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History and the Bible

STANLEY B. FROST

IT is universally recognized that the distinctive feature of Hebrew Religion is that it found God primarily revealed not in the phenomena of Nature but in the events of History.

O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised,
And what Balaam the son of Beor answered him,
And what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
That ye may know the saving acts of Yahweh.¹

It is by a knowledge of God's acts of deliverance on behalf of Israel that His character and purpose are to be apprehended.

That this distinctive feature of Hebrew Religion passed over into Christianity, in an even more emphatic form, is equally universally recognized. Judaism largely substituted Torah, the revealed Will of God, as the deposit of revelation, but Christianity accepted the Old Testament history and added to it the story of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, together with the birth and growth of the church and declared that in these events the character and the will of God are to be known. The following quotation may be taken as representative of the attitude of books dealing with biblical theology: "Hence it is here maintained that Biblical Theology is *the confessional recital of the redemptive acts of God* in a particular history because history is the chief medium of revelation."²

It is this acceptance of the events of history as the medium of revelation which causes the historical matter in both Testaments to form so large a proportion of the whole. It is this same acceptance which has caused many scholars and less-well-equipped religionists to attempt to show that the Biblical record of event is authentic and factually correct. The recent volume by Werner Keller is but the latest in a long series.³ The means by which this accuracy is to be established are, of course, the evidence of the archeologists of the Near East, whose treasure house of rediscovered fact is crammed full of rich stores of material, the growth of which is every day becoming more formidable. And indeed, the evidence the archeologists have assembled is nothing short of overwhelming in its support of the Biblical account of the ancient past. Before 1850 almost the only knowledge mankind possessed of the events of the first half of the first millenium B.C. and earlier was that given by the Bible and the gossipy tales of Herodotus. Since that date, however, the history of the Ancient Near East, the cradle of all civilization, has been painstakingly written for the first time. Not only

1. Micah 6:5.

2. G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts, Biblical Theology as Recital*, p. 13.

3. *The Bible is History*.

has the life of buried towns been reconstructed in the smallest detail, as in the case of Mari and Nusu, but whole lost empires like that of the Hittites have been restored to the knowledge of mankind, and ancient languages like Accadian and Sumerian, long dead and silent, have been supplied with grammars and lexicons, so that to learn them is hardly more difficult than acquiring the Hebrew and Greek in which the Bible itself is written. The impressive fact is that when the whole vast jigsaw puzzle, consisting of innumerable clay tablets, broken sherds, buried foundations and inscribed stelae, has been skilfully fitted together, they form a coherent picture into which the Biblical story fits smoothly and easily into place, as being authentically part of the world which modern scholarship has so painstakingly rebuilt. In its broad outlines, the historical narratives of the Bible have been convincingly shown to be remarkably accurate.

I

But the difficulties confronting the Christian theologian are not diminished but rather increased by this mounting store of knowledge. The rediscovery of the thought-world of the ancients has taught us to recognise the categories of myth and legend. By myth I mean in this connection those stories which, while they may or may not enshrine a vestigial memory of some outstanding natural phenomenon (e.g. a particularly widespread flood), are nevertheless told to enable man to come to terms with the universe in which he lives, and to give an answer, satisfying emotionally if not logically, to his fundamental questionings, Where did the world come from? Why are the forces of nature sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile? Why do the seasons rotate? Why do men die? and so on. By legend I mean narratives which centre around magnetic figures of the past, upon whose life-stories later generations have projected the psychological needs and social requirements of their own time, so that, while the central figure is probably an historical person, and the main events of his career have probably survived undamaged in the tradition, the character as a whole has become aetiological. The newly-recovered Gilgamesh Epic, or the long-known story of Theseus and the Minotaur, now seen against the background of the ruins of Cnossus in an entirely new light, display these characteristics of myth and legend in abundance. But once we have learned to distinguish these narrative-forms elsewhere we cannot fail to recognise them in the Bible in such stories as those of Adam and Eve and of the Patriarchs. Abraham, for example, is clearly to be recognized as one of the many Aramean sheikhs who drifted round the Fertile Crescent in the wake of their more powerful Amorite relatives; but were his journeyings truly a sacred quest, or were they given that character by the legend-making tendencies of later generations? This is the kind of question we have to face, and to such questions neither archeology nor pre-history can provide an answer, a fact which Sir Charles Marston, Dr. Keller, and their followers, seem unable to recognize.

