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Uniqueness of the Hebrew Concept of History as seen in the Books of Kings

MAURICE BLANCHARD

(This and the article in our next number contain the substance of talks given in Sunday morning Bible classes at Kodai-kanal in May, 1957.)

I

In this swiftly moving history where almost four hundred years are covered in forty-seven chapters, may we discern an underlying purpose? Pick up the books and read them at any place where they fall open. Is it possible to have an understanding of the total purpose that will enable one quickly to orient himself and appreciate the historical and prophetic meaning of whatever passage he happens to be reading? At first one may be confused by the seeming disorder and irregularity with which events are recorded. Four hundred years of history recorded in forty-seven chapters, sixty-nine pages in the Revised Standard Version!! The history of the American Republic covers less than two hundred years. The history of modern missionary work in India covers less than two hundred years. The history of the struggle for India's Independence covers less than one hundred years. The very mention of these periods in history calls to mind a flood of facts, events, movements, currents, and cross-currents. What, then, of this period of four hundred years between Solomon and the Exile? Is there a clue to the interpretation of this period of Hebrew history?

Some peculiarities in the author's choice of material are significant. One cannot help asking the questions: Why did he choose to include this? Why did he choose to omit this? Out of the total of forty-seven chapters (twenty-two in First Kings and twenty-five in Second Kings) eleven chapters are given to Solomon; eight chapters to the struggle between Ahab and Elijah; another eight chapters to the work of Elisha and Jehu in wiping out the house of Omri and Ahab and removing the worship of Baal; three chapters to Hezekiah; and two chapters to Josiah. A total of thirty-two chapters out of forty-seven, therefore, given to five kings and two prophets, whereas the

story of forty-one kings is told altogether. Five kings get thirty-two chapters, and thirty-six kings get fifteen chapters. These five kings reigned for a total of 151 years during the 250 years recorded for the Northern Kingdom and 400 years recorded for the Southern Kingdom.

In the period of the Divided Kingdom (1 Kings 12-2 Kings 17) eleven-twelfths of the space are given to the kings of the Northern Kingdom. Moreover, the greatest amount of space is given to the evil kings of the Northern Kingdom during this period. Uzziah or Azariah, a good king of Judah during this period, has only seven verses (2 Kings 15: 1-7), though he reigned for fifty-two years. By contrast, in the period of the lone Kingdom of Judah (2 Kings 18-25), this proportion is just reversed, and the two good kings, Hezekiah and Josiah, have almost all the space, whereas Manasseh, the bad king of Judah, who reigned longest of all the kings, fifty-five years, and whose reign was characterized by material prosperity, has only eighteen verses (2 Kings 21: 1-18).

The two most outstanding kings of Israel from the point of view of government and international relations are hardly mentioned. Omri, who widened the area of the Northern Kingdom considerably and who built the new capital at Samaria, has only six verses (1 Kings 16: 23-28). A century later, Shalmaneser III in an inscription knows Jehu only as the 'son of Omri'. One hundred and forty years later, on an inscription of Tiglath-pileser III, Israel is known only as the 'land of Omri'. Yet, Omri is passed over as of no significance by the author of Kings. In like manner Jeroboam II receives only seven verses (2 Kings 14: 23-29). Jonah the prophet had foretold that he would be very successful in extending the borders of the Northern Kingdom to the limits originally reached under David, from Hamath to the Arabah (2 Kings 14: 25). Great material prosperity marked his reign; but it was accompanied with spiritual declension and moral corruption. Assyria at this time was occupied with her own internal affairs, and thus he was given opportunity to extend and embellish his kingdom; but this is not noted in the Books of Kings.

