

The Christian Interpretation of History

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I

THE general ethnic view of history is usually referred to as the cyclical or circular view. It represents history as a circle or wheel, the same general cycle of events recurring again and again at the end of long periods of time, the world thus returning periodically to the same original state.

Such is the view of history we find prevalent in ancient classical literature, both Greek and Roman. In Greek literature it finds expression chiefly in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and during the later classical period it finds more definite and dogmatic expression in the writings of the Stoics, especially Marcus Aurelius. It is a view of history we find clearly present in the thought of ancient Babylonia and ancient Egypt before it appeared in Greece and Rome. It probably came to Greece and then to Rome by way of Babylonia, although it is found also in Indian thought, Hindu and Buddhist, before making its first appearance among the Greeks. As it appeared in Greek literature it was a view of history determined by and based on preconceived philosophical principles, in particular on certain views of the nature of Reality. For Greek thought Reality consisted in that which is and abides eternally the same, the realm of unchanging Being as contrasted with the realm of Becoming. As for the realm of Becoming, the world of process and change, that was of no more significance for the student of Reality than the dance of shadows cast by flickering firelight on the walls of a cave. This is how Plato puts this point in his *Phaedo*: "When the soul is dragged by the body (and the bodily senses) into the region of the changeable, she wanders and is confused; the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard when she touches change. But when retiring into herself, she reflects, then she passes into the world of certainty and unchangeableness . . . and being in communion with the unchanging is unchanging. And this state of the soul is called wisdom."¹

For such a view, it is evident, history and the time process can have little significance. For history is the sphere of the changeable and contingent. It is concerned not with abiding reality but with events that come to be and then cease to be. History is change, while Being, true Being, is unchanging and eternal. The world of change and becoming is real only in so far as it participates in the unchanging world through a cycle of changeless recurrence. It is a profoundly pessimistic view of history, this cyclical or circular view. If all that can happen is the constant repetition of a cycle of events, there is no possible meaning in the cycle itself; it achieves nothing, it leads

1. Op. cit., *Phaedo* §79 (Jowett's translation, *The Dialogues of Plato*, Vol. II, p. 222).

to nothing. Such a view excludes the emergence of anything new in history, and so is the negation of progress. "Nothing new happens in the universe if we consider the infinite time past," declared Epictetus, expressing the general Stoic view. "The rational soul" wrote Marcus Aurelius "traverses the whole universe and the encompassing void . . . it reaches out also into the infinity of time, comprehends the periodic regeneration of all things, and realizes that our children will see nothing new, just as our fathers saw nothing different; so that in a sense the man of forty years of age, if he has any sense at all, has, in view of this sameness of things, seen all that has been or ever shall be."²

II

Over against this general ethnic pessimistic view of history we have the Hebrew view, represented in the Old Testament; a view filled with hope inasmuch as it looks upon history as a meaningful significant process leading to a great cosmic consummation or culmination, usually referred to as the coming of "The Kingdom of God." Only among the Hebrews and in Hebrew prophetic thought is such a representation of history found, with the possible exception of the representation in the Zend—Avesta, the sacred writings of Zoroastrianism, which some scholars claim influenced Hebrew thought during the period of the Exile. With this exception only in Hebrew thought do we find the conception of history as a significant process leading to a great Divine consummation. And wherever history is thought of in this way, as having a definite direction, and a definite goal, with a consequent emphasis on the value of the time process, there the influence, direct or indirect, of Old Testament Hebrew thought and Hebrew revelation may be traced.

Whence arose, we must ask, this Hebrew view of history with the value it assigns to the time process as a progressive fulfilment of a great end or purpose? The answer is that it was the outcome of, and bound up with, the belief that God was not a static changeless Reality, as in Greek and Indian views, but a dynamic, active God revealing Himself through mighty acts or events in history. He was called "the living God," and was conceived not as mere Thought or Reason but as Purposive Will. The general Hebrew representation was this: God had initiated the process of history by a uniquely creative act. He created the physical universe, and then made man in His own image to cooperate with Him in the realization of His creative purposes. Through man's misuse of his free will evil intruded itself into the world. But God, the living God, acted decisively in a redemptive way to make for Himself a people through whose history this redemptive purpose might be fulfilled. The particular event in which this redemptive activity of God was primarily recognized was the deliverance of the enslaved Hebrews from bondage in Egypt, and their call to be the instrument of a

2. *Meditations*, xi, 1 (quoted in John Baillie's *The Belief in Progress*, pp. 48 f.).