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Further, when we come to those parts of the narrative still usually accepted as history rather than as myth or legend, we find that modern knowledge has given us the ability to distinguish between earlier and later strata of traditions, and to perceive the changes that have been effected in the presentation of material owing to changes in the interests of the narrators. The two presentations of the figure of Samuel in the main sources of the book named after him have long since been noted for their incongruity and more recently Ludwig Koehler in a paper entitled *Die Geschichte eines Gestaltwandels* has drawn attention to the surprisingly different presentations of David as we move from the very human hero of the contemporary Court History, to the divinely ordained and regal personage of the Deuteronomic editors of the Books of Samuel and Kings, and then on to the eager ecclesiastic offered by the Chronicler, or to the pious righteous sufferer presented by the editors responsible for the psalm-titles of the Psalter.⁴ Similarly, Jacob Weingreen has drawn attention to the fact that the theological and religious motives which determined the course of the rabbinic treatment of scripture are themselves but the continuation of the motives which caused the later writers of scripture to recast the material contained in the earlier sources. The only difference is that once the text was regarded as fixed and sacred, the desired adjustments had to be achieved by interpretation and comment.⁵

That ideological considerations profoundly affected the historiography of the Old Testament cannot then for one moment be doubted. A case in point is the treatment afforded to the House of Omri. The founder of that dynasty, though one of the ablest and most important of the northern kings, is dismissed in six verses. Yet almost as many chapters are given to his son Ahab, who is, however, presented in a derogatory fashion because he fell foul of the prophetic movement, and his courageous and largely successful leading role at the battle of Karkar, where the mighty Assyrian empire was halted in its western drive, is completely ignored. Jehu, who overthrew the dynasty, is presented in a favourable light, even though he was guilty of some terrible crimes against all human feeling, plunging the nation into something very like civil war and so weakening it that he became the first Hebrew king to pay tribute to the Assyrian. He is favoured because he shared the religious views of the Deuteronomic editors, at least as regards the supremacy of Yahweh in Israel. It is this kind of consideration which leads us to be suspicious of other Biblical narratives, such as the story of the downfall of the house of Saul together with that of the house of Eli, and the rise of the house of David together with that of the house of Zadok, since they were obviously written from the point of view of the supporters of the successful party. The possible parallel with the unflattering portrait of Richard III of England left us by the Tudor propagandists serves at least to introduce a question mark into our estimate of such presentations.

To seek in other historiography for possible parallels to situations in

4. A paper read to the British S.O.T.S., July, 1953.

5. *B.R.J.L.*, vol. 34, no. 1, September 1951, pp. 166f.

Hebrew history reminds us that a great deal of attention has been paid recently by professional historians to the way in which religious or political or philosophical considerations can set the pattern in which a nation comes to view its own past. Thus the Englishman Herbert Butterfield writes: "Whatever we may feel about the defects of our own Whig interpretation of history, we have reason to be thankful for its influence on our political tradition; for it was to prove of the greatest moment to us that by the early seventeenth century our antiquarians had formulated our history as a history of liberty."⁶ Elsewhere he has remarked that Magna Carta, a truly feudal document safeguarding baronial power, was made the symbol of English democratic ideals and credited with aims which it does not in fact envisage.⁷ Again with regard to Germany in the nineteenth century he says: "The historian in fact played an important part . . . for in effect it was he who said to the country: 'See *this* is your tradition, this is the line which the past has set for you to follow,'" and he adds: "The problem, What is wrong with Germany? has really culminated in the question, What is wrong with the German historical school?"⁸ Elsewhere he uses strong language to emphasise his point: "History is all things to all men. She is at the service of good causes and bad. In other words she is a harlot and a hireling, and for this reason she best serves those who suspect her most. Therefore, we must beware of saying 'History says . . . ' or 'History proves . . . ' as though she herself were the oracle; as though indeed history, once she has spoken, had put the matter beyond the range of mere enquiry. Rather we must say to ourselves: 'She will lie to us to the very end of the last cross-examination.'"⁹

