ESSEX HALL LECTURE

ANCIENT PROPHECY AND MODERN CRISIS

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ANCIENT PROPHECY AND MODERN CRISIS

THE RELEVANCE OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY TO-DAY

In recent years there has been a remarkable revival of interest in biblical studies, especially in biblical theology. The Bible has ceased to be a book which was falling gradually into neglect and to which every tribute was paid but the supreme tribute of reading its pages. It has become again the centre of quickened attention and constant study, something to which the presses of Europe and America bear ample witness. For this change in the contemporary attitude to the Bible more than one cause is to be discerned. Chief among them is the orthodox reaction which has characterized nearly all the main branches of Protestant religious thought, together with a fresh emphasis upon the value of biblical study in the Roman Catholic Church. In Protestantism the result has been to place the Bible at the very centre of its theological systems, and the most influential theology to-day is biblical theology. Since Liberal Christianity, in its modern expression at any rate, has not given the Bible this central place in its theological thought, it has been less deeply affected by current trends. Indeed, some may feel that it does and should remain aloof from them. That, however, is not a view that all Liberal Christians may wish to share. In the past, the Bible has had a crucial influence upon the development of Liberal Christian thought, and for many of its adherents to-day is still of indispensable worth. For them, the revival of biblical study has had two consequences of importance, one of which is

to be deplored, the other, we venture to suggest, to be welcomed and noted. It is regrettable that recent years should have seen a return to bibliolatry and a fresh attempt to set up the Bible again as a final authority in religion and morals. The Bible is proclaimed anew as the sole 'Word of God' for men, an exclusive revelation of his will and purpose, different in kind from the revered books of any other great religion. That attitude, we believe, renders the Bible a profound disservice, since it hides its true value and authority. To uphold it as infallible in the twentieth century is to make it vulnerable to criticism on all sides, historical, scientific and so on, and to divorce it from the culture of the day. From this trend the liberal in theology must dissociate himself. It is opposed to one of his most deeply held convictions—that the divine-human encounter, which is the source of all religion, cannot be limited to one channel.

> Every race and every time
> Hath received thine inspirations,
> Glimpses of thy truth sublime.

The liberal must hold fast to his belief in the universality of God's self-revelation and man's capacity to respond to it.

When, however, the attempt is not made to regard the Bible as a religious ultimate beyond which there is no appeal, there is value in the current emphasis on biblical theology. Modern criticism has to its credit an immense achievement in making the Bible comprehensible to the modern mind. The historical approach is essential for a true understanding of its nature; the various disciplines of historical, textual and literary criticism cannot be ignored by any serious student of scripture. Yet the danger is always present that when scholars are deeply immersed in critical and analytical problems, as, for instance, in isolating and

dating the various sources that lie behind the text, they may neglect the religious thought and experience which created the documents. Absorption in critical problems tends to obscure both the religious message of the subject of study and its relevance to the life of its readers. The present stress on biblical thought has done much to avoid this danger, and this aspect of current biblical study is to be welcomed. It has helped to make clear that the theology of a book which is concerned from first to last with the relations of God to man must always be of first importance. It does not ignore the technical aids that scholarship has evolved for understanding the Bible, but it recognizes that they are contributory to a supreme aim—that the life and thought of the Bible may be made relevant to our age.

The Bible arose out of the spiritual strivings of an ancient people. It needed more than a thousand years for its completion. It is an inexhaustible source of interest to the scholar in many important fields—in the history of religion, in historical and literary criticism, in archaeology and other subjects. As such it will never cease to be studied and evaluated. But what counts above all is the message it may have for each succeeding generation: as they read its pages, it may speak to men and women in all their strivings and sufferings, all their hopes and fears, and in their deepest aspirations.

Now if this is the supreme value of the Bible, it may well be felt that the New Testament has a far greater significance than the Old. It contains the foundation documents of the Christian faith, almost all that we know of the life, teaching and death of Jesus Christ, and is the primary source of Christian doctrine. For Christians of all shades of thought it is indispensable; to it they must return again and again. By contrast, the Old Testament, while it may be recognized as

necessary for the understanding of the New, is often regarded, or has been until recently, as in itself outmoded. It is seen as a primitive collection of writings, interesting for the antiquarian or the historian of religion, but with ideas of God and his dealings with men that are archaic and irrelevant to contemporary issues. Hence, to many people, particularly in the Liberal churches, the Old Testament has become a closed book. Yet it has shared with the New in the revived interest in biblical studies. It has done so because it speaks in its own right and to the situation in which men and women find themselves to-day. Eminently true is this of the prophetic section of the Old Testament Canon, which is the subject of this brief study. The great prophets from the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C. are the high-water mark of Old Testament religion. There are other parts of the Old Testament, notably the Psalms and the book of Job, which have abiding spiritual worth, but it is prophecy which is the supreme contribution of the faith of Israel to all succeeding generations.