Divine redemptive purpose, as effected and interpreted through the prophetic figure of Moses.

The determining significance of this Exodus experience of redemption or deliverance for the Hebrew conception of history, and of God's action in history, is indicated by the fact that time and again the name given to God, the God of Israel's history, is "the Lord God who brought them up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." At the centre of Hebrew national life was a great hope begotten of this initial redemptive action of God in their history, a hope often seemingly frustrated and brought to nought, but still wistfully clung to, even when disaster time and again overtook the nation. It was the hope of the coming of a great Divine Saviour or Deliverer and of a new age and Kingdom—usually referred to as "the Messianic hope"—a hope which was variously depicted by different prophetic thinkers in accordance with the different conditions under which they lived. Two main types of this Messianic hope were entertained, the Davidic and the Apocalyptic types. The former of them, and the older, envisaged the Messianic Kingdom in political terms as a restored national autonomy under the leadership of a prince of the Davidic line. But with the reduction of the nation to a state of political vassalage from which there seemed little promise of escape, the hope of national political restoration was abandoned and hope was found in a catastrophic Divine intervention, in the advent of a Deliverer from heaven suddenly to descend with supernatural power to destroy all their enemies and establish upon a renovated earth the righteous rule of God. But however it was conceived, this hope in a coming future deliverance lay at the centre of Hebrew thought, a hope based on the conception and consciousness of a Creative Directive Sovereign Power working through and over all for redemptive ends.

III

Now it was to this hope and the Hebrew conception of history as a progressive movement towards a great end that Christian thought attached itself. But between the two, between the Hebrew and the Christian view there is a great, a radical difference. The difference consisted fundamentally in this, that the new age, the Messianic age, of which Hebrew prophets and Jewish apocalyptists had spoken was now represented as not any more in the future but as having actually arrived with the coming of Jesus Christ. As a recent writer has expressed it: "The future tense of the Old Testament has now (in the New Testament) become an emphatic present."³ The promised age has dawned, the time of fulfilment has come. Such was the proclamation of Jesus' first followers. "We have found him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets wrote" (John 1:45). And such, according to the Gospel records, was the declaration of Jesus Himself. His earliest public utterance, as recorded in the first chapter of the earliest

3. John Bright, *The Kingdom of God*, p. 216.

Gospel, was this: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk. 1:15); "at hand" not merely in the sense that it is near but, as the writer just referred to, has, we think, properly indicated, following C. H. Dodd and other New Testament scholars, in the sense that it is "right here."⁴ In the presence and work of Jesus the Kingdom of God has come, and the promises of the Old Testament have been fulfilled.

The fulfilment that took place in Jesus was, indeed, a fulfilment very different from that expected generally by His fellow countrymen, the Jews—so different that they ultimately rejected Him and had Him done to death. It did not satisfy those who expected a Messiah of a national or political kind, a Messiah who would lead them in their struggle for deliverance from their oppressors and set himself up as ruler of an earthly Kingdom. Neither did it satisfy the expectations of those Jews who entertained the apocalyptic hope of a sudden intervention of God on the clouds of Heaven on their behalf. As against both representations He presented Himself as fulfilling the Messianic hope of Israel by taking on Him the form of a servant after the pattern represented in the prophecy of the Suffering Servant of God in the Second Isaiah, and through a life of service and sacrificial obedience to God, even to the length of death, bringing in the Kingdom and reign of God on earth. Through His life of sacrificial service of God and His fellowmen, culminating in His Cross and Resurrection, He represented the promised age of God's redemption as being inaugurated or brought in, the great Divine Event to which all previous history had been moving. This was the great Kerygma, the Evangel which the first Christian evangelists and missionaries were called to proclaim—the good news that by the gracious working of God a new era had dawned in human history which gave promise, not only of individual salvation, but of the complete renewal of life in all its relationships, communal and social. So the Gospel of primitive Christianity was the Gospel of what has been called a "realized" as opposed to a mere "futurist" eschatology. As C. H. Dodd has expressed it: "For the New Testament writers in general, the eschaton has entered history; the hidden rule of God has been revealed; the Age to Come has come."⁵

But though the new age has been thus inaugurated in Jesus' presence and work on earth, its consummation, according to the New Testament representation, is still in the future. In the Gospels, Jesus Himself is recorded as in some passages emphasizing the new era as already having arrived in His presence in the world and in His working in the hearts and lives of those who accepted His Gospel and did His will; while in other passages, especially in some of His parables, He is recorded as representing the completion or consummation of the new era as a matter of the future, dependent on the gradual extension of His rule or reign. The New Testament view has recently been vividly represented by the distinguished Swiss

4. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

5. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development*, p. 210.

