

## The Apocalyptic Conception of the Unity of History.

WE moderns readily assume history to be a unity. All civilised peoples, we believe, are in a real sense linked together and reveal in their lives and habits and history certain common characteristics. We assume a unity of history *because* we assume a unity of human nature.<sup>1</sup> But this idea did not originate with the moderns; it was in fact passed on to us from the early Christian Church which taught that all men were, or could become, "one in Christ Jesus", and that the whole of history was unified through the purpose of God in Him.<sup>2</sup> It was the fact of God which led them to this conclusion, and not any interpretation of human nature. But the idea did not originate even with the Christian Church, for they also were inheritors. From whom, then, did they inherit it, and with whom did it originate?

Dr. R. H. Charles would maintain that this idea of the unity of history originated with the apocalyptists who were themselves the true pioneers. "It was thus apocalyptic," he says, "and not prophecy that was the first to grasp the great idea that all history, human, cosmological, and spiritual is a unity—a unity that follows inevitably as a corollary to the unity of God as enforced by the O.T. prophets. Thus whereas prophecy deals with the present destinies of individuals and nations, and their future destinies as arising organically out of the present and on the present earth without reference to the life of the individual after death, apocalyptic dealt with the past, the present, and the future as linked together and forming one whole, and thereby sought to justify the ways of God to man".<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere the same writer says, "The O.T. prophet dealt with the destinies of this nation or of that, but took no comprehensive view of the history of the

<sup>1</sup> Compare, e.g. Marx's economic unity which finds the clue to the solution of this problem in the class struggle.

<sup>2</sup> "It was Christianity which taught men to say with the poet Francis Thompson, 'I view all mundane happenings with the Fall for one terminus and the Millenium for the other.'" H. Wheeler Robinson, *The History of Israel*, 1938, p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> *Commentary on Daniel*, 1929, p. xxv. cf. *Eschatology*, 1913, p. 183.

world as a whole. . . Hence Daniel was the first to teach the unity of all human history, and that every fresh phase of this history was a further stage in the development of God's purposes".<sup>4</sup>

A study of the evidence, however, would show that, in writing thus, Dr. Charles is perhaps not being quite fair to the prophets in the zeal which he has for the apocalyptists. It might be more true to say that the apocalyptists are middle-men in the development of this idea, but they cannot with any full degree of accuracy be described as its pioneers. What they did was to carry still further the sense of divine purpose which was already to be found in the prophets and which itself contributed largely to the birth and growth of the conception of the unity of history.

The belief in monotheism and the belief in the all-embracing purpose of God are correlatives; and, whilst monotheism became explicit perhaps for the first time with Deutero-Isaiah, it had been at least implicit some considerable time before in the teaching of the earlier prophets. Amos, for example, does not expressly state that Yahweh is the only God, but it seems obvious that he takes this for granted. The gods of the surrounding nations—Hadad, Dagon, Melek, Melkart, Chemosh—are to be completely ignored. Yahweh is not only the creator of the physical universe and the controller of all natural phenomena, He is the controller of peoples and their history as well. His interest and control are not confined to Israel. Damascus, Gaza, Edom, Tyre, Moab and Ammon must all come before Him for judgment and receive punishment at His hand (*Amos* i. 3—ii. 3). Assyria is a mighty nation, but she is a mere tool in the hand of God. Yahweh will use her to carry out His purpose just as it pleases Him, and when that task is done she will be destroyed (*Isaiah* x. 5-19). Indeed it was the rise of Assyria that forced the prophets to enlarge their idea of God, for He must now be regarded as equal to the task of controlling and governing that great world empire. Even the great migrations of the past are now seen by the prophets to be the work of Yahweh; not only did He bring up Israel out of Egypt, it was He who brought up the Philistines from Capthor and the Syrians from Kir (*Amos* ix. 7). God's control is over all, and none can escape from Him even though he dig into the depths of Sheol itself (*Amos* ix. 2). The prophets' glance sweeps indiscriminately over the past, present and future, uniting all history into a single plan, conceived and controlled by God; for Yahweh is controller also of the destinies of men and nations. "The great prophets of Israel certainly shared with their predecessors and with their contemporaries the belief that Yahweh would interfere to put an end to the existing order. To some

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. cxiv-cxv.