The Essential Genius of Old Testament Prophecy

Wherein, then, lies the essential genius of Old Testament prophecy? For a consideration of this question, we must first take some note of the findings of recent research into its origins and nature, though time will not allow us to have more than a cursory glance. In the first place, whatever claims Old Testament prophecy may make upon us, it can no longer be presented as a unique religious phenomenon, something *sui generis*, which stood alone among the world's great religions. Like the mythical Melchizedek of the book of Genesis, mentioned in the Epistle to the Hebrews, Hebrew prophecy was thought to be without father,

without mother, without genealogy. This can no longer be maintained. A great deal of recent study has gone to show that the features which marked Hebrew prophecy, especially in its early stages, characterized also the religions of the people that surrounded and preceded Israel. Hebrew prophecy is seen to bear an international character. The establishment of this fact has been the work largely of Scandinavian scholars such as S. Mowinckel, A. Bentzen, I. Engnell and A. Haldar, to name only a few. We may cite here the view of Alfred Haldar, of Uppsala. It is that Old Testament prophecy is part of a general Semitic cultic pattern, which in turn is an offshoot of the general ancient pattern in the Near East. Haldar quotes A. Gressmann with approval: 'Israelite prophecy is rooted, therefore, in Canaanite prophecy and presumably the latter has an international character.'[1] The difference in the present outlook from that which formerly obtained may be seen by recalling an opinion of the late Professor Peake. Writing in 1923 on the roots of Hebrew prophecy, he said: 'We know nothing of Canaanite prophets. And it is questionable whether a movement so zealous for the worship of Yahweh would have taken over for its propaganda a form of religious exercise characteristic of Canaanite religion.'[2] Peake, of course, was writing some years before the discovery of the Ras Shamra tablets and those, along with other modern archaeological discoveries, have shed a flood of light upon Old Testament religion. They show the existence of ritual customs and cultural elements common to both Hebrews and Canaanites. Some scholars therefore believe that the Israelites took

[1] A. Haldar, *Associations of Cult Prophets among the Ancient Semites*, 1945, p. 91.

[2] A. S. Peake, 'The Roots of Hebrew Prophecy and Jewish Apocalyptic', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, January 1923.

over prophecy from the original inhabitants when they entered Canaan. Others maintain that it was already known to them before the settlement. In either case, it is generally accepted that it is through extraneous sources, through Canaanite and consequently Accadian influence, that prophecy in Israel acquired the characteristics that we know it to possess when we first meet it in the Old Testament.

On the basis of this common origin of Israelite prophecy with similar manifestations of religious activity elsewhere, further changes have taken place in the last two or three decades in the approach to the significance of the prophets. It has long been recognized that among the Israelites, as among their neighbours, the earlier prophets (the *Nebhi'im*) were generally gregarious in character. But to-day a much greater emphasis is placed upon their close association with the cultus. They were never in opposition to the cultus, but existed in connection with it. We have been accustomed to make a distinction between 'priestly' and 'prophetic' religion and to regard prophecy mainly as a revolt against the priestly ritual. I believe there is still considerable meaning in that distinction, but we must recognize now that in origin at least there is no clear-cut separation between priest and prophet and cultus. Prophecy did not arise as a protest against the cultus, and both priest and prophet share a common origin. Thus in the work of the Scandinavian school and of English scholars such as A. R. Johnson stress is laid upon the existence of the cultic prophet—a description which would once have been thought a contradiction in terms. The priest and the prophet are both cultic functionaries, standing side by side at the local sanctuaries and even at the Jerusalem temple.

There is yet another aspect of Old Testament prophecy that indicates kinship with the surrounding peoples of the ancient Near East. That is the method

by which the prophets received and transmitted their oracles. There has been much recent discussion about what, for want perhaps of a better psychological term, is called prophetic ecstasy. When we first meet with the phenomenon of prophecy in the Old Testament we find that it is characterized by abnormal psychical experiences. As an example we may take a well-known narrative in the First Book of Samuel. Saul, after his first encounter with Samuel, meets a string of prophets descending from a local sanctuary. They have worked themselves up into a kind of ecstasy by music and dancing. Their enthusiastic fervour is transmitted to Saul himself so that he, too, prophesies.[1] Again, the behaviour of the early prophets was such that prophecy and madness were often regarded as indistinguishable. In the Second Book of Kings Elisha is dismissed by one of the servants of Jehu as 'this mad fellow'.[2] For the early and popular type of prophet in Israel ecstasy was a frequent psychological condition. In that it was not an isolated phenomenon. As A. R. Johnson has remarked, it can be illustrated over a wide area, from early times to the present day, from the opponents of Elijah on Mount Carmel to the wizards of Patagonia and the dervishes of the Near East. According to Alfred Haldar, it was characteristic of Mesopotamian and the north-west Semites in general that they employed artificial means to induce an ecstatic condition. This custom, he maintains, was common also to the Old Testament prophets. The sacred dance and cult music were important factors in stimulating prophetic activities. He even suggests that incense, alcohol and other drugs were used in the service of cult ecstasy. The question at issue is whether this condition was normal and whether it applied to the great prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah. On this point, opinions differ.

