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## HISTORY AND THE GOSPEL



# HISTORY AND THE GOSPEL

BY

C. H. DODD

NORRIS-HULSE PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY IN THE  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

*American Institute of Sacred Literature*



NEW YORK  
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1938

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## PREFACE

**T**HIS book represents the Hewett Lectures delivered in March, 1938, at the Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, Massachusetts ; Union Theological Seminary, New York ; and the Andover-Newton Seminary. The lectures are now published substantially in the form in which they were delivered, but with a certain amount of revision.

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C. H. D.

CAMBRIDGE,  
August 1, 1938.





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I

**CHRISTIANITY AS AN HISTORICAL  
RELIGION**



# I

## CHRISTIANITY AS AN HISTORICAL RELIGION

THE study of the Gospels has recently entered upon a fresh phase. The aim of nineteenth-century criticism was defined as "the quest of the historical Jesus". Its method was the minute analysis and assessment of the Gospels as historical documents. Its assumption, avowed or implicit, was that this method would succeed in eliminating from the records a mass of intrusive material due to the faith and thought of the early Church (*Gemeindetheologie*). When this was done, the residue would lie before us as a solid nucleus of bare fact, upon which we might put our own interpretation, without regard to the interpretation given by the early Church in the documents themselves. Christianity might thus be reconstructed upon a basis of historical fact, scientifically assured.

The modern school speaks with a different voice. It emphasizes the character of the Gospels as religious and not historical documents. It tends to decry the significance of mere facts of

history, supposing they could be ascertained, and to doubt the possibility of ascertaining them.

The change of outlook is no doubt partly to be explained by the apprehension that the older method was leading to barren results. But it is at bottom due to a change in the theological atmosphere. There has been a revolt against what is now called "historicism" (*Historismus*), and a renewed interest in Christian dogma, and consequently in the dogmatic aspect of the Gospels. Moreover, the former emphasis on divine immanence has given place to a fresh emphasis on transcendence.

It is easy to see how this change of emphasis affects the view of the Bible. If the divine is to be identified with a tendency immanent in the historical process, then all that theology needs is to understand that process by purely "scientific" methods, which assume the homogeneity of the process in all its parts. There is no real place for a special revelation, which would make one particular piece of history different in character from all other pieces. The most that could properly be allowed to the Gospels was that they recorded events which might turn out to have made an exceptional impact upon the course of history, like (shall we say?) the Persian Wars in ancient

history, or the Reformation in modern history. This is not the estimate of the events in question which is to be found in the Gospels as they stand. They profess to report, not important historical events simply, but eschatological events, the climax and end of history, the revelation of the supra-historical. But this, for critics of the older school, is mere *Gemeindetheologie*. We want to know, not what somebody thought, but what happened. Back to the facts !

The return to a theology of transcendence makes a difference. The Bible, and the New Testament in particular, is not any longer to be treated as an historical corpus, revealing tendencies within history in which the immanent working of the divine is to be recognized. It is the Word of the transcendent God. Whatever in it is temporal, whatever exhibits development, whatever in fact is simply historical, is irrelevant to its character as the Word of God. Consequently the historical criticism of the Gospels, as we have known it in the past, loses its importance for theology. It possesses a scientific interest, like the historical criticism of any other set of ancient documents, but it has no strictly theological interest. The Gospels were not written from historical, or even from biographical motives. They were written "from



faith to faith", in a Pauline phrase often quoted in this connection. That is to say, they were written as confessions of faith in Jesus Christ, and as the means of awakening such faith in their readers. Their witness is a direct Word of the living God to us, calling for the response of faith; not inviting our judgment upon it, but placing us under the judgment of God.

✓ I believe that the shift of emphasis is salutary. It has invigorated the study of the Gospels at a time when criticism was in danger of becoming trivial and unprofitable. It is certainly true that the Gospels were written "from faith to faith". The older method of criticism, in its search for bare facts, set out to eliminate whatever in the Gospels might be attributed to the faith or experience of the Church. In doing so, it deliberately neglected in them just those elements which in the eyes of their authors made them worth writing. They did not write to gratify our curiosity about what happened, but to bear witness to the revelation of God. To do full justice to the intention of an author is a necessary step towards understanding his work.

✓ Nevertheless, when all these contentions are admitted, they do not dispense us from the duty of asking, and if possible answering, the historical question. The Gospels are religious documents :

granted. But they are Christian documents, and it belongs to the specific character of Christianity that it is an historical religion. Some religions can be indifferent to historical fact, and move entirely upon the plane of timeless truth. Christianity cannot. It rests upon the affirmation that a series of events happened, in which God revealed Himself in action, for the salvation of men. The Gospels profess to tell us what happened. They do not, it is true, set out to gratify a purely historical curiosity about past events, but they do set out to nurture faith upon the testimony to such events. It remains, therefore, a question of acute interest to the Christian theologian, whether their testimony is in fact true. No insistence upon the religious character of the Gospels, or the transcendent nature of the revelation which they contain, can make that question irrelevant.

We must now consider more particularly what is implied in the definition of Christianity as an historical religion. Clearly it does not mean simply that the Christian religion arose out of a particular series of historical events, or simply that it has had a history of its own, closely related to the general history of at least the western world. Both these facts are in themselves significant. Of course, all movements of the human spirit are in

one way or another conditioned by history, and are reflected in history. But their relation to a particular series of events is not necessarily so clear and intimate as the relation of Christianity to the events from which it claims to have arisen. To say nothing of religions which are pre-historic in their origin, and have evolved with the evolution of a people, a religion may be based upon the teachings of a sage or holy man, without any especial reference to the events of his life ; and these may be so completely "other-worldly" in their outlook that they make little positive impact upon history. Religions, again, have emerged out of the confluence of various currents of thought and spiritual life, without the decisive intervention of any historical teacher or leader. Their foundation is in ideas, not in events.

Attempts have indeed been made in recent times to represent Christianity as a religion of this last type. We have been told that in the period to which the origins of Christianity are to be assigned, the cross-fertilization of eastern and western thought led to the emergence of new forms of religion tending towards monotheism. They owed much to the "mystery religions," and derived from them the concept of a dying and rising Saviour-god. Groups of devotees practising this kind of religion in various forms arose

throughout the Hellenistic world. Among them were groups which had relations with the Jewish religion, and some of these last came to identify their Saviour-god with the Jewish Messiah, and created for him a mythical embodiment in a figure bearing the cult-name "Jesus", derived from a Hebrew word meaning "salvation". Or alternatively, they seized upon the report of an obscure Jewish holy-man bearing this name, and arbitrarily attached the "cult-myth" to him. These groups were the nucleus of the Christian Church, which therefore owes its origin simply to the development of ideas in a Hellenistic *milieu*.

This theory bases itself in part upon well-recognized facts. There actually was a religious movement of the kind described during the period in question, though many of the ideas which some writers associate with it are attested only in later documents, and some of them seem to be the product of the writers' imagination. The influence which this movement exerted upon Christianity, as well as the influence of Christianity beyond its own borders, is illustrated by various forms of "Gnosticism" in the second and third centuries. But in order to show that the Christian religion was no more than an offshoot of some Hellenistic cult, the advocates of the theory need to make a whole series of completely

unverifiable assumptions. The contrary view, that the emergence of the Christian religion was the direct result of a series of historical events which took place in Palestine under the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate, is one which needs the fewest unverifiable hypotheses ; and it has the merit that it accords with the view taken of Christian origins both by all our early Christian documents, and also in the earliest non-Christian sources, such as they are. It also accounts best for certain characteristic features of Christianity which distinguish it from all other religions of the time, even those with which it has some affinity.

It is noteworthy that when the Christian Church came into touch with "Gnosticism", and both influenced it and admitted its influence, there was one point at which it felt bound to offer unqualified opposition. The Gnostic systems vary bewilderingly, but they all agree in a dislike for the concrete historical element in the Christian scheme. They will admit a Christ who is a member of the celestial hierarchy, and they will even admit that He may have taken temporarily the appearance or "seeming" of a man, but what they will not admit is that a real man, Jesus of Nazareth, did and suffered certain things at a certain point of history, whereby God redeemed the world. This,

however, is what the Christians affirmed. Like all religious persons of the time they were attracted by the elevated spiritual character of "Hellenistic mysticism", which has left its mark, not only upon Christian, or semi-Christian, Gnosticism, but upon the language and thought of the New Testament. But at the crucial point they parted company with Gnosticism. They rejected the tempting doctrine of "seeming", or "docetism", and insisted upon the crude actuality of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus *sub Pontio Pilato*, while affirming that in these historical facts the eternal God Himself, and no subordinate member of the celestial hierarchy, had acted for the salvation of man.

This brings us to the most important sense in which Christianity is an historical religion. It depends upon a valuation of historical events as the medium of God's self-revelation in action.

It will perhaps clarify the matter if we contrast an historical religion with two other types of religion, mysticism and nature-religion.

The mystical type of religion, so far as it is pure, concerns itself with man's inner life, and rejects the world of nature, the whole order of space, time and matter, and that side of human life which is bound up with it, as an illusion dangerous to the salvation of the soul. Its discipline

aims at stripping off the temporal, concrete, external and social aspects of life, and bringing the individual spirit into direct touch with absolute Being, which may be so abstractly conceived as scarcely to be distinguishable from Not-being. For pure mysticism history is at best irrelevant, at worst a pernicious interference with the ascent of the spirit to the Absolute. For history is essentially in time, and the mystic aspires to the eternal.

Nature-religion on the other hand recognizes the external world as in some sense a medium of divinity. It is ultimately based upon a response to the "numinous" or awe-inspiring quality of natural phenomena, whether they be exceptional and terrifying, as thunder, earthquake and eclipse, or marvellously recurrent, as the tranquil processes of the heavenly bodies and the yearly miracle of seedtime and harvest. The animal life of man, with its cardinal points of birth, marriage and death, takes its place among the mysteries of nature. Nature-worship is found among most primitive peoples, and in civilization there seems to be a recurrent impulse to return to it in more or less refined or sophisticated forms. It re-appears in the modern neo-paganism of blood, soil and race. But it also underlies the sober "natural religion" of the eighteenth cen-

ture, and that type of popular religion in the nineteenth century which said, "Some call it evolution, and others call it God."

These two types of religion are often found mixed in the higher religions of mankind. Thus there is such a thing as "nature mysticism", in which man is encouraged to turn away from his conscious experience and to sink himself in the unconscious and instinctive processes of nature, as the divinest thing he knows. But this is only nature-religion in a romantic form. Or the term may be applied to a religion in which the outer world is regarded no longer as illusion, but as the vesture of the Unseen with which man seeks communion. To this type of religion Christianity has not been inhospitable, for it is easily assimilated, or confused, with its own sacramental view of the world. Nevertheless, as an historical religion Christianity is distinct from all non-Christian mysticism.<sup>1</sup>

Both mysticism and nature-religion may ally themselves with different philosophies, but always with some philosophy for which history as such is irrelevant. Either it is no more than the unsubstantial shadow of the eternal, or it can be

<sup>1</sup> There is a Christian mysticism, which is distinguished from all other forms of mysticism precisely by its reference to the historical revelation in Christ, but not all mysticism that claims the Christian name is distinctively Christian.



reduced, like nature, to general laws of recurrence.<sup>1</sup> But it is precisely the non-recurrent particularity of events that makes them a proper subject for the historian, just as it is the element of recurrence in nature that makes it a proper subject for the natural scientist. A philosophy which sets out to rationalize either mysticism or nature-religion must in some way overcome or escape the concrete actuality of history, consisting of unique, unrepeatable events. But it is this concrete actuality which for an historical religion conveys the revelation of God.

Christianity does not repudiate the revelation of God either in nature or in spiritual experience. On the contrary, it takes up both modes of revelation into its own scheme. Its God is the Maker of heaven and earth, who by His word established the orderly system of nature. His own Being is revealed in it; for "the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth His handiwork"; or, as the New Testament puts it, "the invisible attributes of God—His everlasting power and deity—are discerned when they are contemplated through that which He has made."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand Christianity, like the mystical religions, encourages men to "look

<sup>1</sup> See *The Kingdom of God and History* (H. G. Wood and others), pp. 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. i. 20.

not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen, because the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” ;<sup>1</sup> and it recognizes an inward communion of the human spirit with the divine, in which God is truly revealed. It can even use the language of the mystics about a knowledge of God which is also union with God, and life eternal.<sup>2</sup> But when all this is said, it remains true that Christianity, if it is to be characterized by its classical documents, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, finds in history the primary field of divine revelation, because it is the field of divine action. It is from the vantage point of an historical revelation that we can look both inwards upon the life of the spirit and outwards upon the world of nature and discern in both the vestiges of the Creator.

For Christianity, then, the eternal God is revealed in history. This statement must be understood in its proper sense. Obviously it does not mean that *any* striking episode in history which appeals to the imagination of an individual or a people, may be indifferently regarded as the self-revealing act of God, such as the re-emergence of the German nation under Adolf Hitler, or the

<sup>1</sup> II Cor. iv. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Jn. xvii. 3, 22-23.

rise of the British Empire, or the American Revolution. No doubt if God is the Maker and Ruler of all mankind there is a sense in which His action may be discovered anywhere in its history. But this is not what Christianity means, primarily, by affirming that God is revealed in history.

Nor again does it mean that the truth about God can be discovered by treating history as a uniform field of observation (like the "nature" studied by the sciences), in which it is possible to collect *data* from all parts of the field, and to arrive by induction at a conclusion. Many thinkers have attempted to reach a philosophy of history in this way. Thus, for one school, history is the field of a movement of progress which is an extension of the evolution observed in the fields of the organic sciences. For another, history consists of cycles of growth and decay. For yet others, its movement is a dialectical process, Hegelian or Marxian as the case may be. All such attempts at a synthesis of the observed facts of universal history, so far as they are accessible to us, have a great and abiding attraction.

Indeed, the philosophy of history must always have an especial interest for the Christian theologian, since its subject-matter is the interaction of the human spirit with occurrences in the external

world, and such interaction, in the Christian view, is more directly the medium of divine revelation than either the external world of nature, or the inner life of man, if either be taken in isolation. But it is unwise to be hasty in adopting the formula of any one school, even if it may seem to be capable of statement in Christian terms. In the nineteenth century, and well on into our own time, the interpretation of history as progress was popular, and Christian apologists sought to find in the assumed principle of progress a manifestation of the divine Spirit immanent in the process. In our time the evolutionary conception is somewhat blown upon by an impatient generation, which prefers to set its hope upon revolution. It is then perceived that the catastrophic or apocalyptic element in Christianity is germane to the revolutionary interpretation of history, and many appear to be satisfied with giving to this interpretation a modified expression in Christian terms. It is not, however, in this way that a Christian philosophy of history can be framed. Such a philosophy must in the end account for all the facts accessible to our observation, but it starts from the Christian valuation of a particular set of facts.

At this point it will be well to define what we mean by speaking of "history". The term

itself is used in two senses. It may mean the series of events, or it may mean the record of this series. The ambiguity is not accidental, for historical events are those which come to be recorded, if only in memory or legend. There are innumerable things that *happen*, in the sense that they have a definite *locus* in time and space, but no one is sufficiently interested in them to remember or record them. Such occurrences do not constitute history. Before we can speak of history, even in the most rudimentary sense, there must be events which possess an interest and a meaning for at least a group of individuals, who for the sake of that interest and meaning remember them, recall them in conversation, hand them on by oral tradition, or finally record them for a wider circle.<sup>1</sup> History in the full sense consists of events which possess not merely a private but a public interest, and a meaning which is related to broad and permanent concerns of human society.

Thus historical writing is not merely a record of occurrences as such. It is, at least implicitly, a record of the interest and the meaning which they

<sup>1</sup> The study of human existence in ages to which memory does not reach back, through tradition or record, is more properly styled "pre-history". "Natural" occurrences may however enter into history. The eruption of Vesuvius which destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum is distinctly an historical event.

bore for those who took part in them, or were affected by them at a greater or smaller distance of space and time. The most rudimentary kind of record is the chronicle, which is the public equivalent of the private diary. But what indefatigable Pepys ever entrusted to his most private pages *every* single thing that happened even on one day of his life? And what chronicler ever recorded *every* event of each year enumerated in his lists? Both must select; and the motive of selection is to be found in the private or public interest evoked by occurrences. But neither diary nor chronicle is history in the full sense. Historical writing differs from these not in the fullness or precision with which it records occurrences, but in the clarity with which the record brings out the meaning of events. We might indeed say that an historical "event" is an occurrence *plus* the interest and meaning which the occurrence possessed for the persons involved in it, and by which the record is determined.

Thus the events which make up history are relative to the human mind which is active in those events. The feelings and judgments of the human mind enter into the process. To ask whether the occurrence or the mind which is active in it is the prior determining factor, is to

ask a question which cannot be answered, for history as it is given is an inseparable unity of both, in events. To isolate the occurrences, to recognize in them the working of natural forces (biological, economic, or the like) and to treat these as the real stuff of history, and the feelings or judgments of the persons concerned as mere *epiphenomena*, is to abstract from the concrete reality which is history ; and equally, to treat the human mind with its feelings, judgments and acts of will, as an autonomous entity independent of occurrences, is an abstraction. In the world as we know it the outward and the inward, occurrence and meaning, are inseparably united in the event.

Since, then, events are relative to the mind which is active in them, and the meaning or significance which the mind apprehends in experiencing the event is a part of the event, it follows that a series of events is most truly apprehended and recorded when it is apprehended in some measure from within the series and not from an entirely detached standpoint. The best historian of the past is one who has so familiarized himself with his period that he can feel and judge its significance as from within. Nor does this amount to a subjectivizing of history, since the events of history do not exist as such apart from

their significance to those who experienced them, and this significance is inherent in them. To say that the historian, whether contemporary or retrospective, may often fail to divine the true or full significance of events is neither here nor there. To err is human, and God alone knows the full significance of any event.

It should be clear, therefore, that when we speak of history as the field of the self-revealing activity of God, we are thinking not of bare occurrences, but of the rich concreteness of events. Further, since events in the full sense of the term are relative to the feelings and judgments of the human mind, the intensity of their significance varies, just as in the individual life certain crucial experiences have a more than everyday significance. We can therefore understand that an historical religion attaches itself not to the whole temporal series indifferently, nor yet to any casual event, but to a particular series of events in which a unique intensity of significance resides. This selection of a particular series is not incongruous with the nature of history itself. The particular, even the unique, is a category entirely appropriate to the understanding of history; and since one particular event exceeds another in significance, there may well be an event which is uniquely significant,



and this event may give a unique character to the whole series to which it belongs.<sup>1</sup>

This is in fact the assertion which Christianity makes. It takes the series of events recorded or reflected in the Bible, from the call of Abraham to the emergence of the Church, and declares that in this series the ultimate reality of all history, which is the purpose of God, is finally revealed, because the series is itself controlled by the supreme event of all—the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This valuation of the series is not imposed upon it from without, but is an integral part of the history itself.

It is a remarkable fact that scarcely one of the Biblical writers is of the type of the pure mystic, rapt into another world and detached from temporal events. The prophets, it is true, had their visions of the world beyond this, but these visions bear direct reference to the needs and problems of their time. Their message does not unfold secrets of that other world, but interprets the events of this. When prophecy gives place to apocalypse, there is a growing tendency to dwell upon the unveiling of cosmic mysteries, but even here the main burden of apocalypse is always the course of events leading up to the expected climax. In the New Testament again,

<sup>1</sup> See my book *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, pp. 219-230.

the apostle Paul, standing now in a world where mystical experience was highly valued, claims to have been caught up to Paradise and to have heard ineffable words ;<sup>1</sup> but he did not make a Gospel out of such raptures. With unimportant exceptions our writers are men immersed in the events of their time, and setting forth an interpretation of these events—an interpretation which itself passes into history. This is connected with the fact that the Hebrew mind, of which the Bible is the product, conceives God not as absolute Being, but as the “living God”, active in this world of time and space, though not confined within it.

In thus proclaiming God as the God of history, the prophets were in conscious opposition to nature-religion. For the Baal-worship with which they were in conflict had this character. It was essentially a fertility-cult, associated with the adoration of the powers of nature. “Take ye therefore good heed to yourselves”, says Deuteronomy, “lest ye corrupt yourselves and make a graven image in the form of any figure, the likeness of any beast, any winged fowl, anything that creepeth on the ground, any fish that is in the water ; and lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun and the

<sup>1</sup> II Cor. xii. 2-4.

moon and the stars, even the host of heaven, thou be drawn away and worship them.”<sup>1</sup> Nature is sub-personal and non-moral. The God of the Old Testament, even at relatively primitive stages, has personal character, which is expressed in His actions towards men, and in His demands upon them, and these actions and demands determine the meaning of history, which is therefore the proper field of His self-revelation. In later writings, such as the Psalms and the Book of Job, there is a full recognition of the glory of God in the wonders of nature. The peril of nature-worship was past, because the conception of God in history had by this time worked itself into the very bones of the people. The prophetic protest holds good against all nature-religion, even in those refined or sophisticated forms in which it is raising its head again in our own time. The worship of nature may clothe itself in a romantic and mystical beauty, but at bottom it is non-moral, and never far removed from the sensual and the inhuman.

