Within the New Testament period, which extended only to the first century A.D., this process is only in its early stages. The original missionaries were, of course, Jews, who naturally tended to think in Jewish terms even when talking to Gentiles. Added to this was the fact that the most fruitful field for the spread of Christianity was among pagans who had already attached themselves to Jewish synagogues

as adherents. Amid the bizarre variety of religions and philosophies in the Graeco-Roman world, the Jewish faith had attracted many intelligent inquirers who were seeking some kind of satisfying system of belief and moral code.

They were not prepared to become converts to Judaism, which demanded circumcision and acceptance of Jewish food regulations, but they admired the wholesomeness of Jewish family life and were impressed by the religious and moral teaching of the Old Testament. Such people were therefore familiar with the Jewish thought-forms already, and when the Christian-Jewish missionaries addressed themselves to them, claiming that Christianity was founded on the essence of the Old Testament faith without the restrictive practices of Judaism, they could presume on the part of their pagan hearers a fair knowledge of Hebrew history and Hebrew thought.

There is an additional reason that the earliest records of Christian teaching are still couched in mainly Jewish phraseology. One of the great perplexities of the early Jewish-Christian missionaries was to account for the fact that the majority of their countrymen had not accepted Christ as the Messiah. As is plain from the New Testament records, the Christian church in its earliest days was practically indistinguishable from the Jewish church. To a Roman observer Christians were

simply a Jewish sect. To a Jewish observer, the Nazarenes were simply people with the crazy idea that the Messiah had come, but apart from that they observed the Jewish religious obligations, frequented the Temple in Jerusalem and the local synagogues elsewhere as Jesus himself had done, and were therefore to all intents and purposes Jewish believers.

It was only gradually when men like Stephen and Paul made it plain that Christianity was a much bigger thing than had been at first suspected, and could not be confined to the Jewish people, that the split became visible and both Jews and Christians drew the obvious inference. The Jews proceeded to try to exterminate what they now saw to be a danger to their existence and an affront to their claim to be God's chosen people, and the Christians recognized that they could no longer retain Jewish practices within the Church. If pagans were to be admitted to the fellowship they must enter it on level terms, and must not be expected to adopt views and observances which were essentially bound up with Hebrew tradition.

The mark of this gradual emancipation from the Jewish swaddling clothes in which Christianity had been wrapped at its birth was the replacement of the Jewish Sabbath by the Christian Lord's Day, commemorating the Resurrection, the disappearance of circumcision as the outward sign of mem-

bership of the People of God, the establishment of house-churches in place of the synagogue, and the abolition of the food regulations which were so fundamental a part of Jewish practice.

But all this took time and it was only natural that Christian Jews, inheriting a powerful tradition, built up over centuries, which had authoritatively enjoined all these features as the essential elements of the proper obedience of God, were reluctant to throw them overboard, and became convinced only with great difficulty that these were part of the dead past and had no place in the new freedom of the Christian life.

*"To the Jew First and Also to the Greek"*

This tension went on, however, throughout the New Testament period and, despite opposition and persecution, the missionaries could neither forget how much Christianity owed to its Old Testament upbringing, nor could they cease to hope that the Jews would eventually see the truth of the Gospel. For these reasons, therefore, the presentation of Christianity in the New Testament has still a strong Jewish flavor, but the beginning of the process of detachment from Jewish terminology, and of restatement in a form which would be more readily understood by the Graeco-Roman world, can be plainly seen.

The letter to the Hebrews, which was addressed by an unknown but extremely able Christian Jew to some of his countrymen who were facing this very problem, is an example of how non-Jewish ideas began to be used as a means of stating Christian convictions. At first sight this letter appears to be utterly Old Testament in its language, and its thought. It is an attempt to show that Christianity has superseded Jewish faith and practice. Writer and readers alike, however, lived not in Palestine but in the more spacious air of cosmopolitan cities of the Empire. The author of Hebrews, therefore, in stressing the fact that Christianity is what the Old Testament faith inevitably points to, uses frequently the analogy of the contrast between shadow and reality, which is not a concept taken from a Jewish source but one which is borrowed from Greek philosophy, as readers of Plato's Republic will remember. Even to a Jewish audience living abroad, this way of expressing the difference between the religion of the Temple and the religion of Christ would be full of meaning, since it was couched in terms which were common currency anywhere but Palestine.