[1] See I Samuel x. 5–13. [2] See II Kings ix. 11.

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Broadly speaking, there are two main views. The first is that a sharp distinction must be made between the canonical prophets and all other forms of prophecy. The second is that it is impossible to make such a distinction. Here it seems to me that no clear dividing line can be drawn. Professor N. H. Snaith regards Hosea as the first of a new type of prophet entirely different from any that had preceded him.[1] He holds that there is no evidence that either he or any of his eighth-century contemporaries ever spoke in ecstasy. The word of the Lord came to them in full normal consciousness and they were aware of what they were doing. But whatever terms we may use, there is much in the narratives to show that the great prophets also underwent abnormal psychic experiences. It is highly unlikely that they had recourse to artificial stimulants but they possessed unusual capacities. Outstanding is the vision of Isaiah in Chapter VI of the book attributed to him; there were also the visions of Amos, who had experiences that we should describe as trance, as also did Ezekiel; and there were the psychical experiences that came to Jeremiah when he received his call. As well as the popular prophets, such men as Isaiah and Jeremiah did strange things, which must have excited the wonder of their fellows, as when the former walked naked and barefoot through the streets of Jerusalem, in order to emphasize the futility of depending on Egypt, or when Jeremiah appeared with a wooden yoke round his neck as a symbol of his policy of submission to Babylon. We can discern an affinity between the canonical prophets, their predecessors and contemporaries in Israel, and the prophets of the surrounding peoples. There are indeed scholars who believe that every oracle came to the prophets from some abnormal experience, but that is an unjustifiable exaggeration.

[1] N. H. Snaith, *Mercy and Sacrifice*, 1953, pp. 18 ff.

The significance of this review of recent investigation for our purpose is that we shall not find the vital factors which make Hebrew prophecy of living interest to us in any theory of special origins or by reference to the methods by which they proclaimed their message. It is clear now that Hebrew prophecy had humble beginnings. In its early stages, indeed for much of its history, it is not easily distinguishable from similar manifestations in the wider world which surrounded Israel. But it is not its origin that matters, nor resemblances which can be found between it and the religious life of other Semitic peoples. What matters is what it became in achievement, and the profoundly spiritual nature of its teachings. It is one of the remarkable facts of history that of all the religions of the ancient world—and they were legion—in Europe and the Near East, only one has survived; only one has remained a living faith in the modern world. To the question why it has survived, and why it finds a greater fulfilment in the religion of the New Testament, we shall discover no answer by emphasizing its resemblances and similarities to cults that have long since disappeared. We shall find enlightenment only by seeking the differences, and bringing out the exalted elements that have given it permanent worth. Professor H. H. Rowley has written: 'If in its origin it [i.e. Israelite prophecy] was one with similar prophecy in general, in its achievement it far outstripped that of Israel's neighbours, and it alone produced anything of enduring value to the world. In so far as Israel's prophets were ecstatic, it was not because they were ecstatic that we are any longer interested in them, but because of the content of the oracles that came from their lips.'[1] That is the crux of the matter. We read the prophets to-day, and we study them, because they had an insight into the real world which illuminates our

[1] H. H. Rowley, *The Growth of the Old Testament*, 1950, p. 80.

present experience. If they had not had that insight, they would still be interesting subjects of historical and critical research, valuable for the history of religion, but no more. Only when we judge Old Testament prophecy neither by its origins nor its methods but by its content does it possess a modern relevance. Nearly forty years ago now, in the first edition of Peake's Commentary, Dr. C. G. Joyce wrote words that nothing proclaimed by the investigators of cultic prophecy will invalidate. 'The theology of Isaiah is guaranteed not by the fact that he fell into a trance in the temple but by the mighty influence which his teaching about God exercised over the hearts of succeeding generations and by the response which it continues to elicit.' [1] The test of prophecy is the spiritual experience of mankind.

When we apply this test to the canonical prophets of the Old Testament we find that their teaching contains certain principles and certain judgments upon the nature and goal of human life that will never lose their validity. It is to these I now turn. I wish to discuss five such principles or judgments. They do not in any way exhaust the message of the prophets; others, equally important, are not considered, largely for reasons of time; these are chosen because they are characteristic and because they illustrate the theme that is before us.