The prophetic writers of the Old Testament, then, declare that a series of events in the history

<sup>1</sup> Deut. iv. 15 sqq. This is echoed in the New Testament, where Paul affirms the liberty of the Christian from the rule of the “elements of the world,” Gal. iv. 3, 9; Col. ii. 20. The *στοιχεῖα* are the half-personified powers of the natural order.

of their people exhibits "the mighty works of the Lord"; the call of Abraham, the Exodus and the giving of the Law, the conquest of Canaan, the kingdom of David, the Captivity and the Return. Whatever human or natural factors may enter in, the ultimate ground of this series of events is the purpose of God, who freely chose Israel to be His people, and who uses alien peoples to fulfil His designs. But it is to be observed that this purpose is never conceived to be *completely* revealed in the history of Israel: the complete revelation waits for the end of the historical process—an end which most prophets conceive to be close at hand. The more difficult it became to trace the hand of God in the successive disasters and oppression which His people suffered, the more intensely did religious minds concentrate their attention upon the great consummation, the Day of the Lord. In the apocalypses which succeed to the place of prophecy, eschatology—the doctrine of the End—is an absorbing interest. The apocalypticist surveys contemporary events, and seeks to interpret them as signs of the approaching Day of the Lord. He does not interpret them as events which by a natural process of cause and effect may be expected to lead to the great consummation. On the contrary, in themselves they

may mean no more than that the rule of evil powers—permitted by God for His inscrutable purposes—is becoming more intense. It is only from the unshakable inward conviction that God must intervene to fulfil His purpose, that the dark facts of the moment receive illumination as stages in the process which will end in the establishment of the Kingdom of God. In some apocalypses, indeed, this world is felt to be so incurably under alien rule that the consummation involves its destruction and the creation of new heavens and a new earth. Apocalyptic therefore, serves by exaggeration to make clear an aspect of the Hebrew interpretation of history which is implicit in it all through : namely, that the ultimate power in history comes from beyond history. Its meaning is not an immanent teleology but the purpose of a transcendent God, who, as He wills, and when He wills, intervenes to bring His designs to pass. The expected Day of the Lord is not the ultimate issue of tendencies embedded in the process, but a final act of God from His throne on high.

Hebrew prophecy and apocalypse, then, affirm the reality of God's "mighty acts" in history, but in order to make that affirmation they postulate a "mighty act" which has not yet happened. The more ardently the imagination dwells upon

that coming event, the more clearly does it confess that without it the divine meaning of history rests in doubt. This doubt is mordantly expressed in the pessimism of Ecclesiastes, for which the life of man on earth is a meaningless round.

This sense of inconclusiveness and of expectation is characteristic of the Old Testament as a whole. In contrast, the New Testament, taking over the general scheme of eschatology, declares that the expected event has actually taken place. In the coming of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, the prophecies have been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is revealed.

This declaration has a two-fold result. In the first place it resolves the doubts which shadowed the prophetic interpretation of the history of Israel, since the purpose manifested in that history has reached its fulfilment. In the second place, the events which constitute that fulfilment—the coming of Christ, His death and resurrection—are eschatological events in the full sense; that is to say, they are not simply important events, not even the most important events in the series, but unique and final events, in which the God beyond history intervened conclusively to reveal His Kingdom on earth.

This is the specific content of the Gospel as it

is set forth in the New Testament. The prime theme indeed of the Gospel is the glory of God.<sup>1</sup> But the glory of God resides not in the static perfection of His being, but in His mighty works. Upon this point the New Testament is as clear as the Old. The Gospel sets forth the glory of God by declaring what He has done. That is why it is most authoritatively embodied in those narratives which we refer to as "Gospels", but which in our earlier MSS. of the New Testament have the common title, *TO EYANGELION*.

If now we accept the definition of history as consisting of events which are of the nature of occurrence *plus* meaning, we may describe the story of the Gospels as a narrative of events whose meaning is eschatological, that is to say, events in which is to be discerned the mighty act of the transcendent God which brings history to its fulfilment. There is, then, an historical and a supra-historical aspect of the Gospel story. On the one hand it reveals what the saving purpose of God is eternally, in relation to all men everywhere, over-ruling all limitations of time and space. In this sense the Gospel is timeless,<sup>2</sup> and can be preached everywhere as the present power of God unto salvation. On

<sup>1</sup> It is "the gospel of the glory of the blessed God", τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς δόξης τοῦ μακαρίου θεοῦ I Tim. i. 11.

<sup>2</sup> εὐαγγέλιον αἰώνιον Rev. xiv. 6.

the other hand, it narrates the singular, unrepeatable events in which the saving purpose of God entered history at a particular moment, and altered its character. If the former aspect is emphasized exclusively the precise factual content of the story is not important : it is only " truth embodied in a tale", and the tale may be dropped if the truth is acknowledged. But this is most certainly not the intention with which the story is told. It is told as the story of events that happened, once for all, at a particular historical moment, whose particularity is a necessary part of what happened. If we lose hold upon that historical actuality, the Gospels are betrayed into the hands of the Gnostics, and we stand upon the verge of a new Docetism. Moreover, the denial of the importance of historical facts would carry with it a denial of what is of the essence of the Gospel, namely, that the historical order—that order within which we must live and work—has received a specific character from the entrance into it of the eternal Word of God.<sup>1</sup>

But if we take this view, then we must seek the meaning which Christianity attaches to history by an examination of the events which it declares most fully to reveal that meaning, that is to say,

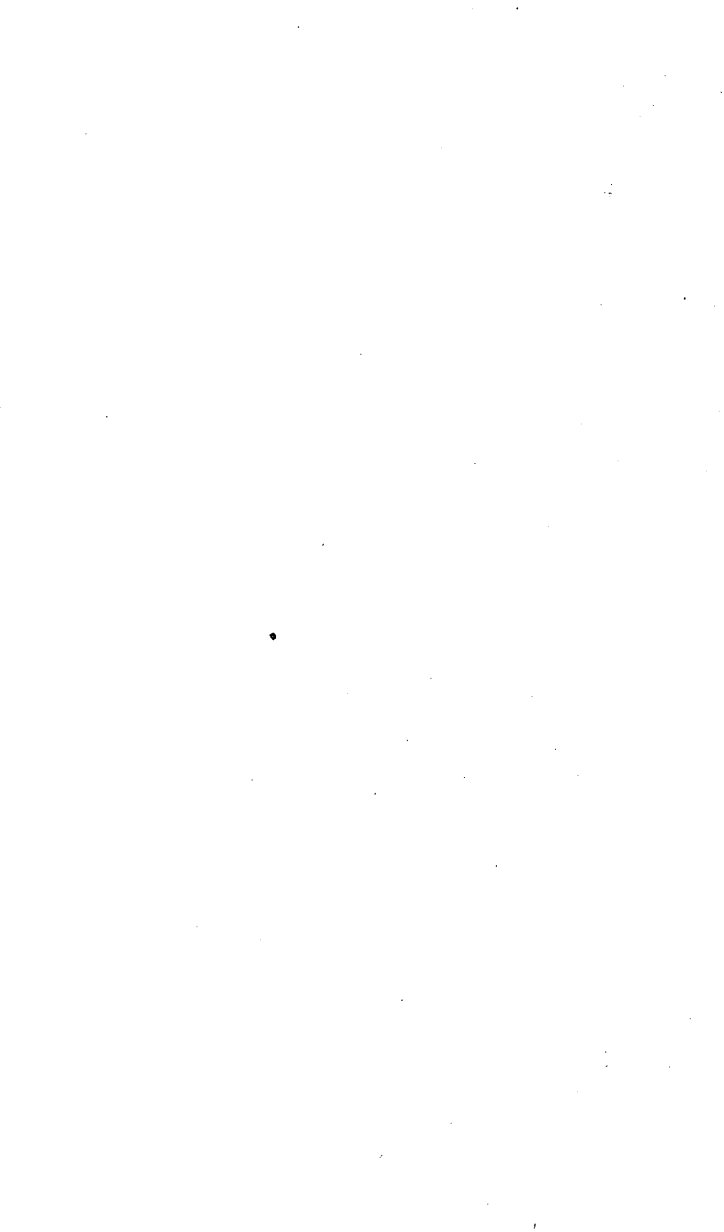
<sup>1</sup> See Chapter V.



by an investigation of the historical episode of the coming of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection. This at once raises the whole problem of the historicity of the Gospels, with which New Testament criticism has so long concerned itself; and that problem cannot be set aside by assertions that the Gospels are not historical but religious documents. They are both, if the Christian assumptions are true.

II

THE HISTORICAL TRADITION IN  
THE NEW TESTAMENT



## II

### THE HISTORICAL TRADITION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

WE now turn to the documents of the New Testament. Let us first approach them as they might come under the observation of a secular historian. If he were studying the history of the Roman Empire from Augustus to Trajan, these documents would not appear to relate themselves directly in any important way to the movement of events, but they would interest him for the light they throw upon the life and thought of little-known circles in the population of the Empire, namely, the *petite bourgeoisie* of the Levant from Palestine to Greece. As he would be aware that the older historians unduly narrowed the field of their observations to the wars and politics of the time, eked out with the back-stairs scandal of the imperial palace, he would welcome information to supplement what he could learn from the non-literary papyri and inscriptions about the obscurer strata of the population, whose importance no modern his-

torian would neglect. There are few extant writings of this period which illuminate the strange ferment of thought among these newly-awakened sections of society in the Græco-Roman world, so clearly as do the epistles of the New Testament. The Gospels again give a glimpse of the minds and ways of people in Palestine shortly before the Jewish War and the final settlement of the province, which is of real value for an understanding of the situation. But the *events* to which the New Testament writers, and the Gospels in particular, refer would not seem to have any obvious importance for the story of the early Empire. Of the existence of the Christian Church, one of a very large number of religious fraternities in the Empire, the historian is made aware chiefly because two or three times during this period it is recorded to have drawn upon itself the unwelcome attentions of the police and the government, as when Tacitus records the persecution under Nero, and Pliny writes to Trajan about his difficulty with Christians in Bithynia. Such episodes illustrate the methods by which the Roman order was maintained, and the limits to which toleration was extended. But there is no obvious reason why the secular historian should pay them more attention than he gives to a large

number of other examples of the policing of the Empire.

During these two centuries the historian observes that a new phase of the history of antiquity is defining itself. The Roman Empire, with its Hellenistic civilization, was like a great reservoir into which the diverse currents of ancient life and thought emptied themselves, and from which in time the currents setting towards the mediæval and modern world would emerge.

The imperial system itself represented a new political synthesis. It combined the principle of personal rule, inherited from the great Eastern empires through the Hellenistic monarchies, with a business-like civil service which the genius of Rome had worked out, and with a real measure of local self-government carried forward from the Greek city-states.

Under this system the Hellenistic synthesis of culture developed. From the time of Alexander the fusion of Greek and Oriental thought had proceeded, and its results now determined the general structure of a culture conterminous with the Empire itself.

It is to be observed that this Græco-Roman synthesis had on both sides a religious inspiration. The imperial system was knit together by Cæsar-worship, which was far from being a mere con-

vention.<sup>1</sup> The contribution, again, of the east to Hellenistic culture was essentially a religious contribution. Oriental religions, like Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and the native religion of Egypt, made a fresh appeal to the sceptical Greek mind. Mystery cults of various origin established themselves, and their popularity reminded the Greeks that they too had their ancestral mysteries. Meanwhile philosophy stood ready to interpret the myth and ritual of such religions. Stoicism, originally an austere school of atheistic and materialist morality, now spoke the language of theism with a pantheistic meaning. Platonism returned to the mystical side of its founder's thought, and allied itself with a revived Pythagoreanism as the upholder and guide of men's aspirations towards God. Satirists like Lucian might scoff, but the Roman world had "got religion", after the interval of unbelief and moral anarchy which followed the breakdown of classical Greek civilization and of the republican *pietas* of Rome. All this the historian must note. It is a vital part of the picture of the early Empire.

During the century following Trajan—the age

<sup>1</sup> We ought to be able to understand Cæsar-worship. If we can realize what lies behind the ceaseless pilgrimage to the mausoleum of Lenin, we know what *Divus Augustus* stood for. If we can understand the religious devotion which the Führer commands as the embodiment of resurgent Germany, we have a clue to the worship of *Roma et Augustus*. *Restitutor Orbis* was no empty title.

of the devout Antoninus Pius and the philosophical Marcus Aurelius, as well as of the superstitious Syrian emperors and the restorers of the ancient *pietas*, like Decius and Valerian, it becomes clear to the historian that among the new religious forces there is one which for good or ill is overshadowing all others in importance, namely, the Christian Church. From the outbreak of the Decian persecution in 250 until Constantine capitulated in 311, the "Christian question" is one of the first magnitude in imperial policy. The Church had assimilated the purest and most vital elements in the religious revival, and along with neo-Platonism stood for the spiritual basis upon which civilization was to be sustained: along with neo-Platonism, but with a wider appeal and a far more effective organization, and with growing prospects of driving its rival from the field. The Christian Church, however, refused to enter into the imperial synthesis. It rejected the worship of the Emperor, as well as of the gods of paganism, and followed a policy of partial non-co-operation. That is why the situation developed into a life and death struggle under Diocletian. The Empire, faced with the menace of disintegration within and without, could not tolerate an *imperium in imperio*. When Constantine made his peace with the Church, the way



was open for the final settlement under Theodosius by which the *civitas Romana* entered into the *civitas Christiana* which had been growing up alongside it, and the ancient world attained its final synthesis.

Christianity has thus become part and parcel of secular history—with how much modification, whether of loss or gain, to its religious character, it is not within the province of the historian to judge. In any case its importance as an historical factor in the world is established.

Looking back, the historian now suspects that the occasional allusions to the Christian sect in earlier writers have more importance than appeared at first sight. When Pliny wrote his report to Trajan upon the Christian menace in Bithynia,<sup>1</sup> he was not dealing with some local and temporary difficulty, like the affair of the fire-brigade at Nicomedia,<sup>2</sup> or the municipal scandals at Prusa.<sup>3</sup> Temples deserted; a slump in the fodder-market owing to the declining demand for sacrificial victims; the “inflexible obstinacy” of men and women who refused to worship the Emperor—all this, as it turned out, was no flash in the pan, but strangely ominous of trouble to come. What lay behind it? What was the

<sup>1</sup> *Ad Trajanum Epp.* 96 (97).

<sup>2</sup> *Ib.* 33 (42).

<sup>3</sup> *Ib.* 17 (27), 81 (85).

character of this formidable religious movement which grew up some time between Augustus and Trajan?

The historian now observes that by great good fortune we possess a series of documents produced during the latter part of the period in question, which contain an absolutely contemporary and first-hand picture of some at least of the early stages in that growth.<sup>1</sup> The Pauline Epistles reflect directly the period of expansion from A.D. 50 to the moment when Christianity first attracted the serious attention of the imperial authorities under Nero. The Epistle to the Hebrews, the First Epistle of Peter, and the Revelation of John, reflect the early persecutions down to Domitian. The Catholic Epistles as a whole reflect the movement of consolidation in thought and institutions at the turn of the first and second centuries. The Acts of the Apostles reflects the outlook of the Church as it set itself, towards the close of the first century, to the task of consolidation in face of opposition, but it contains also those traditions of its beginnings which at that period carried authority. The Gospels, finally, spread over most of the period between Nero and Trajan, are in the first instance documents

<sup>1</sup> What would he not give for an equally coherent corpus of (say) Mithraic documents of equal antiquity?

of first-rate value for the conceptions which the Church during that period entertained regarding the life, teaching and fate of its Founder, and for the manner in which it presented Him both to its own members and to the outside world. Their value as historical sources for events during the reign of Tiberius is a question which must occupy us in the next chapter. But the immense authority which they possessed in the Church of the second century, as the point of reference for all that was taught and practised during the formative period, makes them invaluable to the historian who wishes to understand the Church as a factor in history.

This is not the place for any attempt to construct from the New Testament a detailed account of the early Church. It is the tradition concerning Jesus that we are to study. But the life and thought of the early Church were the matrix within which this tradition assumed its present form, and as such they are of the first importance for our purpose.

Our knowledge of this life and thought has come down to us in no systematic way, but must be gathered from documents which almost accidentally reveal a state of affairs which they very largely take for granted. The Pauline epistles, which are the earliest of these docu-

ments, are directly concerned to guide the thought and practice of newly converted Christian communities. They present to us the figure of an outstanding Christian missionary and teacher in relations with his converts and with other Christians whom he wished to influence. Other epistles set before us, less clearly and individually, other leaders of the Church engaged in the same task. Incidentally, they refer to a great variety of aspects of the thought and practice of the Christian communities. They illuminate the efforts of Christianity to break away from the limitations of its Jewish origin, while conserving its heritage in the religious tradition of Israel. They preserve references to liturgical practice, forms of prayer and fragments of hymns, which reveal the Church in its worship. They reflect the shaping of a system of Christian morals, involving a criticism, both negative and constructive, of the morals of pagan society. They exhibit the early stages in the growth of a massive theology, which is (to use later terms) both dogmatic and apologetic.

We now observe that all this is implicitly or explicitly related to a central body of accepted tradition. However bold and original may be the thought of Paul, and the anonymous author to the Hebrews, and the Fourth Evangelist, they

do not come before us as free and independent leaders of thought. Paul, jealous enough of his authority, nevertheless expressly repudiates the position into which some of his over-zealous followers at Corinth would have thrust him, the position of the hierophant of a cult, who has initiated his converts into a "Pauline" religion.<sup>1</sup> He distinguishes between the foundation, which is something given, and accepted by him and by them, and the superstructure which he and others erect upon it.<sup>2</sup> The author to the Hebrews similarly scorns to "lay again the foundation",<sup>3</sup> with which his readers should be familiar enough. The author of the First Epistle of John, who stands near to the close of the New Testament period, recalls his readers to the "word which you heard", the "old commandment which you had from the beginning".<sup>4</sup>

I need hardly multiply examples. Reflection on the epistles will show that for all the individuality of the writers and their creative power in the realm of theological and ethical thought, their work presupposes everywhere a common tradition of the centre, by which they and their readers are bound, however boldly and freely

<sup>1</sup> I Cor. i. 13-17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ib.* iii. 10-15.

<sup>3</sup> Heb. vi. 1.

<sup>4</sup> I Jn. ii. 7; iii. 11.

they may interpret and apply it in the rapidly changing situations of an expanding Church.

Broadly speaking, we may recognize two aspects of this central tradition. On the one hand it is a "preaching" or "proclamation" (*κήρυγμα*) about God's action for the salvation of men, by which the Church was called into existence, and which it announces to all men everywhere as the ground of faith and hope. On the other hand it embodies an ethical ideal for corporate and individual life. The most general term for this is "teaching" (*διδασχῆ*).

Of the form and content of the "preaching" more will be said below. The "teaching" also has a characteristic form of its own. The ethical teaching of the New Testament is not given in a code or body of precepts, like the Jewish law, or in a system of virtues deduced from first principles, after the pattern of the Greek philosophers (though there are traces of such a pattern here and there). Its characteristic form is that which is called *paraenesis*. This form can be recognized in such diverse writings as the Pauline epistles, the Epistle to the Hebrews, the First Epistle of Peter, and the Epistle of James. It has some affinity with the "gnomic" style of the Greeks. Its nearest analogue outside the New Testament, and no

doubt its precursor, is to be found in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha ; but it is not simply a copy of its models. From the ethical sections of the epistles we can frame a very fair idea of the way in which the common ethical ideal was set before the early Christian communities ; and it is to be noted that the Gospels contain much teaching in similar form (along with some different forms).

This two-fold structure of the tradition has left a deep mark upon the forms of New Testament literature. Several of the Pauline epistles fall naturally into two parts, one of which is theological in character and the other ethical. Traces of the same arrangement are to be found also in Hebrews and I Peter. The theological sections represent the development of ideas contained or implied in the "preaching", the ethical sections enforce what Paul calls "the type of teaching to which you were committed".<sup>1</sup>

We recognize, then, underlying the whole life of the early Christian community a common tradition having two main aspects. In both aspects it is directly related to the person of the Founder. The "preaching" is described as "the Gospel of Christ".<sup>2</sup> The "teaching" is

<sup>1</sup> Rom. vi. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Mk. i. 1 ; Rom. xv. 19 ; Gal. i. 7, etc.

given as representing "the law of Christ", or "the commandment of Christ".<sup>1</sup> The Gospel is fundamentally a story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the teaching is given as from Him, and as possessing His authority. It is often said that the epistles show surprisingly little interest in Jesus Christ as an historical figure. On the surface that is true, in the sense that they contain comparatively few direct references to historical facts—though, as we shall presently see, not so few as is sometimes thought. But that is largely just because a knowledge of the crucial facts is presupposed. The epistles were in no case written to give instruction in the fundamentals of Christianity to people who previously knew nothing about it. They are all addressed to a public already Christian. If we make due allowance for this fact, we shall be rather disposed to think it remarkable that the Christian documents, unlike all other religious documents of the Græco-Roman world, depend for the cogency of their arguments and the validity of their conceptions upon the assumption of an historical Figure as a perpetual point of reference.