Similarly Paul uses metaphors from Roman armor and the Greek games, from the law courts and the slave market, quotes Greek poetry and refers to Greek philosophy, in an endeavor to make his non-Jewish readers see the relevance of the

gospel. When we read his letters, preferably in a modern translation, we are struck by the difference between the general texture of his thought and that of the first three Gospels. He is not saying anything different but he is saying it in a different way. The pages of the Gospels are studded with concepts and references to conditions which would be fully understood only by Jews. Paul is making an effort to translate the substance of what the Gospels narrate into terms which the pagan world would comprehend. Phrases like the kingdom of God and the Son of Man disappear. Instead we find Paul's mind working out something not unlike the modern theory of evolution and seeing Christ as the new type of Man, as God meant man to be, or as the Head of the Body in which all his followers are incorporated as members.

Above all, the Fourth Gospel illustrates how conscious were the New Testament writers of the need to speak to people in ways that they could understand. Writing in Asia Minor for a largely non-Jewish circle, the author tries to show that the Gospel was not a matter for Jews only but for the whole world. Accordingly, Jesus is presented as the Way and the Truth for all men. He is the Light of the World and the Bread of Life. The Fourth Gospel constantly seeks to show the deeper meaning behind the events which were localized in Palestine and to draw out the cosmic significance



of Jesus. In the Prologue to his Gospel, the author identifies Christ with the Logos of Greek philosophy, the immanent creative principle expressing the purpose of the universe.

Thus despite the fact that we are shown only the beginning of the process in the New Testament, it is quite clear that the moment the Church became conscious that its mission was to address a world which was unfamiliar with the Jewish idiom, it proceeded to look for adequate ways of transposing the gospel into its new setting. In so doing the first Christians were adding nothing new to what had been handed on to them as the truth about God and man, but were merely trying to make explicit what had been implicit in the deeds and words of Jesus. At the same time they were conscious that they must always be anchored to the historical means by which that truth had been conveyed through its Hebrew medium.

In attempting to restate the essence of the biblical interpretation of life, our place in the world, our purpose and our responsibility, we have therefore the best authority for saying that so long as we safeguard the historical basis of Christianity, we are not bound in any way by biblical terminology, whether it be the thought-forms of Palestine or the language of the King James Version.

## Chapter X

### INVITATION TO LIFE

It has become clear that we can no longer regard the Bible in the same way as it was regarded before science revolutionized our ideas. Not only are we compelled to think differently about the world we live in, but also, scientific methods applied to the biblical documents have made it necessary for us to revise many of our ideas about the Bible itself.

We have lost forever a Bible which could be treated as an authoritative *vade mecum* giving tidy and compact answers to all possible problems of life and conduct. But in losing that we have in effect lost nothing. Not only were the answers sometimes contradictory, but often we might well be led into mistaking Jewish practice for Christian obligation. Further, to set up an infallible book as our guide would be to commit the same sin as that of the Pharisees.

What we have gained, on the other hand, is an

immeasurably greater understanding of the real nature of the Bible. We can now see that it deals not with science, chronology, or archaeology, but with truth about God and man. Its authority no longer rests on some dubious foundation, but on the results of careful scientific examination. If we are asked, therefore, "What is left?" we might well reply: "All that matters." For nothing of value has been lost and a vast amount has been won.

The new view of the Bible is not in conflict with the new view of the world that modern science has given us, because we can see now that the message of the Bible is independent of any particular age or climate of opinion. The New Testament writers themselves were the first to show us that the truth of the Bible does not depend on words or thought-forms which are merely the shell in which its essential meaning is contained.

Our final task is therefore to restate the basic themes of the Bible in ways which are relevant to our twentieth-century situation, and it would seem that the Bible suggests to us certain lines of approach to life which it claims to be of perennial significance, and valid in any generation. It not only offers this interpretation of the world we have to live in and the life we have to live in it, but also invites us to make up our minds for or against it, and to draw the consequences for ourselves.