The Conception of God as the Lord of History

A first principle or proposition basic to the prophetic outlook is the conception of God as the Lord of History. There are many people to-day who are asking—has history any meaning? We are living in catastrophic times, in the midst of wars and rumours of wars, and we are facing a very uncertain future. So people are

[1] *A Commentary on the Bible*, ed. A. S. Peake, p. 430.

questioning the meaning of human existence. Is there any purpose in it? Or is man just stumbling along blindly, in a situation where no hope or endeavour, no moral striving, no higher aspiration, whether meeting failure or success, serves any ultimate or enduring purpose? If people turn to the historians and ask them what it all means, as often as not they will receive a disappointing answer. For the historians will be inclined to say that such is not their business. It is for them to record or elucidate the course of events, but not to pass judgment upon it. Yet I feel that the questioning of the ordinary man, who is not satisfied with a purely agnostic answer, is not to be set aside. If we cannot discern any meaning at all, if we can make no judgment whatsoever on the value of human endeavour, we are 'of all men most miserable.' I believe that we must listen again to what the Hebrew prophets have to tell us. For to them the world of human life was far from meaningless. It was their conviction that this world is God's world, and that men and nations are the instruments which he uses for the carrying out of his purposes. The destinies of men and nations lie in the hands of God, and it is God who is their ruler, and it is God who is the Lord of History. History is the arena of God's activity and the scene of a continuing encounter between men and God. All men's actions will be judged according to whether or not they fulfil his purpose and serve his will. Isaiah, for instance, sees Assyria as a tool in the hands of God for the chastisement of Israel. But that is something about which Assyria herself should not boast. If she believes that her military triumphs are due solely to her own merits, she is mistaken. For all might comes from the Lord; he uses nations for his own purposes, and if they do not recognize this, then in due course they will meet disaster. For it is the Lord alone who raises up and casts down. If Assyria does not recognize that she is

not her own mistress but the servant of the Lord, then she, too, will be punished, even as Israel, the chosen of the Lord, will be punished. Now this might be thought a primitive reading of events, unacceptable to the modern mind. The idea that, in the words of the Second Isaiah, God takes up the nations and casts them down, as if they were playthings, is outmoded. God does not intervene on the stage of history in that way. After all, it will be said, the Hebrews had only a limited conception of the world and the universe, and they were ready to see God's hand everywhere. Nevertheless, I believe the Hebrew prophets saw clearly and truly into the nature of history, for they recognized that the affairs of men are constantly coming under the judgment of God. When men seek to carry out purposes that are opposed to the will of God, they fail and must fail, and in the failure we rightly see divine judgment. In the words of John Macmurray, when men set out to realize an intention that is not God's intention, they do not achieve it, and cannot achieve it.[1] Professor Herbert Butterfield has remarked that the history of the world is littered with empires and human structures that have not stood the test.[2] Perhaps we may venture an interpretation of recent events. It was the intention of the German Führer to set up a political order in Europe based on the idea of a dominant race which had the right to use the inferior peoples of conquered nations as tools. In so far as we know of the intention of God, that was in direct contradiction to it. By the nature of reality, such an attempt could not succeed. For a time, of course, it seemed to succeed: Hitler's United Europe came into being; to its authors it had, no doubt, the quality of permanence. Yet in the end it collapsed in dust and ashes, as any attempt to organize human

[1] See John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, 1938, pp. 92 ff.
[2] Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, 1949, pp. 48 ff.

life on a basis that is opposed to the will of God must collapse. All the same, the defeat of the Nazis did not mean the realization of God's intention. The task of organizing human society in accordance with the divine purpose remains; the purposes of men stand ever under the judgment of God. The prophetic insight holds good that God so made the world and God so governs the world that nothing morally unjust, i.e. contrary to God's intention, can find a permanent home in it. Any structure of human society that men erect, if it is not strong or righteous enough, will sooner or later collapse. Man's proud and evil purposes do not find a lasting home in the world.

> Except the Lord build the house
> Their labour is but lost that build it.

These words are not from the prophets but from the Book of Psalms, but they arise from the same faith in the moral government of human life.