New Testament scholar, Oscar Cullmann, in the distinction he draws between what he calls in modern jargon, "the D-day" of history and the "V-day." "The decisive battle in a war," he says, "may already have occurred in a relatively early stage of the war, and yet the war still continues. Although the decisive effect of that battle is perhaps not recognized by all, it nevertheless already means victory. But the war must still be carried on for an undefined time until victory day actually arrives."⁶ Precisely this, says Cullmann, is the situation represented in the New Testament. In what he calls the "Christ-event," the "Once for all" event of the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the decisive battle of history with the powers of evil has been fought and won. Final victory has been assured, but this victory is still in the future, the day of the full consummation of God's Kingdom or rule, when Christ shall be "all and in all" (Col. 3:11). And the present period of redemptive history is the period of the activity of the risen, living Christ through His Church, a period which is spoken of by Cullmann as a "Zwischen-zeit," the time between the decisive battle which has already occurred, and the full victory which is still in the future.

IV

Such is the view of history presented in the New Testament. Christ is its centre, its midpoint; history proceeds to and from Him. From this midpoint of history, the Christ-event culminating in the Cross and Resurrection and Exaltation of Jesus, light is thrown at once over the past and over the future. It illuminates the past, first, of Israel's history, which is seen as a preparation for the coming of Christ and is thus shot through with a Divine redemptive purpose, a developing *Heilsgeschichte*; and second, of universal history, which is seen as providentially governed for the fulfilment of moral ends by a God who came to be realized, not only as Jehovah the God of Israel but as the God of all nations who not only brought the Israelites from Egypt but also "the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir" (Amos 9: 7). The "Christ-event" casts light also over the future, which is looked upon as a progressive fulfilment of redemptive purposes, issuing in a final consummation and victory at the Second Coming of Christ, which is spoken of in the New Testament as His Parousia ("appearance") to judge the world and bring in an eternal reign of glory.

As to when this final consummation will take place there is a development of view in the New Testament itself. To begin with in primitive Christianity it was believed to be imminent. In his earliest extant letters Paul evidently shared the belief of the early disciples in the speedy return of Christ. He expected it to be very soon, in his own life time indeed or in the life time of those to whom he wrote. But in his later letters we find him departing from this early belief and allowing his recognition of the unexpected delay in the

6. Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, p. 145.

return of Christ to lead him to a modification of his inherited early Christian eschatology and a new emphasis on the ever fuller coming of Christ through the presence and working of His Spirit in the Church. But whatever the difference of view in the New Testament writings as regards the nearness or remoteness of the Parousia, there is no difference as regards the intensity of hope and assurance in a final consummation and victory. This is so because it is a hope and assurance grounded not in anything that is still to come but in a fact that has already taken place. As Cullmann puts it "What has already happened provides sure guaranty for what is still to happen."⁷

This Christian view of history is sometimes referred to as a linear view of history, as contrasted with the general ethnic pre-Christian cyclical or circular view referred to in the beginning of this article. So indeed it has been characterized by Cullmann, the distinguished New Testament scholar to whom we have already referred. But so to characterize it is strictly incorrect and misleading since "its distinctive feature is," as Dr. John Marsh puts it, "that the end (or climax) of the process has already appeared in the middle of the line."⁸ The linear view of history is that associated rather with liberal humanistic evolutionary thinking with its exaggerated optimistic estimate of the possibilities of what man can do in his own strength for his own and society's reconstruction and redemption. Such a way of thinking, whether conceived of in a more materialistic or more idealistic fashion, regards history as a gradual continuous upward progress, having perhaps its ups and downs but manifesting in its general trend a steady ascent. For such a way of thinking the Christian view which selects one particular historical individual and one particular event in history, and declares that it possesses an absolute and final religious value by contrast with all other individuals and events, is a "scandal" or "offence"—"the scandal of particularity" it has been called by Gerhard Kittel in *Mysterium Christi*.⁹ "Once for all at the end [or consummation] of the age he [Christ] has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26). Such is the uniform New Testament representation. And the subsequent historical development resulting from this "once for all" appearance is thought of less as an evolution than as a continual resurrection and regeneration process, a dying and rising again into newness of life.

