

Methods of Revelation—The Torah.

"THEORETICALLY" writes Wheeler Robinson, "there is no limit to the possible media of revelation, since the transforming power of the mind of man can give religious meaning to any object."¹ The Old Testament and Judaism bear witness to the belief that God may approach man independently of man's effort to find God. One way of God to man is bound up with the idea of Torah.

The word Torah is inadequately translated "Law," a word which fails to express the true meaning or to account for its connection with Judge, Prophet and Wise Man, as well as with the Priest. The fundamental meaning is "teaching," "direction" or "instruction," which probably meant originally "casting" of the lot by which the priestly oracle was given. (cf. *Joshua* xviii. 6.) Thus the Torah of the priests meant not a "book" but "the sacred decisions given by the priestly oracle or otherwise, in the Sanctuary which in Israel was the seat of divine judgment."² The people in their desire to know the will of Jahweh turned to the priests, and the decisions which they gave included moral as well as ritual teaching. It is because of their failure to "teach" that the priests were so passionately criticised by the prophets.³ The prophets had not always been opposed to the priests and their oracles seem to have been given, on occasions, in connection with the priestly ritual. Yet the great prophets repelled by their unworthy professional namesakes and angered because of the betrayal of the people by the priests, separated themselves from the cult of the Sanctuary and delivered their own "toroth." These "decisions" came not from the sacred lot but from the high prophetic consciousness and the living prophetic word. Here we see the noble distinction of Israel's worship where the "decision" given by the prophets reveals the exalted ethical character of their God, for their standard and predominant interest is the moral law, as opposed to the perverted "torah" of the priests.

It was during the Exile that the transformation of prophecy began, more emphasis being laid upon the externals of religion. The spontaneity which had been so characteristic of prophecy began to disappear, and after the time of Ezra the Jews had a vague idea that the age of prophecy had come to an end and the

¹ *Redemption and Revelation*, pp. 98, 110.

² W. R. Smith, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, p. 299.

³ *Micah* iii. 11. *Ezek.* xxii. 26. *Hosea* iv. 6, etc.

age of tradition had begun. This may be seen in Malachi, whom Lods regards as a forerunner of the Scribes and the Talmudists,⁴ for he does not look to the continuance of prophecy, but rather to the return of Elijah (iv. 5), and the same tendency is clearly seen in *Zechariah* xiii. The collection of works known as the Apocrypha, belongs to the age when prophecy had ceased and the people were content to live under the Law, while apart from an occasional pseudo-prophetic book in Apocalyptic form, the highest literary efforts are concerned with the Halacha, Midrash and Haggada. Any suspicion of new revelation is not published openly, but is given under the name of some ancient figure like Enoch, Moses, Abraham or Adam. This feeling grew with time and in the age of the Maccabees, the prophets were believed to be no more—"there was great sorrow in Israel, such as there had not been since the days that prophets ceased to exist among them." (1 *Macc.* ix. 27.) The writer of *Ecclesiasticus* speaks of pouring out doctrine as prophecy, and apparently fails to see the difference between his teaching and the great creative prophecy of Isaiah, Jeremiah and the other prophets. The truth is that prophetic revelation had run dry, but there was a supposedly unailing source from which revelation had been sent forth, a source rich and inexhaustible. It was this source which gave the scribes their power, and from which they drew the inspiration for their highest and most fruitful lives. Here we see as S. H. Hooke has pointed out, a refusal to accept the implications of the prophetic protest. The apocalyptic of the day falls largely under this criticism, as does also the "despairing hedonism" of *Ecclesiastes*, and while devotion to the letter of the Law produced the noblest type of piety, it also "yielded the Dead Sea fruit of formalism and hypocrisy so bitterly denounced by Jesus."⁵

The foundation stone of Judaism⁶ is that religion is revealed, and when the prophetic river had become a stream, the stream in time running dry, revelation was sought elsewhere. All revelation, so runs the creed of orthodox Judaism, is contained in the Torah. Unlike prophetic inspiration this is an unailing source, comprising all wisdom and all possible revelation. It was all that God had given, and all that he could give. Unailing in its source it was regarded as pre-existent and eternal, "He created me from the beginning before the world, and I shall never fail." (*Ecclus.* xxiv. 9). This is the theme, repeated and emphasised

⁴ Lods *The Prophets and the Rise of Judaism*, p. 279. W. R. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 156ff.