Take, for example, Paul's theology of redemp-

<sup>1</sup> Gal. vi. 2 ; I Cor. vii. 25 ; Jn. xv. 12 ; I Jn. iv. 21.



tion. It has a good deal of superficial resemblance to other current doctrines of salvation, as liberation from the control of the astral powers (the "world rulers" or "elements of the world" as Paul calls them)<sup>1</sup> and a blessed immortality in communion with the divine. But it would no longer hold together if Paul could not take for granted that the Redeemer did His work "in the flesh";<sup>2</sup> and if He came in the flesh, then He must have had a human history in this world. Again, the Epistle to the Hebrews has a high doctrine of the divine High Priest, which recalls some things that Philo said about the Logos as mediator between this transitory world and the eternal God. But it is of the essence of the doctrine of Hebrews that "we have not a high priest who cannot be touched with a feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are".<sup>3</sup> To take one more example, the First Epistle of John, which has superficially some markedly "Gnostic" traits, insists that saving knowledge of God is conditioned by a testimony to "that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we have beheld and our hands have handled".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eph. vi. 12 ; Gal. iv. 3, 9 ; Col. ii. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. viii. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Heb. iv. 15.

<sup>4</sup> I Jn. i. 1-3.

Indeed this epistle is all through a recall to the living apostolic tradition of Jesus Christ.

We can easily satisfy ourselves how characteristic of the New Testament is this historical reference if we compare the rival presentation of Christianity given in some of the Christian or semi-Christian Gnostic systems. There the main movement of the "plan of salvation" takes place in a fantastic realm of supra-temporal essences. "Aeons" emanate in various succession from absolute Being, and play out a shadowy drama having no relation to anything that happens in this world. The figure of Jesus is almost otiose; at best His appearance—which is a mere appearance, and no historical actuality—is no more than a kind of signal to men of the occult truth which to know is life eternal. Yet even these strange systems are evidence that if a creed was to represent itself as Christian in any sense, it must make some reference to the common tradition of Jesus, however it might whittle away the historical significance of that tradition. In the New Testament, however, the tradition is always vital and its historical character indispensable.

It is true that this "traditionalism" stands in some degree of tension with a conception of the Church as a prophetic community, endowed

with the Spirit by which spiritual things are discerned. Students of "Hellenistic mysticism" have been struck by the likeness of some of Paul's language about the Spirit to the language of that type of piety, which implies a direct mystical apprehension of supra-mundane realities.<sup>1</sup> It is certainly true that Paul makes high claims for himself as a "spiritual" person, able to declare divine "mysteries". Not only so; he expects that his readers will in their measure possess similar inward illumination. Yet he insists that the Spirit is intimately related to Jesus Christ. To have the Spirit is to have "the mind of Christ".<sup>2</sup> It is "when one turns to the Lord" that the Spirit opens up the inward truth of the Scriptures.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is notorious that the conception of the indwelling Spirit is in Paul hardly separable from the conception of the living Christ. But this does not mean, as has been said, "a certain de-personalizing of the idea of Christ".<sup>4</sup> It means that Paul, while accepting the truth that "spirit with Spirit can meet", will not recognize as a valid experience of guidance by the Spirit anything which is not

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. Reitzenstein, *Die Hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, 1920, pp. 185 sqq., Paulus als Pneumatiker.

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. ii. 16.

<sup>3</sup> II Cor. iii. 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> "Eine gewisse Entpersönlichung desselben Christusbegriffes", Holtzmann, *Neutestamentliche Theologie*, II. p. 88.

continuous with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, that is to say, with the Church's tradition of His work and teaching.

That Paul did not confuse his spiritual revelations with the tradition is clear from his discussion of the ethics of sex in I Corinthians vii. "To the married", he writes, "I say—not I, but the Lord—that a woman must not separate from her husband".<sup>1</sup> "To the rest say I 'not the Lord . . .'" "Concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who through the mercy of the Lord am a believer". "She is happier if she stays as she is, in my opinion (*κατὰ τὴν ἐμὴν γνώμην*); and I think that I too have the Spirit of God".<sup>2</sup> Nothing could be clearer. Where the tradition contains a direct precept of Jesus, Paul accepts that as authoritative. Where such a precept is wanting, he depends upon the guidance of the Spirit which through the mercy of God is granted to believers. Such guidance supplements the tradition, and carries authority.<sup>3</sup> But what the Lord commanded, that is to say, what was handed down as the teaching of the "Jesus of history", is regulative, and what Paul

<sup>1</sup> The reference is to the saying variously reported in Mk. x. 11-12; Mt. v. 31-32, xix. 9; Lk. xvi. 18.

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. vii. 10, 12, 25, 40.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. I Cor. xiv. 37: it too is "of the Lord" (but *ἐντολή* here is probably not part of the original text).

lays down, even under the guidance of the Spirit, is subordinate and derivative. Similarly, the Fourth Evangelist, whose language is even more reminiscent than Paul's of "Hellenistic mysticism", defines the function of the Spirit in the words (put into the mouth of Jesus) "He shall take of mine and shall declare it unto you".<sup>1</sup>

It is consistent with this view that there appears from the first a principle that alleged deliverances of the Spirit are not necessarily to be accepted at their face value, but must be tested. For Paul the test is, that genuine utterances of the Spirit acknowledge that "Jesus is Lord".<sup>2</sup> Half a century later the author of the First Epistle of John makes the test more definite still: "By this recognize the Spirit of God: every spirit which acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not acknowledge Jesus is not of God".<sup>3</sup> In other words, Christianity recognizes no spiritual revelation which is not directly related to the historical reality of Jesus.

It would thus be a mistake to regard primitive Christianity as a "religion of the Spirit" *sans phrase*, over against religions of authority or of tradition. The early Church was no society of

<sup>1</sup> Jn. xvi. 14.

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. xii. 3.

<sup>3</sup> I Jn. iv. 2-3.

the "inner light", dependent for its doctrine and its ethical standards upon mystical promptings. Spiritual experience may interpret, supplement and enlarge the original content of faith, but it is not an independent source of truth. It is all controlled by the central and common tradition of the Gospel of Christ and the Law of Christ. In the period after the New Testament, Christian thought moved appreciably in the direction of a metaphysical type of religion, especially in the Greek fathers ; but it is noteworthy that Origen, who stands nearer to neo-Platonism than most of them, prefaces his most comprehensive work, the *De Principiis*, with the traditional *kerygma*, in a form closely akin to that which can be recovered from the New Testament, and that he regards the *gnosis* which he has to communicate as a kind of commentary upon it, and not as the result of independent illumination.

It is, however, necessary to observe that the tradition underlying the New Testament writings and embodied in the *kerygma* is not simply historical but historical-eschatological. The events to which it refers are not simply historical events, but events in which history reaches its divinely ordained conclusion ; and the Christ to whom it refers, while He is a truly historical figure, is also an eschatological figure : the Messiah, in whom

the prophecies are fulfilled. The early Church took over a large corpus of eschatological predictions from the Old Testament and the apocalyptic literature ; and from a very early period its mind was bent upon showing how these predictions were fulfilled in the story of Jesus. The study of testimony books has led to the conclusion that the application of prophecy was probably the earliest form of Christian theological thought.<sup>1</sup> To our minds, the methods of application often seem arbitrary and far-fetched, but the intention is clear—to show that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the *eschaton*, or ultimate issue of history, was indeed realized. We must admit the likelihood that certain elements in the developed story as we have it in the Gospels may have been imaginative products of the search for fulfilled prophecy. There is at least a *prima facie* case for such a conclusion, for example, in the Matthæan stories of the Nativity and the Flight into Egypt, of Judas's thirty pieces of silver and the Potter's Field. The question is, how deeply has this process affected the tradition? Is it possible, as some have averred, that not merely details but the main tradition is largely the creation of an imagina-

<sup>1</sup> I would observe in passing that this fact determined once for all that Christian theology should preserve at bottom its Hebraic character, however widely Hellenistic categories might be used.

tion fired by too ardent a study of prophecy and apocalypse?

In attempting to answer this question, we must observe that the New Testament writers, for all their anxiety to discover fulfilments of prophecy, and all their ingenuity in doing so, do not attempt to exploit the *whole* corpus of Messianic prediction. There are large sections of it which are not represented. It is not only the purely supernatural traits—the coming with the clouds of heaven, the portents in heaven and earth, the transfiguration of the elect, and the like—that are missing from the Gospel story. The whole conception of the Messiah as king, warrior and judge, the ruthless vindicator of the righteousness of God, is absent from the Church's presentation of the Jesus of history, though imagination working freely upon the prophetic *data* might easily have constructed a quasi-historical figure having these traits. There has been some principle of selection at work, by which certain sides of the Messianic idea are held to be fulfilled, and others are set aside. What was that principle of selection? Surely the simplest explanation is that a true historical memory controlled the selection of prophecies. Those were held to have been fulfilled which were in general consonant with the memory of what Jesus had been, had said, had done and



had suffered. The fulfilment of the rest was postponed to the future. By retaining a residue of the "futurist eschatology" of Judaism the Church kept its historical tradition from being completely transformed by eschatological ideas, since there was always a repository for unfulfilled expectations, in the hope of the Second Advent.

In fact, those aspects of the Messianic idea which apparently bulked most largely in Jewish thought of the time, whether it followed the line represented by the Psalms of Solomon or the line represented by I Enoch and IV Ezra, play little part in the tradition about the Jesus of history, but are applied to His expected coming in glory. On the other hand the Scriptures which are held to be fulfilled in the facts concerning Jesus are often those which, so far as our evidence goes, were not currently interpreted as Messianic at all. This is notably the case with the deutero-Isaianic prophecies of the Servant of the Lord. That these play an important part in the definition of the Christian conception of Messiahship is clear. The evidence that they were interpreted Messianically in pre-Christian Judaism is very slight, and not convincing. Why were they selected as the principal pointers to the reality of the Messiahship of Jesus? There seem to be only two plausible

answers. Either, the brute fact that Jesus, believed to be Messiah, had been put to death led His followers to find the divine justification for His death in these prophecies ; or, He had Himself defined His Messianic calling and destiny in terms of the deutero-Isaiah. In either case a true historical memory determined the use of prophecy by the Church. The Messianic idea of early Christianity is not an eschatological creation ; it is the result of the impact of historical fact upon an inherited eschatology, by which that eschatology has been drastically revised.

While, therefore, it is probable enough that in detail the search for fulfilments of prophecy has modified the story of Jesus in its developed form, there is no reasonable ground for the view that the main and central tradition is the product of imagination under the control of eschatological conceptions. It is an historical tradition, presented in eschatological terms.

We must now attempt to determine the content of the historical tradition underlying those parts of the New Testament which are not explicitly concerned with history. We start naturally with the earliest of all Christian literature, the epistles of Paul.

As we have seen, Paul regarded himself, in spite of his claim to independence and originality in

the presentation of the Gospel, as the bearer of a tradition which was common to the whole apostolic body. "Whether I or they, it was thus that we preached, and thus that you believed" (I Cor. xv. 11). In the immediate context he cites as from this common tradition the statements "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and was seen of Cephas (and others)". Elsewhere he reports, as something "received from the Lord" (*i.e.* as primitive tradition), the story of the Last Supper (I Cor. xi. 23-26).

This does not exhaust what Paul knows regarding the life of Jesus. He mentions the fact that He was born a Jew,<sup>1</sup> claiming descent from David;<sup>2</sup> that He had several brothers,<sup>3</sup> including one named James, whom Paul knew quite well;<sup>4</sup> that He worked among Jews, and not among Gentiles,<sup>5</sup> and that the Jews were responsible for His death, although He actually died by the

<sup>1</sup> Gal. iv. 4; Rom. ix. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. i. 3. Paul shows elsewhere no interest in the Davidic descent of Jesus; we must suppose that he is here referring to generally accepted tradition.

<sup>3</sup> I Cor. ix. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Gal. i. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Rom. xv. 8. Paul must here be subject to the tradition. If it had been possible to aver that Jesus had preached to Gentiles, this would have been a valuable asset to Paul in his controversy with the Judaizing Christians.

Roman method of crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> He is also acquainted with a recognized tradition of the sayings of Jesus. Two of these he quotes explicitly,<sup>2</sup> and there is so much beside in Paul's ethical teaching which directly or indirectly recalls the actual words of the Gospels, that we must suppose that both he and his converts were acquainted with a collection of traditional sayings of Jesus, similar to those collections which have been used by the Evangelists.

Further, Paul has a definite conception of the character of Jesus. Not only does he emphasize His righteousness and obedience (which might be taken as general or conventional), but he notes as His outstanding traits of character gentleness, forbearance,<sup>3</sup> humility,<sup>4</sup> and a complete absence of self-seeking.<sup>5</sup> These traits are expressly held up for the imitation of Christians.<sup>6</sup> Moreover,

<sup>1</sup> I Thess. ii. 15, *et passim*. To say that the Jews "killed the Lord Jesus", and that He died by crucifixion, looks like a formal contradiction, since crucifixion was not a form of execution known to Jewish law. The statement, however, quoted above from the Talmud shows that the Jews accepted responsibility, and the situation described in the Gospels, in which the Jewish authorities take the initiative, while Pilate pronounces condemnation, explains the apparent contradiction in Paul.

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. vii. 10 ; ix. 14. Both these sayings are in the Gospels.

<sup>3</sup> II Cor. x. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Phil. ii. 7-8. Observe that the *ταπείνωσις* is not the Incarnation, which is described in the words *ἐκένωσεν ἑαυτόν*. As a man (*εἰσέθελς ὡς ἄνθρωπος*) Christ humbled Himself.

<sup>5</sup> Rom. xv. 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. I Cor. xi. 1 ; I Thess. i. 6. Observe that these passages exclude the idea that Paul is referring to an ideal Messianic figure and not to the Jesus of history, for Christ is an object of imitation in the same sense as Paul himself is.

after Paul in Rom. xii.-xiii. has set forth the Christian moral ideal in some detail, he sums up in the words, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ".<sup>1</sup> This surely implies that the moral ideal he has set forth is that embodied in the character of Jesus.

The facts to which Paul alludes regarding the Jesus of history are always related to His Messianic calling and destiny. Then how, it may be asked, do we know that Paul is not describing an ideal Messianic figure, rather than an historical person? To this I will reply with another question. Where will you find in the Messiah of prophecy or apocalypse the moral character which Paul attributes to Jesus as Messiah? Admittedly the general attributes of righteousness and obedience to God are inherent in the Messianic idea. But humility, meekness, gentleness, *ἀγάπη*, forgiveness of enemies—where are these? They can be found, if at all, only by combing Messianic prophecy with care, and selecting out of it an occasional reference which in the literature itself is overshadowed by a mass of quite different conceptions; or else by treating as Messianic, passages which were not so regarded in pre-Christian Judaism. Paul was indeed aware of that other Messianic figure—the Messiah

<sup>1</sup> Rom. xiii. 14.

characteristic of prophecy and apocalypse, who will appear with the angels of his power in a flame of fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God or obey the Gospel. It is in this guise, he says, that the Lord Jesus will come again.<sup>1</sup> But this figure stands quite apart from the Jesus of history. In fact Paul's account of Jesus as Messiah, while it corresponds to the one essential point in the Messianic idea without which Messiahship is meaningless—that the Messiah is the divinely appointed Head of the people of God, and the bearer of His Kingdom to the whole world—in all other respects represents the Jewish Messianic idea reversed. The Messiah should have exhibited the attributes of power and dominion on earth; instead, He "took the form of a slave". He should have united Israel under His sway; instead, He was rejected by Israel. He should have vindicated the Law; instead, He died under the curse of the Law as a malefactor. The phenomenon of a "crucified Messiah" was a "scandal" to the Jews. It could not have come from anywhere except out of history. To the Pauline historical data, therefore, we must add that Jesus came as Messiah, and (by implication) that it was as such that He was killed by the Jews; and that His

<sup>1</sup> II Thess. i. 7-10.

death was the result of a conflict with the Law. These data we shall find reappearing in the Gospels.

The Pauline testimony, therefore, is all of a piece. He attests the character of Jesus, something of His life and death, and something of His teaching ; and he assigns Him His place in history as a crucified Messiah. This testimony is of the utmost importance, since we know that Paul came into the Church (which he already knew before his conversion) within seven years (probably less) from the Crucifixion ; that he was well acquainted with Peter, John, and James, the brother of Jesus ; and that for all their differences of opinion, he never differed from them in his conception of the fundamental tradition.

Nor is Paul our only witness outside the Gospels. The anonymous author to the Hebrews refers in the same allusive way as Paul to generally accepted facts about Jesus. He knows that He was of the tribe of Judah ;<sup>1</sup> that He preached salvation as the first Apostle of the faith ;<sup>2</sup> that He was faithful and obedient to God,<sup>3</sup> learning

<sup>1</sup> Heb. vii. 14. May we not surmise that this author, with his interest in priesthood, would have been attracted by the idea of a Messiah of the tribe of Levi, which is found in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* ? But the tradition by which he was controlled prevented him from construing the Messianic priesthood of Jesus on these lines.

<sup>2</sup> Heb. ii. 3 ; iii. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Heb. iii. 2 ; x. 5-9.

obedience by suffering ;<sup>1</sup> that He was tempted, without falling into sin ;<sup>2</sup> that He met with great opposition ;<sup>3</sup> that He prayed to be saved from death ;<sup>4</sup> that He was crucified<sup>5</sup> outside the gate (of Jerusalem) ;<sup>6</sup> and that He rose again.<sup>7</sup> There is no suggestion that the author was dependent for these facts upon any of our written Gospels. He says that he and his readers had received the Gospel from the original hearers of Jesus,<sup>8</sup> and we may accept him as one more witness to the common tradition.

The allusions to the Jesus of history in other New Testament epistles are of less importance, because we have no means of connecting them in the same direct way with the original fount of tradition.

The statement in I Timothy vi. 13 that Jesus "witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate", if we could be sure it came from Paul, would belong to the general body of Pauline tradition, which we have already reviewed, and would carry the weight which attaches to that tradition because of its close connection with the

<sup>1</sup> Heb. ii. 10 ; v. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Heb. ii. 18 ; iv. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Heb. xii. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Heb. v. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Heb. xii. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Heb. xiii. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Heb. xiii. 20 ; x. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Heb. ii. 3.



earliest days of the Church. It is noteworthy that Pilate's name occurs also in the Pauline *kerygma* as it is given in Acts xiii. 28. But I Timothy is probably, at least in its present form, a post-Pauline work, and the allusion to Pontius Pilate may be derived from the Gospels, though I think it more probable that here and in the Creed the name of the procurator is due to a continuous tradition independent of the Gospels.

In I Peter ii. 21-23 the demeanour of Jesus before His judges is held up as an example for imitation. If the epistle is really from the hand of the apostle Peter (as some eminent critics still hold), this moving picture of Jesus at His trial would be among our most original and valuable pieces of historical evidence. But the Petrine authorship is in doubt, and there is nothing else to connect the statements here made with the fount of tradition. The passage is often regarded as an ideal description of the suffering Messiah, based on Isaiah liii. On this point I would refer to what was said above about the relation between prophecy and the historical tradition. But I would further point out that the really characteristic statement in I Peter is not derived from II Isaiah at all: "When He was reviled He did not revile in return; when He suffered

He made no threats, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously". Is that pure imagination, or does it come out of a tradition which preserved a genuine memory of the Jesus of history? It is no doubt possible that the author of the epistle had read one of the Gospels. But there is no trace in this passage of any literary reminiscence of Mark xiv.-xv. or its parallels. It seems most likely that we have here again an appeal to a current tradition, known and accepted by the writer and his readers, which preserved a memory of the facts.

On the other hand, the account of the Transfiguration in II Peter i. 16-18 is in all probability a literary derivative from the Gospels. The epistle is by common consent regarded as pseudonymous. The author is deliberately aiming at the semblance of a personal reminiscence in order to represent his book as a work of the apostle Peter. The chief value of this passage for our purpose is to illustrate by contrast the genuinely traditional character of the references in Paul, Hebrews and I Peter.

There is thus good ground for the conclusion that the epistles presuppose an historical tradition generally known and accepted, to which appeal can be made as authoritative. Since we have no more than casual allusions to this tradi-

tion, called forth by particular occasions, we can reconstruct it only fragmentarily. Have we any evidence for its character as a whole?

In the Acts of the Apostles we have a number of passages which purport to be addresses of the apostle Peter to various audiences in the early days of the Church. Upon examination these addresses are found to be variations upon a common theme, which recurs in almost stereotyped form.<sup>1</sup> It runs after this fashion: The Messianic age has dawned, and the prophecies are fulfilled. Jesus of Nazareth came in the power of the Spirit, wrought mighty works and taught with authority. He was crucified, dead and buried. The third day He rose again from the dead, and is exalted at the right hand of God as Lord and Christ. He will come again in glory. Meanwhile the company of those who believe in Him is marked out as the new Israel of God by the gift of the Spirit. Forgiveness and salvation are offered in His name. Therefore repent and believe.

There can, I think, be little doubt that this represents the common form of the *kerygma*, or proclamation of the Gospel, which we have found to be presupposed in the epistles; and the

<sup>1</sup> See my book *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, pp. 29-47.

historical tradition, with its eschatological setting, is the core of the *kerygma*.

The Acts is a work of the late first century. It might be held that its formulation of the *kerygma* belongs to that period. But a comparison with the *data* of the Pauline epistles makes it certain that at least the substance of this *kerygma*, with its historical core, is as early as the time of Paul, and that it represents the Gospel which he declares to be common to him and the original apostles, the tradition which he received and handed on. When we further observe that most of the forms of the *kerygma* in Acts show in their language a strong Aramaic colouring, we may recognize the high probability that in these passages we are in fairly direct touch with the primitive tradition of the Jesus of history.