The Responsibility of Election

A second basic proclamation is that of the responsibility of election. We do not have to read far in the Old Testament before coming across the idea that the people of Israel were an elect, a chosen people of the Lord. God had called them to be his servants in a way that was different from what could be applied to any other people. The idea of a bond, a covenant, between God and Israel is central to the thought of the Old Testament. The relationship between Yahweh and Israel is a covenant relationship. It is historically conceived, and according to the traditions, springs from the call of Abraham, or the deliverance from Egypt, or it is even thought of as going back to the creation of the world. The prophets are constantly reminding people of the covenant. Hosea, for instance, taking

the election back to the Exodus, speaks of Israel's adoption in these words: 'When Israel was a child then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.'[1] Amos represents Yahweh as saying: 'You only have I known of all the peoples of the earth.'[2] The Second Isaiah expresses the relationship in this way: 'But thou, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend; thou whom I have taken hold of from the ends of the earth, and called thee from the corners thereof, and said unto thee: Thou art my servant, I have chosen thee and shall not cast thee away; fear thou not, for I am with thee: be not dismayed, for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. Behold all they that are incensed against thee shall be ashamed and confounded . . . for I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee.'[3] There are many other passages that emphasize, in a way that cannot be affirmed of any other people, that the people of Israel, the people of the covenant, are the Lord's chosen people upon the earth.

Now this is a conception that to our minds must surely be outmoded. We cannot conceive of a God who has special favourites. It is axiomatic to us that if God exists, then he must be the God, not of one people only, but of all peoples. It is easy to see this aspect of Old Testament religion as belonging to the primitive stages of religious thought. In a sense that is true. All the peoples of the ancient world had their gods; and just as the Israelites looked to Yahweh, so was Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and so on. Each people looked to its deity for help and protection and special favours. Further, we are well aware how, not only in the case of Israel, but with many other peoples, the idea of election leads to arrogance and spiritual

[1] Hosea xi. 1. [2] Amos iii. 2. [3] Isaiah xli. 8 ff.

pride, and is the seed-bed of intolerance. During the Christian centuries, far too many peoples have believed that the oracles of the Old Testament gave them licence to destroy their enemies, from the protagonists of numberless religious wars in Europe to the European settlers in countries overseas, where they have been all too prone to exterminate the native inhabitants in the name of Jehovah.[1]

But before we reject the concept of election altogether let us note the remarkable treatment that it receives at the hands of the great prophets. They see that the election of Israel is an election to responsibility. It is an election to service and to suffering. It will not bring the people great privilege, nor ease and comfort, but hard tasks and difficult duties. Amos speaks for Yahweh when he says: 'You only have I known of all the peoples of the earth', but he immediately follows it with a dire threat: 'therefore—*therefore*—I will visit upon you all your iniquities.'[2] Unlike the peoples of the surrounding nations, it had been given to Israel to understand that the demands God made upon the people were moral demands. If they fail in their response, then their failure is greater than that of other peoples, and consequently their punishment will be more severe. That is the burden of the message of Amos. Special gifts bring with them special responsibilities. Election implies responsibility. It is a principle from Hebrew prophecy of universal worth. All men and all nations are not equally endowed. It is clear from human experience that there are those who have special gifts and special talents. The noblest gifts bring with them the noblest duties; from him to whom much is given, much is required; but the consequences of failure are all the

[1] See A. J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. I, 1934, pp. 211 ff.

[2] Amos iii. 2.

greater and more disastrous. What is impressive about the Hebrew prophets is their forthrightness in denouncing any failure to live up to the highest requirements of the faith. Their message was just the opposite of what the people wanted to know and to hear. The people thought that their special relationship to Yahweh would absolve them from any serious consequences; the prophets never ceased to remind them that to cherish such a belief was to live in a fool's paradise, and that any such confidence was entirely misplaced. Here we may have one clue to a problem with which we are confronted from time to time in the Old Testament. Is there any criterion by which a distinction may be made between true and false prophets? We may find it in the assumptions that distinguished the great prophets from their popular contemporaries. The false prophets assumed that the purposes of Yahweh and the purposes of the nation were the same. The great prophets from the eighth century to the sixth consistently denied that assumption. So Amos tells the people that God must choose between righteousness and Israel; and if righteousness is not found within Israel, then God will utterly destroy the people.

It is often felt to be a mystery of divine providence that men and nations should be differently endowed; it appears to contain an element of injustice. For, after all, that some men should be gifted with intellectual power or some nations with a natural genius for art or science is not something that comes within their power of choice. Why it was given to Israel to have such profound religious insights, we do not know, any more than we know why in art and literature and philosophy the Greeks of the classical age should have reached superlative heights, or why the Romans should have become the legislators of the western world. But whatever privileges men enjoy, the principle that comes from the Hebrew prophets of the responsibility of election holds good. For no gift is man's own to do with as he will. It is a law of heaven (and it is entirely just that it should be so) that of him, or of the peoples, to whom much is committed, much is required. Every faculty that men and nations possess is a trust from God, to be faithfully used in his service. And if it is not used, and the trust that is laid upon them is betrayed, then it will be taken away from them. Should its employment bring heavy burdens and great tasks, that is something loyally to be borne; it is, indeed, an inescapable debt. In the light of this spiritual truth, the situation in the modern world is starkly illuminated. Never were the promises of human achievement so brilliant; never were the possible consequences of human failure so forbidding.