*The Biblical View of the World*

The Bible has a distinctive view of the world. Whether that world is thought of as a small self-contained globe with the earth in the center and the sun, moon, and stars in attendance, or whether our mind reels in contemplation of the infinite dimensions of the modern astronomer's universe, the Bible invites us to believe that it is not in existence as the result of chance, but because a Power greater than the universe has brought it into being and sustains its activity. Astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and botany encourage rather than discourage a religious attitude, because they unveil more of the resources of the creative Mind.

The Bible does not think of this ultimate Reality as an impersonal Absolute but as a Personal Being, who has not only imposed natural laws for the universe as a whole, but moral laws for the well-being of man. Man will reach fulfillment of his life only in obedience to the laws which have been designed for the harmonious living together of all creation. His discovery of the nature of these laws is like his discovery of the nature of the universe, a gradual process, in which he is given to understand no more than he can at the time absorb. His only true freedom lies in his recognition of his

creatureliness, and his dedication of his gifts to the service of the Creator.

As opposed to communism, scientific humanism, and materialism, the Bible sees the world as God-centered and not man-centered. As distinct from any kind of fatalism or behaviorism, it sees the whole world process as purposeful, creative, and meaningful.

The Bible has, therefore, a distinctive view of history, which it regards as having both a beginning and an end. History does not move in cycles, or repeat itself. It is thus nonsense to say that "it will be all the same a hundred years from now," because what the world will be like then depends on what we do today. Mankind, according to the Bible, makes or mars his own future. God's purpose is to recreate the world, bringing the whole of its life into the right relationship with himself. For this he invites man's co-operation, to ascertain God's purpose and then to commit himself to its furtherance. History moves onward to this climax, the realization of the will of God for his creation; and despite the folly and stupidity of men, the end of the process, which lies beyond history, will be the victory of goodness over evil and the complete triumph of God.

*The Biblical View of Man*

Against this background the Bible sees man, not as a mere animal, still less as a machine, but as potentially a son of God. He has bestowed on each one of us a spark of the divine fire, a point of contact which enables us to glimpse our destiny and to respond to the Father of us all. Yet this image of God which we bear is defaced through our pride and self-will. We are caricatures of what we are meant to be, so that although we can soar to the heights with St. John we can sink to the depths with Judas, and each of us has in himself something of both. The Bible does not share any naïve and optimistic views of man's ability to create Utopia, but neither does it view him as doomed to exterminate himself by his own vice and folly. It sees him as he is and shows him what he can be.

This guidance toward the fulfillment of his destiny, the Bible claims, has been given to man in the course of history. God has disclosed himself and his purpose in a special way. We may learn much of the truth and beauty and goodness of God through art, literature, music, philosophy, and the created world around us. In all religions men have seen something of the deeper meaning of life. But in the experience of a particular nation at a certain

stage in world history, the ultimate significance of life was made plain. They were given glimpses of the truth, as they were able to receive it, and their minds were prepared for the definite disclosure in a historical person of the nature and purpose of God. The climax of the progressive unfolding of the mystery that surrounds us came when God confronted man on the human stage.

The Bible would have us see in Jesus the clue to the true nature of God and the true nature of man. He is the bridge across the gulf which man's failure to be what he was meant to be creates between himself and God. As the Founder of a unique community, the Church, Christ inaugurated a New Order, where men and women, bound in fellowship with him and in loyalty to the way of life he indicated, may live in a new relationship to God and to each other. Through him the way to God has been opened up, men's lives can be changed, and barriers of race and class can be broken down. The power of evil, pain, and death may be overcome as Christ himself has overcome them.

In its interpretation of this puzzling world in which we find ourselves, the Bible sees the Church as the means which God has designed to achieve his purpose of renewing the life of the world and infusing his Spirit into all departments of that life.

It is the place where personalities may be recreated, where men encounter God and through their encounter become more fully his sons. It is not a collection of like-minded individuals with a taste for religion, still less an exclusive club for the pious and virtuous, but a divinely instituted society, springing from the words and acts of Christ, by which he reconstituted the People of God, the community designed to bring about God's purpose for the world.

The Church is the guarantee that the revelation of God given in history, and recorded in the Bible, is not dissipated in the changed conditions of modern civilization. In its worship the Psalms are still sung, the Old Testament and New Testament are recited and expounded, and their essential meaning and permanent value are made plain. Jerusalem is still, symbolically, the place to which men are encouraged to turn in order to find God.

