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The Uniqueness of Hebrew History

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II

Having considered in the first study the uniqueness of the Hebrew concept of history as seen in the Books of Kings, it is proposed now to consider the uniqueness of Hebrew history as seen in the Books of Kings. Perhaps there might be some indications that this unique concept of history was largely responsible for the unique development of their history; but that will not be the main concern in this study. Our main concern is practical, and in closing an effort will be made to show what practical lessons may be learned from this rapid survey of Hebrew history.

SOLUTION OFFERED TO PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY

Three basic problems with which philosophy has always concerned itself relate to the nature of reality, the nature of man, and the nature of morality. A little earlier than the Greek philosophers, a little earlier than Buddha and Confucius, the prophets who wrote Hebrew history dealt with the same problems with which these philosophers were later to wrestle. The amazing thing is that the prophets found their answers to these problems in the realm of historical events, rather than in theories and intellectual speculations. One of the unique things about Hebrew history as recorded in the Books of Kings is that in the realm of historical fact, what men can see and touch, it gives elementary answers to man's greatest problems. Right here is laid the foundation upon which was later built the whole Hebrew-Christian solution of these problems.

At the risk of over-simplification, it is proposed to state here in summary fashion the various solutions that have been proposed to these three problems and to compare the solution offered by the facts of Hebrew history. Regarding the nature of reality it has been the tendency of philosophy to emphasize on the one hand the spiritual nature of ultimate reality or on the other hand the material nature of ultimate reality. Plato said that the ideas one entertains are more real to him than the material things he can touch and see. To the Hindus the Paramatman is the ultimate reality, and the material world is Maya. To the materialist

the created world is the only reality ; it is eternal. Dialectical materialism asserts that matter alone is real, and that economic considerations motivate every act of man. What then is the Hebrew experience of reality ? What is real ? Both material things and spiritual things are real. Material depends for its existence on the spiritual ; but both are real. The natural and the supernatural are intertwined, though the natural is subject to the supernatural. Elisha's house may be surrounded by the hosts of Syria, a material fact ; but if one had eyes to see, he would also discover there a mountain full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha (2 Kings 6:11-19). Countless stories in the Books of Kings are recorded, not as simply illustrations of spiritual truth, but as actual historical fact, which indicate the line the Hebrews were following in their solution of the problem of the nature of reality.

Regarding also the nature of man, it has been the tendency of most philosophies and religions either to over-emphasize the spiritual side of his nature or to over-emphasize the physical side of his nature. To the Hindus the only abiding element in man is his Atman. The Atman is a part of the Paramatman, and the ultimate goal of life is absorption back into that spirit. On the other hand the materialist declares that man is only an animal, and happiness of the body is all that matters. What is the Hebrew solution to this problem ? Found in elementary fashion in the Pentateuch and illustrated by historical events in the Books of Kings is the teaching that man is an animal, but not only an animal. Man has God's image stamped on him ; he is spiritual. In man two worlds meet, the material and the spiritual : he has both material and spiritual needs. Food is provided by ravens for Elijah at the brook Cherith ; the oil of the widow of Zarephath does not fail (1 Kings 17:1-16). An angel provides food for Elijah in the wilderness ; but this same Elijah can hear the speaking of the 'still small voice' (1 Kings 19:4-18). On and on the stories go. Man is a creature responsible to his Creator. His life and history are dependent on his own free choice and his recognition of responsibility to God. He determines his destiny by his attitude toward God ; the exile is the chief evidence of this.

Regarding also the nature of morality, Hebrew history gives a unique answer. To the materialist moral laws are the inventions of man, customs brought into being for the sake of social order, or for the sake of enforcing and maintaining the authority of government. To the Hindu, morality is defined in terms of caste duty, social customs with a religious sanction. To the Hebrews, moral laws were given by the Creator for the governance and welfare of those whom He had created. They were given to man from God, since God has the right to govern those whom He has created. They were given to the Hebrews especially because He had delivered them from Egyptian bondage and had made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai. Every judgement that fell on the people and their leaders is interpreted as the

result of unfaithfulness to that covenant. Ahab and Jezebel are punished for taking the life of Naboth. Religion cannot be divorced from social justice. Exile stands at the end of the road for those who will not obey the Law ; God judged the Hebrews in history.