Of the forty-one kings who reigned in both Israel and Judah, only eight merit praise from Jehovah. Six of them are praised reservedly. They did many good things, but they did not remove the high places which remained as the chief symbols of the Canaanite Baals, the chief rivals of the worship of Jehovah, oftentimes occupying the same site as the altar of Jehovah. These six kings were: Asa (1 Kings 15: 11-14); Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22: 43); Jehoash (2 Kings 12: 2); Amaziah (2 Kings 14: 3); Azariah or Uzziah (2 Kings 15: 3); Jotham (2 Kings 5: 34). Two kings are praised unconditionally. They did many good things, just as these six, but in addition they removed the high places. One was Hezekiah (2 Kings 18: 3-5), in whose period Isaiah was a prophet; he was most highly commended for his

trust in Jehovah (2 Kings 18:5). The other was Josiah (2 Kings 23:1-5), in whose period Jeremiah was a prophet; he was most highly commended for his constancy of purpose and singleness of heart.

It is significant that of these eight good kings all were kings of Judah. Except these, all the other kings of Judah were either unstable or bad. But, all the kings of Israel were unrestrainedly bad, and were all alike condemned. In the Southern Kingdom there was always only one dynasty, that of David. But, in the Northern Kingdom, there were nine dynasties.

Why this neglect of certain men who were otherwise important politically and economically? Why the emphasis on the work of Solomon, the struggle between Ahab and Elijah, the reforming work of Elisha and Jehu, the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah? The purpose of the authors was evidently moral and religious. In order to understand the narratives we must realize that when they are giving history their real concern is with its moral. Included in the history are lessons of secondary importance. But if we are to see their real significance, we are to remember that everything that was written was written by prophets in the true succession from Moses, who were raised up by God as was Moses to tell their countrymen the meaning of what had happened and was continuing to happen to them in their history. The author is showing how, in the struggle between Jehovah and Baal which reached its most intense pitch in the period of the monarchy, the revelation of ethical monotheism given to Moses was preserved and new insights into its meaning were discovered. The long line of evil kings in the Northern Kingdom was given greater proportion of space because it was the purpose to show that the Northern Kingdom was given over to its enemies earlier than the Southern Kingdom on account of its long record of evil and idolatry unbroken by a single revival or reformation through more than 200 years of its history (2 Kings 17:13-18). Then, the Southern Kingdom, not learning the lesson of history from its Northern Brother and in spite of the heroic efforts of the two good kings, Hezekiah and Josiah, 135 years later was also given over to its enemies because of its sins. This is not to say that there were not other factors also contributing to the longer life of the Southern Kingdom, such as more isolated geographical location; but it is to say that to the authors of Kings the overriding cause for the captivities was moral and religious. Pfeiffer is right in saying the Books of Kings are a 'theological treatise', but his interpretation of its significance misses the mark.

There are serious difficulties involved in this moral and religious view of history. Why do the righteous sometimes suffer and the unrighteous prosper? Why did Manasseh, the most wicked king of Judah, son of the good king Hezekiah, enjoy the longest reign of all (55 years), and why such peace and prosperity? Why did Josiah the reformer meet violent death at

the battle of Megiddo (2 Kings 23:28-30), while heretical Omri and Jeroboam II were eminently successful in peace and war and died a natural death?

The question may be asked in these days: 'Is all of history just a matter of the power of intelligence, efficient administration, disciplined organization, material force and power of personality? Or, is there a moral judgement in history?' The writers of Kings would say that all these factors have their place, but that the moral judgement overrides them all. The interpretation of this purpose does not allow that a morally upright king who committed a rash, unwise deed would be automatically protected just because of his moral goodness and devotion. Some of the best kings made a serious mistake of judgement and suffered because of it. Asa who deposed his heathen mother from being queen-mother, nevertheless made a costly alliance with Syria against Israel, and suffered from it (1 Kings 15:16-24). Jehoshaphat committed a serious mistake by taking the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel as wife for his son Jehoram (2 Kings 8:18), and also by joining forces with Ahab in battle (1 Kings 22:1-4). Hezekiah was, too, friendly and open-handed with the Babylonians, and failed to give a testimony to them concerning the living God Who had just restored him to life from a dread disease (2 Kings 20:12-15). Josiah was killed in a battle which he had unnecessarily and unwisely entered (2 Kings 23:28-30).