To sum up : leaving the Gospels aside, we can recover from the New Testament a clearly articulated picture of the place which the historical tradition of Jesus occupied in the early Church, and of the general character of its contents. From the very beginning of things, the life of the Church grew up about this central tradition, which remained normative of its thought, its worship, and its practice through all the rapid and far-reaching development which it underwent in the apostolic and sub-apostolic periods.

The Gospels are to be regarded primarily as the deposit, or crystallization, of this tradition in narrative form. They result from the gathering together of material of various kinds about a central strand of testimony embodied from the first in the preaching (*kerygma*) and teaching (*didaché*) of the Church. Both elements, preaching and teaching, reappear in our Gospels. Of our earliest Gospel sources, Mark represents primarily the story of Jesus <sup>1</sup> and "Q" primarily the teaching of Jesus.

<sup>1</sup> For the relation of Mark to the *kerygma*, see *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, pp. 104-117.

III  
HISTORICAL CRITICISM OF THE  
GOSPELS



### III

#### HISTORICAL CRITICISM OF THE GOSPELS

THE argument in the preceding chapter has led to the conclusion that the Gospel story as we have it in the canonical Gospels lies within a framework which can be traced to the earliest days of Christianity. The primitive preaching postulates the historical reality of the main facts, and so acted as a preservative of the historical tradition, over against any attempt (such as exhibited itself notably in Gnostic heresies) to devaluate the historical element in Christianity. So far as we have gone at present, it might be the case that the detail of the Gospel story is the product of the mind of the Church working within the framework of the *kerygma*, or apostolic preaching. But we have in any case to account for the *kerygma* itself. A true historical perspective suggests that it would be nearer the truth to say that the *kerygma*, or the facts and beliefs involved in it, created the community, than to say that the community created the *kerygma*. The Church formulated it, no doubt, but except upon the



hypothesis that something happened of which the apostolic preaching gives an account, we can assign no adequate reason for the emergence of the Church.

The Gospels, however, as they stand, belong to a comparatively late period. The authority to be attached to their evidence in detail will depend upon the earlier sources, written or oral, from which the Evangelists may be supposed to have drawn their material. There are two lines of investigation to be followed: (i) "source-criticism", which deals with the written documents, and seeks to establish their proximate sources; and (ii) "form-criticism", which seeks to reconstruct the oral tradition lying behind the proximate written sources.<sup>1</sup>

It will be convenient to start with a division of the Gospel record into two main parts, the story of the Ministry and the story of the Passion. The

<sup>1</sup> The school of Form-criticism (*Formgeschichte*) arose in Germany at the end of the war. Its first expressions are in K. L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu*; R. Bultmann, *Geschichte der Synoptischen Tradition*; and M. Dibelius, *Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (second edition translated into English under the title *From Tradition to Gospel*). The general attitude of these writers may be gathered from K. L. Schmidt's article *Jesus Christus* in the new edition of *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Bultmann's *Jesus* (Engl. tr. *Jesus and the Word*), and Dibelius's *Geschichtliche und Uebergeschichtliche Religion im Christentum*, and *Gospel Criticism and Christology*. For the English reader Form-criticism is clearly and judiciously explained by Vincent Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*. See also B. S. Easton, *The Gospel before the Gospels*, Hoskyns and Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament*, and R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels*.

former consists of a series of episodes, each more or less complete in itself, often with only the loosest connection between them, but with a slender thread of continuity provided by short summary statements, which serve to link one episode with the next following. In the Passion-narrative the form changes. We have a long continuous narrative, in which each event presupposes the event which has preceded, and leads on to the event next succeeding.

The division is marked by the Evangelists themselves, though they do not all begin their formal Passion-narrative at precisely the same point. Mark clearly indicates a fresh departure at xiv. 1, where he alludes to the plot of the Sanhedrin. Matthew, at the same point, emphasizes the fresh departure by inserting a solemn statement by Jesus that the time for His Passion has arrived (xxvi. 1-2). Luke, aiming as usual at a greater continuity of narrative, has linked the reference to the plot with the foregoing narrative of the ministry in Jerusalem by means of a brief summary statement (xxi. 37-38). But for all that, the division between the earlier part and the later betrays itself in the changed manner and *tempo* of his narrative. In the Fourth Gospel the division is strongly marked at xiii. 1. John however has equivalents for the contents of

Mark xiv. 1-11 in the earlier part of his Gospel, and begins the Passion-narrative with the Last Supper.

Accepting then this division, we shall first consider the Passion-narrative. Here source-criticism suggests that the Marcan narrative has been reproduced by Matthew with some alteration and expansion in details ; that in Luke it has been combined with a narrative from a different source ;<sup>1</sup> and that John, while he may be in some measure indebted to Mark, has in substance followed an independent tradition.<sup>2</sup> Form-criticism can go further, and having regard to the allusions to the story of the Cross in the Epistles, and to the formulation of it in the apostolic preaching (*kerygma*) in Acts, will suggest that underlying our three primary accounts there is a common form or pattern of Passion-narrative.<sup>3</sup> This pattern is constituted of nine episodes :

1. The Last Supper. Forecast of the treachery of Judas.
2. Forecast of Peter's denial, and of the desertion of the disciples.

<sup>1</sup> This seems to me to be made overwhelmingly probable by Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, Chapter VIII, whether or not his "Proto-Luke" hypothesis be accepted.

<sup>2</sup> I hope to review the evidence in favour of this view in a forthcoming book. Reference may be made to Gardner-Smith, *St. John and the Synoptic Gospels*.

<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I differ widely from some Form-critics. The points cannot be argued here, but the line of argument is indicated.

3. Retirement to a place on or near the Mount of Olives. Betrayal ; arrest ; desertion of disciples.
4. Examination before the High Priest. Peter's denial.
5. Trial before Pilate. Declaration of innocence. Condemnation as King of the Jews. Release of Barabbas.
6. Crucifixion at Calvary, with two others.
7. Burial.
8. The Empty Tomb.
9. Appearances to disciples.<sup>1</sup>

The Marcan, Lucan and Johannine accounts insert various additional episodes, but all give these nine, in the same relative order, and with a large amount of the same detail (though often in widely different words). All of them reflect the ideas of the *kerygma* in showing, by reference to the Old Testament, that "Christ died . . . according to the Scriptures", but the actual prophecies cited differ almost entirely in the three accounts. The general idea of fulfilment of prophecy is common to all, and, as we should infer from the *kerygma*

<sup>1</sup> The genuine text of Mark in its present form contains no appearances, being broken off at xvi. 8. But they seem to be anticipated in xiv. 28, xvi. 7 ; unless Professor Lightfoot is right in holding that these two passages refer to the Second Advent rather than to appearances of the risen Lord in the sense of Luke and John (see *Locality and Doctrine in the Gospels*, pp. 73 sqq.).

itself, probably primitive, but the working out of the idea, with few exceptions, belongs to the specialization of the tradition in its various forms. Again, all our accounts emphasize the fact that Jesus was put to death as Messiah ; though John (in his Passion-narrative) confines the Messianic idea almost entirely to its aspect of royalty, while Mark connects it explicitly with the titles " Son of God " and " Son of Man ". Each account again includes certain supernatural " signs " accompanying the death of Jesus, but again these belong to the specialization of the tradition, and not to its common pattern, since no such " sign " is recorded in all four Gospels.

It certainly looks as if all our Passion-narratives were controlled, as regards their main contents, by a fixed, even stereotyped form of narrative, in which from a very early date the essential facts were set forth. If we ask whether there is any further evidence that such a form existed, we may recall (i) that Paul's description of his preaching to the Galatians, " before whose eyes Christ was set forth crucified " <sup>1</sup> seems to imply something more than a mere statement of the fact such as we have in the formula of I Cor. xv. 3-4 ; and (ii) that a " recital " of the death of the Lord formed part of the observance of the Eucharist in

<sup>1</sup> Gal. iii. 1.

the Pauline churches.<sup>1</sup> This evidence does not amount to proof, but it suggests the likelihood that some form of Passion-narrative accompanied the preaching of the Gospel and the celebration of the Sacrament; while the discovery of a common form underlying our canonical reports fits in with this suggestion.

It is to be observed that the type of narrative which seems to be pre-supposed is straightforward and objective. The motives which can be discerned are quite simple: the desire to show that Jesus went to His death with open eyes, that He was condemned unjustly, and that His sufferings fulfilled the Scriptures. These motives have perhaps been carried a little further in one and another of the canonical accounts, and we seem to discern a tendency to fasten the guilt of His death somewhat more definitely on the Jews rather than the Romans. But the characteristic features of martyr-legends are conspicuously absent, such as harrowing details of suffering, edifying speeches, and miraculous interventions on behalf of the sufferer. Still more conspicuous is the absence of any such theologizing of the story as might not unreasonably have been

<sup>1</sup> I Cor. xi. 26. That *καταγγέλλετε* refers to a verbal recital seems to me almost certain in view of the evidence for the use of *καταγγέλλειν* advanced in Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, s.v. ἀγγέλλω.

expected, in view of its theological importance. This is especially notable in the Fourth Gospel. That work is in general deeply penetrated with a distinctive theology, but if one reads its Passion-narrative it is difficult to find more than two or three points at which the narrative appears to have been influenced by that theology. As a whole it is singularly plain and objective. The reason would seem to be that the story was so fixed in tradition that no serious departure from the common form could be contemplated, even by an evangelist who set out to give a theological interpretation of the Gospel.

On all grounds it seems probable that in the Passion-narrative we are in close touch with the primitive tradition. The story was not produced either by the preaching of the early Church or by theological reflection upon it. It is the story that underlies the *kerygma*, and provided the basis for the theology of the epistles.

We now pass to the earlier parts of the Gospels, where the material is presented as a series of loosely connected units of narrative or of teaching, and where the variations both in content and in order are greater than in the Passion-narrative.

I assume the main results of source-criticism as they bear upon this part of the Gospel record. Mark is the earliest Gospel. Matthew and Luke

depend largely upon it as a source. They also depend upon a lost document, denominated "Q", which may be conjecturally dated to about the same period, the sixties of the first century. The "Q" material can be isolated for study, and Mark and "Q" can be compared. The importance of such a comparison rests upon the facts that the two sources belong to different geographical areas (Mark western, "Q" eastern), and to different circles in the Church, and that the interest and purpose of the two is quite different. Mark, as we have seen, represents primarily the Gospel story which goes back to the primitive preaching (*kerygma*); "Q" the tradition of the sayings of Jesus which was embodied in the teaching (*didaché*) of the Church. In so far therefore as we can recognize convergences or correspondences between the two, they carry us back to a state of the tradition much earlier than the time to which Mark and "Q" belong. In point of fact, attentive study of the material reveals a considerable number of such correspondences.<sup>1</sup> From the data attested by Mark

<sup>1</sup> A list of "doubly-attested sayings" is given in Burkitt, *The Gospel History and its Transmission*, pp. 147-168. For our purpose not only such sayings come into view, but also those cases where the two documents confirm one another implicitly. It should be added that in some cases, as for example in predictions of the Second Advent, Mark and "Q" represent different and *prima facie* inconsistent traditions. Those points in which they agree obviously carry the greater weight when we are seeking for the central tradition.



and "Q" in conjunction we can derive a clear and relatively full picture of the character of the ministry of Jesus. This picture is based upon evidence which, when allowance is made for the time required for the tradition to develop in the two directions represented by Mark and by "Q" respectively, can hardly be later than, say, the forties. It may be used as a criterion for estimating the value of other material in Mark and "Q", as well as in other parts of the Gospel canon. By the use of such a criterion, it becomes clear that the general impression produced by the Synoptic Gospels as a whole is in harmony with this early and central tradition, with expansions which do not alter its character, but that there are sections of these Gospels, and still more of the Fourth Gospel, which lie somewhat off the line of this tradition, and may turn out to be of only secondary historical value.

Of Form-criticism it is necessary to speak at greater length. It is so called because it starts from the forms or patterns in which the material is presented, and seeks to draw conclusions from these forms with regard to the character of various parts of the tradition in the oral stage which lies behind the written Gospels. Its method, as distinguished from that of source-criticism, may be illustrated in this way. The source-critic takes,

for example, the story of the Withered Hand (Mk. iii. 1-6 and parallels). By a minute comparison of the actual wording in the three Gospels he concludes (a) that this story was taken by Matthew and Luke from Mark, and (b) that Matthew has expanded it by the addition of a saying which is found elsewhere in Luke, and so was probably drawn from "Q". The form-critic on the other hand will take the same story, and observe that its pattern consists of three elements only—setting, action, and significant saying. He then points out that the same pattern is found, not only in the similar story of the Dropsy (Lk. xiv. 2-6) but also in sections whose content is quite different, *e.g.* the stories of the Blessing of the Children,<sup>1</sup> of the Feast with Publicans and Sinners,<sup>2</sup> and of the Anointing at Bethany.<sup>3</sup> With only slight variations in the pattern a whole class of such stories can be collected, and can be compared and contrasted with other stories which have a different pattern. Similarly the Gospel Sayings can be classified; for example, as parables, poetical utterances, and prose aphorisms.

It is not necessary here to supply a detailed classification of the material, such as form-criti-

<sup>1</sup> Mk. x. 13-16.

<sup>2</sup> Mk. ii. 15-17.

<sup>3</sup> Mk. xiv. 3-9.

cism seeks to provide. It is enough to note certain characteristics of the material.

(i) Apart from the long and sustained narrative of the Passion, the bulk of the oral tradition seems to have been in the form of brief stories and sayings, each of which aims at setting forth clearly and vividly some one main point.

(ii) It is thus possible in most cases to recognize the interest or motive which led to the formulation and preservation of the tradition. The interest is seldom directly biographical. Such biographical information as we can glean is all the more significant because it is imparted incidentally.

(iii) More often the interest is related to some theme belonging either to the preaching (*kerygma*) or to the teaching (*didaché*) of the early Church. In each case the tradition was open to the possibility of being modified under the influence of some special evangelistic or didactic motive, but in each case also, the nearer a particular story or saying stands to the primitive and permanent concerns of the Church, the more sure we may be that it belongs to the central tradition.

(iv) Sometimes the mere form of a unit of the tradition permits an estimate of its probable historical value. Thus, it is generally recognized that the parables as a whole have a strikingly in-

dividual style and character, which encourages the belief that they belong to the most original and authentic part of the tradition. Many of the aphoristic sayings on the other hand have little individual stamp, but are of the nature of current proverbs, so that it is hard to say whether they were coined by Jesus Himself, or taken by Him or His followers from a common stock.

There are, again, passages where a definite poetical structure can be recognized. Burney, *The Poetry of Our Lord*, showed that such passages can without difficulty be turned word for word into Aramaic. We can then perceive that they not only exhibit the marks of parallelism and rhythm characteristic of Semitic poetry, but are actually in poetical metres well-known from the Hebrew Old Testament. Such passages are especially characteristic of "Q" and of the special source of Matthew. We conclude that the older oral tradition contained utterances of Jesus in verse, similar to the oracles of the Hebrew prophets, and this poetical structure helped to protect such passages from serious modification, even in the process of translation. It does not necessarily follow that Jesus Himself spoke in verse. The poetical form may have been given to His sayings by the early Aramaic-speaking community. But since Jesus appeared

to His contemporaries as a prophet, and prophets were accustomed to give oracles in verse, it is credible that we have here something approaching His *ipsissima verba*. However that may be, the verse-structure carries these passages back well into the early Aramaic-speaking period of the life of the Church, and their form guarantees their place in the central tradition.

Again, if we consider the narratives, we observe that some of them have a suspicious resemblance in form and character to folk-tales current in the Jewish or the Hellenistic world, while others have a unique form which seems to have been the product of the Christian genius. The latter we shall attribute to the central, the former to the peripheral tradition.

(v) It is often possible to infer the situation in the life of the Church in which a particular element of the tradition had special significance. Thus such a story as that of the Coin in the Fish's mouth (Mt. xvii. 24-27) is pertinent to the question of the payment of the Temple tax by Jewish Christians who no longer felt themselves to be within the Jewish community. That question is hardly likely to have become acute in the stage of Church life represented by the early chapters of Acts, and still less likely during the lifetime of Jesus. The story is suspected, not without good

reason, of being a later accretion. On the other hand such passages as those in which Jesus is challenged to give a sign from heaven, or accused of casting out demons by Beelzebub, may indeed have had apologetical value in the Church's conflict with Jewish opponents, but no "setting in life" is so natural or appropriate as their ostensible setting in the life of Jesus Himself, who, as Jewish tradition avers, was accused of sorcery. We can scarcely doubt that they belong to the primary tradition.

If we ask what is the chief value of the method of form-criticism for our immediate purpose, I should answer that it enables us to study our material in fresh groupings, which point to distinct strains of tradition, preserved from various motives, and in some measure through different channels, and to compare these strains of tradition, much as we compared Mark and "Q", in search of convergences and cross-correspondences.

The grouping is, it is true, not always quite clear or exclusive. There is some overlapping, and some units may from one point of view belong to one group, and from another point of view to another group. Nevertheless some fairly definite groupings do emerge; for example, the parables, the poetical sayings, the controversial dialogues,

the "pronouncement-stories".<sup>1</sup> Any such group may be profitably studied, for our purpose, in isolation from the rest. A remarkable fact emerges. Each group taken by itself gives a picture of the ministry of Jesus from a particular standpoint. I have shown elsewhere that the body of parables, taken as a whole, enables us to reconstruct, from this source alone, a surprisingly complete and coherent picture of the ministry in its various phases.<sup>2</sup> The other groups do not, it is true, yield such a complete or detailed picture as this. But they do set Jesus before us as a clear-cut Figure in word and action. And although the points of view differ, we cannot avoid the impression that it is the same picture that we are seeing from them all. The material has come down through different channels, but it is all drawn from the same reservoir of tradition.

This comparison of various groups of tradition can be carried out in detail.<sup>3</sup> I will give some examples.

Take the following sections of the Gospels :

1. The Call of Levi. Mk. ii. 14.

<sup>1</sup> A term suggested by Dr. Vincent Taylor for narratives in which the interest is centred in a saying or pronouncement rather than in action. They coincide more or less with Dibelius's "paradigms" and Bultmann's "apophthegms."

<sup>2</sup> *The Parables of the Kingdom*, pp. 198-202.

<sup>3</sup> The method which I have elaborated here was employed in Hoskyns and Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament*, pp. 162-207.

2. The Feast with Publicans and Sinners.  
Mk. ii. 15-17.
3. Zacchæus. Lk. xix. 2-10.
4. The Sinful Woman in Simon's House.  
Lk. vii. 36-48.
5. The Woman taken in Adultery. Jn. vii.  
53-viii. 11.
6. The Parable of the Lost Sheep. Lk. xv. 4-7 ;  
Mt. xviii. 12-13.
7. The Parable of the Pharisee and the  
Publican. Lk. xviii. 10-14.
8. The Parable of the Children in the Market-  
place. Mt. xi. 16-19 ; Lk. vii. 31-35  
(" Q ").
9. The saying, " The publicans and harlots  
enter the Kingdom of God before you ".  
Mt. xxi. 32.

Here we have a great variety of traditional " forms "—aphorisms, parables, poetical sayings, dialogues, stories of various kinds—taken from all four main strata of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, " Q," Matthew's special source, and Luke's special source), as well as from some unknown source which has entered into some MSS. of John and some of Luke.<sup>1</sup> The under-

<sup>1</sup> The *pericopé adulteræ* is absent from our best MSS., with one single exception. Of the MSS. which contain it, some give it in Jn. vii. 53-viii. 11, some at the end of the Fourth Gospel, and some after Lk. xxi. 38. The story appears to have been given also in the Gospel according to the Hebrews. It was evidently a piece of floating tradition.



lying motives are various. No. 4 is primarily teaching on forgiveness, No. 7, teaching on prayer, No. 6 deals with the Gospel theme of the grace of God. Nos. 8 and 9 are simple comments upon the actual situation in the ministry of Jesus, the former in a poetical and parabolic form, the latter in aphoristic form. But all of them in their different ways exhibit Jesus as an historical personality distinguished from other religious personalities of His time by His friendly attitude to the outcasts of society. This convergence of a great variety of strands of tradition is impressive. We may surely say, on strictly critical grounds, that we have here a well-attested historical fact.<sup>1</sup> This fact stands independently of the historical status of the several stories in detail. Thus the story of the Woman taken in Adultery is poorly attested, being in fact no part of our canonical Gospels according to the best MSS. But the implications of the story regarding the attitude of Jesus to the sinful and to the self-righteous are in agreement with a whole body of evidence,

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to observe how this fact emerges in a fresh guise in the epistles. "This man receiveth sinners," says the Lucan tradition (xv. 2): "receive one another as Christ received you," says Paul (Rom. xv. 7). "A friend of publicans and sinners," says the "Q" tradition (Mt. xi. 19); "God commendeth His love towards us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us," says Paul (Rom. v. 8). It would be perverse to suggest that the stories and sayings of the Gospels were developed out of the Pauline dogma, which in that case would hang in the air.

