

## THE NOTE OF PROGRESSION IN OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

IN THE Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is disclosed a prophetic scheme on the grand scale which gives purpose and meaning to history. Originating in ages now far distant, and developed over an extended period of time, this disclosure is consummated in the recorded facts of the death and resurrection of Christ, and in the apostolic doctrines implicit within these facts. The Bible, so viewed, is a prophetic interpretation of the world's history, "declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done". The form in which this revelation has come to us is twofold: that of history, establishing a vital contact with human experience; and that of prophecy, securing as real a contact with the sovereign mind of God.

These two schemes, moreover, one drawn from actual life upon earth, and the other from the secrets of the divine counsel, have an unmistakable correspondence with each other, which argues a common source. In the Scriptures they are co-ordinated upon a vast and impressive scale, and within a closely interwoven texture of events. This necessarily brings together the objective realities to which each bears witness, and points to some fundamental and absolute relationship between the supernatural activity of God and the outward development of human affairs. Nor is this relationship merely an academic agreement between prophetic ideologies on the one hand, and the concrete realities of history on the other: for it is based on the common denominator of personality. Prophecy and history alike fulfil themselves through living persons: prophecy and history alike have their spiritual values in terms of personality. Truth is here found in its final and absolute category.

This clears the way for the recognition of the fact that in the Person of Christ both history and prophecy have their complete fulfilment, and also their perfect co-ordination. The divine purpose, disclosed in prophecy, and wrought out in history, is held together, throughout all its parts, in a living Person. All its movements converge upon one solitary commanding Figure. "He is before all things, and in Him all things consist." There

is a pattern to history, and the key to that pattern is Christ. As the Son of the Highest, incarnate in human flesh, Himself truly God and truly man, this One of Whom the Scriptures bear witness is the pivot upon Whom history is balanced. Time centres in Him. Values are given to antecedent and to subsequent events by those of His incarnation: supremely so, by His death and resurrection. This divine event is a central point of energy, the radiation of which is thrown out to the extremes of human history. It penetrates in every direction. In the eternal present of this, the great Event of history, subsist alike the past and the future. It is the key-position to the human situation. Take it away, or weaken its spiritual content, and the Old Testament becomes a pointless collection of Hebrew records, and the New Testament writings a fantasy of religious enthusiasm. The deliberate and continuous emphasis placed, throughout all parts of Scripture, upon this dynamic act of God, illustrates how Scripture itself is held together in Christ and finds its fulfilment in Him.

Old Testament history, then, is progressive to Christ, and each stage brings forth some divine activity, unparalleled in previous experience, and so requiring new vehicles of praise. When, therefore, we hear the recurrent burst of song from Israel's minstrels, "O sing unto the Lord a new song; for He hath done marvellous things", we know that it heralds some unique and amazing and hitherto unheard-of happening. The former things are forgotten; a new thing springs forth: who but must declare it? The events so celebrated are new, not simply in the sense of having newly occurred—which might mean nothing more than bare repetition—but new in the sense of each being without precedent, new in itself, original. Not of the circumstances of Sinai alone, but of all other milestones in the national history could the words be spoken:

"Ask now of the days that are past, which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from the one side of heaven to the other, whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it?" (Deut. iv. 32).

For throughout the entire history creative activity breaks in upon the course of events, and situations arise which to human experience are bewilderingly new and different.

This accounts for the double function of prophecy which deals, first of all, with the moral relation of the present to both

past and future, and also, by predicting God's future interventions in history, prepares believing men for the unprecedented in historical experience. This latter function of prophecy is all the more necessary since human anticipation of things to come is based largely upon observation of known circumstances; and if prophecy had not been given, the incalculable element in history would have bewildered rather than confirmed faith. Hence, too, when the prophets predicted events which to their contemporaries had no counterpart in the experience either of past or present, their prophecies, to men unacquainted with the power of God, appeared altogether fantastic and incredible. "Where is the promise of His coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation" (2 Pet. iii. 4). Justin Martyr's observation is pertinent to this:

"For such things as were incredible and impossible to be, in the opinions of men, God by the prophetic Spirit foretold should be; that when they found such things in being, the very predictions should make it hardly possible to disbelieve them" (*The First Apology*, para. xliii).