Such sentiments expressed by a professional historian of Professor Butterfield's standing clearly must have very serious implications for a religion which maintains that history is "the chief medium of revelation." The problem thus raised for Biblical Theology is well put by J. N. Sanders in his review of C. K. Barrett's *The Gospel According to St. John*. He quotes from the introduction to that commentary: "John asserted the primacy of history. It was of supreme importance to him that there was a Jesus of Nazareth who lived and died in Palestine, even though to give an accurate outline of the outstanding events in the career of this person was no part of his purpose," and comments: "This may well be true, but if so, it is important to have some opinion how much in the Gospel can be accepted as historical. It is a nice question how far one can go in maintaining both that John asserted the primacy of history and that one cannot place reliance on his historical details."¹⁰ Hoskyns and Davey showed twenty-five years ago that this was the "riddle of the New Testament,"¹¹ but it is now becoming clear that it is in fact the riddle of the Bible as a whole.

6. *Man on his Past*, p. 27.

8. *Man on His Past*, p. 27.

7. Cf. *Englishman and his History*, pp. 25f., 56f.

9. *Whig Interpretation of History*, p. 131.

10. *N.T.S.*, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 74f. Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 117.

11. *Riddle of the New Testament*, London, 1931. Cf. p. 14: "The riddle is in fact a theological riddle which is insoluble apart from the solution of an historical problem: What was the relation between Jesus of Nazareth and the Primitive Church?"; and also,

When therefore we look more closely at the historical element in the Bible, we find that it has to be distinguished from a fairly small body of myth, e.g. Genesis 1-11, or in eschatological form Ezekiel 38-39 and the Book of Revelation, and from a larger assortment of legend, e.g. the Patriarchal narratives, stories of the infancy of Moses, Samuel and Jesus, and of the youth of David, the Elisha saga, some of the Gospel miracle-narratives, and the differing accounts of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. That any particular scholar might want to vary the list is beside the point so long as he admits that the category of legend is properly applicable to any of the Biblical narratives. But when history has been isolated in this way, we now see that we are left not with solid and undeniable fact, but with what we may call "ideological history," that is, a record conditioned and shaped by partisan or theological considerations. In the case of the Biblical narratives we may describe that ideology as "faith in God." Hebrews told the story and shaped their view of Israel's past in such a way as to expound that past as *heilsgeschichte*—"salvation-history." But the Bible itself shows that theirs is not by any means the only interpretation possible in an instructive passage in Jeremiah.¹² On finding the worship of the Queen of Heaven prevalent in the Egyptian diaspora, the prophet indignantly asks them whether Yahweh's punishment of such practices, culminating in the destruction of the Judean state, has not yet taught them to refrain; but they repudiate his interpretation of their disaster. When they worshipped the Queen of Heaven in the old days, they say, all was well with them: it is only since the Deuteronomic Reformation interfered with that worship that all these troubles have come upon them. They therefore are going to return to the worship and protection of the goddess. Thus the Biblical interpretation springs from a prior faith in God and we are not surprised to find that this interpretation supports and confirms that faith. Nor, on the other hand, are we greatly impressed, since obviously we are operating in a tightly closed circle.

Nor will it meet the difficulty we are discussing to reply that "the chief medium of revelation" is not the history as written but the actual events themselves, for we have no knowledge of the events except as recorded for us in the Biblical narratives. The only history which can be for us a medium of revelation is that written by the historiographers. Thus our enquiry is driven back to two fundamental questions: what is the nature of written history and in what sense can that history be said to convey any meanings or implications of any kind and so prove at least capable of being a medium of revelation?

II

In answer to the first of our questions we may recall H. Wheeler Robinson's insistence that history is "event plus interpretation."¹³ We have already

p. 79: Is "the Jesus of History wholly submerged in the New Testament, or does that history rigorously control our New Testament documents?"