Intelligence, efficiency, discipline, sagacity, force of personality, all of these have their part in determining whether a kingdom flourishes or falls, according to the Books of Kings. If all of these are present, even without fear of Jehovah and devotion to His covenant, a kingdom may flourish for a while. If all of these qualities are present and combined with fear of Jehovah and devotion to His covenant, a kingdom will flourish for ever. But, the overriding consideration, the most important basis on which God's judgement and His blessing are determined, is the attitude of the heart towards Him and His law. Through all the history of the Hebrews as recorded in the Books of Kings, God is seen to be patient and merciful, but bound to punish evil in the end. Jehovah transcends history, and judges men and nations in history.

Is this view of history unique? Is it even significant? At the risk of too-great over-simplification, contrasting views of world history may now be briefly named and summarized, for the sake of comparison and contrast with the Hebrew view. Six world-views may be briefly considered: (1) To many Greek and Hindu philosophers, time is a wheel of unending recurrences, one circle after another, and each part of a bigger circle, itself connected to a bigger circle. This view is also accepted in the West today, and finds expression in Spengler's *The Decline of the Occident*. (2) To some Greek and Roman philosophers, and to such psychologists as Freud and Watson, the world of nature and the world of man are phases in a cosmic machine.

Man as a part of nature is controlled completely from the outside, just as any other piece of the cosmic machine is controlled. Heredity and environment determine one's destiny, and determine the destiny of a nation. History moves in a straight line. Mohammedanism largely accepts this mechanistic view of history also. (3) To Hegel, history was a dialectical process, the interacting of 'thesis' with 'antithesis' to produce a new 'synthesis', which itself became the 'thesis' for the next step in the development of history. In this view, history moves in a zigzag line. Every sphere of history—social, political and religious—is interpreted according to this dialectical process. For Hegel, history was the onward march, zigzag fashion, of the Absolute Idea which found supreme expression in the State. (4) A fourth view, the biological, was produced by science in the nineteenth century. Having discovered certain laws in operation among plants and animals, men sought to superimpose those same categories on the study of the history of man. They observed that Nature (equivalent to God for them) was prodigal with the individual but careful of the species, that the law of the jungle was the survival of the fittest, and they sought to interpret human history according to these same laws. The Biological View of History and the Dialectical View found support from each other. Science and philosophy joined to enunciate the doctrine of Automatic and Inevitable Progress. (5) A fifth view, that of dialectical materialism, has been compounded in this century, based upon previous views and going beyond them. To Marx, Hegel's finest pupil, the Absolute Idea of Hegel became manifest in the economic factor in history; all ideas were motivated by purely economic considerations. Capitalism was necessary at a certain stage of human history. Economic man has now reached the stage of rejecting this 'thesis' for an antithesis, which will work for the production of a new synthesis, in the next generation. This view amounts to a religious faith, for in their view the cosmic process is on their side, history is working with them. (6) More recently, another view has been put forth by Toynbee, to the intent that history is a stage, a great world-stage, on which is being fought out a personal conflict between supernatural forces striving for mastery over the soul of men.

When set alongside these other views of history the uniqueness of the Hebrew interpretation of history as seen in the Books of Kings becomes more sharp and clear than before. It is not our purpose here to inquire whether the authors of Kings have fully established their view of history by the facts they have recorded. Our first purpose is to get their view clearly in mind. It is not our purpose here to claim that the Hebrew idea of history as seen in the Books of Kings is a fully-developed, well rounded concept. But it can be claimed that later Hebrew-Christian development of the doctrine of history is properly based on what is recorded in the Books of Kings in elementary fashion. The circular or cyclical view of history has certain elements of