To natural reason what more incredible than that God's Anointed should suffer the death of a malefactor? But to faith founded upon the prophetic Word, what more worthy of reverent belief? Thus prophecy becomes a touchstone by which men's hearts are tried before God.

Over against the Biblical interpretation of history may be set the basic conception of pagan nature mythologies, namely, the idea of endlessly-recurring cycles of events without any point of departure or arrival, and therefore in their movement without dynamic progression. With such heathen philosophies the revelation of God's action in history has nothing in common. The prophets faced with unflinching opposition all naturalistic world-views, such as those expressed by the cult of Tammuz denounced by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. viii. 15-16), represented in later times by such pagan figures as the Scandinavian Baldur. These mythical heroes and goddesses symbolised processes of nature, and in particular the natural cycles of the seasons. Transferred as a thought-form to collective human experience they also express mythologically the rise and decline of successive generations as the ultimate norm of human history. So expressed, history moves onward by a sort of natural necessity in an endless chain of perpetually-repeated events, having no

fixed point of beginning, and leading up to no conclusive ending. Human life upon earth becomes a vicious circle from which there is no escape, and man, created in the image of God for the enjoyment of eternity, settles down to a futile natural existence, seeking the fulfilment of life in the ordered changes of the little turn of the wheel in which he finds his earthly existence moving. All deeper hopes of a more satisfying environment for his true being become doomed to perpetual frustration.

In the book of Ecclesiastes we have a reasoned exposition of this naturalistic philosophy, worked out to its logical conclusion. Not that Ecclesiastes is a divinely-authenticated world-view of things! Rather is it a formal presentation of a fallacious creed of life considered on its own principles. The viewpoint under discussion is not endorsed but described. But because justice is done to it, and its supporting facts presented soberly and accurately, we may be assured that the uncompromising attitude of Christian faith to all rival philosophies does not spring from ignorance or prejudice.

The Preacher, assuming the position of natural scepticism, asks in open challenge, "Is there anything whereof it may be said, See, this is new?" "No," he continues, "there is no new thing under the sun. Consider the movement of human history. One generation passes away, another takes its place; nevertheless, the face of things on the earth remains very much the same. The sum total of life now is not very different from what it was in former days, is it? True, the figures may have altered a little, but do they not add up and give practically the same result? Take, again, the world of nature. This is bound by a law of constant change, but is it not a change which simply takes things back to where they were before? The great circuits of the sun, the wind, and the rivers, these illustrate what I mean. Their movements are no real progressive development, only a fixed round in a beaten track. Or if the appeal is made to human experience, see how the even succession of events rouses in man only a dreary sense of futility and frustration. What profit hath a man of all his labour? What, indeed, but the oppressive drudgery of the treadmill? History—what is it but human situations, endlessly repeated, in inevitable cycles of time? Individual life—what is it but the slow fulfilment, already expressed in a thousand other lives, of an inevitable natural process? Everything moves on a dead level: nothing is leading

anywhere: as things have been, they remain. I ask, therefore, what profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? Nor does the outward world around offer him any hope. Everything seen and heard, strikes eye and ear with an impression of incompleteness. There is no break in the monotonous regularity, no ultimate objective. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing. Things travel, indeed, but arrive nowhere. Thus by the inexorable logic of facts we are forced to the conclusion that nothing is, in a real sense, worthwhile: everything is vanity and vexation of spirit."