extent their views were apocalyptic in the strictest sense of the term, and there are passages which suggest that they looked forward to the great day when the heaven should fall and the earth be shattered, that a new world might be born from the ruins of the old".<sup>5</sup>

The implicit monotheism of the eighth century B.C., and its manifestation in the belief in a world-wide divine purpose, embracing past, present, and future, seems to point to the fact that in the prophets and not in the apocalyptists we are to find the pioneers and originators of the idea of the unity of history. It may be true, as Dr. Charles says, that "whereas prophecy incidentally dealt with the past and devoted itself to the present and the future as rising organically out of the past, apocalyptic, though its interests lie chiefly in the future as containing the solution of the problems of the past and present, took within its purview things past, present, and to come".<sup>6</sup> This does not necessarily imply, however, that the prophets did not thereby grasp the idea of the unity of history; indeed the evidence of their writings implies that they did. But perhaps it would be fair to say that, although the prophets grasped the idea of the unity of history, they did not complete the logic of that idea. That completion was left to the apocalyptists.

"The knowledge of history," says Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson, "is not the mere accumulation of facts. We must relate these data to one another, and trace their connections."<sup>7</sup> The apocalyptists, following the lead of the prophets, set about relating these data to one another, and traced the connection by means of the divine purpose underlying history. They saw and interpreted the events of history *sub specie aeternitatis*, observing in the apparent confusion of history an order and a goal. "The apocalyptists believed in God, and believed that He had some purpose for the world He had made, and that His power was equal to its achievement. Their faith goes beyond the faith in the divine control of history, indeed. It is a faith in the divine initiative in history for the attainment of its final goal".<sup>8</sup>

So far we have noted very little advance, if any, on the contribution made to this subject of the unity of history by the prophets themselves. That advance came when the apocalyptists began to work out history systematically in vast periods and even deterministically.

Allusion is made to this division of history into vast periods in 4 *Ezra* xiv. 5 which tells how God spoke to Ezra concerning

<sup>5</sup> Oesterley and Robinson, *Hebrew Religion*, 1937, p. 227.

<sup>6</sup> *Eschatology*, 1913, p. 183.

<sup>7</sup> *Redemption and Revelation*, 1943, p. 167.

<sup>8</sup> H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*, 1944, p. 142.

Moses, saying, "I told him many wondrous things, showed him the secrets of the times, declared to him the ends of the seasons". As Dr. G. H. Box points out this refers to "the secret tradition regarding the crises of the world's history (measured by certain periods of time) which was associated with the name of Moses".<sup>9</sup> In the *Assumption of Moses* x. 12 the writer describes Moses as saying, "From my death until His advent there shall be CCL times", i.e. 250 year-weeks or 1,750 years which, when added to the 2,500 years which had elapsed before the death of Moses, makes the duration of world history eighty-five jubilees or 4,250 years.<sup>10</sup> The scheme of history is systematised still more in the *Apocalypse of Weeks* (1 *Enoch* xciii. 1-10, xci. 12-17) where history is divided into ten "weeks" of unequal lengths, each of which is marked by some great event. From the standpoint of the writer the first seven weeks are in the past and the last three weeks in the future, the Messianic Kingdom being set up in the eighth week and continuing till the close of the tenth week when the final judgment takes place.<sup>11</sup> A somewhat similar division is made in the *Testament of Abraham* where we read of "seven fiery serpents' heads", symbolising the seven ages into which the world is divided, each of which presumably lasts for 1,000 years (cf. chs. xvii, xix). In several other passages history is divided into twelve parts. In ch. vii. B. of the *Testament of Abraham*, for example, the 7,000 years of the world's duration mentioned above are described as "twelve hours of the day". In the *Apocalypse of Abraham* the present age lasts for twelve hours (ch. xx,) each hour representing a period of one hundred years (ch. xxviii); those twelve hours or 1,200 years are probably to be regarded as extending from the founding of Jerusalem by David (cf. 4 *Ezra* x. 46) to the destruction of the last Temple by Titus.<sup>12</sup> The same twelve-fold division of history is found in Baruch's vision of the cloud with black and white waters; these waters, which symbolise the periods of world history (2 Baruch lvi. 3) are poured out upon the earth twelve times (liii. 6). In the Latin text of 4 *Ezra* xiv. 11 we read that "the world-age is divided into twelve parts; nine parts of it are passed already, and the half of the tenth part; and there remain of it two parts, besides the half of the tenth part"; in the Ethiopic text it is divided into ten parts and not twelve, half of the tenth part remaining.<sup>13</sup> These divisions of time, of whatever number or

<sup>9</sup> *The Ezra-Apocalypse*, 1912, p. 308.