⁵ *Judaism and Christianity*, Vol. I., p. 266.

⁶ The Articles of Belief of the scholastic theologian Maimonides illustrate the prevailing belief of orthodox Judaism. See F. H. Smith, *The Elements of Comparative Theology*, p. 37.

throughout the whole of Jewish literature,⁷ and the word Torah which had such prominence in the Old Testament, gradually came to mean "revelation," Moses having written down the Law to God's dictation. Commands had been given by God previous to Moses; they had been given to Adam, Noah, Abraham and Jacob, but "to Moses the complete revelation was given once for all."⁸ The Jews, influenced as they were by this conception of revelation, could not conceive of a time when there was no revelation. It was therefore necessary to include Adam in their scheme, maintaining that he had received laws for all mankind. The point which they emphasised above all others was that "Whatever previous revelations there had been, they were all included in the complete and final revelation, the twofold law being given to Israel at Sinai."⁹ This exaggerated emphasis upon Scripture may be largely attributed to Persian influence. Communion with God could be obtained through the study of Scripture, and the gradual canonisation of the Law dug the grave of the sacrificial system.

The pre-eminent position granted to Moses had a disastrous effect upon the reputation of the prophets. In direct contradiction to the Biblical presentation of the prophets as creative geniuses, we are told that they added nothing to the revelation already given by Moses. They explained, emphasised, warned and repeated warnings, but achieved nothing more. We should remember the advice which has been given by numerous Christian students of Judaism, that it is futile to attempt to understand Judaism, unless we accept its assumptions and not substitute ours for them. The prophets were in effect, according to this teaching, simply links between the time of Ezra and the Scribes, and although they gave authoritative interpretations and applications of the Torah of Moses, yet their creative genius is denied, their works being relegated to the rank of Kabbala and connected with the oral tradition of the Scribes.¹⁰

Apart from the revelation as it is embodied in the writings in the Pentateuch, there is also the conception of revelation transmitted orally from generation to generation. This conception had significance when allied to the casuistical labours of the Scribes, but first of all we must consider the effect upon the rest of the Old Testament. We have already seen that while deference was shown towards the prophets as mere interpreters, their original significance was lost, despite the denial of this fact by some modern Jewish writers. Moore writes, "To the Jews at the beginning of our Era the revelation of God was in part

⁷ W. R. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁸ Moore, *Judaism*, Vol. I, p. 112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

¹⁰ Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 112, and W. R. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

embodied in writings which had come down from earlier times—the Law of Moses, the prophets, the histories attributed to the prophetic authorship and conveying religious and moral lessons, the poetry of religious devotion in the Psalms, prudent counsels for the guidance of life in the Proverbs, and story books like Ruth and Esther, to all of which the quality of inspiration, the character of sacred scripture belonged.”¹¹ It was freely recognised that the prophets were men who had possessed the Holy Spirit, consequently all inspired men were regarded as prophets. God had promised to raise up prophets, “The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee . . . I will raise them up a prophet . . .”¹² and under the copious shelter of this text there entered Abraham and Isaac, David and Solomon, Ezra and Mordecai, all being recognised as prophets. It was an easy step to maintain that all the Old Testament books had been written by prophets i.e. by inspired men, and thus everything in Scripture bore the mark of inspiration.

In the Rabbinical Schools there was no theory of the method of prophetic revelation such as that which Plato gives in his *Timaeus*, and which Philo adopted, where the human *nous* was displaced by the divine spirit, but they received as an undoubted axiom the belief that every word of Scripture had the authority and truth of the very Word of God. This inspired work was given an immediate revelation, through visions and dreams or through prophetic inspiration. All Scripture is the revelation of God and the Canon is not a collection of Books distinguished merely by exalted teaching from other collections, but a sacred collection of which every word is inspired. This principle, that the whole of religion is contained in the revelation of God, is the first and essential principle of orthodox Judaism. Yet all Scripture is not intelligible. Some of the “teaching” is clear and unmistakable, but much has to be interpreted, and so there arose teachers and schools for the exegesis of Scripture, that it might be applied to life.