The Preacher, however, is not content with abstract speculation, but puts his theories to the proof by certain experiments in living. For this discussion is no dilettante intellectualism but a passionate search after the reality of things. In modern parlance, it is existential thinking. The naturalistic position must be tested in actual practice. Would it yield a vital solution of the riddle of life? The results were disappointing. Experience only confirmed philosophic reflection, and although his ultimate pessimism is modified by the recognition of the homely pleasures of everyday life and by the perception of the excellence of wisdom over folly, yet in the end of his book, as in the beginning, he sadly confesses, *Vanity of vanities; all is vanity* (Eccl. xii. 8).

The decision, however, is not wholly unqualified: another and disturbing factor is present to his mind. View life as a natural process, and the conclusion is undoubtedly final: but the Preacher is inwardly aware that life is bound up with realities which lie beyond those of nature, that natural realities are not the final conditions of human existence. Moral consciousness of God is as real to him as perception of the phenomena of nature. Men have their being in moral responsibility to God as Creator, and will for every action be accountable to God as Judge. Creation and Judgment—these are the two points, then, between which history completes its movement.

"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth. . . . Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. xii. 1, 13 f.).

In other words, man is more than part of the great process of Nature: he is a personal being, directly related to God, and exists in a world above that of nature. Although it is true that man has

relations with the natural universe, being formed of the dust of the ground (Gen. ii. 7), yet the fundamental fact in the constitution of man's being is that God created man in His own image (Gen. i. 27), and that God breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life, and that man became a living soul (Gen. ii. 7). It is in God that "we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts xvii. 28). This relationship it is that gives us our consciousness of the supernatural.

Our true nature, then, is one of personal being, not one of natural existence merely; so that for us life has a moral quality and moves in a higher dimension than that of the beasts of the field. We are capable of personal decisions: we possess a free will, and are conscious of personal responsibility: we live in the isolation of self-consciousness into which no other save our Creator can enter. Within these unplumbed depths of personal being move spiritual energies which liberate themselves in incalculable ways. Is not this the very stuff out of which history is made? Is not this that which makes possible, nay, inevitable, the emergence of historical situations completely new and unprecedented?

This spiritual consciousness of true personality and selfhood is conditioned absolutely by the existential relationship established between God and man in the act of creation. This fact makes certain a future act of judgment, final in character, when the supremacy of the Creator over the whole field of history will be made manifest. Of these morally-related facts of Divine creation and Divine judgment the Preacher is profoundly conscious, and although in his treatise he does not work out their implications, yet he does recognise that in them are determined the final values of human existence upon the earth, and therefore of all history. With this he reaches the conclusion of the whole matter. The works of man are not vain and empty; on the contrary, they are full of potentialities for good or evil; and every one of them shall be brought into judgment. Everything, therefore, is of tremendous significance: nothing is vanity.

History, viewed thus, is the product of active personality, with infinite possibilities of creative action. The Old Testament Scriptures emphasize the free activity, both of God and of man, in the sphere of time. That of God is not limited by the automatic reign of natural law. During the long interval between His mighty acts of Creation and Judgment, God does not remain

passive. Were this so, God's presence in history would be purely pervasive. His laws indeed would operate, but He Himself would be, save at the beginning and end, inactive. So far from this being the case, the personal intervention of God breaks ever and anon into the field of human history, taking the form of transcendental energy, redemptive in purpose, yet fulfilling itself on the plane of natural circumstance. Therefore, even when it has the form of common history, it transcends nature in its final issues, as is evident when the far objective is reached. The call of Rebecca to be the wife of Isaac, the adoption by Ruth of Bethlehem as her home-town, the rise to kingship of David the shepherd lad, in their connections with the still undeveloped Messianic purpose, illustrate the point. God thus for a time hid His wonders under the normal circumstances of everyday life until later developments disclosed the fact, hitherto unsuspected, of a personal Divine action. God also revealed His presence through events which were miraculous in form as well as in destiny. When it is considered that such events proceeded from One Who in His Being is above and outside Nature could it well have been otherwise? Should not the exercise of supernatural powers be expected from Him Who in His Godhood is essentially supernatural?