<sup>10</sup> See R. H. Charles, *The Assumption of Moses*, 1897, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Sib. Or.* Bk. IV, lines 47f. where world history is divided into ten generations.

<sup>12</sup> Josephus says that this period extended over 1,179 years.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the half week in *Daniel* ix. 27 = the last 3½ years of tribulation.

duration they may be, form a unity of history, for in and through them can be traced the unfailing purpose of God, leading the present age up to its close in the final judgment or in the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom.

But not only did the apocalyptists divide up history into different periods of time, they regarded it as having been determined beforehand by the will of God and revealed to His servants. "Determinism thus became a leading characteristic of Jewish apocalyptic; and accordingly its conception of history, as distinguished from that of prophecy, was often mechanical rather than organic."<sup>14</sup> It was believed that God had set down on the heavenly tablets (of which we hear a great deal in these writings) the fixed order of the events of history from which there could be no deviation whatsoever. What God had set down must come to pass. "That which is determined shall be done" (*Daniel* xi. 36). On the heavenly tablets will be written down "all the deeds of mankind, and of all the children of flesh that shall be upon the earth to the remotest generations" (*Jub.* i 29). God has determined beforehand the destinies of Israel and the nations (*Ass. of Moses* xii. 4f.), and will bring this present age to a close when the predetermined time is fulfilled (4 *Ezra* iv. 36, xi. 44). But if men could not alter what was predetermined by God, they could at least investigate the scheme of history thus set out, and try to discover at what point in it they themselves stood by identifying past historical events with specific events in the scheme. The calculation of times, therefore, became a very important part of the apocalyptists' job. Usually the description of the times and seasons up to the writer's own day is fairly clear and straightforward, but when this point is passed then "predicted" history becomes prediction proper, with the result that the events described are for the most part given in very general terms. By reason of his calculations the seer believed himself to be standing in the last days very near to the final crisis of history. This belief was no doubt encouraged by the fact that the times in which he lived were usually times of great travail and distress. This predeterminism of history, making possible the calculations of times and seasons, emphasises still further the strong sense which the apocalyptists had of the unity of history. Behind everything, from the very beginning to the very end, the purpose of God was working itself out, binding those times and seasons into one great scheme.

The apocalyptists, then, completed the logic of this idea of the unity of history, which had originated with the prophets, by developing and systematising the whole conception. They acted as middle-men and not as pioneers; they passed on, in

<sup>14</sup> R. H. Charles, *Eschatology*, 1913, p. 206.

changed and fuller form, what they themselves had already received.

Two influences in particular were brought to bear on the apocalyptic writers which helped to widen and develop their conception of the unity of history—the external influences of Zoroastrianism and the internal influence of beliefs and conditions within Judaism and the Jewish State.

To try to give any detailed account of the influence of Iranian apocalyptic in this connection would take us far away from our present subject. Only a very brief statement need be made here. Characteristic of the Iranian teaching was that the world should last for a period of 12,000 years. This period was divided into four eras of 3,000 years each. During the first of these everything was invisible;<sup>15</sup> during the second the great god Ahura-Mazda created the material world and man; during the third Angra-Mainyu, the great evil spirit, has power over men; during the fourth men gradually approach a state of perfection through the work of Shaoshyant the saviour. What is of significance for our purpose is that history was divided up into great world epochs and that the Iranian apocalyptists worked out for themselves elaborate schemes and systems of measurement just in the same way as we have seen the Jewish apocalyptists do. In fact, there can be no doubt about it that the latter were influenced greatly by Iranian thought in this particular respect. It cannot be without significance, for example, that the number twelve, which plays such an important part in Zoroastrianism, should appear so frequently in the Jewish divisions of history. The Jewish apocalyptic writers took over this Iranian conception of great world epochs and used it to make more vivid and more wide-embracing the idea which they had received from the prophets of a unity of history made such by the unfailing purpose of Almighty God.