V

The final outcome of this resurrection and regeneration process through the working of the living exalted Christ and His Spirit is represented by Paul in such terms as these: "In the fulness of time to unite (lit. "to bring to a head") all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10); "Through him [Christ] to reconcile to himself [God]

7. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

8. John Marsh, *The Fulness of Time*, p. 169.

9. *Op. cit.*, Essay II.

all things whether on earth or in heaven" (Col. 1:20); "God has highly exalted him [Christ] and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11). In the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, this consummation of history is represented in more detail in the language of Apocalyptic in terms of a final dramatic struggle and victory. On one side are arrayed all the powers of Evil visible and invisible, on the earth and beyond it, Satan and his minions; on the other the exalted enthroned Christ, the crucified Jesus now "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." Of the issue of the struggle, dreadful though it be, there is no doubt. This one thing is sure "The Lord our God the Almighty reigns" (Rev. 19:6). The powers of Evil cannot win, they have already been beaten. The battle has already been won at Calvary and in the Resurrection. The struggle, severe as it is, is but the birth pangs of a New Creation. And with the vision of this New Creation, "a new heaven, and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1), the New Testament story ends.

This representation which is set forth largely in the form of myth and symbol, drawn from Jewish apocalyptic and Hellenistic Gnostic speculation, is difficult of apprehension and acceptance by the modern mind. The whole Biblical story of Divine redemption indeed is represented today by a dominant current school of scholars as "mythological" in character, and the claim is made by this "demythologising school," of which Professor Rudolf Bultmann of Marburg is a chief representative, to get behind the traditional mythological framework of the Christian Gospel and state it in terms more acceptable to the modern scientific mind.¹⁰ The picture of the world presented in the Bible—such is the representation—is that of a "three-storey" or "three-decker" universe conceived quite literally in spatial terms, with heaven above and the underworld below, and in between the two the earth which is open to miraculous intervention or invasion both from God and angelic powers above, and from Satan and the powers of evil below. So when the Bible, and the New Testament in particular, presents the story of Divine saving intervention in the world it does so in terms of this old world cosmology. Through the descent of Jesus from heaven, and the saving efficacy of His life and death and resurrection and ascension, the demonic world-powers are robbed of their dominion and a new world era or world order is ushered in. We must today however, it is said, get rid of such a scientifically outdated or outmoded conception of the universe if we are to expect acceptance of the Christian Gospel. So Bultmann pleads for a "demythologized" presentation of the Gospel, and the way to this he suggests for us today must be or should be, through following the guidance of the so called "existentialist" philosophy as expounded in particular by the German philosopher Heidegger and translating the "myths" of Scripture

10. See especially Bultmann's Essay, "New Testament and Mythology" in *Kerygma and Myth* (E. T.), pp. 1-44.

from intellectual cosmological terms into terms of properly religious experience and decision. Presented in such terms—as the living “encounter” of man with God for redemptive ends in Jesus Christ—Bultmann believes the essential Christian Gospel can be stated in a way that is independent of changing intellectual forms of thought, scientific, or philosophical; the knowledge of its truth and saving efficacy being attained not primarily through intellectual or rational understanding but through Spiritual committal and surrender.

We cannot now enter into any critical appreciation of Bultmann’s suggested “existential” restatement of the Gospel for the modern scientific mind. On this it must suffice for the present, while acknowledging the considerable service done by him to Biblical and in particular to New Testament scholarship, simply to indicate two things. First, in our judgement, Bultmann does not sufficiently recognize the fact that the language of religion and spiritual truth, as contrasted with that of science and philosophy, must be not that of rational concept but of poetic “myth” and symbol, figurative and pictorial. And second, and chiefly, again in our judgement, he does less than justice at once to the New Testament representation and to the witness of Christian history and experience with its ever repeated corroboration of the essential abiding miracle of the living Christ’s working, expressed in the Pauline statement that “if any one is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).