Salvation by a Remnant

A third spiritual principle is that of salvation by a remnant. Other prophets besides Amos proclaimed that the election of Israel was an election to responsibility and that failure in responsibility would bring its just retribution, but there were those who carried it forward to another conception. That was the teaching that in spite of all the disasters that would fall upon the people, there would always be a 'remnant', a nucleus, a loyal few, who would be faithful to God, and through whom salvation would come to the people. It is debatable when and with whom this conception was first adumbrated. Dittmann maintains that the notion was older than the prophets and that it was the prophets' work to establish it more firmly. It finds clear expression, however, in the work of the First Isaiah (although, here again, how early in his career it is difficult to say); it is to be found also in Zephaniah and

other prophets. Isaiah did not doubt that the people of Israel would suffer for their selfishness and blindness; but he came to the conviction that however great the physical catastrophe might be, it would not be the end. The chance of re-birth would come. It would come through a small minority of the people, which would contain the nation's real life, and from which a new nation would spring. It is a notable feature of Israel's history that such a re-birth happened time and again. It happened before Isaiah, in the days of King Ahab and the prophet Elijah. Then salvation came through the seven thousand who would not bow the knee to the Tyrian Ba'al. It happened in the days of Isaiah himself, when the Assyrian menace was at its height. He gathered to him a small band of disciples, representative of the nation's true life, whose spirit would survive the approaching disasters, and be the starting point for growth and renewal in the future. The prophet inspired a movement which was the source of the best ideals in Israel for generations to come. Then again, in the days of the exile, salvation came through a minority. Later still, when the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes exercised the utmost savagery in attempting to destroy both the Jewish people and their religion, he failed through the loyalty of a few. The struggle of the Maccabees against the Seleucid Empire is an epic of human endeavour against overwhelming odds. To-day, the state of Israel, whatever feelings it may arouse among its opponents, is the effective achievement of a determined band of idealists.

The principle of salvation through a remnant, nurtured in the prophets' vision, reflected in the experience of their people, has also a universal application. It commends itself to our thought and encouragement. In all ages, many have been called and few chosen; it has been the privilege of the few to bring

light and salvation to the many. The world has constantly been saved by its minorities; it is they who have defended and kept alive the truth of God. It is they who have broken through the dull inertia of the mass and roused the people from their indifference to nobler heights of endeavour and achievement. Nothing from Hebrew prophecy comes with finer relevance to the modern situation than this truth that the faith of a whole society can be renewed, and its moral and spiritual ideals kept alive, by the ceaseless activity of a small minority.

The Supremacy of Righteousness over Ritual

A fourth spiritual principle arises out of what was once thought almost universally to be the essential characteristic of prophetic religion, namely, the supremacy of righteousness over ritual; in familiar words, of 'right' over 'rite'. Now, as we have seen, the distinction formerly made between priestly and prophetic religion cannot be maintained in the way that it once was. The association of prophets with the cultus and their existence as part of the Temple personnel are well established. Nevertheless, these findings do not make invalid the conclusions of older scholars that the greatest prophets proclaimed a spiritual form of religion that could exist independently of the ancient sanctuary rites or the Temple sacrifices. Against this view it is frequently stated to-day that the canonical prophets at no time repudiated the sacrificial system or the cult practices. In his book, *Prophet and Priest*, A. C. Welch maintains that to say that the prophets did so is going beyond the terms of a just exegesis. But one can say in reply to this that it is equally culpable to ignore the plain meaning of passages that are by no

means, as Welch contends, isolated. In the canonical prophets the note of uncompromising opposition to the cult is repeatedly sounded, as, for instance, in the first chapter of Isaiah. 'To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams . . . and I delight not in the blood of bullocks . . . When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hands? Trample my courts no more; to bring an offering is vain; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and solemn assemblies I cannot endure; fasting and idleness and your appointed feasts my soul hateth . . . Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.' [1] The meaning of this utterance seems luminously clear. The sacrifices and the cult practices are not essential to the service of Yahweh.

Many modern interpreters of the prophets who admit that the prophets did condemn the sacrificial practices of their day claim that they did not do so on principle, but only when the sacrifices were brought with unclean hands. Professor H. H. Rowley, in his book *The Unity of the Bible*, remarks that the canonical prophets held that sacrifices that were purely an external act and were unrelated to the spirit had no value.[2] But that, he says, is not to condemn sacrifice as such and the prophets would have had no objection to the sacrificial system if the people had led lives of moral rectitude. This seems highly disputable, and on this view two observations can be made. The first is that it may rest upon a doubtful exegesis. As an example, we may take some well known words of

[1] Isaiah i. 11 ff. For part of the text given above see G. W. Wade, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 1911, pp. 7–8.