The Old Testament Scriptures likewise recognise man's freedom from the fatalism of natural law, and base this freedom upon the true nature of man's being. Powers inherent in personality, even if circumscribed in their field of action because of creaturely limitations, are of necessity free. Accordingly, man's history is here presented to us as something more than the inevitable outworking of fixed laws; rather is it the free operation of spiritual responsibilities. It is therefore full of surprises. This it is which makes history progressive, either for good or evil.

But while man is under no compulsion in his personal course of life, we must keep in mind that God reserves to Himself the right of judgment and sovereignly controls the final issues. The end of all things abides in His power. Man's liberty of choice and God's sovereignty in judgment are complementary truths.

If it be asked what actual illustrations the Old Testament provides of such historical progression, reply is not difficult. The great Flood in Noah's day introduced a new dispensation in God's dealings with man. Hitherto, nothing like it had ever happened; from henceforth, also, nothing like it would again

occur. Original to human experience, it was, until actually taking place, deemed impossible—as also will be the fiery destruction of the great day of the Lord (2 Pet. iii. 4–10). Without precedent in the past, and not to be repeated in the future, it stands out as a unique event in Old Testament history. In token of this a covenant was made by God promising that never again should a similar flood of waters destroy the earth. Moreover, the fresh laws then made to regulate man's future upon the earth (Gen. viii. 21f.; ix. 9–17) show that history had been switched on to a new level, and that another and different age had dawned.

The rapid development of the post-diluvian world—with its organisation of the world into political systems and God's counter-movement in the call of Abraham—reached a new crisis in the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. Once again singular events began to take place, culminating in the extraordinary experiences of the Passover night and of the passage of the Red Sea. A nation was born in a day. And such was the impact of this rush of events upon the people of Israel that for them it dated the beginning of a new period of time.

“This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you” (Ex. xii. 2).

The past was superseded, and in the significance taken on by the present, the future opened out as a completely new dispensation. The history had again moved forward.

The chapters in Isaiah's prophecy which speak of the return from the Babylonian captivity (xl.–xlix.) disclose the unparalleled circumstances under which that deliverance was to take place. God's redemption of His people was to be an occasion of triumphant originality, and the prospect awakes all the enthusiasm and jubilation which such circumstances always call forth.

“Sing, O ye heavens; for the Lord hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the Lord hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified Himself in Israel” (Isaiah xlv. 23).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, with the historical portion of that of Daniel, show that this was indeed the course that events took. The overthrow of Babylon produced a world-crisis, and thereby, in the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem, was accomplished in history the over-ruling purpose of God. The depth



of the impression made upon those who passed through the crisis of those days is reflected in the Psalms of the Restoration.

“When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them. The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad” (Psa. cxxvi. 1-3).

Jew and heathen alike recognised that God had broken in upon history. The times had changed, and that not by the natural evolution of historical processes, but by a direct intervention of Divine providence. That is to say, there was a prophetic fore-view of a future end toward which earlier beginnings had already moved, and toward which present events had bent the direction of history. This dispensational change had been foretold by Daniel in his prophecy of the seventy weeks, which were to run their course “from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem” (Dan. ix. 25). The writing on the wall was now history. God’s purpose in Israel had again risen above the dead level of natural causes, and now stretched out toward its destined goal.

Of what that goal was even the prophets in Israel were but dimly aware (1 Pet. i. 10-11). But that there was a goal was never in doubt. This consciousness of a destiny in time and history for God’s prophetic purpose had deepened with each successive crisis. Without such ultimate destiny historical progress would have been meaningless, a mere wandering out into the darkness, and as empty of spiritual values as were the recurring processes of nature. But with such ultimate destiny, historical progress is full of spiritual reality, and guarantees a worthy meaning for human existence.