Yet it is as no dead bones that the Church maintains its legacy from the past, but as a living body of truth to be reinterpreted in every age under the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God, which permeates the Church's life. As well as looking backward to what God has disclosed to man in history, the Church looks forward to the progressive realization of his will on earth and its ultimate fulfilment be-



yond history. In the central act of its worship, the sacrament of Holy Communion, the Church finds a focus for the past, present, and future elements of its belief.

### *The Liberation of Man*

We might therefore summarize the relevance of the Bible for our time by amending Rousseau's dictum. The claim of the biblical writers is that man was meant to be free, but everywhere he is in chains. His chains are partly of his own making and partly of society's making. They are forged by our own selfishness and folly, as well as by our heredity, our environment, and the accumulated mass of evil which our whole society inherits. In face of this the Bible conveys the message that it is God's intention that man should be free, and describes the means he has provided to make this possible. It is therefore a message that the progressive liberation of man is the will of God.

This liberation takes place on all levels. On one level it means the emancipation of man in the economic, political, and social spheres. The Bible does not provide a blueprint for the remaking of society. It is not tied to any particular school of economic or political thought. It has no cast-iron theories

of social betterment. But it does maintain that men are meant to become sons of God, and that because God came into human life in Jesus Christ, every individual human personality is sacred.

If we accept that interpretation of our destiny, the Bible invites us to work out its implications with the intelligence God has given us guided by the basic principles of human relationships which it indicates. On the biblical view, men may never be treated as goods and chattels at the mercy of any State. Political totalitarianism, whether Communist or Fascist, is anathema. So likewise is exploitation of the community whether by Big Business or by Trade Unions.

The Bible would condemn, on the one hand, race prejudice in any form, be it anti-Semitism or the color bar, alike in South Africa, the United States, or the British colonial empire. On the other hand, it would encourage men's natural desire for national independence, whether in South-East Asia or Northern Europe. Men cannot attain to their full status as sons of God unless they are decently clad, properly housed, and adequately fed. Housing and health, malnutrition and child welfare are therefore from a biblical point of view of primary importance. All these matters are bound to be the concern of the Church because they are not the accompaniment

of the gospel or the sequel to the gospel but they are the gospel, the will of God for man as revealed in the Bible.

### *Freedom from Self*

On a higher level the Bible proclaims God's intention that each one of us should be liberated from fear and futility, from pride and greed and sensuality. Again we are not provided with a ready-made handbook of rules and prohibitions to school us in good conduct. The Bible teaches us that that does not save us from frustration but leads to it. Jesus summed up all commandments in one when he set up as the supreme standard love to God and our neighbor. In two inimitable illustrations he sketched our proper relationship to God and man.

The story of the Prodigal Son,<sup>1</sup> which is the gospel in a nutshell, is the story of any one of us. We go our own way, which is a downward way, a way that ends in disillusionment. When we find that we have reached a dead end, if we are as sensible as the prodigal, we turn back and make for home. There we find our Father, ready to forgive, coming to meet us halfway, offering us a fresh start. The obedience of God is not primarily a moral code but an attitude of trust and dependence. It is from this relationship, involving daily repentance and

daily forgiveness, that the right kind of attitude to our neighbor springs.

The Good Samaritan,<sup>2</sup> in the story which Jesus tells to illustrate love of our fellow men, had an easier assignment than those which often come our way, when it is extremely difficult to know what is in fact good neighborliness in a given situation. The Bible does not tell us the answer to each problem but it does suggest that where there is obvious need, we dare not pass by on the other side. It is not only sound psychology but biblical teaching to say that the less self-centered our lives become, and the more we are concerned for others, the less likely are we to suffer from maladjustments, neurosis, depression, and similar modern ills.

Once again the Bible points to the Church as the place where character is made and remade, where we are saved from pride by being constantly reminded of our creatureliness and our need for repentance; where we are given power by the Spirit of God to overcome our evil inclinations, and strengthened in our resolves by the fellowship of equally fallible mortals. By worship, sacrament, and prayer the distorted image of God begins to be restored, and we become channels through which God can transform the face of our times.