ROAD TO ETHICAL MONOTHEISM

Hebrew history, then, is a kind of touchstone by which a clue is given for the solution of the problems of existence. But it is more than that. It is also unique in that it gives an interpreted revelation of the road by which God brought up a people out of a pagan cultural and religious background to the acceptance of ethical monotheism. Two steps on this road are found earlier than the Books of Kings. The first step was an act of redemption which all nations could see and recognize, the deliverance from Egyptian bondage. Thus, even here, the Gospel preceded the Law. The second step was the establishment of a covenant. By this the people accepted a Law, a Standard, different from their previously accepted standard. Though at first this Law was only understood by a few, nevertheless there was great importance in a general and popular acceptance of the Law as their Law. Though practice fell far behind theory, it was important that the Mosaic Law be the basis of appeal for correction of abuses if the people were to move upward.

The third means in their history by which God led His people upward was that of such extremists as the Nazirites and the Rechabites. The Nazirites took three vows, each of which gave a lesson in visual education to the Hebrews. It was not possible for all to take these vows, but it was necessary for the good of the whole that a few should take them: (1) non-use of wine or strong drink, (2) abstention from use of the razor, and (3) abstention from contact with a dead body (Numbers 6:1-12). None of these acts was considered sinful in itself. But, because of certain associations with the fertility cults of the Baal-worshippers, the presence of a small minority of men who had taken these vows would always be a public indication of the fact that abstinence from such practices was a mark of special separation unto Jehovah. The Nazirite vow was voluntary, for a temporary period, only taken by the few, and was taken by both men and women.

The origin of the Rechabites is obscure. According to one hypothesis they seem to have been originally a Kenite clan (1 Chron. 2:55), and may have come from Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses. Numbers 11:29-32 shows that Moses invited the son of Jethro to go with him to Canaan, but leaves it doubtful as to what he did. Judges 1:16 shows that at the time of the occupation of Canaan the Kenites were present. From Jeremiah 35:1-11 it appears that Jonadab, the son of Rechab, in order to keep his descendants free from the fertility cults of the Baal-worshippers, had taught his sons to forswear vine-culture and

house-building as well as wine drinking. They are referred to in 2 Kings 10:15-17, when they give their support to Jehu in his eradication of Baal-worship from the Northern Kingdom. These were extremists, and their custom was good though not commanded of the Lord. Their presence was always a rebuke to any excesses in the drinking of wine, especially that associated with Baal-worship. The Nazirites and the Rechabites both had a place in God's way of leading His people upward out of paganism. The spiritual life of any society depends upon and may be greatly advanced by the presence of such minorities, extremists, ascetics who give up certain things which are not harmful in themselves. Such people become a rebuke to others, and serve as a goad to the conscience of society to make it move upward.

The fourth means in their history used by God for lifting up the Hebrew people was the prophets. The 'dynamic' element in Hebrew history was the inter-action between the high beliefs and concepts and practices of the prophets and the low practices of the masses of the people. These prophets were raised up by God in a true succession from Moses, for a practical interpretation and application of the Mosaic Law. Basing their appeals on the Mosaic Law which the masses had accepted theoretically as their Law, and combining social justice with religious idealism, the prophets sometimes condemned current practices with the support of the priests, sometimes with the support of the kings, sometimes with the support of both. But they were willing to stand alone if necessary, and often did stand alone speaking with authority based solely in their own integrity and their assurance that what they said was the Word of the Lord. It was the prophets who made the difference in Hebrew history; they are the chief ones responsible for the unique development of Hebrew history.