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As another example, take the following passages :

1. Rejection at Nazareth, with the saying about a prophet at home. Mk. vi. 1-6 ; Lk. iv. 16-30.
2. The Mother and the Brethren. Mk. iii. 31-35.
3. Jesus and His brethren. Jn. vii. 1-9.
4. The saying, "The foxes have holes . . ." Mt. viii. 20 ; Lk. ix. 58 ("Q").
5. The command to "hate" father and mother. Lk. xiv. 26 ; Mt. x. 37 ("Q").
6. The Call of the Sons of Zebedee. Mk. i. 19-20.

The motive of No. 1 is the theme of the rejection of the Messiah by His own people, which appears also in Gospel sayings like Mt. xxiii. 37-39, Lk. xiii. 34-35, and underlies Jn. i. 11, Rom. ix.-xi., and numerous other passages. The motive of Nos. 4 and 5 is teaching (*didaché*) about the conditions of Christian discipleship, and the same motive probably led to the preservation of No. 2. No. 6 belongs to a whole class of stories of vocation (the call of Peter and Andrew, and of Levi, in the Synoptic Gospels, and of Philip in the

Fourth Gospel). The motive of such stories seems to have been to establish the fact that certain persons in the early Church possessed the authority given by a direct call of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> But all five passages, however different their immediate motives, attest the fact that Jesus was, with His followers, an exile from home and family.<sup>2</sup>

We make one more group :

1. The apocalyptic saying, " I beheld Satan as lightning fallen from heaven ". Lk. x. 18.
2. The Parable of the Strong Man Bound. Mk. iii. 27 ; Lk. xi. 21-22.
3. The Temptation. Mt. iv. 1-11 ; Lk. iv. 1-13 (" Q ").
4. The controversial Dialogue on Exorcism. Mk. iii. 23-26 ; Mt. xii. 24-28 ; Lk. xi. 17-20 (" Q ").
5. The Demoniac in the Synagogue. Mk. i. 23-27.
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It is in this manner that the whole question of the miracle-stories can best be approached. We begin with the observation that various strains of tradition are concerned with the theme that through the work of Jesus men enter into a sphere of "salvation" (*σωτηρία*) as well for the body as the soul (e.g. the "Q" passage Mt. xi. 5, Lk. vii. 22). The statement that Jesus wrought

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miraculous cures is embodied in the primitive *kerygma* (Ac. x. 38). That "miracles" were a matter of experience in the early Church we have first-hand evidence in Rom. xv. 19, I Cor. xii. 28, II Cor. xii. 12, Heb. ii. 4. Whatever therefore we may make of any particular miracle-story, we are dealing with a tradition which, for better or worse, contained this kind of thing from the very beginning. Since, then, the most authentic tradition certainly contained some miracle-stories, we may attempt to distinguish those whose form and character link them closely with that tradition,<sup>1</sup> from others which show a suspicious resemblance to non-Christian popular tales of wonder-workers,<sup>2</sup> and assign to the former a superior historical status.

These stories of miracles are clearly related in the closest possible way to the primary theme of the *kerygma*, that the New Age has dawned, the age of miracle, the age in which the arm of the Lord is laid bare for the salvation of men and the discomfiture of the powers of evil. Other aspects of the same theme are similarly illustrated in various units of tradition.

<sup>1</sup> Such as the Withered Hand, which is inseparably bound up with teaching about the Sabbath, and the Paralytic, which is similarly bound up with the proclamation of forgiveness through Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> Such as the Blind Man of Bethsaida (Mk. viii. 22-26), the Dumb Man of Decapolis (Mk. vii. 31-37) and the Gadarene Swine.

Thus we have the motive of the contrast between the old order and the new :

1. The Law and the prophets until John. Mt. xi. 13, Lk. xvi. 16 ("Q").
2. Patched clothes, burst wineskins. Mk. ii. 21-22.
3. Water into Wine. Jn. ii. 1-10.
4. Living water. Jn. iv. 5-15.
5. Divorce. Mk. x. 1-10.
6. Murder and anger. Mt. v. 21-22.

No. 1 is an aphorism, No. 2 a parable. The underlying idea of both is much the same. No. 3 expresses this idea in the form of a story in which water (the water of the Jews' purifying) is turned into wine. The use of wine as a figure links it up with the Marcan parable. No. 4 is a dialogue with narrative setting. The water of eternal life, now given by Christ, is contrasted with the water of Jacob's well. Nos. 5 and 6 are plain ethical teaching, in the form of a controversial dialogue and an aphorism respectively ; but both strikingly illustrate the maxim enunciated in No. 1.

Again, we have the motive of " fulfilment " :

1. The plentiful harvest. Mt. ix. 37-38, Lk. x. 2. ("Q").
2. The fields white for harvest. Jn. iv. 35.

3. The parable of the ripening of the corn. Mk. iv. 26-29.

4. The blessedness of the disciples. Mt. xiii. 16-17, Lk. x. 23-24.

5. Reply to John the Baptist. Mt. xi. 2-6, Lk. vii. 18-23 ("Q").

6. Prophecy fulfilled. Lk. iv. 17-21.

7. The parable of the Great Feast. Mt. xxii. 2-10, Lk. xiv. 16-24.

Nos. 1 and 2 are aphorisms which, using the ancient symbol of the harvest of the world, declare that "the time is fulfilled". No. 2 is a parable which, as I have tried to show elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> is best understood in the same sense. No. 4, an aphorism again, declares unequivocally that the hopes of past generations are fulfilled in the experience of the disciples. No. 5, a dialogue, states the same truth in answer to a question. No. 6, a "pronouncement-story" (conflated with another episode), cites a prophecy, and declares it to be fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus. No. 7 again uses an ancient symbol, that of the Messianic Feast, and announces, "All is ready". Once more, the several units are drawn from various strata, and from various strains of tradition, but they converge upon a central theme.

<sup>1</sup> *The Parables of the Kingdom*, pp. 176-180.

Finally, take the following passages, which (among many others) deal with the theme of judgment :

1. The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen. Mk. xii. 1-9.
2. The Blood of the Righteous. Mt. xxiii. 34-36, Lk. xi. 49-51 (" Q").
3. The Doom of Jerusalem. Mt. xxiii. 37-39, Lk. xiii. 34-35 (" Q").
4. Tears over Jerusalem. Lk. xix. 41-44.
5. Judicial Blindness. Jn. ix. 39.

Nos. 2 and 5 may best be described as prophetic utterances in prose. No. 3 is a poetical utterance. No. 4 may perhaps be classified as a "pronouncement-story". The purport of them all is the same: the rejection of Jesus by the Jews is a sign of divine judgment, the Last Judgment of which prophecy and apocalypse spoke.

In view of this accumulation of evidence, it is clear that the various channels of tradition all conveyed sayings and stories of Jesus which necessarily imply that His coming is eschatological in character. It is in the light of all this that we must consider those passages which represent Him as directly fulfilling a Messianic role, or explicitly claiming to be Messiah. Such

passages are few. But the question whether this or that particular Messianic passage is to be considered historically authentic becomes a subordinate question when we observe that the tradition in all its several parts is permeated with the Messianic idea. Thus, recent criticism has thrown doubt upon the explicit reply of Jesus to the High Priest's question, "Art thou the Christ?"—"I am".<sup>1</sup> But even if this be rejected, the Messianic character of the whole ministry remains inseparably embedded in the tradition.

It is possible enough that the developed tradition in the Gospels contains sayings which are more precise and explicit than the original tradition attested. Thus an examination of the canonical and non-canonical Gospels suggests that there was a tendency to express beliefs about the Messianic character of the ministry of Jesus in the form of sayings in the first person (the so-called *Ich-worte*, or "Ego-sayings"). For example, the formula "ἦλθον ἵνα<sup>2</sup> . . .", "I came to" (call sinners, etc.), seems to have become a stock formula for such sayings.<sup>3</sup> But to say that all such "Ego-sayings" are late coinages is to go beyond the evidence, especially

<sup>1</sup> Mk. xiv. 61-62. <sup>2</sup> or alternatively with the infinitive.

<sup>3</sup> See my article *A New Gospel* (reprinted from *Rylands Bulletin*, vol. xx., pp. 66, 87).

as many of them state no more than is implied in the whole range of the tradition. Whether or not Jesus explicitly made, or admitted, His claim, it is not doubtful that from the beginning the tradition affirmed that He lived, taught, worked, suffered and died as Messiah. We can find no alternative tradition, excavate as we will in the successive strata of the Gospels.

I have been able, in this chapter, to do no more than outline a method of criticism which promises a fresh approach to the problem of historicity. It is a method which does not aim, directly or in the main, at establishing a residuum of bare facts, presumed to stand independently of any meaning attached to them. The number of such facts which can be established by this or by any other method is strictly limited. The aim of this particular method is to recover the purest and most original form of the tradition, which inevitably includes both fact and interpretation. It starts from the existence of the early Church as itself an historical fact of great significance. By comparing the classical documents of the early Church—Epistles with Acts, Acts and Epistles as a whole with Gospels, and different elements in the Gospels with one another—it studies the formulation and growth of the

tradition of Jesus and His teaching by which the Church lived. By analysis it discovers certain groupings and forms of material, and in each of them it recognizes a central and a peripheral element, a nucleus of firm tradition and a penumbra of secondary value. By this process it seeks to arrive at a clear conception of the *central* tradition as a whole, and to trace it to the earliest possible date. In so far as it is successful, it sets forth the *primitive* tradition, coeval with the Church itself. In this primitive tradition the facts are given from a particular point of view, and with a particular meaning.

And here I must recall what was said in Chapter I about the nature of history as consisting not merely of occurrences, but of events which are occurrence *plus* meaning. We should now observe further that as events differ in the intensity of meaning they possess for the experient of them, so one event will differ from another in requiring a larger or a smaller degree of interpretation if it is to be faithfully reported.

Among events of public interest there are some which can be adequately recorded as a series of bare occurrences, as for example the story of a scientific invention. There are others which can take their true place in an historical record only as they are interpreted, as for

example, the beginning of the Reformation at Wittenberg, or the fall of the Bastille, or the abdication of King Edward VIII. It is true that the element of interpretation opens the door to all the fallibilities of the human mind, but the point is that the attempt to rule out any interpretation in such cases inevitably suggests a false interpretation. The events are such that the meaning of what happened is of greater importance, historically speaking, than what happened. There are even events of outstanding historical importance in which practically nothing at all happened, in the ordinary external sense of happening. It was simply that the meaning of the whole situation changed for an individual or a group, and from that change of meaning a chain of happenings ensued. Such events were the call of the prophet Mohammed, and the conversion of Ignatius Loyola, and the mysterious inward process that made the house-painter Adolf Hitler into the hope or the terror of Europe.

Now it is clear that the events narrated in the Gospels differ among themselves in this respect. The trial and crucifixion of Jesus could be recorded as bare fact. Tacitus reports it thus : " The originator of that name (*scil.* the name 'Christian'), Christ, was executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate "



(Ann. XV, 44). So far as that sentence goes, it is a purely factual record, though the context in which it stands, referring to Christianity as *exitiabilis superstitio*, supplies an interpretation. Indeed, an historian who records the death of any man is bound to suggest at least the reason why this death should be singled out from the myriads of deaths that happen every day, and to that extent to interpret its meaning. Without such meaning, no man's death is an historical event, in the strict sense of the term. The Talmud records that "they hanged Jesus on the eve of Passover . . . because he practised sorcery and led Israel astray".<sup>1</sup> That is a record of the fact with an unmistakable interpretation. A Syrian philosopher of (probably) the early second century alludes to the fact that the Jews killed "their wise King", as an historical example of persecution of the wise and virtuous, along with the deaths of Socrates and Pythagoras.<sup>2</sup> That is a more sympathetic interpretation of the fact. The Gospels record the same occurrence, with a different interpretation of its meaning. The *occurrence*, we may say, is the same; the *event* emerges as something different.

There are, however, other events narrated in

<sup>1</sup> Bab. Sanhedrin, f. 43a.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Mara bar Šarapion, in Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum*.

the Gospels where the element of mere occurrence is evanescent. For example, if we ask what lies behind the story of the Temptation, it is likely enough that the merely factual element was as elusive as in the cases of Mohammed, Ignatius Loyola and Adolf Hitler to which I have referred. But it is quite another question whether or not the Gospels are veracious in affirming that the ministry of Jesus was introduced by an event of profound significance, an event in which the element of meaning altogether overshadows the tenuous substratum of observable fact. Again, what was the Resurrection, as mere occurrence? Various theories can be suggested—a corpse was resuscitated; or there were communications from the dead, like those claimed by modern mediums; or the disciples were the victims of corporate hallucinations. These are all theories abstracted from the record of the complete event, and it is impossible to produce convincing evidence for any of them. The complete event, that is to say the occurrence, whatever it was, *plus* the meaning it bore for those who experienced it, is given in the Gospels: Christ triumphed over death and was raised to the right hand of God. It is as thus interpreted that the Resurrection led to historical consequences in the rise of the Church. To say that our reports of the

Resurrection make the meaning of the fact clearer than the fact itself is not to remove the Resurrection from the field of history into that of purely spiritual experience. The Resurrection remains an event within history, though we may not be able to state precisely what happened.

But while the several events narrated in the Gospels are in this respect on different levels, the narrative as a whole is clearly concerned with an historical episode which for those who lived through it, and for those who experienced it through close fellowship with them, bore a weight of meaning greater than could be attributed to any other event in history. It was for them the *eschaton*, the final and absolute event, in which the Kingdom of God was revealed, and His purpose fulfilled. And we must observe that it was as thus understood that the episode in question won its place in history, as an "epoch-making" event in the strict sense. But for the fact that it was so interpreted—or rather (for "interpreted" suggests too self-conscious a process) that it presented itself to experience with this meaning—it might be not inadequately summed up in the words of Tacitus, and so dismissed. But we are surely justified in saying at least so much, that a supercilious and somewhat cynical Roman aristocrat, with all the

prejudices of his class, regarding the episode entirely from the outside, at a date later than the bulk of our New Testament evidence, and at a great distance from the scene of action, is not *a priori* likely to have formed a juster estimate of its significance than those who stood under the immediate impact of the facts. And this holds good of modern writers who have taken a substantially similar view. The assumption that the whole great course of Christian history is a massive pyramid balanced upon the apex of some trivial occurrence, is surely a less probable one than that the whole event, the occurrence *plus* the meaning inherent in it, did actually occupy a place in history at least comparable with that which the New Testament assigns to it.

For it is only the apprehension of the facts in this particular light that could account for the emergence of the Church as an historical phenomenon. Attempts to account for it on other grounds lead to a fundamental historical scepticism, such as is reflected in M. Guignebert's recent judgment: "The rise of the Galilæan prophet marks the beginning, *however accidental*, of the religious movement from which Christianity sprang".<sup>1</sup> The connection of events ceases to be "accidental" if the tradition as we

<sup>1</sup> Ch. Guignebert, *Jesus* (Eng. trans.), p. 538. My italics.

can recover it from the New Testament represents in substance a true memory of the facts, with the meaning which they really bore as an episode in history. We cannot, however, prove that this is so. What we can hope to prove is that in the fourth decade of the first century the Christian Church grew up around a central tradition which, however it is expressed—in preaching, in story, in teaching and in liturgical practice—yields a coherent picture of Jesus Christ, what He was, what He stood for, what He said, did and suffered. The step beyond that will probably be taken by something more akin to faith than to objective historical judgment. Either the interpretation through which the facts are presented was imposed upon them mistakenly—and in that case few facts remain which we can regard as strictly ascertained—or the interpretation was imposed by the facts themselves, as they were experienced in an historical situation, and gave rise to historical consequences—and in that case we do know, in the main, what the facts were. The latter conclusion may not be demonstrable, but it is not unreasonable.

IV  
THE GOSPEL STORY



## IV

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**A**S the outcome of the last two chapters I shall assume that we have in the Gospels a body of material of genuinely historical value, from which we can construct a credible picture of the events that happened "under Pontius Pilate". To write a "Life of Jesus" on the basis of this evidence is a hazardous enterprise. We cannot be sure of more than the broadest outline of the succession of events before the closing scenes. Since the Evangelists have not followed any strict chronological order in narrating the various episodes of the ministry, any arrangement of them in a continuous narrative can be no more than tentative, and, at the best, probable. On the other hand, we are comparatively well informed about the situation in general, about the main purport of what Jesus taught, in relation to the thought and the problems of the time, about the kind of religion for which He stood, about the nature and causes of the opposition which He encountered, and about the proceedings which led to His death.



Let us then try to envisage these facts in the context of the history of first-century Palestine under the Roman Empire. In the situation at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus three main factors may be recognized, representing three permanent elements in history—civilization, nationalism and religion.

First, the Roman Empire was the bearer of a cosmopolitan civilization with a long development behind it. It rested upon power, but power employed, in intention at least, in accordance with law, and in the interests of peace, order, and general well-being for its subjects. One of its primary concerns was unity among the diverse peoples under its rule. In this concern it was effectively supported, particularly in the eastern provinces, by the permeation of a vast region with a common Hellenistic culture. Rome was wise enough not to attempt any ruthless *Gleichschaltung*. It tolerated wide differences of local custom, and permitted a large measure of local autonomy. But its natural tendency was in favour of a growing assimilation towards uniformity. Upon political recalcitrance and religious fanaticism it was accustomed to bring its hand down with unsparing severity. Under the Roman peace there was ample opportunity for the spread of a humane, reasonable and practical

philosophy of life such as Stoicism in its popularly diffused forms was ready to provide, while economic conditions, if often precarious, were on the whole vastly better for most of the population than they had been before the unification of the Hellenistic world under Rome. There were abuses and instances of oppression, and there was no doubt much suffering and some discontent, but on the whole the Roman order was beneficent. It was at least an efficient organ of civilized life, and the best hope of a genuine unity of civilized mankind.

In Palestine, the Roman Empire met with a problem of unusual difficulty through the stubborn national feeling of the Jews, which was unlike anything else that had confronted its administrators. Most of the east had welcomed the Augustan settlement either with enthusiasm as a great deliverance, or at least as a much lesser evil than the internecine conflicts to which it put an end. Even among the Jews there were some, chiefly among the higher social *strata*, who took this latter attitude. They had retained in some measure the Philhellenism which had at one time threatened almost to swamp the native tradition. They found themselves, as the hereditary leaders of their people, in the position which Roman policy was always ready to assign to local grandees,

whether they were tribal chiefs or civic aristocracies ; the position of acceptable mediators of Roman rule. Such were the members of the great priestly families, who appear to have constituted the party of the Sadducees. For the Sadducees, whatever may have been their religious position—and they have been variously represented as sceptics and as extreme conservatives—were clearly a party who if not in the strict sense philo-Roman, at any rate enjoyed a substantial dignity and authority on the condition of keeping on good terms with the paramount power.

But over against this complacent priestly aristocracy, the body of the Jewish people remained stubbornly hostile to Rome and to the civilization for which Rome stood. They would not be willing partakers in the Roman order with its Hellenistic culture. They were its unwilling and rebellious subjects. The quite astonishing lengths to which the imperial policy went in the way of concession and conciliation failed to win them over. From the time when Judas the Gaulonite led an overt revolt, which was crushed with exemplary ferocity there remained as a permanent element in the population a body of sullen, resentful nationalists—the “ fourth philosophy”, as Josephus absurdly calls them—also

known as "Zealots". From time to time they provoked measures of repression, and in the end they precipitated the fatal rebellion of 66 A.D. Already in the period of the Gospels they must have commanded the sympathy of a large part of the nation. For their attitude was deeply rooted in the history of the race. Their spirit was that of the heroes of ancient Israel, the spirit of the Maccabees, the spirit expressed in many psalms and apocalypses. They believed their nation to be a chosen race, superior to all other peoples of the world, and precluded by a solemn calling from any accommodation with a heathen power. If we accord admiration to the patriotism of small nations, from the Greeks at Thermopylæ to Serbia in the Great War, we cannot withhold it from the Jewish Zealots, recognizing as we must that patriotism has been one of the chief springs of human virtue, as well as of many crimes.

Besides the Sadducees and the Zealots there were the Pharisees, whose absorbing interest was in religion. If the Zealots were the spiritual successors of the early Maccabees, the Pharisees were the successors of the Chasidim who joined their revolt while religious freedom was at stake, but stood aside when they sought worldly power. The Pharisees represented the fruit of the long development which began with the prophets, and

was carried on through the work of the post-exilic reformers and the teachers of the synagogue. They have a bad name in Christian tradition. But we must confess, if we compare the prophetic books of the Old Testament, some of the best parts of the apocalyptic literature, such as the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, and the sayings of the elder Rabbis, such as are preserved in *Pirke Aboth*, that there is here a genuinely continuous religious tradition, which commands our respect. Its faith in God is magnificent; its conception of His nature, character and claims is elevated; its ethical standards are singularly lofty, and certainly compare favourably with any other moral teaching current in our period, even that of the finer Stoics. The recent sympathetic study of Rabbinic Judaism, which has so enlarged our knowledge of Pharisaism, has made it impossible to simplify the situation presented in the Gospels by conceiving it as a conflict between light and darkness in which the Pharisees stand altogether on the side of evil.

Indeed the tragic quality of the situation lies in the fact that civilization, patriotism and religion are none of them bad things, and were not altogether unworthily represented by the Romans, the Zealots and the Pharisees, and yet together

they were responsible for the catastrophe which the Gospels record. The conflict among these factors, each of them with some right on its side, produced the situation of tension into which Jesus entered. We all too easily read the Gospels as it were *in vacuo*, without realizing that their whole story moves in a tense atmosphere of smouldering conflict—Jew against Gentile, Pharisee against Sadducee, Roman against Zealot.