On the highest level the Bible proclaims the liberation of men from pain and death. No religion,

not even the Christian religion, has an answer to the problem of pain that is completely satisfactory. Looked at in the abstract, pain is the greatest single argument against believing in the goodness and love of God. Yet in the experience of Jesus, and of countless numbers of his followers, who have accepted it as part of the mystery which we shall understand hereafter, pain has proved an enrichment of faith and not an impoverishment. The Bible would say to us that self-giving, sacrifice, and suffering are, however little we may comprehend it, woven into the texture of life and that they can have creative power.

On the subject of what lies beyond death the Bible is, unlike most religious writings, notably reticent. It suggests rather than depicts the nature of the after-life but offers us the only historical guarantee, in the Resurrection of Jesus, that the two worlds that it proclaims are real, and that the new life available here and now through Christ is of a quality that death cannot destroy.

## NOTES BY CHAPTERS

### *I. What the Bible Is Not and What It is*

- |                     |                     |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Genesis 3:1-4.   | 3. II Kings 6:4-7.  |
| 2. Numbers 22:28-30 | 4. Joshua 10:12-13. |

### *III. A Nation with a Unique Faith*

- |                           |                         |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Exodus 6:3.            | 2, inclus.              |
| 2. II Samuel 11, 12.      | 4. Isaiah 2:2-4; Isaiah |
| 3. I Kings 17 to II Kings | 55:5; Jonah.            |

### *IV. Disillusionment and Hope*

- |                      |                         |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. I Kings 19:18.    | 5. Micah 6:8.           |
| 2. II Samuel 11, 12. | 6. Isaiah 9:2-7; Isaiah |
| 3. I Kings 22.       | 11:1-9; Luke 1:68-79;   |
| 4. Isaiah 53.        | Luke 2:29-32.           |

### *V. The Carpenter of Nazareth*

1. Pliny, governor of Bithynia, in a letter to the Emperor Trajan, says that the Christians in his province "sang hymns to Christ as to a god" (Ep. X, 96).

Tacitus, writing of the persecutions of the Christians under Nero, notes that "the originator of that name, Christ, was put to death in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate" (Annals XV, 44).

Josephus mentions James "the brother of Jesus who was called Christ" (Antiquities XX, 9).

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|---|--------------------------|
| 2. Deuteronomy 6:5; Le-<br>viticus 19:18. | 3. Matthew 5:21-22, etc. |
|   | 4. Mark 8:27-33.         |

- |                    |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| 5. Mark 1:9-11.    | 7. Isaiah 53.      |
| 6. Matthew 4:1-11. | 8. Daniel 7:13-14. |

### VI. *The New Community*

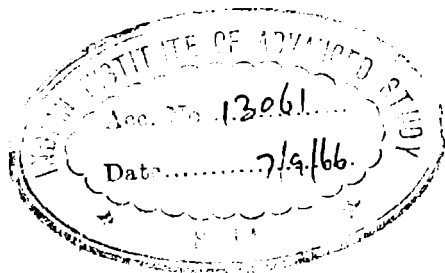
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|-------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Acts 2:24.     | 4. Philippians 3:12.    |
| 2. Acts 2:1-13.   | 5. II Corinthians 5:19. |
| 3. Matthew 18:20. | 6. To Philemon.         |

### VII. *Keeping Our Feet on the Ground*

- |                        |                                       |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Luke 17:21.         | 9. Leviticus 11.                      |
| 2. I Corinthians 11:5. | 10. I Samuel 31.                      |
| 3. Isaiah 7:14-15.     | 11. Genesis 11:1-9.                   |
| 4. Deuteronomy 19:21.  | 12. Acts 2:1-13.                      |
| 5. Acts 2:44.          | 13. II Kings 2:11.                    |
| 6. Matthew 5:39.       | 14. For example, I Samuel<br>23:1-5.  |
| 7. Matthew 5:41.       | 15. For example, I Samuel<br>16:1-13. |
| 8. I Kings 6, 7.       |                                       |

### IX. *Invitation to Life*

- |                   |                   |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Luke 15:11-32. | 2. Luke 10:25-37. |
|-------------------|-------------------|



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