truth in it. History also sometimes appears to move in a straight line, and at other times in a zigzag line. The personal struggle of supernatural beings for mastery over the soul of man on the world-stage is also evident in history. But the Hebrew insight seems both to go beyond all of these, and to go deeper than all of these. If one were asked for another picture that would most completely comprehend all the facts of history, a picture which would represent most accurately the Hebrew Concept of History as seen in elementary fashion in the Books of Kings, the picture of a river might be suggested. History flows like a river, ever getting wider, now and then obstructed or diverted, now flowing quietly between pleasant banks, now rushing rapidly over the falls of God's judgement, but always rolling on irresistibly to a certain end, the judgement of God, before whom every individual and every nation is accountable. God's judgement is not withheld either from an autocracy or a democracy, just because it is an autocracy or a democracy. God's judgement is not withheld either from an Ahab who respects the rights of private ownership of property or from a Jezebel who has no such respect, for both of them sin in taking the life of Naboth. Capitalism and communism are both subject to God's judgement. God is sovereign over all social and political and economic systems, and He judges men and nations by the processes of history. In this view of history the interest is in the individual as well as in the universal.

The individual has universal significance. The insignificant strip of territory, Palestine, has universal significance. What happened to the insignificant people who lived there between the time of Solomon and the Exile can happen to any people, and will happen to them. God individualizes. He is not prodigal with the individual and careful of the species. He is careful of the individual. Much space is given in the Books of Kings to stories of the individual lives of kings and prophets, but not only kings and prophets, also ordinary people, the widow of the seminary student, the Shunammite woman, Naaman, and Gehazi. Revelation is bound up with the history of individuals and nations. Jehovah is more than a God of Nature; He is a God of History. He is to be remembered chiefly not for making the ground fertile and for giving children, but for historical deliverance from Egypt and for His acts in history, of both salvation and judgement. If all other means of lifting His people out of idolatry fail, He will at last both judge and purify them through deliverance into the hand of their enemies. The moral judgement overrides all. Exile stands at the end of the road for His people who will not give up their idols and do justice to their neighbours.

The uniqueness of this Hebrew concept of history becomes all the more impressive when one recalls the cultural and religious background in which it was developed. Archaeology has now shown that Abraham, more than four hundred years before the Exodus, was not a simple-minded nomad, that the civilization from which he came in Chaldea was highly organized, and that

he interacted with a highly developed religion before he received his call from Jehovah. Hebrew backgrounds are being pushed not only backward in time, but also outward in geographical limitations. The Hammurabic Code, discovered in 1902, revealed the existence in the ancient world of a comprehensive jurisprudence antedating the Mosaic Law and probably contemporary with Abraham. It seemed to indicate that early Hebrew law need not have been merely the customs of a nomadic people. The discovery of Mohenjo-daro and a few other ancient sites in the Indus River Valley has proved the existence of a highly developed civilization in India about the time of Abraham. People of that area built cities with beautiful streets, perpendicular to each other, developed an excellent system of drainage, wove cotton cloth as fine as any that can be produced today, and used copper vessels.

Moses arose at a time in Egypt when the religion was a complex and highly developed system. The first Egyptian monotheistic reformer, Pharaoh Akh-en-Aton, was born in 1396 B.C., which, according to the view taken here, would place his far-reaching reforms of Egyptian polytheism in the century following the Exodus of the Hebrews under Moses. While there is no evidence of any direct connection between the monotheism of Moses and that of Akh-en-Aton, scholars have often wondered about the possibility of a relation. The Tel-el-Amarna Tablets have made it reasonably clear, along with other evidences, that the Exodus was around 1440 B.C. and the Entrance into Canaan around 1400 B.C. Thus Moses would be contemporary with Amenhotep III and Queen Hatshepsut, and this 'Hattie Sue' may probably have been the one who drew Moses out of the waters of the Nile. Moses, being trained in all the arts and wisdom of the Egyptians, had the very best intellectual preparation for receiving the revelation given on Mount Sinai and for developing the whole system for the governance of the personal, community, and national life of the Jews. His cultural and religious background provided an excellent framework within which the whole monotheistic system of the Jews could be expounded.