The form in which that destiny was to be realised began to take shape as time went on. God’s eternal purpose, in the beginning vested in man as man, had, in the course of the development, gradually narrowed down in its field of action. For, in due succession, a race, a nation, a tribe, and, later still, a single household, had become its sole repository. And whenever the chosen line showed signs of natural expansion, this restrictive principle was again seen at work. In this narrowing the far end toward which God was working became more and more evident: it was narrowing toward one Man. The flame of destiny was to burn in a single lamp, which God would raise up for His servant David. So in the writings of the prophets, when national hopes

were burning low, this note of the advent of a personal Messiah lightened the growing darkness and became the strong consolation of the faithful in Israel.

The advent of this coming Redeemer was to be accompanied by unmistakable signs of the Divine presence and power, so marvellous and many-sided that they would be declared by unbelievers to be not only incredible but impossible.

“Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you” (Hab. i. 5 with Acts xiii. 41).

“As many were astonished at Thee. . . . So shall He sprinkle (startle) many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at Him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider. Who hath believed our report?” (Isa. lii. 14–liii. 1).

The fullness of the times would come. And the events associated therewith would in freshness and originality, in volume and richness, and in direct divine initiative, completely surpass anything that had preceded them.

According to the confession of Christian faith the Saviour, in His birth, “was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary”. This credal statement is in perfect harmony with Holy Scripture (Matt. i. 18; Luke i. 30–5). That we are required to believe in the uniqueness of this birth is plain. The words “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise” stand over against the regular formula of the earlier part of the chapter “Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob . . .” and indicate that the birth of Christ was otherwise than was the birth of these. In Matthew, therefore, the emphasis is laid upon “was conceived by the Holy Ghost”.

The passage in St. Luke underlines the mystery contained in the words “born of the virgin Mary”. Such an event, indeed, was “a new thing in the earth”, though anticipated beforetime (Jer. xxxi. 22). Were it not that the prophetic Scripture had intimated, both by guarded phraseology and by direct statement, that the coming Redeemer should be born of a virgin, we might well have found it difficult to accept the facts; but with such indications given beforehand it becomes equally difficult now to reject them (Gen. iii. 15; Isa. vii. 14). Moreover, unless we discredit the duly authenticated testimony of the Gospels (Luke i. 1–4), the belief in the virgin birth was not a judgment formed *after* the event, but the response to a revelation received *before* it took place, by those most intimately concerned therewith,

namely Joseph, Elizabeth, and Mary herself. This but strengthens the case. But why should it be thought incredible that the birth of Him Who before His birth had divine pre-existence should in its manner differ from that of those who before their birth had no existence? The miracle is accounted for by this one great fact, that the Word, Who was in the beginning, Who was with God, and Who was God, became flesh and dwelt among us. The incarnation makes the virgin birth intelligible, but also, we must confess in reverent worship, only deepens its mystery.

The public ministry of the Lord Jesus was one of intense miraculous activity. Supernatural powers were in active exercise. These miracles did more than impress the beholders' imagination; they laid a challenge upon heart and conscience, and called for spiritual decisions. To the Jew, with his knowledge of a new age to come—derived from Messianic prophecy—such visible tokens of God's power as were now seen proclaimed its advent. For the new age was to be inaugurated by an outpouring of the divine Spirit, first of all upon the coming Redeemer (from which He takes His title of Christ or Anointed), and in due course upon those who came to be associated with Him (Isa. xlii. 1; lxi. 1). The free action of God would fill men with amazement and so widespread would the effects of it become that eventually all flesh would share in the blessings it brought (Joel ii. 28f.).

The baptism of our Lord, as all four evangelists testify, was the occasion when this anointing took place. The fullness of power characterising His public ministry was the fitting sequel thereto. According to St. Mark, this is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And Peter, too, seems invariably to have begun his testimony at this point, as is borne out by his recorded addresses in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts x. 37f.; ii. 22). The dead were raised, the powers of darkness spoiled of their prey, the sick healed, and Nature made subject to laws higher than its own.