Jesus did not ally Himself with any side, or set up a new party to join in the conflict. He did not ally Himself with any side, though there are signs of sympathies that might have drawn Him to the one or the other. The Gospels adduce some remarkable incidents and utterances, which, even if we do not care to claim literal accuracy for all of them, must certainly be a safe index to His attitudes. If He said to a leper, "Go and offer the things that Moses commanded",<sup>1</sup> or to an enquirer after eternal life, "You know the commandments",<sup>2</sup> He spoke as any accredited rabbi might have spoken. He is said to have accepted with enthusiasm from a scribe (who according to our information will have been a Pharisee of the school of Hillel) the fundamental statement of ethical monotheism: "Thou shalt love the Lord

<sup>1</sup> Mk. i. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Mk. x. 19.

thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength ; and thy neighbour as thyself".<sup>1</sup> Many of His ethical precepts in fact are no more than re-affirmations of the moral teaching of which the Pharisees were the principal custodians, and have a close resemblance to sayings of the early rabbis.

On the other hand, a Sadducee hearing Him denounce the accretions of oral tradition with which the Pharisees had encumbered the Law might have thought to find an ally ;<sup>2</sup> and any one who wished to preserve tolerable relations with Rome must have rejoiced when He emphatically dissociated Himself from the patriotic front in the matter of paying tribute—the test question for all adherents of the "fourth philosophy".<sup>3</sup> Indeed His friendly attitude to the Gentile asserted itself beyond such mere acceptance of the inevitable. He consorted with the collectors of the foreign excise duties.<sup>4</sup> He praised a military officer who saw in the Roman order a symbol of the divine order to which he pinned his faith. He went out of His way to recall how before the days of intense nationalism the prophets had been sent

<sup>1</sup> Lk. x. 27-28.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mk. vii. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Mk. xii. 13-17.

<sup>4</sup> Mt. xi. 19 ("Q"); Mk. ii. 15-17 ; Lk. xix. 2-10.

to foreigners,<sup>1</sup> and surmised that the cities of Tyre and Sidon would have been a more fruitful field of work than His own country.<sup>2</sup>

And yet He allowed Himself to be acclaimed by a patriotic crowd with cheers for "the coming kingdom of our father David",<sup>3</sup> and the priests concluded that He was no better than a Zealot. The debate in the Sanhedrin recorded in the Fourth Gospel may or may not be described from an actual report, but it fits perfectly the historical situation: "If we let Him alone, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away our place and nation".<sup>4</sup> And so He was arraigned before the Roman court as a potential rebel.

If Jesus had appeared as a religious and moral reformer, it is not difficult to conceive lines of policy which He might have adopted. A patriotic leader with purer motives and a more consistent spiritual basis than those of Judas the Gaulonite might have rallied strong forces to his side. The programme sketched for the "Son of David" in the Psalms of Solomon<sup>5</sup> is no unworthy one, and stands in direct succession to some splendid prophecies of the Old Testament. The cause was

<sup>1</sup> Lk. iv. 24-27.

<sup>2</sup> Lk. x. 13 ("Q").

<sup>3</sup> Mk. xi. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Jn. xi. 47-50.

<sup>5</sup> Ps. Sol. xvii-xviii.



the cause of the poor and oppressed, with whom Jesus certainly had a deep sympathy.

Again, many Pharisees would surely have welcomed a teacher who stood for a deeper, more intense devotion to the spiritual ideals of the Law and the prophets, with a popular appeal beyond the reach of most of them, provided he were willing to accommodate himself to the orthodox tradition. We may even surmise that a brilliant success might have been attained by a leader who could unite the energetic patriotism of the Zealots with the intense piety of the Pharisees—as they were united, too late, by Aqiba and Bar-cochba a century later.

Perhaps, however, we might with less difficulty conceive Jesus as leading a movement away from the growing particularism of contemporary Judaism, towards a friendly co-operation with all healthy elements in the Græco-Roman world. There were enlightened Jews, like Philo, who were making such approaches to Hellenism, even in face of anti-Semitism. The ethical monotheism of the prophets had the potentiality of a universal religion, if it was stripped of those tribal limitations which had been imposed upon it. That such universalism lay very near to the heart of the teaching of Jesus is plain. According to the Fourth Gospel it was at one time thought that

He would "go to the Dispersion among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks".<sup>1</sup> It would have been a bold policy with prospects of success.

These hypothetical constructions of what might have happened are idle, except to bring into clear relief the actual fact that Jesus stood isolated among the movements of His time. He took no side in the conflict of ideals. Nor did He form a party of His own. It is true that He collected a band of followers who might be variously regarded as the disciples of a rabbi or the accomplices of a conspirator. But when He commissioned them to carry His message through the towns and villages of Palestine, He gave them, so far as our records tell, no programme and no body of teaching to propagate. All they were to do was to heal the sick, to cast out demons, and to say, "The Kingdom of God is at hand".<sup>2</sup> It is not a programme for human action, but the proclamation of an act of God.

His own ministry turns upon the same proclamation: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has drawn near: repent and believe the Gospel".<sup>3</sup> His acts of power and compassion are no mere examples of wonder-

<sup>1</sup> Jn. vii. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Mt. x. 7-8; Lk. x. 9-11.

<sup>3</sup> Mk. i. 15.

working such as were attributed to God-possessed men in the Hellenistic world, and even to some Jewish rabbis. They are the baring of the arm of the Lord for the salvation of men : “ If I by the finger of God cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you ”.<sup>1</sup> His championship of the disreputable is not to be interpreted as the kindly tolerance of a broad-minded humanist. It expresses the sovereign mercy of God in calling whom He will into His Kingdom, as in the parable the king’s messengers gather his guests from the highways and hedges.<sup>2</sup> “ I came not to call the righteous, but sinners ”.<sup>3</sup> His conflict with the upholders of the tradition is not to be understood as an assertion of the natural freedom of the spirit of man from the bondage of outward regulations. It is the affirmation of an immediate and absolute sovereignty of God over every sphere of human life, even its most private and inward parts ; a sovereignty which cannot be evaded by hiding behind a body of external rules of behaviour. His pronouncements upon questions of law and morals are not the *sententiae* of a sage or a rabbi : they are the Word of God overruling all human wisdom. “ He taught them with authority, and

<sup>1</sup> Lk. xi. 20 (“ Q ”).

<sup>2</sup> Mt. xxii. 9 ; Lk. xiv. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Mk. ii. 17.

not as the scribes".<sup>1</sup> His ethical teaching is no system of general casuistry, nor yet an "interim-ethic" for a brief and special period in human history. It is the absolute ethic of the Kingdom of God, the moral principles of a new order of life. The implied major premiss of all His ethical sayings is the affirmation "The Kingdom of God has come upon you":<sup>2</sup>—The Kingdom of God has come upon you, therefore love your enemies that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.<sup>3</sup> The Kingdom of God has come upon you, therefore if hand or foot offend, cut it off: it is better to enter into the Kingdom of God even maimed.<sup>4</sup> The Kingdom of God has come upon you, therefore take no thought for your life, but seek first His Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> The Kingdom of God has come upon you, therefore judge not, for with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged,<sup>6</sup> in the judgement which is inseparable from the coming of God in His Kingdom. The teaching of Jesus is not an ethic for those who expect the speedy end of the world, but for those who have experienced the end of this world and the coming of the Kingdom of God.

<sup>1</sup> Mk. i. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Lk. x. 9; xi. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Mt. v. 44-45.

<sup>4</sup> Mk. ix. 43-47.

<sup>5</sup> Mt. vi. 25-34.

<sup>6</sup> Mt. vii. 1-2.

It is in relation to this ever-present thought of the Kingdom of God that the absoluteness of the ethics of Jesus stands forth so clearly. It is distinguished from all prudential or utilitarian morality such as that of the Jewish Wisdom literature. It is distinguished also from the Pharisaic tradition, which aimed at making the commands of God practicable by placing them within a system elaborately adapted to a particular people with its own history and its own special relation to the world at large.<sup>1</sup> The ethical teaching of Jesus is set forth in absolute terms, without the question of its practicability under these or those conditions being expressly raised. When we contemplate that teaching as a whole we can see that these moral principles are indeed principles on which the best kind of human life could be lived. The nearer we could get to love for our enemies, to uncalculating self-sacrifice, to a serene freedom from all self-regarding cares, and to a broad charity that never judges our neighbour, the finer, truer, holier and happier would human life become. Of that we cannot doubt. Moreover, when once we have seen the precepts of Jesus in this way, we are under obligation to them. Not only so, but the

<sup>1</sup> Compare Klausner's criticism from a Jewish standpoint, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 369-376.

grace of God which places us within His Kingdom becomes a source of moral power towards the attainment of such ideals. But we deceive ourselves if we suppose that ever in this world we could fulfil these precepts of Jesus with the absoluteness that is inherent in them. We never do and never can love our enemies, or even our friendly neighbours, as we love ourselves; we never can be completely single-minded; we never can be entirely free from selfish cares, from feelings of anger, from lustful thought; we never can be merciful as our Father in heaven is merciful; and if we understand the absoluteness with which Jesus made these demands, we shall not suppose ourselves capable of fulfilling them. They are not of this world, though they are to be put into practice in this world. They stand for the unattainable which we are bound to strive to attain. For to "receive the Kingdom of God" is to place ourselves under this absolute obligation. And yet—"when ye have done all, say, 'We are unprofitable servants: we have only done our duty'".<sup>1</sup>

Thus the ethical precepts of Jesus are not only

<sup>1</sup> Lk. xvii. 10. The omission of ἀχρεῖοι in the Sinaitic Syriac version has recently won much support: surely a slave who has done his duty is not unprofitable! No doubt that was what the Syriac translator thought. But it was not what Jesus said, according to the testimony of all other MSS. and versions.

a guide to the good life, in the sense that they set before us the goal which determines the true direction of moral effort. They are also, and even more emphatically, a means of bringing home to the conscience the judgement of God, since they reveal the sinfulness which resides even in our human best. But in doing so, they place us in the presence of a God whose mercy and forgiveness are as absolute as His demands. For no merit of our own, but of His sheer goodness, it is His good pleasure to give us the Kingdom,<sup>1</sup> with the blessedness that it brings—which is, to be children of God.

The whole teaching of Jesus, then, is orientated towards this absolute, which is the Kingdom of God, now come upon men in judgement and in mercy. That is why He could not ally Himself with any of the historical movements of His time, and why He stood isolated among men as the bearer of a Kingdom which is altogether other than the relativities of human existence.

Nevertheless, this gift of the Kingdom of God was not offered as a form of mystical experience, which the individual might enjoy in abstraction from the social and historical context in which his life was lived.

<sup>1</sup> Lk. xii. 32. *Εὐδοκεῖν, εὐδοκία*, always refer to the free exercise of God's sovereign grace.

Jesus did not withdraw his disciples into a monastic seclusion where they might practise undisturbed a beautiful and elevated piety in enjoyment of the spiritual blessedness of the children of God. He might have done so : there were Jewish communities of this kind in His lifetime—those of the Essenes. Some of those who have tried to reconstruct the life of Jesus have represented Him as closely associated with the Essenes. That view is not only totally devoid of historical foundation, but it betrays a fundamental misconception of the meaning of His ministry. If Jesus had joined the Essenes, He need never have been crucified.

His work as bearer of the Kingdom of God led him into intimate relations with the common life of men in society. His widespread propaganda in Galilee of the Gentiles gave the impression that He was a dangerous social agitator, and brought upon Him the suspicions of the ruling classes.<sup>1</sup> Indeed a concentration of some five thousand followers in a desert place close upon the great centres of population on the Sea of Galilee might well arouse suspicion. Yet He was no agitator. The very nature of His message

<sup>1</sup> The Pharisees and Herodians, we are told, formed a coalition against Him (Mk. iii. 6). No doubt the two parties objected to His proceedings on different grounds, but for both the danger lay in His appeal to lawless and irresponsible elements in the population.



involved a divine call to men outside the Law. He justified His procedure by the parables of the Tares and the Dragnet.<sup>1</sup> The call of God must go to all men ; the judgement of God alone selects those worthy of His Kingdom ; "for many are called but few are chosen".<sup>2</sup> But the translation of this into action meant the breaking down of barriers which secured the social balance of the Jewish community.

Again, in His insistence upon the immediate, inward, and all-embracing demands of the Kingdom of God, He came into conflict with the prescriptions and prohibitions of the Law, written and unwritten, by which the integrity of the Jewish national and religious system was safeguarded, and this embroiled Him with the Pharisees. It is no accident that two of the points upon which the conflict turned, Sabbath observance and ritual purity, were among those upon which in the days of the Maccabees the Chasidim had fixed as the pre-eminent symbols of the national separateness ; and in this the Pharisees were their successors.

Yet it was very far from His intention to break up the solidarity of Israel as the people of God. On the contrary He accepted an historic destiny

<sup>1</sup> See my book, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, pp. 183-189.

<sup>2</sup> Mt. xxii. 14.

as the Messiah, the representative leader and head of Israel. Whether or not He used the express words, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the House of Israel",<sup>1</sup> those words describe the limitations which He actually accepted. The Church must have been extremely anxious to show that His mission was both to Jews and to Gentiles, yet even Paul describes Him as *διάκονος τῆς περιτομῆς*,<sup>2</sup> and our earliest evangelical sources, Mark and "Q", can produce only two cases of contact with Gentiles—the Centurion and the Syro-Phœnician woman—while even the later sources can add only the case of the Greek proselytes at the Feast in Jn. xii. 20, along with two examples of friendly contact with Samaritans. Such cases were obviously sporadic and almost accidental. His concentration upon Israel is the more marked because, according to a well-attested saying, He divined that He would have found a more ready response in Tyre and Sidon.

Nor again was it His wish to inculcate an individualist type of piety, separating men and women out of the body of Israel to practise a higher morality. He made his appeal to Israel corporately. There can be no other explana-

<sup>1</sup> Mt. xv. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. xv. 8.

tion of his determination to appear in Jerusalem. Whether he went there, primarily, to make a last appeal, or, primarily, to offer Himself to death, He was clearly resolved that in Jerusalem alone, the Holy City, the historic centre of the Israel of God, could His Messianic career find its fitting climax.<sup>1</sup> In setting His face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem, He was securing the stage for the predestined Messianic conflict in which the Kingdom of God should be revealed.

His last visit to Jerusalem was accompanied by two acts of prophetic symbolism. The first is the Triumphal Entry. He entered the Holy City in a guise which directly suggested Zechariah's forecast of the Messiah—meek and riding upon an ass.<sup>2</sup> The people hailed "the coming Kingdom of our father David".<sup>3</sup> Their expectations were far astray, yet there was a truth in their acclamations deeper than they suspected. Jesus was about to do that by which the true people of God should be revealed under His Kingdom.

The second symbolic act is the Cleansing of the Temple. Once again prophetic forecasts are in view. "The Lord whom ye seek shall

<sup>1</sup> Lk. xiii. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Zech. ix. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Mk. xi. 10.

suddenly come to His temple . . . but who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appeareth? . . . He shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, and they shall offer unto the Lord offerings in righteousness" (Mal. iii. 1-3). "And in that day there shall be no more a trafficker<sup>1</sup> in the house of the Lord of hosts" (Zech. xiv. 21). There could be no meaning in this demonstration in the Temple, the sacred centre of the religion of Israel, unless the intention was to claim Israel corporately for the spiritual worship of God now come in His Kingdom. But this new and final phase of the religion of Israel is universal in its scope. The purified Temple is to be "a house of prayer for all nations" (Is. lvi. 7). We are thus reminded of the whole body of "universalist" prophecy from II Isaiah on, for which the ultimate destiny of Israel is to be the bearer of God's name to the whole world. But it is Israel, corporately, embracing the nations within its corporate relation to God, that is in view, and not an aggregation of individuals saved individually. And the corporate idea is signified in the symbolic action of Jesus. He has come to reveal the true Israel of God, as

<sup>1</sup> קנעני is probably to be rendered so, rather than "Canaanite".

the centre from which His Kingdom shall be revealed to the whole world.

While, however, these actions are symbolic in intention, they were actions which in that particular situation had definite effects. Jesus offered Himself as a leader to Israel, and He challenged the authority of the hierarchy. The former made Him an object of suspicion as a nationalist leader, the latter as an assailant of the established religion. As an appeal to Israel, the challenge failed. It precipitated the crisis in which all factions joined to put Jesus to death.

The Roman order, the patriotism of the Zealots, the religious zeal of Pharisaism, representing constant factors in human history, were not, as we have seen, evil things, but there was so much evil embedded in them—so much of pride and selfishness, malice and cruelty, blindness and hardness of heart, mixed with their very virtues,—that they united in the crime of the Cross. This was the judgement of the Kingdom of God. Confronted with the absolute of the Kingdom in Jesus, the world by its actions pronounced its own judgement by rejecting it and crucifying Him.

It is in relation to this “great refusal” that we must read those numerous sayings which pro-

nounce the doom of Israel.<sup>1</sup> The appeal has gone forth, and its negative result is the divine judgement upon Israel. The harvest is being reaped, and the tares are separated from the wheat. The blood of the righteous from Abel to Zechariah is visited upon a faithless generation. God's husbandmen have conspired to kill the heir and the vineyard is taken from them. The fig-tree of Israel will bear no fruit henceforth for ever. The mountain of the Lord's house will be uprooted and cast into the sea. Jerusalem is abandoned to her enemies. Of the temple not one stone shall be left upon another.<sup>2</sup>

This body of predictions is eschatological in character, and its form is often apocalyptic. It is, however, probable that Jesus saw the matter in historical terms. As Isaiah had seen in Assyria the rod of Jehovah's anger, and Jeremiah had acknowledged in the Babylonian conquest God's rejection of His people translated into historical fact, so Jesus saw the menace of Rome, ready to set a seal upon the apostasy of the Jewish people. Although in some passages of the Gospels the predictions may have been made more precise in view of what actually happened forty years later, I see no reason to doubt that in substance

<sup>1</sup> See *The Parables of the Kingdom*, pp. 60 *sqq.*

<sup>2</sup> Mt. xiii. 30; Mt. xxiii. 35-36 ("Q"); Mk. xii. 9; Mk. xi. 14, 23; Mt. xxiii. 38 ("Q"); Mk. xiii. 2.

the forecasts of doom, often laden with an intense emotion of horror and pity, represent the actual response of the mind of Jesus to the situation which He saw developing. The rejection of Israel was not an eschatological *theologoumenon*, it was an historical reality which would embody itself in events. The Kingdom of God has come. The Jews have rejected the blessedness of the Kingdom and chosen the judgement of the Kingdom—a judgement which lies within history as well as beyond it.

What then becomes of that Messianic people of God, the Israel with which the whole mission and destiny of the Messiah is bound up? From the time of Isaiah onward, it had been recognized by the prophets that the true Israel of God is the faithful remnant of an apostate people.<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah had prophesied a new covenant—lying the other side of utter disaster.<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel had depicted the restoration of Israel as a resurrection of dead men's bones.<sup>3</sup> The characteristic message, in fact, of the great prophets is "Israel is dead: *vivat* Israel!"

In the light of this let us consider the third of the acts of prophetic symbolism which characterize the close of the ministry of Jesus—the

<sup>1</sup> Is. iv. 3-5; Mal. iii. 16-17; iv. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Jer. xxxi. 31-36.

<sup>3</sup> Ezck. xxxvii.

institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. It is clear that the disciples are here being treated as the nucleus of the new Israel. They are to sit upon thrones judging the twelve tribes, and to eat at the table of the Messiah in His Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> And here, and now they are bidden to eat at His table. He gives them bread and cup. The cup is the cup of the New Covenant.<sup>2</sup> We are here in the presence of the Remnant, the true Israel of the age to come. But with a difference. For this is no faithful remnant of men who stand fast in the general apostasy. For almost at the same moment Jesus declares that one of them will deny and the rest forsake Him.<sup>3</sup> Their membership of the new Israel does not depend upon the merit of their fidelity. Upon what then does it depend? As they eat and drink at His table, the Lord gives them broken bread, saying "This is my body". He gives them the cup, saying "This is my blood of the covenant". It is by virtue of partaking of the body and blood of the Messiah that they are sealed for membership in the new Israel. Meanwhile, there is no one in whom the absolute of God's Kingdom is embodied except the Messiah Himself.

Before that new Israel can emerge into historic

<sup>1</sup> Lk. xxii. 29-30 ; Mt. xix. 28.

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. xi. 25 ; *cf.* Mk. xiv. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Mk. xiv. 27-31.



actuality, the Messiah is to die and rise again. The Israel of the new covenant lies, as always, the other side of disaster. Its pre-destined members meanwhile must go down to the depths of despair, in separation from their Lord. They, too, lie under the judgement of the Kingdom of God. Their reunion with Him after His resurrection is the decisive instance of the forgiving grace of God. Not for their virtue or faithfulness but of His mercy, because they are His, the Lord comes to them and joins them in one body with a mission to the whole world. As the destruction of Jerusalem is the historical embodiment of the Kingdom of God as judgement, so the *κοινωνία* of the Church is the historical embodiment of the Kingdom of God as the gift of eternal life. The Church in its first utterances offered forgiveness to those who had killed the Lord, and a share in the life of the new Israel to those who had rejected Him. The emergence of the Church is a signal act of divine forgiveness.