The Torah of which we have spoken, was suitable for an agricultural community, but the Jews scattered throughout the Graeco-Roman world were conscious of its insufficiency; thus a new literature was created. In the new circumstances the most convenient way of making the Law applicable to later generations was the creation of an unwritten law of interpretation. This method may appear a legal fiction to us, but the Jew

¹¹ Moore, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 237, Vol. III, p. 81, where he shows Rabbinical use of the Torah to denote whole of Old Testament. cf. MacGregor and Purdy, *Jew and Greek, Tutors unto Christ*, p. 72ff.

¹² *Deut.* xviii. 15ff.

believed most fervently in its validity. The adjustment to changed conditions was a difficult one. Nothing contained in the Torah could be altered, nothing added, nothing taken away. Yet it was not sufficiently explicit (e.g. regarding Sabbath observance) and gave no complete ritual for the daily round. The Canon of Scripture having been closed, no new literature was tolerated for a considerable time, but during the interval a process of oral interpretation was set in motion, which in time was to have the name of Moses attached to it. With the help of a greatly increased Law, the Jews were able to face the changing historical scene, and adapt their lives in accordance with the swift passing of time. A vast Talmudic literature ascribed to Moses, solved what seemed an insuperable difficulty, and gained a delegated reverence almost equal to the Torah itself. These rules of life set forth in the Talmud and based on the Mishnah claimed the divine Torah as their inexhaustible source. Rosenthal writes, "Moses, Jewish tradition holds, not only received on Sinai the written Torah but also its interpretation in the form of Oral Torah. The Sinaitic origin of the entire Torah, written and oral, may for the Jurist and the Bible critic be a fiction, but it certainly was an unquestionable truth and reality for the Jewish people."¹³ Revelation is therefore still a great fact, but it now speaks through the words God gave to Moses, and is adapted to life through the diligent study of the Scriptures.¹⁴ For this important work there was the training and tradition of the schools, and also certain rules were evolved "as norms of method and criteria of validity."¹⁵

The broad assumption that there must be an oral tradition going back to Moses, and the firm belief that these ideas had been imparted to Moses, gave such a wide meaning to the Torah, that it could be adapted to almost any situation. The Pharisees held that the Law should be adapted to changing circumstances. "All had been imparted to Moses, so it was held, and whatever might be, at any future time, unfolded as its meaning by some acute and forseeing teacher, was contained in the Torah as Moses had received it."¹⁶ The word Torah which had meant originally "teaching" and "instruction," and had come to be applied to the Pentateuch and still later to the whole of the Old Testament, now referred to the whole revelation contained in the written text and the unwritten tradition. It referred to what had in the past been regarded as included in the Torah, but also to anything and everything which might in future be implied in it. In this

¹³ *Judaism and Christianity*, Vol. III, p. 172.

¹⁴ H. W. Robinson, *Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*, p. 126.

¹⁵ Moore, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 248ff.

¹⁶ *Judaism and Christianity*, Vol. III, p. 103.

way the Torah became in reality both immeasurable and inexhaustible. God in his infinite wisdom had caused the Scriptures to be written, but his revelation was not wholly contained in them, for much remained unrealised and obscure until it came as new knowledge to the enlightened mind. Professor Loewe has pointed out¹⁷ how much that has been asserted regarding the Pharisees is false, because of the failure of many scholars to recognise the breadth and scope of their belief. It was never admitted that the commands of the Torah were set on one side, but simply that they were re-interpreted. There was therefore room for development and this method of interpretation by which revelation could mean anything was adopted, occasionally, by St. Paul, with embarrassing results, and was used by Protestant dogmatists in their efforts to unravel the mystery of the Trinity and prove the deity of the Son.

G. F. Moore in his work on Judaism maintains that with such a conception of revelation as the Jews were pleased to follow, there could be no notion of progressive revelation.¹⁸ In a very real sense this is true, but it has been maintained that the Pharisees believed in progressive revelation. "The Pharisee believed in bringing religion into daily life," writes Loewe, "because he stood for the principle of progressive revelation. By this he meant that the spirit of the Torah contained the power of inspiring changed circumstances, not that the Torah required supplementing from without. It could expand."¹⁹ This was obviously the idea behind the unwritten Torah, bringing it into accord with higher moral standards and advancing civilization, and at the same time, by the very subtlety of the conception, preventing any diversions between the conscience and the strict commands of the written Torah. God could then speak to his people in every age, and the method to which the Pharisees gave popularity is regarded by Herford as much more successful than any adopted by the Prophets.²⁰ The Pharisees according to this view, followed the method of applied prophecy—they were certainly practical. The Pharisees based everything on the will of God as it was contained in the Torah, and that will was gradually discerned by the light of conscience and reason. This was the Pharisaic view of the Law and of the method of revelation.