Archaeology and anthropology have also shown three things of importance in the study of the early life of the Hebrews: (1) The religious practices and beliefs of a primitive people are not always simple; they have their complexities. (2) Some primitive peoples are monotheistic. Some of our Primitive Contemporaries (to borrow the phrase used for the title of Murdock's book on the customs and habits of primitive people found in existence in the twentieth century) are monotheistic. Monotheism is not a unique characteristic found at the end of a long stage of development. It may be found at the beginning, among primitive peoples. (3) Hebrew religion from the beginning interacted with other highly developed religions of South-West Asia, from Babylon to Egypt. It was not a simple thing developed in a vacuum.

Most significant among the elements of Canaanite worship and the popular religion of the Hebrews is the figurine of the fertility goddess. These figurines are not found in Israelite sites of the period of the Judges, although they were popular in the Canaanite cities of that age. The Hebrews, it seems, had not yet yielded to the allurements of the fertility cult of their neighbours by the time of the Judges. But, by the period of the Monarchy, that is, of the Books of the Kings, several types of fertility goddess figurines became common in all the cities of Israel. Every Israelite house apparently had one or more of these figurines, according to archaeological finds. A widespread belief in these fertility goddesses is indicated among the masses during this period. In other words, the trend of popular religion was downward instead of upward.

W. Robertson Smith was first attracted to his tremendous studies, which eventuated in his great work, *The Religion of Semites*, by his belief that in this area of South-West Asia would be found a true and typical example of man's religion in general apart from a revelation in history. It is of importance to us in India that archaeology and anthropology are bringing innumerable facts to light to support this belief, to show that in spite of racial, linguistic, economic, and other differences all of these people seem to have shared a certain common idea of religion, and to indicate that the religious and cultural life of ancient South-West Asia including Palestine was strongly similar to the religious and cultural life of India as known through the past two centuries.

In an environment where the God of Nature was supreme, the Hebrews developed a unique concept in which God was seen to both judge and save men within history. We cannot but ask how this happened, and we shall not be far wrong if we say that it was the prophets of Israel who were mainly responsible for this development. The prophets were writers not only of prophecies in the literal sense, but also in the broader sense of writing history from the prophetic point of view. The Books of Chronicles name seven prophets who wrote history, and to whose writings recourse was had in the compilation of those books: namely, Samuel, Nathan, Gad, Shemaiah, Jehu, Ahijah, and Iddo (1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 9:29; 12:15; 13:22; 20:34; 32:32). Isaiah is also named as one of the prophets who wrote history from the prophetic point of view (1 Chron. 26:22). It seems likely that each prophet wrote the annals of the kings who reigned during his time, that later under the superintendence of Jeremiah all of these were studied together with the official annals of the kingdom, and from this study the Books of Kings were compiled. The Jews put the Books of Kings in the section of their Scriptures with the Prophets, probably because they regarded these books as having been written from the point of view of the prophets and under the superintendence of the prophets. These historical books serve to complement and to

furnish the necessary background for the understanding of the prophetic books. In these historical books the prophets drew well-known illustrations from the nation's history and from the lives of its heroes and leaders, in order to impart great moral lessons ; and at the same time, more significantly, they were laying the foundation for the development of the unique Hebrew concept of history. The revelation of a righteous God both judging and saving men in history was first comprehended by the Hebrews and is their unique contribution to the world of religious thought.



THE TEMPLE IN THE HEART

*In my heart and in my home,
When in my busy mart I roam,
Or where civic duties call,
Lo ! Thy temple in them all.*

*Sisters, brothers, round me stand,
Each of them Thy temple grand,
Deeds and thoughts, life's hopes and fears
Beauteous there Thy shrine appears.*

*Profit, loss, success, defeat,
Weal or woe—Thy radiant seat.
Memories past and future raise
Lovely temples to Thy praise.*

*Father, what Thou once hath shown,
Mysteries before unknown,
May they never from me pass,
Still unfolding, so says Dās.*