Such, then, briefly, are the events which are presented in the Gospels as the eschatological climax of history. They are represented as a "fulfilment" of the law and the prophets, that is to say, of the religious history of Israel. It is surely a paradoxical kind of fulfilment, for in the

conflict which led to the crucifixion of Jesus the heirs of the prophets rejected the Messiah and fell under the judgement of the Kingdom of God. In what sense is the history of Israel “fulfilled” in the Gospel facts?

The Old Testament has often been interpreted as a record of the “evolution of religion”, with Christianity as its climax and crown. Upon the horizontal level of history, if one may use the term, it is possible to trace such an evolution. There is enough continuity between the various stages to warrant the use of the organic concept of development, and the end of the process is richer, finer, truer than the beginning, if such terms have any meaning for the historian. But even considered upon this level the continuity of the process is only partial. There is in classical prophecy something which can only by straining terms be described as a development out of pre-prophetic religion. If we are to look for the natural development of the religion of the monarchy we should turn to the temple at Elephantine in the fifth century B.C., where Jehovah was accompanied by four satellite deities. The religion of the pre-exilic prophets was something new, and different. The Exile again made a sharp break. In one sense post-exilic Judaism is a development of the prophetic

religion and an accommodation of it to new conditions, but its continuity is clearly no more than partial. In some respects it harks back to the pre-prophetic stage: in other respects it reaches out into regions which neither the prophetic nor the pre-prophetic periods had touched, largely through its contacts with Iranian and Greek ideas. The heirs of this religion were the Pharisees of the first century who destroyed Jesus. Modern Judaism, which claims succession to the Pharisees, repudiates any claim of Christianity to be the legitimate development of first-century Judaism, and on the face of it the religion of the Mishna is in a much more direct line of evolution. It is true that a very large part of the thought of Christianity is derived from Judaism, and Jewish ideas can be shown to have moved into a more developed phase in Christianity. Yet to speak of Christianity as evolved out of Judaism, even with some measure of cross-fertilization from Hellenism, is not in the last resort illuminating.

If, in fact, we look at the history of Israel, not under modern categories of development, but as it is presented in the Old Testament, we have a picture rather of a series of crises than of a continuous evolution. Abraham was called out of pagan Mesopotamia, and with his departure

began the patriarchal period. This ended in the disaster of the Egyptian servitude. Next, Moses was raised up by God, and inaugurated the process which culminated in the conquest of Canaan and the kingdom of David. But this was quickly followed by a relapse into semi-paganism under Solomon and his successors. Once again God raised up prophets. Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah all believe themselves to be uttering a word of the Lord against the temple, the priesthood, the prophetic order, and the whole contemporary religious life of their people. Once again disaster ensues, a disaster interpreted this time directly by contemporary observers as the judgement of God upon His faithless people. The return from Exile is not, in the eyes of the prophets who interpret it, a simple harking back to the conditions of the monarchy. It is a response to the proclamation : " The Lord hath redeemed Jacob and will glorify Himself in Israel ".<sup>1</sup> It is to be the beginning of a fresh stage in the relations between God and His people. Yet the bliss of that dawn fades only too quickly into the light of common day, and fresh disasters follow. The key-points of the story are the crises in which, as the biblical writers aver, the word of God descends upon history through Abraham, Moses

<sup>1</sup> Is. xlv. 23.

and the prophets, and challenges men to a response. The horizontal line of the secular process is cut vertically by the word of God from on high.

The word of the Lord as spoken by the prophets has all through a reference to the future. To Abraham it is the assurance: "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed";<sup>1</sup> to Moses the promise of the inheritance in Canaan. Amos and his successors prophesy the coming judgement, Isaiah the deliverance of the faithful remnant, Jeremiah the new covenant. The anonymous prophet of the Exile proclaims "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together";<sup>2</sup> and Haggai encourages the builders of the Temple with the assurance, "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, and in this place will I give peace, said the Lord of hosts".<sup>3</sup> Thus the successive crises of history are determined by a word which brings into history an anticipation of a final crisis yet to come. History is revealed as something more than a simple process of development in time.

It is this complex process, and no simple evolution, that is fulfilled in the coming of Christ.

<sup>1</sup> Gen. xxii. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Is. xl. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Hagg. ii. 9.

The Word of God once again descends upon history, not now with reference to a crisis yet to come, but proclaiming the immediate impact of the Kingdom of God upon this world, in judgment and mercy. "God, who in sundry parts and in divers manners spoke unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son".<sup>1</sup> And as in divers parts and manners the Word of the Lord had been rejected by His people, so now in one concentrated act of rejection Israel denies the Messiah. In the Gospels, the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, and the saying about the blood of the righteous, represent the crime of the crucifixion as the climax of the history of Israel's rebellion. Similarly in the speech of Stephen in Acts vii. the rebellion of Israel against Moses, the apostasy of Solomon and the murder of the prophets are consummated in the slaying of the Righteous One. But on the other side, the glorious promises to the fathers are fulfilled in the beatitudes of the Kingdom, and that which prophets and kings desired to see and saw not is revealed to the disciples.<sup>2</sup>

For a further elucidation of the matter we may look to Paul. For him the call of Abraham is the

<sup>1</sup> Heb. i. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Lk. x. 23-24 ("Q").

beginning of a process in which the purpose of God is at work to make for Himself a people.<sup>1</sup> But this purpose appears to be frustrated, as the descendants of Abraham fall away: Ishmael first, then Esau, and then among the children of Israel those who worshipped Baal in the time of Elijah, and all save the faithful remnant in the time of Isaiah.<sup>2</sup> This remnant diminishes, until the people of God is embodied in a single individual—the σπέρμα ᾧ ἐπηγγέλθη.<sup>3</sup> Christ gathers into Himself the whole of what God designed for His people. And then in the final apostasy the Messiah is killed. With Him the hope of Israel perishes and the promise seems frustrated. But He rises from the dead, and in Him the people of God rises, as Ezekiel had foretold, out of the valley of dry bones into newness of life. Thus the seeming frustration of God's purpose is overcome, and all the episodes of Israel's history receive fresh meaning from the final event. The Exodus is a foretaste of the redemption in Christ; the manna in the wilderness and the water from the rock are an anticipation of the life of the new age: for the rock was Christ.<sup>4</sup> The inheritance in Canaan is, in a figure, the inheritance of the

<sup>1</sup> Gal. iii. 7-14.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. ix. 6-13, 27-29; xi. 2-5.

<sup>3</sup> Gal. iii. 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> I Cor. x. 1-11.

saints in light, given to those who are dead and risen with Christ. For with the death and resurrection of Christ an authentically new age begins in which the purpose of God, to create a people for Himself, is realized by the incorporation of Jews and Gentiles alike in the Body of Christ, where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman, but Christ is all and in all ;<sup>1</sup> for, as Paul puts it, interpreting the absoluteness of the crisis in which Christ died, " God hath shut up all unto disobedience, that He might have mercy upon all ".<sup>2</sup>

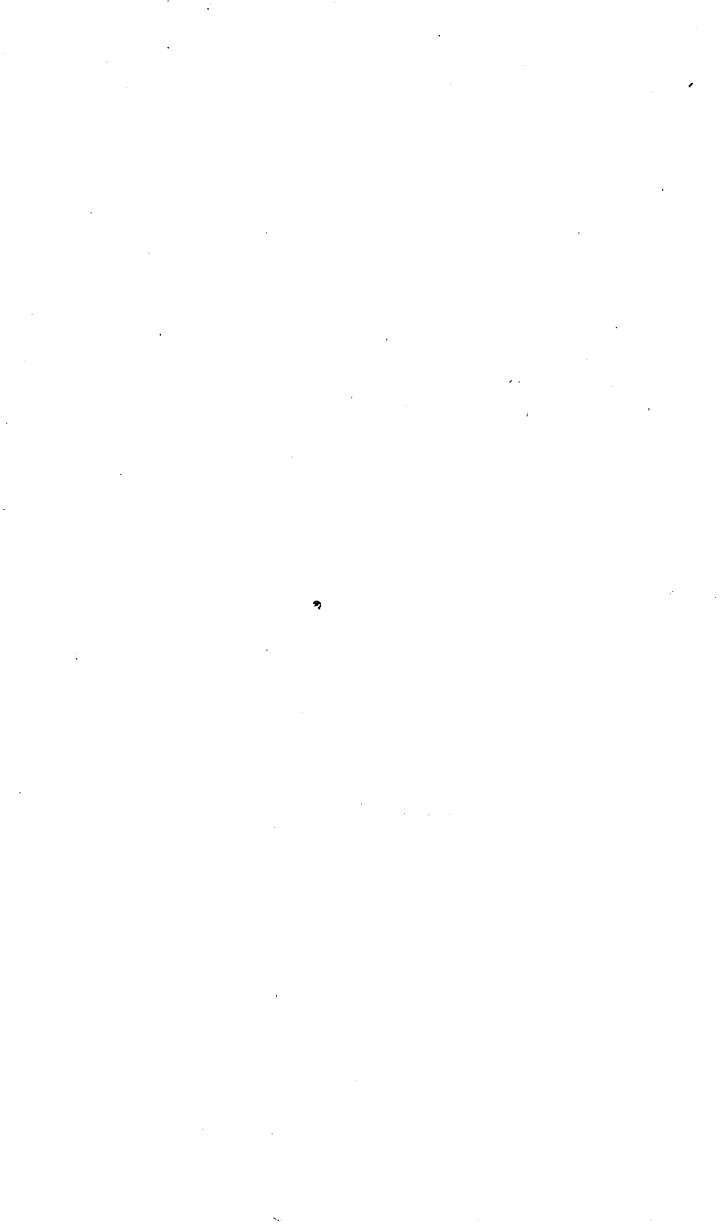
All this is no abstract theology, but a realistic interpretation of the Gospel story in relation to the whole history of Israel. The coming of Christ, His death and resurrection, constitute the fulfilment of that history, not as the last term in a process of development, but as the concentration in one decisive historical moment of the factors determinative of all preceding history, through which, consequently, that history becomes not only meaningful, but in the full sense real.

The relation of this eschatological event to subsequent history we must study in the last chapter.

<sup>1</sup> Eph. ii. 11-22 ; Gal. iii. 26-28 ; Col. iii. 9-11.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. xi. 32.





V

THE CHURCH IN HISTORY



## V

### THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

THE events recorded in the Gospels had little or no immediate or ostensible influence upon history. Pilate's execution of the Galilæan pretender produced no repercussions in imperial or provincial affairs. Upon Judaism the direct effect was little greater. The temporary alliance of Pharisees and Sadducees, with the connivance of the patriotic mob, to make an end of Jesus, did not last. Their internećine feuds were resumed until a nation riddled with faction rose in hopeless revolt against Rome, and was crushed.<sup>1</sup>

The one incontestable historical result of the events of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the emergence of the Christian Church. If, therefore, the eschatological interpretation of these events is to justify itself, it must find justification in the nature, activity and

<sup>1</sup> Two questions are more readily raised than answered. (i) How far did the drawing-off of valuable elements of the Jewish community into Christianity weaken the national resistance to internal and external attacks upon its integrity? (ii) How far did the teaching of Jesus affect the Judaism which survived the war?

destiny of the Church. And in fact the rise of the Church is for the New Testament writers an inseparable element in the eschatological complex. It is the fulfilment of prophetic hopes of a new people of God. It is the Israel of the last days ; Isaiah's Remnant ; Jeremiah's people of the New Covenant ; Ezekiel's renovated Israel, raised from the dead by the breath of the Lord ; Daniel's people of the saints of the Most High ; Enoch's congregation of the Elect. For in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the people of God has passed through death into newness of life.

But while these eschatological descriptions are taken over and declared to be realized in the Church, they necessarily suffer a notable shift of meaning. For it had always been contemplated that the emergence of the Messianic society would be associated with an unmistakable change in the whole state of the world in which that society would live. Either, as in the earlier prophetic eschatology, the existing conditions of human life would remain, and the people of God would supplant the great monarchies of the pagan world ; or, as in the later apocalyptic eschatology, this world would disappear, and the Messianic society would function in a new heaven and a new earth. But,

historically, the Church came into existence in a world ostensibly quite unchanged by the events in which the Kingdom of God came. The great crisis had passed and out of it the Church had emerged, and yet there was scarcely a ripple on the surface of the great stream of history in the Græco-Roman world.

Not only so : the Church as an historical body of necessity partook of the character of the empirical order which it nevertheless believed to be transcended. We have faint glimpses of a state of affairs in which the Church attempted as it were to contract out of that order : as when the so-called communistic experiment at Jerusalem aspired to independence of economic realities, or the enthusiasm of the Thessalonians led them to abandon work and regular ways of living. But the attempt broke down. The Church as we see it in the New Testament at large is an institution ostensibly very similar to other religious bodies in the ancient world. It has its officials, its funds, its discipline, its courts of arbitration, its methods of propaganda. Its members inevitably have relations with their fellow-men outside the Church : relations economic, social, juridical. Though they believe their own life to be sustained by a Spirit totally different from " the spirit that now worketh in

the children of disobedience",<sup>1</sup> yet they cannot preserve their own purity of life by declining relations with outsiders. To do this, as Paul with his sardonic realism reminded them, they would have, literally, to "go out of the world".<sup>2</sup> Indeed the moral imperfections inseparable from life in the world early appeared within the Church itself. Where there is money there will be quarrels about money; where there is official rank there will be ambition and jealousy; and so long as we live in this world and in the flesh, the desires of the world and of the flesh must be reckoned with. So the early Church found, as we know from admonitions in the epistles. The Church's sense of being a supernatural society was indeed so vivid that for a long time it maintained the principle that sin of a serious character necessarily excluded the sinner permanently from its fellowship. But the growth of a system of penitential discipline was a confession that the ideal of a sinless people of God, though demanded by the eschatological doctrine of the Church, was not realizable empirically.

Thus from the very beginning the Church in history possesses a paradoxical character. On the one hand it claims the prerogatives and

<sup>1</sup> Eph. ii. 2.

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. v. 10.

characteristics of a supernatural society. It is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Bride of Christ, the Body of the Lord. It is justified, sanctified, glorified. On the other hand it is a body of very fallible men striving to attain an unrealizable ideal. This paradoxical character attaches to the Church throughout its history. It has, like any other empirical society, its ups and downs, its advances, its declines, and its recoveries.

The apologist can show that the Church has worked as an ameliorating factor in civilization, promoting social justice, economic welfare, peace, liberty, and other things that we value. He can point to the growth of humane legislation under the Christian emperors, to the taming and civilizing of the invading barbarians, to the great mediæval synthesis, in which learning, art, philosophy and good government flourished, and the economic order was regulated in the interest of justice and humanity. He can point to the growth of ordered liberty in the Protestant nations since the Reformation, to the abolition of slavery and other social reforms, and to the good results of modern missionary enterprise in various parts of the world. But this is not the whole story. If legislation under Constantine took on a humanitarian cast, this was balanced by the ferocious persecuting laws of subsequent



emperors, for which the Church must directly bear at least a part of the blame. The historian Gibbon made the Church partly responsible for the downfall of the Roman Empire. Again, while the Catholic glorifies the Christian civilization of the Middle Ages, the Protestant vilifies the mediæval Church as the bulwark of superstition and the main cause of the arrest of free thought and the advance of science. Similarly while the Protestant credits the reformed Church with inspiring the achievements of a free and progressive democracy, the Catholic blames the Reformation for the rise of the capitalist system with its disastrous consequences. There is here a rich field for controversy, a controversy with which we are not at the moment concerned. In our own day this old quarrel is thrown into the background by a new and determined attack upon the Church from the side alike of Communism and of Fascism, as a stubborn hindrance to social and political amelioration. The Church is on the defensive against attacks made upon it on ideal grounds, as it has not been for a very long time. It is in any case clear that on objective historical grounds we cannot confidently affirm that the Church has been, always, everywhere, and undeniably, an instrument of human progress.

We may reasonably hold that on the whole and in the long run its influence in history has been effective for good, that where it has been bad there is extenuation to be found in the conditions of the times, and that there is at the moment no other institution in existence which offers equal prospects of bringing about an improvement of the situation. But it is not on such grounds that we can hope to justify the exalted claims which are made for the Church as the Body of Christ, the ultimate people of God.

Again, the apologist would like to show that, even if the record of the Church as an agent within the world is not beyond question, at least it has in its own life advanced towards the ideal set before it. Such progress has in any case not been continuous, nor is it easily measured. It can hardly be estimated by the number of Christians at any given period, or the area of their dispersion in the world. Periods when the Church has enjoyed great power and influence have sometimes been periods of moral decline. If we are thinking of inward rather than of outward achievement, who would be prepared confidently to affirm that the Church of the present day is superior to the ancient Church in sanctity, moral fervour, inward cohesion and fellowship, intellectual

apprehension of the truth, clarity and courage in testifying to it? It is certainly true that the Church has from time to time shown after periods of outward and inward decline a remarkable power of self-renewal, and that it displays a quite astonishing toughness of constitution, by virtue of which it still exists as an active body in the world while almost every other institution of similar antiquity has long ago disappeared. But to say this is to fall far short of justifying empirically the conception of the Church as the eternal City of God, against which the gates of hell can never prevail.

The saints, prophets and reformers of the Church, so far from believing that it has made progress towards an ideal not yet attained, have uniformly sought to recall it to the purity and sincerity of its early days. So far as this implies an idealization of the primitive Church, it is no better than sentimental romanticism. For the Church as an empirical society never was pure. There is perhaps a touch of the romantic about the first ecclesiastical historian, the author of Acts; yet even his picture of the earliest days of the Church admits widows quarrelling over their dole, and Ananias and Sapphira defrauding the revenue. Paul's picture of the Church in being is anything but sentimental. And as early as

the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Apocalypse of John we hear the first note of complaint that the Church has declined from its pristine love and zeal <sup>1</sup>—a note which from that time on has never ceased to sound.

There is in this recurrent phenomenon in the life of the Church something more than a romantic idealizing of the past. The appeal to a primitive purity does not really refer to a hypothetical period early in the Church's existence, when its condition, relatively to subsequent periods, was nearer to the ideal. It refers not to the relative sanctity which may be attained at one period or another, but to that absolute sanctity which belongs to the Church as the eschatological Israel of God, and which is paradoxically associated with an empirical existence admitting of no absolutes.

It is a tempting resolution of this paradox to adopt a Platonic view, according to which the spiritual or invisible Church is the true reality, "laid up in heaven", like Plato's ideal city,<sup>2</sup> and all actual congregations of Christian people constituting the visible Church are no more than the imperfect embodiments of this invisible

<sup>1</sup> Heb. iii. 12-13 ; v. 12 ; vi. 4-12 ; x. 32-39 ; xii. 12-13 ; Rev. ii. 4-5 ; iii. 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Plato Rpb. ix. 592b. ἐν οὐρανῷ Ἰσως παραδείγμα ἀνακείται τῷ βουλομένῳ ἡρᾶν.

Idea of the Church. There is much to be said for such a view, which might justify itself by an appeal to the undoubtedly Platonic element in New Testament thought. Judaism, like Platonism, knew of a heavenly city, the celestial archetype of the earthly Jerusalem,<sup>1</sup> as well as of a temple that existed before the world.<sup>2</sup> When the author to the Hebrews speaks of "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem",<sup>3</sup> and Paul of "Jerusalem above which is our mother",<sup>4</sup> they might be understood to be using a quasi-Platonic category. But these writers do not contrast the heavenly city with the Church visible on earth. In both, the other term of the antithesis is "Mount Sinai", which for Paul is the Jewish community in servitude, from which Christians have been redeemed, and in the Epistle to the Hebrews

<sup>1</sup> See evidence cited by Strack-Billerbeck on Gal. iv. 26.

<sup>2</sup> See evidence cited by Moore, *Judaism*, I, p. 526. It should be added that there are apocalyptic passages which seem to suggest that the Messianic community is in some sort pre-existent, and that it will "appear" with the Messiah at the End. See I Enoch xxxviii. 1-2; xxxix. 4-8; xlvi. 1-7; liii. 6; lxii. 7-8. It is thought by some that the "Elect One" or "Son of Man" was in the original intention of Enoch, a personification of the "congregation of the elect", which in that case is clearly pre-existent. If so, then the idea of an invisible Church is pre-Christian, and what Christianity adds is the belief that this invisible Church is now made visible. In substance I believe that this is so. But the interpretation of *Enoch* is doubtful. It is worth while recalling that for some Gnostics *ἐκκλησία* was a pre-existent "æon".

<sup>3</sup> Heb. xii. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Gal. iv. 26.

stands for the now obsolete system of Jewish religious ordinances. In Judaism and Christianity alike, those elements of thought which resemble Platonism are always crossed by eschatological conceptions. The heavenly city of Jewish thought was not simply eternal in the heavens ; at the End it would descend to earth.<sup>1</sup> It would be consistent with the "realized eschatology" of the New Testament if the Church itself were thought of as the new Jerusalem on earth. And indeed a logical development of Paul's allegory of Hagar and Ishmael would lead to some such conclusion. Moreover, he does identify the Church with the temple of God,<sup>2</sup> and a similar identification is probably suggested by the Johannine equation of the new temple (the *ναὸς ἀχειροπονητός* of Mark xiv. 58) with the "body" of Christ.<sup>3</sup> And the suggestion of the passage in Hebrews is of a single community including inseparably the Church on earth and the denizens of the heavenly city.