¹⁷ *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 157ff.

¹⁸ Moore, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 239, 249.

¹⁹ *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 153. cf. E. F. Scott, *The New Testament Idea of Revelation*, who writes, "The aim of Rabbinical exposition, however strange its methods, was to maintain through the Law a living apprehension of God's will. Old ordinances and traditions were so re-interpreted as to afford divine guidance in present needs," p. 233.

²⁰ *Judaism and Christianity*, Vol. I, p. 108ff.

The Samaritans failed to engineer anything comparable to this ingenious scheme of the Pharisees. Stubbornly refusing to enlarge their conception of the Torah, they clung to their own narrow views refusing to adjust themselves to the changing scene. It is true that unlike the Jews they were never greatly scattered abroad, and consequently were not so conscious of the need for reform. Starting from the dogmatic assumption that the Torah was written by the finger of God and then copied by Moses, they guarded against the unhealthy intrusion of human frailty. There was nothing superficial, no superfluities, and to them the suggestion of scribal errors was a phrase unreal and meaningless. The Samaritans clung to the letter of the Law, and would admit no other writings as Holy Scriptures, their lives being moulded according to the narrow belief which hardened in their minds. Lacking in resiliency they could not hope to achieve anything like the success which came to the Pharisees, for they attached all their belief by slender threads to the Pentateuch, the corner stone of their faith.

Finally, there was the relation of the Law to the Gentiles. It was maintained by both the great schools of the second century (Ishmael and Akiba) that the whole Law was revealed to all nations at Sinai, but all refused it except Israel. Hence we are told of the thundering at Sinai, when the Law was given in Hebrew, Roman, Arabic, and Aramaic, but its appeal failed because it forbade sins which were the curse of heredity upon these people.²¹ "In Jewish computation, however," writes Moore, "based on Genesis x. the nations of the World were seventy, and the notion that the Law was given to all nations takes the form of a revelation in seventy languages. Sometimes it is God's voice at Sinai that is heard in all seventy at once, or Moses on the Plains of Moab interpreted the Law in seventy languages; or again, the Law was inscribed on the stones of the altar on Mount Ebal (*Josh.* vii, 31 f.f.) and the nations sent their scribes who copied it in seventy different languages."²² God, apparently, knew from the beginning that this revelation would be refused by all save the Israelites. They therefore became His "elect" in a very real sense. The collective rejection, however, did not prevent individual Gentiles from obeying the commands and sharing the promises, and this element of a saving tolerance was seen occasionally in the zealous missionary work of those who would compass sea and land to make one proselyte.

The developed conception of the Torah while suspiciously ingenious, and marred by the necessity of postulating a theory

²¹ Moore, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, Note 48, p. 87, gives examples of this argument.

²² Moore, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 278.

which has little, if any, historical basis, nevertheless approaches a great truth. It proclaims that God is ever speaking, for the ancient conversations between God and Moses contain inexhaustible riches from which one may obtain deep and abiding truths.

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Faith Stakes a Claim, by Leslie E. Cooke, B.A., B.D., 171 pp.
(Independent Press, 6s. net.)

These sermons by the Secretary of the Congregational Union, formerly minister of Warwick Road Church, Coventry, have about them a characteristic freshness and vigour. As one would expect, they have a strong social application and their illustrations are taken from many walks of life and fields of knowledge. A number of the sermons were preached for special occasions. Some preachers are notably not at their best then. But Mr. Cooke knows how (in the old phrase which he revives), to "improve the occasion."

The style varies and perhaps a sermon should never be judged by how it reads but by how it sounds. Yet we wonder at times how the preacher managed to carry his congregation with him to the far end of some of his long sentences. One such sentence, at the beginning of the sermon on the Potter, occupies the whole of the second paragraph. Again, the points of the sermons as read do not seem to stand out clearly and simply. In some of the sermons the reader is carried from beginning to end without sufficient pauses and rests for the mind.

But these are minor criticisms in view of the prophetic quality of the discourses themselves. Those preachers who read will find themselves refreshed to want to preach some of their own sermons again, but differently; and to expound familiar texts that glow here with new heat and light.

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