Kings and priests and prophets had been anointed to their several offices in Israel. Their anointing had been with oil, and therefore had a purely typical value: but this was with the very Spirit of Whom oil is a symbol, and therefore has the value of absolute spiritual reality. Instances of supernatural anointings of the Spirit, resulting in mighty acts of divine power, are met with but rarely in Israel's former history. In the book of Judges we read concerning Othniel and Gideon, Jephthah and

Samson, that the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and that consequent thereupon notable deliverances were effected. Such effusions of the Spirit, however, were but temporary, and lacked the perfection and fullness of that holy chrism by virtue of which we recognise God's Christ. *They* belonged to history at a lower level: *this*, by its unique fullness and permanence, proclaimed that Old Testament history had entered the Messianic Age.

The death and resurrection of Christ form one divine event, never to be repeated. "In that He died, He died . . . once for all" (Rom. vi. 10). "Christ, being raised from the dead, dieth no more" (Rom. vi. 9). "Behold, I am alive for evermore" (Rev. i. 18). Together, they constitute one great action, wholly unique, without precedent in history. The death and resurrection of Christ stand in an order of their own. Other deaths there have been; other resurrections there will be: these take their power from a necessity outside of their subjects. "In Adam all die . . . in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. xv. 22). But this death, and this resurrection, take their power from Him Who was their Subject. "I lay down My life, that I might take it again . . . I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (John x. 17-18). The death and resurrection of Christ therefore transcend all human experience, being the outcome of His divine nature and Almighty power.

How misleading, therefore, may become the popular conception of Eastertide as the symbol of the resurrection of Christ, as if *His* resurrection had anything in common with the nature-myths expressed in the re-birth of the Sun-god. No, the triumph of Christ is something other than the return of Baldur the Beautiful, or the reappearance of Spring, or the annual recurrence of one of the cycles of Nature. We search the Bible in vain for any such analogy—unless we take the abominations which Ezekiel saw (Ezek. viii. 13-16) as a sort of prolepsis to Christian faith! The season of harvest, it is true, is employed, both in the Old Testament and the New, as a figure of resurrection, but even here we must beware of using the analogy as a support for any idea of naturalistic necessity in the resurrection of Christ. To do so would be to lower the value of the death of Christ from being the final act of a long historical progression to being only one among the many expressions of the ebb and flow of natural processes, and to make Christ Himself a supreme figure merely among the gods many and lords many that provide an

object of worship to the natural man. For what gives point to our argument is that, in their relation to the divine purpose worked out in Old Testament history and in their bearing upon the future, the death and resurrection of Christ constitute the crisis of all Time and bestow upon history in its widest aspect the element of dynamic progression.

The essential points may be recapitulated. Israel's national history is a progressive series of original non-recurring events, moving steadily from a given beginning, through a measured distance, toward a final crisis. It stands in contrast to the pagan view of life in which human existence is expressed in terms of endlessly-recurring processes. The opposing views, with their values for life, are considered critically in the book of Ecclesiastes, with full justice done to the naturalistic world-view. Granting the premises for the latter, everything below the sun is, in the end, without moral result. But if, on the other hand, as the Preacher finds out, God and not nature is to be accepted as the ultimate postulate for history, then life is charged with intense moral meaning. In this view, God controls the destiny of free-willed men and women, being revealed as Creator and Judge of mankind. History is thus brought within the sphere of existential personal relationships between God and men, and its movement is fulfilled in that field. The personal action of God is to be discerned in the course of Old Testament history, and moves forward in a pre-determined sequence of dispensations, each an advance upon those preceding it, and finally culminating in the dawn of the Messianic Age. The advent of Christ, with everything it stands for, completes Old Testament history.

All this goes to show that while history sometimes apparently repeats itself—thus to lend colour to a naturalistic interpretation—it never does so in reality. In its course it always rises above and beyond itself, and may be thought of as moving spirally round and along a Time-axis, of which Creation and Judgment are the two poles. The time-process is definite, not indefinite: dynamic and personal, not merely mechanical; moral and spiritual in its ultimate significance, not without divine meaning or eternal consequence. In this fact we have the guarantee of all that makes life worth while, and gives sombre weight to the thought of eternity.

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