The fifth means in their history used by God for lifting the Hebrew people out of paganism was the revivals and reformations. Six of the kings of Judah effected widespread reformations; but they were praised reservedly because they did not remove the high places (1 Kings 15:11-15; 22:43; 2 Kings 12:1-3; 14:3, 4; 15:3, 4; 15:34). However, that those revivals served to keep alive the conscience of the people and to remind them that God expected more of them must be noted. Last of all, the two kings, Hezekiah and Josiah, effected even the removal of the high places (2 Kings 18:4; 23:1-25). There is no evidence that Isaiah showed any confidence in the revival under Hezekiah, or that Jeremiah showed any confidence in the revival under Josiah. Perhaps they saw that the revival was largely the result of the 'royal edict' of the king, and that no moral change had taken place in the heart of the people. The hopelessness of Josiah's day is seen in the words of Huldah the prophetess (2 Kings 22:14-20). But, just the same, when one takes the larger view of this whole period of Hebrew history, he cannot help but notice that these revivals did serve to condemn idolatrous practices and

to goad the conscience of the people. Though the people slipped back into idolatry after each revival, yet the revivals were used of God as one means of eventually bringing them to the acceptance of ethical monotheism.

After the reformation under Hezekiah, Manasseh the worst king of all led the people into greater wickedness than they had ever known before (2 Kings 21:1-18). After the reformation under Josiah, while Jeremiah stands with a red flag waving the nation back from its doom, the people plunge ahead into greater wickedness. Has all failed? The redemption from Egypt? The Law at Sinai? The work of the Nazirites and Rechabites? The work of the prophets? The revivals and reformations? Are all of these not sufficient to lift the people out of paganism? Is there any other means left by which God can purify and cleanse His people from idolatry? There is one other: The Exile. That is God's sixth means by which He will bring to completion the work He began more than seven long centuries before. Because the prophets interpreted the Exile as part of the discipline of God on the nation, this whole national experience put the final touches on all that had gone before. When they returned, they may have lapsed into idolatrous practices a few times, according to Ezra and Nehemiah; but the backbone of idolatry among the Hebrews had been broken. No matter what further hardships they experienced under the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans, they did not go back to the idols; the nation had become monotheistic. This is something unique in history. Romans 1: 18-32 tells how other nations sank down into idolatry, and stayed there. The history of the Hebrews is unique in that it records how a people came up out of idolatry and paganism to the level of ethical monotheism; their history may serve as a clue for understanding how God will work similarly in dealing with other people.

PREPARED BACKGROUND FOR COMING OF CHRIST

There is a third thing that is unique about Hebrew history. Their history not only gives the facts for the solution of the problems of existence; their history not only indicates the path by which God leads a people out of paganism; their history is also unique in that it prepared a proper background in which Jesus Christ could be born. The appearance of Jesus was so meteoric, and the work He did extended for such a short duration in time that He cannot be understood apart from the historical events that preceded His appearance, and the epistles by which the inner significance of His life and work were interpreted after His appearance. Jesus Christ came in the 'fulness of time' as a part of an historical development started many centuries before.

In the first study it was noted that though the Hebrews assimilated many of the customs of their neighbours, there were four things for which they must always be commended: (1) the

observance of the Passover as their chief festival, (2) the refusal to make an image for Jehovah, (3) the non-attribution of children to Jehovah, and (4) the development of a tension between the prophets and the masses. These four elements in their history were of prime importance in preparing for the coming of Christ. While Jeroboam I changed the chief festival for the Northern Kingdom to the eighth month to make it coincide with the New Year Harvest Festival of the God of Nature worshipped by the Canaanites (1 Kings 12:25-33), yet in the Southern Kingdom the Passover was always observed as the chief festival, and was revived at each of the great reformations under Hezekiah and Josiah. The Passover was of prime importance because it pointed back to the chief historical fact in Hebrew history, the deliverance from Egypt, and forward to the historical event when God would deliver sinners from the bondage of sin through the death and resurrection of His Son. The Passover lamb recalled the blood which was sprinkled on the doorpost and by which the house was protected from the angel of death, and pointed forward to the blood of Christ which would be shed for the justification and reconciliation of the world. The Passover was the main link between the past and the future. It had no equivalent among the neighbours of the Hebrews ; it marked their God as a God of History ; it prepared for the coming of Christ in a unique way.