12. Jeremiah 44.

13. *Redemption and Revelation*, p. xl.

drawn attention to the way in which ideological or doctrinal considerations impose themselves upon men's accounts of their past, but we now need to recognise the full implication of the fact that it is indeed impossible to write history without imposing some kind of pattern or meaning on to it. To give an account of a fact is indeed to interpret it. The event by itself is a bare abstraction which we can distinguish in thought but never know in reality. Even the annalist interprets his material in a rudimentary way when he chooses some facts for preservation and rejects numberless others. Nevertheless, the fact that there is an inner core of bare event to history—what Wheeler Robinson called the “actuality” of history—is of the **greatest** importance, for in it we meet the *datum* of history, that element which gives historical study its objectivity and ties it down to the world of observed fact.

These considerations lead us to observe that it is not a reproach to be laid against Biblical history that it is ideological in character, since all history is so to a greater or lesser degree. W. F. Albright discusses this point in an encyclopedic chapter entitled “Towards an Organismic Philosophy of History” in his book *From the Stone Age to Christianity*. In the course of a survey of the work of outstanding philosophers and historiographers like Hegel, Ranke, Toynbee, Sorokin and the historical determinists, Marxian and otherwise, he says of the German “positivistic” school that “whatever happens to future history, scholars must always be profoundly grateful to the men who were the first to realize the supreme importance of accuracy and completeness, both in defining facts and in explaining changes. However, it should also be rather obvious that the historian cannot limit himself forever to the accumulating of new facts and explanatory theories. If he should go on indefinitely without trying to interpret and classify his data, history would eventually collapse under its own weight. Natural science has only been able to maintain its own effective life and to progress towards new triumphs by periodically ordering its house and simplifying the task of the scientist by classifying its masses of heterogeneous data under inclusive rubrics which we know as ‘natural laws.’ This also the historian must endeavour to do, though his task is far more difficult, owing to the vastly greater part which caprice and indeterminacy play in the domain of human affairs.”¹⁴ The historian then cannot avoid imposing some kind of “organismic” pattern upon his facts and in so doing he interprets as well as records his history. The Biblical historians are not and could not be exceptional in this respect.

Nevertheless, there is a point at which such interpretations become destructive of the actuality of history, and facts are contravened in order that the interpretation may be unimpaired. Thus Winston Smith's task in George Orwell's *1984* was to “correct” previous issues of *The Times*, so that official records only contained what conformed to the Party line; and if the line changed speeches delivered earlier had to be “corrected” to the new

14. *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 48.

orthodoxy. In all the Bible, there is only one parallel instance, I believe, of such an activity. In Deut. 27:4 we read *Ebal* as the name of the mountain on which an altar was raised by Mosaic commandment, but the Samaritan text is obviously correct in reading *Gerizim*, since the latter was the mount of blessing and the former the mount of cursing. We certainly meet with such things as aetiological legends which justify the social subordination of the Canaanites and Gibeonites at a later age (Gen. 9:25; Josh. 9:23), and we find ourselves questioning whether Gideon did disavow all intentions of kingship (Jud. 8:23) or whether this account of the offer of a crown and his reaction to it does not reflect the Deuteronomic editors' dislike of kingship. Similarly, we strongly doubt whether Uzziah's leprosy was really due to an attempt to arrogate priesthood to his kingship (II Chron. 26:16) or whether the story as now told is not rather part of the priestly pretension in the face of a kingship which had from the beginning a sacerdotal aspect. Again, we may recognize that the needs and interests of the Primitive Church have largely determined the choice and conditioned the presentation of the materials in the Gospels, in the way with which form-criticism has made us familiar. But in none of these instances (as distinct from the *Ebal* reading) and the many similar ones which could have been adduced, does it appear that the historians deliberately set out to falsify the actuality of event. C. P. Scott of the *Manchester Guardian* was in a greater tradition than perhaps he knew when he said, "Fact is sacred, comment is free." Of course, it can be argued that the Biblical writers were not historiographers, but some other class of writers peculiar to the Biblical literature, but in that case we are deprived of written history in the Bible, and history as the chief medium of revelation has vanished also.