[2] Cf. H. H. Rowley, *The Unity of the Bible*, 1953, p. 42.

Amos. He concludes his condemnation of the sacrificial system and his demand for righteousness with a rhetorical question: 'Did ye bring me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel?' [1] The question implies the answer 'no' and may appear as a denial that the sacrificial system went back to the Mosaic period. On the latter point it may well be that Amos was wrong, as Jeremiah may have been when he said: 'I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.' [2] But what we are concerned with is not whether Amos was right or wrong in his view of Israel's religious development, but what his own conviction was as to the place of ritual and sacrifice in religion. Professor Rowley says that taking into account the order of the words in the Hebrew what Amos probably meant was: 'Was it only sacrifices and meal offerings that ye brought me in the wilderness . . .?' and the expected answer would be 'No, we brought more than this; we brought true worship of heart and righteousness.' [3] That is not a certain exegesis, and in his discussion of this oracle Professor Martin Buber interprets Amos as teaching that the desire of the children of Israel to redeem themselves through offerings and psalms was not acceptable to Yahweh, who had demanded neither of these when he led the people through the wilderness, and who did not demand them in Amos' time. What Yahweh demanded was righteousness and judgment; that is to say, right judgment and right action. The second observation is that with the greatest of the prophets pure religion transcended and became independent of the ritual and the sacrifices. It may or may not be that they condemned the cult absolutely; I think that they did; but in any case

[1] Amos v. 25. [2] Jeremiah vii. 22.

[3] *The Unity of the Bible*, p. 42.

they reached a conception of religion that had no need of it. They rose above the common level of Israelite religion, which so often made no distinction between cultic and moral commandments. In the highest prophetic teaching the latter were seen as the real demands of God and the former were eliminated. Thus in Jeremiah's prophecy of the New Covenant, the summit and goal of religion will be reached when each man has his own personal experience of God.[1] The first covenant that God had made with the people was an external covenant. The Mosaic law was written upon tablets of stone; the new law would be written upon the regenerate heart of man. It would no longer be necessary for religion to be taught, for it would be an inner personal experience shared by every man.

That is an ideal of religion that may never be reached; if it were, then the churches might have no reason for their existence. But churches exist and public worship is observed because men need their stimulus. Few men can sustain, in solitude and isolation, their religious and spiritual life. Yet if worship is necessary, the prophets remind us that it is never an end in itself. We constantly need that reminder. All organized worship involves a certain amount of ritual, even in its simplest Puritan forms, and it carries with it an ever-present danger. It may cease to be a means to an end, and become an end in itself. There is always the danger of men persuading themselves that once they have observed the correct ritual, they have completely fulfilled their religious obligations. But worship is valueless unless it inspires the worshipper to go out and see more clearly in every aspect of his life what it is that God requires of him. So the prophets spoke to their generation, and so they speak to ours. 'What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love

[1] Jeremiah xxxi. 31 ff.

mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?'[1] Whether those words were or were not spoken by the prophet Micah, they go right to the heart of religion. Worship is a source of religious activity, and never a substitute for religion.

Redemptive Suffering

Lastly, a fifth spiritual principle that we can consider is that of redemptive suffering. Generally speaking, the pre-exilic prophets are of far greater importance than those who came after the exile. The classical age of Old Testament prophecy comes to an end in the sixth century B.C. But during the exile there spoke an unknown prophet whose contribution to the interpretation of human experience is of the utmost value. To this unknown prophet the name Deutero- (or Second) Isaiah has been given, and Chapters XL to LV of the canonical book of Isaiah have largely been attributed to him. It is believed that they were written during the exile and on the eve of the captives' deliverance. It is significant that some of the finest spiritual teaching should come out of the darkest moments in Israel's history. Both in the body of the prophecy, and in the four so-called 'Servant Songs',[2] the conception of Israel as the Servant of Yahweh is lifted on to a higher plane than ever before. Israel is entrusted by Yahweh with a mission to the Gentiles; and the Servant—whether envisaged as the nation, or as an individual, or in Semitic fashion, as a conception that fluctuates between the one and the many—is to be a light to the Gentiles, a messenger of God to other peoples. The significant point is that this mission will entail suffering, and suffering that is unmerited. The

[1] Micah vi. 8.

[2] Isaiah xlii. 1–4; xlix. 1–6; l. 4–9; lii. 13–liii. 12.

Servant is suffering, not for his own sins, but for the sins of others.

> Yet ours were the sicknesses that he carried,
> And ours the pains that he bore;
> While we regarded him stricken,
> Smitten of God, and afflicted.[1]

But this suffering, though it is unmerited, and appears to have fallen upon the Servant at the hand of God, will not be purposeless; it will be the means of bringing salvation to others.