It is remarkable that the Hebrews never made an image for Jehovah. Numerous images of other gods and goddesses have been found on sites alongside the worship of Jehovah. In the period of the monarchy the people kept many figurines of mother-goddesses in their houses. But no image of Jehovah has ever been discovered, and there is no indication anywhere that an image for Jehovah was ever made. Isaiah pictures the people of Israel as being ashamed at a great Parliament of Religions because all other nations have beautiful images to represent their gods, but they have nothing (Isaiah 41:1-29). Nevertheless, they never made an image for Jehovah. This lack of an image of Jehovah required the coming of a Person Who would Himself be the Express Image of God (Hebrews 1:3).

It is also remarkable that the Hebrews never attributed children to Jehovah. The worship of Jehovah and the worship of the mother-goddesses were carried on side by side. All the Baals were thought of as males and the Astartes as females. The Canaanites had many stories of marriages among the gods. Yet, there is no evidence that any of the mother-goddesses were ever connected with Jehovah as wives. And no children were ever attributed to Him under any circumstances. Alexander the Great gave credence to the story that the god Zeus, in the form of a serpent, cohabited with his mother and caused him to be born. The Minoans, in the centuries before Moses, told the story that the god Zeus, in the form of a bull, captured a Phoenician princess, swam with her to the isle of Crete, there became the father of three sons by her, and thus established the ruling line

of Minos in the island. In the cultural and religious background of South-west Asia during the period of the monarchy the line between gods and men was a very fine one, gods could become men at will and then change themselves back again. In this background the Hebrews developed a high monotheism almost amounting to deism, and so emphasized the transcendence of God that in the time of Christ people feared to call God by the name of Jehovah and invented another name for Him, Adonai, by which they would refer to Him indirectly. In this background the story of the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ, to a virgin, by the power of the Holy Spirit, once for all, would be difficult for a Jew to comprehend or accept. The very difficulty of admission would make the story more credible if accepted, and would tend to make its acceptance in the nature of an exception to be made only once. This kind of background would give greater value to the claim for a Virgin Birth than if the claim had been made in a background which was already accustomed to accepting all kinds of stories about miraculous, unusual, extraordinary births. In this way Hebrew history prepared especially for His coming.

The tension that developed between the prophets and the masses was also in itself a preparation for the coming of Christ. During the first period after the deliverance from Egypt, it was the priest who exercised chief power over the people. From the human point of view there was a struggle going on between the spiritual and civil leaders of the people. The fall of the House of Eli (1 Samuel 1-5) signified the end of priestly dominance, though the institution of priesthood continued even down to the time of Christ. When Solomon became king, he deposed the line of priesthood coming from Eli and established a new line (1 Kings 2:27, 35). At the time of the dedication of the temple, Solomon acted as both priest and king (1 Kings 8:62-66). This showed the ascendancy of the king over the priest, of the civil power over the spiritual power. But during the period of the Kings, while the priesthood was still in existence, and while the monarchy was rising to its glory and falling, beginning from Samuel onwards, it was the prophets to whom the future belonged. When Christ came, as Priest, King, and Prophet, He fulfilled the functions of all three, and of the three He continued only the last, the Prophet, in the ministry of His Church. With the coming of Christ, the priestly function was both fulfilled and ended. Each individual believer became a priest. There is no mention of an earthly priesthood in the New Testament. Nor is there mention of an earthly kingship. But, in the New Testament Church the prophetic ministry continues. In the three listings of spiritual gifts, found in Romans twelve, First Corinthians twelve; and Ephesians four, prophets in every case stand near the head of the list. The prophetic gift in the sense of interpreting the acts of God in history continues throughout the present age. The prophets were the chief ones who prepared

for the coming of Christ ; they exercised the greatest influence in preparing the background within which He would do His work ; the future belonged to them.