Moreover, it would appear that in Biblical historiography taken as a whole, the event created the interpretation rather than vice versa. This is where the evidence of the archeologist and the prehistorian become of primary importance to the theologian, for they substantiate what Israel's tradition affirms, that she originated in Mesopotamia, of Aramean stock, that she had experience of Egypt, and that the smell of the desert lingered about her. We find it easier to think that a series of dramatic events, interpreted by a prophetic personality,¹⁵ put the idea of a Redeemer God into Israel's mind, than that nothing very much happened but somehow she got the idea it had. Again, to look at the Biblical story at the other crisis point, it appears that certain events took place in the life of Jesus and in the company of his disciples, which led them to say, "Truly this man is the Son of God," in a very different sense from that in which the centurion first used the words, and this in the face of their own ingrained and prized monotheism. It was the facts which forced them to a conclusion which left them and the Church down through the ages to grapple with the problems, "How can God be One and more than one?" and, "How can

15. H. H. Rowley has consistently emphasized the importance of the interaction of event and personality. Cf. *The Faith of Israel*, p. 40.

Jesus be Man and God at one and the same time?" What does not appear in the least probable is that someone conceived the idea of Incarnation and then imposed it on so intractable a set of facts as those contained in the Gospels.

We may therefore say in answer to our first question that history is event plus interpretation, but that in sound history it is the event which controls the interpretation and not vice versa. To that we may add that in the Bible it does appear that the events gave birth to the interpretation, rather than that the interpretation was conjured up from elsewhere and imposed upon the facts. Nevertheless, we must recognize that once the interpretative principle that God is purposive in history on mankind's behalf was established in the writers' minds, then that was used by them as the clue to all history, and they were often guilty, probably unconsciously, of shaping detail in order to bring out this significance more clearly. It is this same process which brought their myths and legends to bear the same significance as their history, and thus the myths and legends are truly part and parcel of the one Biblical presentation. As Cullmann puts it, they are in the one linear development of Biblical time,¹⁶ and this is true even though in themselves they belong to an absolute era which is not part of history at all.¹⁷

We may now turn to our second question: how may history be the medium of revelation? Clearly a bare incident in history has nothing to tell us about God. "Boaz begat Obed" (Ruth 4:21) purports to be a fact of Hebrew history. Of itself it tells us nothing more than the fact of Obed's paternity. But when we know that Boaz had married Ruth the Moabitess, and that it was by her that he begat Obed and became David's great-grandfather; and further when we know that in the days of Nehemiah and Ezra there was a particularist party which forbade mixed marriages and which wanted to impose strictly the Deuteronomic law which debarred anyone of Moabite descent "to the tenth generation" from associating themselves with Israel¹⁸; then that fact of Obed's paternity becomes highly significant. We are at liberty to say that by means of this fact, God gave the lie to the particularism of Israel, fore-seen and fore-denied. This implies something very remarkable about God's character. But this revelation of God's character lies not in the bare abstract fact but in our interpretation of it, by relating it to one series of facts, and by posing it over against another series. In other words, history can be the medium of revelation just because it is event plus interpretation, and it is the interpretation rather than the event which can allow history to function in this way.

If, however, we note that the Book of Ruth shows signs of having been written about the time of Nehemiah-Ezra, and suspect that it is a historical novel rather than history as such, then we may think that our statement "Boaz begat Obed" is not an historical fact, and that Ruth the Moabite woman is only the beautiful creature of the author's imagination. Then it

16. *Christ and Time*, p. 94.

18. Neh. 13:1-3; Deut. 23:3.

17. Cf. Frankfort, *Before Philosophy*, p. 35f.

is no longer God who is to be seen as preparing David's descent in such a way as to controvert Israel's particularist party: rather, it is the author who is controverting their teaching, and that tells us something about the author's concept of God, but nothing directly about God Himself. Thus whether a statement is or is not a fact can be highly significant and if the actuality of Biblical history were ever to be seriously undermined, the validity of its claim to be a medium of revelation would be equally called in question. *While when we say it is in the interpretation of event that the ability of history to be a medium of revelation resides, nevertheless it only possesses that ability so long as it is the interpretation of the actuality of history. The Hebrew-Christian religion still stands or falls in so far as the facts it is based upon are true or false.* But we may add that so long as the main structure is true, the Bible record can afford—by its very nature must afford—a large degree of latitude as to detail.