> But he was pierced through by reason of our rebellions,
> Crushed by reason of our iniquities;
> The chastisement leading to our welfare was upon him,
> And by means of his stripes there is healing for us.[2]

Here the prophet is wrestling with one of the darkest problems of our human life, that it is upon those who least deserve it that the greatest suffering may fall. To this problem, in all its varied forms, there can be no final solution, but there comes to us from the unknown prophet of the exile an insight that will help our struggling faith. It finds expression in the principle of redemptive suffering, perhaps put forward for the first time by the Second Isaiah. In the later history of religious thought there are certain forms of the doctrine that are not acceptable to us, especially as they have been applied to the work of Christ, in the penal and substitutionary theories of the Atonement. But in its purest forms, which do not throw dark shadows on the character of God, it has great creative value. That there are men who deliberately and consciously accept suffering, or who at least will not shrink from it, in order to help and serve their fellows, is one of the inspiring and ennobling factors in human life. It

[1] Isaiah liii. 4. For the text see C. R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah*, 1948, p. 121.

[2] Isaiah liii. 5. North's translation.

reveals the divinity within Man. It is one of the fundamental truths of human history that men are redeemed by the sufferings of others. Our experience teaches us that men and women in this world are not isolated units, living and acting entirely independently. We are members one of another. We share one another's joys, and we are partakers of one another's sufferings. As Dr. S. H. Mellone has pointed out, the fact that men for good or for ill inherit and share a common life, is the truth that the doctrine of original sin sought to express.[1] Now there are men and women ready and willing to take on their shoulders the sins and sufferings of their fellow human creatures. They cannot isolate themselves from the cruelty, injustice and misery which bind and shackle other men. Out of the profoundest love of their fellows, they are moved to destroy the cruelty and injustice and to alleviate the suffering. And in so doing they bring suffering upon themselves, not because they seek it, not because they merit it, but because of the enmity and opposition that they bring upon themselves. Yet from this suffering there comes the healing and redemption of their fellows. Supreme among them was Jesus, and we must believe that, steeped as he was in the thought of the Old Testament, he was profoundly moved by the conception of the suffering servant delineated in the second Isaiah. It was how he himself came to interpret his Messianic consciousness; his mission could be fulfilled only by suffering.

Now this conception may be seen to have value from two points of view. First, it leads to an understanding of the death of Christ in keeping with the thought of Unitarianism and Free Christianity. In some orthodox formulations the death of Christ has been held to be a unique and isolated event in history. It has been given a 'once and for all' character. By the death of Christ,

[1] See *Converging Lines of Religious Thought*, 1903, p. 123.

the divine scheme of redemption for human kind was finished and completed. Christ won salvation for all men by one single, perfect and complete sacrifice. Unitarians have found it difficult to accept this doctrine, which reads the death of Christ as an external transaction and places his sufferings in a category entirely apart from all other suffering. But if we see it, not as a 'once and for all' transaction, but universalize it, we shall come to understand it as part of the whole process of human growth and development. To regard the sacrifice of Christ as an act in human history to which there is no parallel, either before or since, is false to its significance. But to see it as part of that spiritual process, first illuminated in the work of the Second Isaiah, whereby every man and every nation must give themselves in willing sacrifice for others and be prepared, if need be, to suffer for them, is to enter into a noble conception of man's life and destiny.

Secondly, the conception has value for the time in which we live, in so far as it sums up the whole challenge of the Hebrew prophets to our age. They spoke to their own people, to the individual and to the nation, in the conditions of the time, but they believed that all peoples were peoples of the one God, created to serve him. The task of Israel was to live as a nation consecrated wholly to the purpose of God, to be a light and example to all nations upon the earth. That was their election. It was an election to service and if need be to sacrifice and suffering. Through the faith in which we have been nurtured, we have entered into the heritage of Hebrew prophecy. It is vitally relevant to our condition. We live at a time when the purposes and actions of men and nations are burdened with a dreadful responsibility, through the limitless powers that for good or for evil are now at their disposal. This, it is said, is a time for greatness. The Hebrew prophets summon us to consider afresh wherein true

greatness lies. Is it solely in the exercise of power, sustained by national pride, unallied with moral purpose? If it is, have we any reason to think that ultimately it will not meet with the same fate that such pride has drawn upon itself time and again in history? It was the conviction of the Hebrew prophets that the nature of true greatness lay in the willing self-dedication of a people to moral and spiritual purposes. That is the challenge of their work to the modern world, to individuals and to nations. To accept the challenge means sacrifice. It implies a radical reassessment of our ideals and our values. But the people that is ready to make the venture of faith will inspire a vast upsurge of hope and confidence in a world that has lost direction and is desperately seeking for moral leadership.

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