PRACTICAL VALUES

In closing it will be profitable to ask what we may learn from this study of the Books of Kings that will be of practical value to Christians today. One of the first things will come with humbling effect on us all: namely, that we are not to expect too much recognition from the rest of the world for the religious and cultural contribution made to the world by Christianity. In the inscriptions of Babylon and Assyria and Egypt there are occasional references to the Hebrews ; but there is nothing whatever in those inscriptions to indicate that any of Israel's conquerors appreciated in the smallest degree her unique religious history or her cultural contribution to the world. The incidental references that are found here and there relate only to various conquests of the land and collections of revenue from the land. To the other powers of South-west Asia, Samaria and Jerusalem were never more than troublesome fortresses which stood in the way of their spoliation of surrounding villages and towns. Our appreciation of the uniqueness of Hebrew history and of the uniqueness of the Hebrew interpretation of history are entirely out of proportion to the appreciation of the peoples among whom they lived. And we must not expect any greater appreciation for Christianity today than was accorded to the Hebrews in that previous day.

A second thing we may learn is that it is important for any people, if it is to march upward out of paganism, that there be a few extremists, like the Nazirites and Rechabites, who will live lives of utter separation unto God, and who by their presence will be a constant rebuke to the rest of the people and a public sign of God's holiness. A few such men might well be encouraged.

A third thing we may learn is the prime importance, yes, the indispensability of the prophetic ministry, interpreting the Law of God, the Word of God, and combining social justice with religious idealism. No amount of administrative efficiency, no amount of organizational discipline, no amount of financial resources can take the place of the prophetic ministry. These others are all right in their place. But, the prophets, without any financial backing and without any power to discipline wrongdoers, relying solely on the rightness of their cause, appealing straight to the innermost conscience of their people, achieved what no king by royal edict could ever achieve. The greatest need in the churches of India today is for the prophetic ministry.

A fourth thing we may learn is that revivals are important. We cannot always live on a revival level. But revivals, times of cleansing and restitution, times of repentance and reformation,

have their place. Throughout the long period of four hundred years covered by the Books of Kings only eight revivals are recorded, all were in the Southern Kingdom, and six were limited by the fact that the high places were allowed to remain. In the hundred and fifty years of modern Christian activity in India, how many revivals have there been? How many revivals have there been that reached throughout one whole language area? Perhaps the greatest revival of all these years might come within this generation if the prophetic ministry arose in mighty cleansing power.

A fifth thing we may learn is that we are to interpret hardships, difficulties, obstacles, even an Exile, as part of the plan of God for the purification of His people. We have the same human ground for discouragement today as the little handful of Hebrews had in the midst of great Babylon in the sixth century before Christ. But, there can be, by the grace of God, and by a prophetic vision, a transformation of these obstacles; they can become a means of discipline and a preparation for some greater blessing to come. No doubt to many Jewish leaders at the fall of Jerusalem it seemed that the world had come to an end; they saw no hope for the future. Likewise, at the fall of the Roman Empire, even to Augustine, there seemed no hope for the future, and no hope for Christianity. It was in that circumstance that he saw his vision of the City of God. The Exile shows that out of the fall of a civilization God preserves the best elements and works for the achievement of His purposes. We are not to put our faith in any system, not even capitalism or democracy; but in the God who rules over all systems, judges them, and saves the best out of them. We are never to doubt that it is God's purpose for all the doors of the world, including China, to be open to the full and free proclamation of His Gospel. If they are closed anywhere, it is due to human sin and blindness, and the closing of the doors is a judgment of God. But we are to be sure that He is even now working to bring good out of this situation.

A sixth thing we may learn is encouraging, inspiring, optimistic, just as the first thing was humbling, depressing, somewhat pessimistic. The progress made by Indian Christians during the past one hundred and fifty years of Christian activity in India is more remarkable than the progress made by the Hebrews during all the eight hundred years of their history between the bondage in Egypt and the exile into Babylon. That Indian Christians live in a background very much parallel to that in which the Hebrews of the monarchy lived has been seen earlier. That their progress has been more remarkable than that of the Hebrews cannot be denied, and it is a tremendous tribute to the extra power released through the Life and Death and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to all the glorious truths revealed in the New Testament that were not known even to the best of Old Testament saints and prophets. The power of the Gospel has been demonstrated in the history of India. The future belongs to Christ and to His Gospel.