III

It still remains true, however, that those who look for objectivity in the revelation of God in history are bound to be disappointed. As with all the other media of revelation, certain facts are put before us. We may if we will so construe them that they exhibit significant patterns whereby God himself is delineated. But the facts do not compel that interpretation. Indeed, we are often left to our own judgement as to whether they are facts. God never confronts man with so overwhelming a demonstration of Himself that there is left no room for disbelief. Rather, in history as in all other media, God gives to men the opportunity to exercise faith in Him if they will. Bible history is so told as to convey plainly the God-delineating interpretation. But the choice whether to believe or disbelieve is always ours. God speaks, but some say it thundered.¹⁹ The Risen Lord confronts his disciples in Galilee, but some doubted.²⁰ The Christian religion is always a faith; never knowledge, sometimes not even conviction, but always faith.

There remains a further thing to be added. Those who live through a series of religiously significant events often claim not that in them they found a revelation of God but that in them they met God Himself. All those who have shared in that experience, or who in prayer and sacrament have known, however dimly, the immediacy of the Divine Presence, will understand their meaning. But as regards the history in the Bible we have to remember that we are dealing with recorded event, and therefore with the record of any such revelation. Thus the distinction which some have tried to establish between the revelation of God and the revelation of communicable ideas about Him, valid as it is for other discussions, falls to the ground in this present study. Nevertheless, even in our present discussion, the original experience of the immediacy of God is important, in that it reminds us that faith never sees itself as the human imposition of an

19. John 12:27-29.

20. Matt. 28:17.

arbitrary pattern of significance upon a series of events in themselves without significance, but rather as the recognition of a significance which is inherent in them because God Himself initiated the events in order to effect His purposes. Thus while it remains true for the philosophy of history, and therefore also for the philosopher of religion, that "histories" are man-made, and that therefore there can be no objectivity of revelation in them, nevertheless for the believer, and therefore for the theologian, there is an objective element in salvation-history in that it is an account of human history which corresponds to God's view of that history as His own purposeful activity. When of any event the believer exclaims: "This is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes," he is expressing his conviction that God does initiate particular events in history, and that he has correctly divined such an event at that moment. Indeed, this is the Biblical concept of what is popularly termed a "miracle." It is an event in which God is revealed as working on behalf of His people. Whether that event is in accord with normal phenomena or contravenes that normality is irrelevant to the essential character of the "miracle": that in it God should be manifest as working out His purposes. This is implicit in the main Biblical terms for such events: "works," (*ma'asim, dunameis*) and "signs" (*'othoth, sēmeia*).

Thus we may return to the fundamental conviction of the Hebrew people that God is most clearly revealed in history and say that whether the revelation of God in history is seen or overlooked depends upon the seeing eye. Yet the revelation of God is not "in the eye of the beholder" but is in the *datum* of history. Therefore it is important that the facts should be correctly recorded and accurately assessed. We may again quote J. N. Sanders on the subject of the Fourth Gospel but give his words a wider reference: The Bible "is of value as a theological treatise only if it is reliable as an historical document."²¹ We may recognize that while ideological tendencies display themselves at all levels and periods of the Biblical record, the main structure of Biblical history has received overwhelming authentication. True, its details are often so arranged as to emphasize the revelation in which it believes but seldom so as to pervert or destroy the actuality of that history. We may also affirm that the interpretation was initiated by the facts of history rather than imposed upon them. But we must recognize that the historical passages of the Bible now convey that revelation only to those who are already persuaded on other grounds of its truth, or who are willing to venture on that belief. In its historical passages as in all its parts, the Bible was written from "faith to faith."

21. *The Listener*, London, issue dated 11.11.56.