The second influence brought to bear on these writers helping to widen and develop their conception of the unity of history was that of the prevailing beliefs and conditions within Palestine. From the time of the Maccabean Revolt right down to the year of the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. the Jewish people were welded together to form a nation in a way unlike at any other time. At the beginning of this period patriotism ran very high and the continued tension within the State between Hellenism and Judaism heightened feelings still more. No longer were the Jews merely one of a number of small nationalities in and around Palestine. They had become a nation different from other

<sup>15</sup> Cf. 2 *Enoch* xxiv. 4, "For before all things were visible, I alone used to go about in the invisible things, like the sun from east to west, and from west to east."

surrounding nations. During those two-and-a-half centuries they had become "a kingdom of this world, an alternative to Civilisation as then understood".<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the Jewish nation could not be compared with the great Empires of the Seleucids and the Ptolemies in material power, but this did not prevent it from seeing itself play an imperial part in the history of civilisation. Professor Burkitt illustrates this point by comparing those prophecies in *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel* which are directed against the nations with those in *Daniel*. "In *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel*," he says, "we have announcements of Divine vengeance upon the enemies of Israel, but it is all piecemeal and detached. In *Daniel*, on the other hand, there is a philosophy of universal History".<sup>17</sup> And here the same writer quotes some words of Dr. Edwyn Bevan, "The great Gentile kingdoms, like the Greek supremacy of the Seleucids and Ptolemies which seemed so overwhelming and terrible, are shown as phases in a world process whose end is the Kingdom of God".<sup>18</sup> *Daniel*, in his visions in chapters ii, vii, viii, sees the fall of the Empires of Babylonia, Media, Persia, and Greece. The Jewish nation sees itself set against the background of these mighty powers; its outlook has become in the most real sense cosmopolitan. It is not inferior to those great nations; rather it is superior, for they must perish, but Israel will inherit the Kingdom prepared by God. It is not at all surprising, then, that with this very much wider view of the world's history in which their own nation was playing and was yet to play such an important part, the apocalyptists should have a wider vision than the prophets had of the significance of the unity of history.

Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson writes that, if we are to meet all the difficulties involved in the problem of the relation of time to eternity, we must try to resolve three dualities into "transparent unities". "The dualities are that (a) history must vindicate God, and yet is inadequate within itself to do so, (b) the values of history which . . . require a temporal order for their actualisation, also require an eternal order for their interpretation and justification, (c) the temporal must be so taken up into the eternal, that its process, as well as its product, has meaning and value for God."<sup>19</sup> The apocalyptic writers cannot be said to have succeeded in resolving these dualities into unities, but they are at least one in seeing the need for an eternal order. The characteristic note struck by most of these writers, however, is not the sameness of this present "age" and the new "age", but the difference between them. A dualism is maintained between the

<sup>16</sup> F. C. Burkitt, *Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, 1914, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>18</sup> *Jerusalem under the High Priests*, p. 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Redemption and Revelation*, 1943, p.xlii.

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present age of ungodliness and the future age of righteousness.<sup>20</sup> The Cosmos cannot be reduced to a harmonious whole, for "the Most High has made not one Age but two" (4 *Ezra* vii. 50). And yet there is a link between the temporal and the eternal orders which cannot be broken; it is the purpose of God which will be vindicated in the vindication of His people. Through a synthesis of the eschatologies of the individual and the nation the apocalyptists see this vindication to be one of the righteous individual as well as of the righteous nation who take part in the Messianic Kingdom. In the apocalyptic writings, then, there is after all a unity wider than that of mere world history; it is a unity in which the temporal is taken up into the eternal by means of those moral and spiritual qualities which make up the purpose of God—a purpose which, whilst finding its actualisation in history, must seek its justification beyond history.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Apoc. of Abr.*, xxix, xxxi, xxxii. This dualism probably owes much to the influence of Iranian thought.

*Facing Life with Confidence* by L. J. Tizard. (Independent Press, 6s.)

The author's thesis is that "something good can be gained from everything that we face in a receptive spirit" and, negatively, that the escapist attitude is both useless and unchristian. That is not startlingly original but the author has reached it for himself, tested it widely, and seen it work for others in experiences through which he himself has not yet passed. He works it out in relation to trouble, temptation, sin, doubt, old age, death and bereavement. Within the field he has set himself, Mr. Tizard has aimed at being fairly comprehensive and he has been bold enough to reiterate some of those truthful counsels which have sometimes been made to sound platitudinous but which are true none the less. For a digestible, popular treatment his book leaves little to be desired either in matter or manner of presentation. It is sane and helpful and written in a friendly, readable prose.

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