In view of all this, we may hesitate to account for the paradoxical character of the Church by a simple recourse to a contrast between the ideal and the actual.

<sup>1</sup> See evidence cited by Strack-Billerbeck on Rev. iii. 12.

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. iii. 16. The dwelling of the Spirit in the Church is a fulfilment of the prophecy in Ezek. xxxvii. 27-28.

<sup>3</sup> Jn. ii. 21.

We need, therefore, to penetrate a little more deeply into the historical existence of the Church. We may perhaps best do so by observing the Church in its most characteristic activities. It would be generally agreed among virtually all Christian communities that whatever may be of the *esse* or of the *bene esse* of the Church, we can with confidence affirm that where the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed and the Sacraments duly administered, there is the Church.<sup>1</sup> I propose, therefore, that we should think of the Church in the act of proclaiming the Gospel and in the act of celebrating its central sacrament, the Eucharist. This line of approach has a two-fold advantage. On the one hand it gets behind the awkward question, where we are to find the visible Church, a question which would be differently answered by different communions. On the other hand, it sets before us not some theoretical concept of the Church, but the Church itself in action ; and it is congruous with the Christian belief in a living God to contemplate every religious reality dynamically rather than statically : the Church therefore in act rather than the Church in essence.

<sup>1</sup> Our difficulties begin when we try to define what is meant by a "faithful" preaching of the Gospel, and a "due" administration of the Sacraments. Each reader may give to these terms whatever meaning seems to him right. The argument will not be affected.

There can, moreover, be no question that when we contemplate the Church in this twofold action of preaching the Gospel and celebrating the Sacrament we are considering that which has been central in its life from the beginning, and consequently that which characterizes the Church in its actual historical origins. We have no earlier picture of the Church than that which meets us in the Pauline epistles, and the two things to which Paul expressly points as primitive are the Gospel and the "Lord's Supper".<sup>1</sup> The picture in Acts agrees with this. The Church enters history with the apostolic *kerygma* as the expression of its life outwardly to the world, and the communion of "the breaking of bread" as the expression of the same life inwardly among its members.<sup>2</sup>

First, then, the Church's proclamation of the Gospel is the continuation and completion of the prophetic witness to the Word of God. For the prophets the utterance of the Word of the Lord is very much more than mere homily or instruction. It is an act, powerful to shape the course of history. "Is not my word like as a fire, and like a hammer that breaketh the rocks in pieces?" asks Jeremiah.<sup>3</sup> "My word," says the second

<sup>1</sup> I Cor. xv. 1-11 ; xi. 23-26.

<sup>2</sup> Ac. ii. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Jer. xxiii. 29.



Isaiah, "shall not return unto me void ; but it shall accomplish that which I please and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it".<sup>1</sup> It is in this sense that we must understand some language of the prophets which sounds to us strained and hyperbolical ; as when Jeremiah proclaims himself set over the nations, to break down and to destroy, to build and to plant.<sup>2</sup> The meaning is that the Word of the Lord spoken by the prophets becomes an actual factor in history, shaping it in the direction of the divine purpose. *A fortiori*, then, the Word of the Gospel, which declares not what God will do in the last days, but what He has done in sending His Son, is an actual factor in history, through which the divine action in Christ becomes effective. The Church in proclaiming this Gospel is the instrument of a divine intervention in history which is not limited by the unworthiness of the instrument. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of ourselves".<sup>3</sup>

But this divine intervention which is mediated by every preaching of the Gospel is the same that was accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ. The *kerygma* itself is no more than the

<sup>1</sup> Is. lv. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Jer. i. 10.

<sup>3</sup> II Cor. iv. 7.

rehearsal of the history in which the Kingdom of God came. There is no "other Gospel", as Paul so emphatically declared.<sup>1</sup> The Church may in its teaching rightly draw material from the changing experience and ideas of men throughout the centuries. It may use such material to illustrate and enforce its preaching of the Gospel. But the Gospel itself can never be other than it was at the beginning. Paul's description of his preaching to the Galatians—"before whose eyes Christ was placarded as crucified"<sup>2</sup>—indicates what the character of preaching at its centre must always be: it is a re-presentation of the history of Jesus: it is designed to place the hearers in the very presence of the historical event, and so to expose them to the power of God which worked in that event.

We set it down, then, that the relation of the Church to history is in the first place to be sought in its preaching of the Gospel, an act by which the Church itself lives, and by which it mediates the power of God to every age.

Secondly, in its central sacrament the Church places itself ever anew within the eschatological crisis in which it had its origin. Here Christ is set before us incarnate, crucified, and risen, and

<sup>1</sup> Gal. i. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Gal. iii. 1. προεγράφη ἐσταυρωμένος.

we partake of the benefits of His finished work, as contemporaries with it. We are neither merely recalling a story out of the past, nor merely expressing and nourishing a hope for the future, but experiencing in one significant rite the reality of the coming of Christ, which is both His coming in humiliation and His coming in glory. It is this that gives character to the Church, that it lives always, when it is its most real self, within the historical moment of its redemption.

This contemporaneity must not be confused with the timeless "now" of the mystics. For that which the Church experiences is not just an eternal reality symbolically set forth under the forms of space, time and matter. It is a slice of the actual history of the world—something that happened *sub Pontio Pilato*. It happened—and we are *there*. It is a slice of actual history, continuous, upon the temporal level, with all other history, and in particular with this moment in history in which we are now living. Thus in the Sacrament we have a two-fold relation to history. Our empirical selves stand within a time-process in which events are determined by their precedents, and especially by the "epoch-making" events of history, above all by *the* epoch-making event which changed the character of our world. But our Christian selves stand directly within that

event itself, and are shaped by it. By virtue of this sacramental experience our work-a-day life in A.D. 1938 is made a part of the redemptive history set forth in the Gospels.

It appears then that Christian faith is on the one hand not committed to the mystic's denial of the reality of time. It does not detach us from all temporal succession in a timeless "now". But on the other hand it is not bound to history as simple succession in time, with a uniform, non-reversible movement from past to future. Superficially, the teleological view of history which Christianity inherits from prophetic Judaism might be held to coincide with a view of history as a succession of events in time, linked casually, and culminating in a complete realization of the end towards which the whole process has been directed. As we have seen, however, even for Judaism this view is to be accepted only with qualification, for the prophets always assume that God intervenes in the process, so that a simple efficient causality does not give a complete account of history. But in Christianity the teleological "end" is other than the temporal end of the process. It is given in an event which entered into the course of history once for all, while the process still went on. This event gives meaning to all that went before, establishing the

divine character of the process. Similarly, being experienced time after time throughout succeeding ages, it gives meaning to the whole subsequent process.

This appears to imply a view of history which may be indicated as follows.

The material of history is the whole succession of events in time, in which the spontaneity of the human spirit interacts with outward occurrences. Part of this succession of events is recorded in the Bible. The biblical record is a source of evidence for secular history, dovetailing into the records of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. But the events recorded are presented in the Bible as a history of the dealings of God with men, interpreted by the eschatological event of the coming of Christ, His death and resurrection. As such, the biblical history is denominated by German theologians, *Heilsgeschichte*, that is, history as a redemptive process. We have no such convenient term in English. We may perhaps use the term "sacred history", as distinguished from secular history. It is important to bear in mind that the same events enter into sacred and secular history; the events are the same, but they form two distinguishable series.

The empirical series which is secular history extends over all recorded time, to our own day,

and is still unfinished. In this series events are linked together by succession in time, and by the operation of efficient causes, whether these causes be physical or psychological. The attempt to find a general pattern and a universal meaning in this succession meets admittedly with no more than doubtful success. The fundamental reason for this is that it is impossible in the empirical series to work backwards to a real beginning, or forwards to a real end. But of a process which is not a process from a beginning to an end, but just sheer process, it is difficult to predicate any absolute meaning or value. Any period or event which we may choose as a standard of judgement—our own period for instance—is only part of the process; and any ideas which may be in our minds are equally unavailable as criteria, because these can be shown to be, in part at least, a product of our particular historical conditions. It is probably this uncertainty about the meaning and value of history that encourages the religious mind to turn either to mysticism and the inner life, or alternatively to nature as the field of a recognizable and definable order, which empirical history fails to show.

But there is another series into which historical events may fall, that which I have called “sacred

history", or history as a process of redemption and revelation. Of this series the biblical history forms the inner core. But the Bible always assumes that the meaning of this inner core is the ultimate meaning of all history, since God is the Maker and Ruler of all mankind, who created all things for Himself, and redeemed the world to Himself. That is to say, the whole of history is in the last resort sacred history, or *Heilsgeschichte*.

This principle of the universality of the divine meaning in history is symbolically expressed in Christian theology by placing the history of the Old and New Testaments within a mythological scheme which includes a real beginning and a real end. In the beginning God created heaven and earth and all that in them is. In the end He will unite all mankind, and indeed all orders of being, under His sole sway in a last judgement. I have described this as mythological, and as such it must, I think, be understood. Creation and Last Judgement are symbolical statements of the truth that all history is teleological, working out one universal divine purpose. The story of Creation is not to be taken as a literal, scientific statement that the time series had a beginning—an idea as inconceivable as its opposite, that time had no beginning. Nor must the story of the Fall, which is the necessary complement of the

creation-story, be taken as a literal, historical statement that there was a moment when man first began to set himself against the will of God. The story of creation and the fall is a symbolic summing-up of everything in secular or empirical history which is preparatory to the process of redemption and revelation. It affirms that in man and his world there is implanted a divine purpose, opposed by a recalcitrant will. This is universally true, not only of primitive ages before Abraham, but of the entire human race at all points in the temporal process. There is a place in the myth of the creation and fall for all facts of secular history that may be established. It is all covered, from a Christian point of view, by the affirmation of a creative process dependent on the will of God, and a deep-seated misdirection of human life. But secular history gets us no further than the prophecy in the biblical story of the fall : " it shall bruise thy head, and thou shall bruise his heel " : <sup>1</sup> it is a ding-dong battle. It is upon this field of an indecisive conflict between the recalcitrant will of man and the true divine meaning of man himself and his world, that sacred history supervenes, telling how the victory is won through a dying to the world and a resurrection in power.

<sup>1</sup> Gen. iii. 15.



Again, the myth of a Last Judgement is a symbolical statement of the final resolution of the great conflict. Serious difficulties are raised if we attempt to treat it as a literal and quasi-historical statement that the succession of events in time will one day cease—once again an idea as inconceivable to us as its opposite. Nor, I think, is it profitable to rationalize the myth as a prediction that before man dies out of this earth, or before the earth itself perishes in some astronomical catastrophe, the good will finally and manifestly triumph over the evil in human history. Any such rationalization is beside the true intention of the myth, which says that the Last Judgement will supervene unexpectedly and unpredictably upon a world showing no indication of its approach, unless it be that “the sky grows darker yet and the sea rises higher”. That seems to imply that there is no moment in the world’s history which by historical necessity leads up to the Judgement. Doomsday simply takes a cut across the time-stream at any point and reveals the triumph of the divine purpose in it. But this triumph is something actually attained, not in some coming Day of the Lord, near or distant, but in the concrete historical event of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is significant that Christianity

separated off from the general expectation of Jewish eschatology this concrete, historical element of "realized eschatology", leaving the residue as a symbolical expression of the relation of *all* history to the purpose of God. For the essential feature of the Last Judgement is its universality. It includes "the quick and the dead", *i.e.* all generations of mankind. It means that *all* history is comprehended in that achievement of the divine purpose of which the coming of Christ, His death and resurrection, is the intra-historical expression.

This mythological setting is essential to the Christian interpretation of history as a process of redemption. And that is why in the Creed the historical facts of the birth, death and resurrection of Christ are placed within a framework which begins with God as Maker of heaven and earth, and ends with judgement upon the quick and the dead.

History, therefore, as a process of redemption and revelation, has a beginning and an end, both in God. The beginning is not an event in time; the end is not an event in time. The beginning is God's purpose, the end is the fulfilment of His purpose. Between these lies the sacred history which culminates in the death and resurrection of Christ.

It is this sacred history which comes to life when the Church experiences the coming of Christ in the Sacrament, and proclaims it to the world in its preaching. By this means *this* situation in which we stand is made a part of the sacred history. It is no longer *merely* a part of the succession of events which is secular history, though it remains *also* a part of that succession. It is taken up into that other historical series, which has real meaning—the *Heilsgeschichte*.

As a result of this transposition from the one historical series to the other, the character of our own history, whether as individuals or as communities, is altered. The Old Testament story comes to be our own story, for it is the story of man under God's calling and law, but disobedient to it, the object of His redemptive purpose yet recalcitrant to that purpose, the recipient of His promises, yet failing to attain them. And the New Testament comes to be the story of the crisis in which we ourselves are brought to judgement and to redemption. This is the pattern of all history, and as *our* history falls into that pattern, it confesses its divine meaning.

This is the effective relation of the Church to history. It is continually bringing the successive situations of empirical history, through Gospel

and Sacrament, into the sacred history which embodies the divine meaning.

In doing so, it necessarily brings the present situation under the divine judgement, for the characteristic effect of the Cross is to bring to light the evil which is inherent in all human action, intermingled with all human virtue. Its function in relation to the world is prophetic, and like the prophets of the Old Testament, it may not be complacent towards the iniquities of the world or give out a cheering assurance that all will come right in the end. The task of the Church is to bring all historical movements into the context of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in order that they may be judged by the divine meaning revealed in that crucial event.

The divine judgement is not a bare sentence, or expression of opinion. It is historical action. Let us recall what was said of the meaning of the Cross as judgement. The action of the Jewish people, their rulers, and the Roman government displayed, in reaction to the appearance of Christ, the sinfulness resident in human movements and institutions which nevertheless contained much good; and the sinfulness thus made plain worked itself out to the catastrophe of the Jewish War. So at any period of history

the Gospel reveals the inherent sinfulness of a situation working itself out in disaster. It interprets the history of our own times. The great structure of human existence which was nineteenth-century civilization contained much good. It was shaken to its foundations in 1914, and for the last twenty years it has been disintegrating before our eyes, in a course of events which seems almost to have been impelled by some malign fate. May we not borrow a fitting comment from Paul?—"They were hardened; as it is written, God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear, unto this very day".<sup>1</sup> That was his comment upon the rejection of Christ by the Jews. Does it not equally interpret the events of this last quarter of a century in terms of divine judgement?

When we speak of divine judgement upon the world, we are not to think of the Church, or of ourselves its members, as in any sense the judge over against the sinful world. For the world is within the Church, in so far as the Church is an empirical, historical society. The Church, though it apprehends itself as living within sacred history, lives also within secular history, and no attempt to remove it from that series

<sup>1</sup> Rom. xi. 8.

can succeed. Therefore, in proclaiming the Gospel, the Church itself comes under judgement<sup>1</sup> and it is this judgement under which it would also bring the world and all movements within the world of any particular period.

But the testimony of Gospel and sacrament alike is that the other side of divine judgement is forgiveness. The moment when man places himself unreservedly under the judgement of God is the moment at which he experiences the mercy of God: his death unto sin is a resurrection unto God. The Christian way, therefore, of dealing with an historical situation is to place it under the divine judgement that it may also fall under the divine forgiveness. And forgiveness again is no mere inward or subjective condition. It, too, is divine action in history. The coming of the Kingdom of God, which revealed itself as judgement in the rejection of Israel, revealed itself as mercy in Christ's return to His undeserving disciples, and in creating out of them the fellowship of the Church as an historical society. And if the Gospel reveals the history of our time as the field of divine judgement, it reveals it also as the field of the renewing grace of God "according to that working of the

<sup>1</sup> "It is time for judgement to begin from the House of God" (I Pet. iv. 17).

strength of His might which He wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead . . . and gave Him to be head over all things to the Church".<sup>1</sup> We are wrong in confining such expressions to purely spiritual experience. They declare that as any situation is brought within the context of sacred history, with its creative centre in the Gospel facts, it is exposed not only to the judgement of God, but also to possibilities of transformation and renewal which we can neither define nor limit, because they lie within the immeasurable power of the mercy of God.

It is to this transformation of an actual situation that the prayer of the Church refers: "Thy Kingdom come". If we consider the Lord's prayer in the context of His ministry, it is apparent that it was addressed to a situation of immediate need. "Watch and pray", said He to His disciples, "that ye enter not into temptation". The *πειρασμός* was at that moment at hand, as the traitor approached Gethsemane.<sup>2</sup> It was surely in a like sense that He taught them to pray, "Lead us not into temptation". It was as much a prayer for the moment as that other petition, "Give us this day our daily bread". Why should it be thought that the

<sup>1</sup> Eph. i. 19-22.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Parables of the Kingdom*, pp. 165-167.

petition, “ Thy Kingdom come ”, was any less immediate in its reference? “ Take no thought for the morrow ”, said the Lord, “ but seek His Kingdom ”.<sup>1</sup> The Kingdom of God is not of “ the morrow ”. “ Behold *now* is the accepted time ; *now* is the day of salvation ”.<sup>2</sup> And we may observe that “ now ” is the only aspect of time with which we are directly concerned. We live in the present, that bit of time in which we actively experience the transition from past to future. The past no doubt exists, but it exists for us only as raw material for action in the present. The future exists only as an idea of the imagination by which action in the present is evoked. The reality of past and future resides in the mind and will of God, and not in the experience of the creatures of a day. In the petition, “ Thy Kingdom come ”, we bring *this* crucial moment into the context of God’s redemptive action, that His purpose in it may be accomplished. The prayer brings its own answer. It was surely of this prayer, more than any other, that our Lord said, “ All things whatsoever ye pray and ask for, believe that ye have received them, and ye shall have them ”.<sup>3</sup>

In critical times like the present the Church

<sup>1</sup> Lk. xii. 31 (“ Q ”).

<sup>2</sup> II Cor. vi. 2, *cf.* Heb. iii. 13-15.

<sup>3</sup> Mk. xi. 24.



is urged either to lend its support to one or another of the secular programmes for building a new world, or alternatively to enter the conflict with a competing programme of its own. It may indeed be the vocation of the individual Christian to work, and if need be to suffer, for one programme or another, according as he judges it to have in it something of the intention of the Gospel. He will bring it under the judgement of God, and take responsibility for it before Him. He will never identify any limited objective with the absolute which is the Kingdom of God ; but, knowing that the empirical order belongs to God, he will work in and upon it under the constraint of His Kingdom. The vocation of the Church, however, transcends all programmes. It is called to live always within the great event beyond which history can never go, and to make every emerging historical situation a part of the sacred history controlled by that event.

This does not mean that the Church withdraws from contemporary history into a purely spiritual task. The ministry of Jesus Christ exposed Him to the historical forces of His time, which caused His death ; but as a result, the situation changed. A formidable historical structure was broken up, and a new element was

introduced unawares into Græco-Roman civilization. The Church, similarly, so far as its life is governed by the Gospel, is necessarily involved in the immediate historical situation. Like its Lord, it may be "set for the falling and rising again of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against".<sup>1</sup> But the tendencies of the age meet a stubborn thing when they impinge upon the actuality of the Church. Out of the clash something new is created, which in the providence of God enters into the fulfilment of His purpose for the world.

At the present moment, the existence of the Church has become one of the crucial problems of European civilization. What will emerge, we cannot predict, either from a calculation of political probabilities, or by appeal to spiritual convictions. But the Church, whether as a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence, or as the headstone of the corner, is destined to be a determining factor in contemporary events.

Whatever part the Church has played in the crises of history, whether negative or positive, whether conservative or revolutionary, it is always a disturbing factor, upsetting calculations and opening up unforeseen possibilities. It is a standing protest against any conception of

<sup>1</sup> Lk. ii. 34.

history as a closed order, naturally determined. For it witnesses to the creative energies of God in this world, and offers itself to Him as an instrument of His good pleasure. It is in the Church, so far as it realizes its vocation, that history is made, not by us but by the power of God. It is this that justifies the Christian faith in the Church as an eschatological fact, in spite of the imperfection, fallibility, weakness and sin of its members. This is the Church that we speak of when we confess: "I believe, in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins".

We may now sum up our conclusions so far as they bear upon the Christian interpretation of history. The doctrine of progress, which until recently seemed to provide a scheme of interpretation, and of interpretation in a Christian sense, has worn somewhat thin. Progress is in any case not continuous or inevitable. There are phases of retrogression, and on empirical grounds it is difficult to affirm that such retrogression is merely temporary. There are indeed considerations which encourage the hope that the evils of human society are, in a long run, self-destructive, and the good self-preservative. But it is a long way from this to the assurance that history will justify itself by the final victory of the good within

the span allotted to human life on this planet. Nor is it clear that the Christian faith intends to give such an assurance. The category of progress is, as we have seen, only partially applicable to the biblical history, and in the New Testament the coming of the Kingdom of God is not (whatever it may be in the Old Testament) identified with the remote goal of history.

But if there is any validity in the argument here set forth, history is finally to be judged not as a simple succession in time, but as a process determined by the creative act of God vertically from above—if we must use spatial metaphors—and not by the *vis a tergo* of physical and psychological causation. The test case is the Gospel story. It relates events which obviously have a place in the empirical order. On that level the episode remains an enigma to the historian. The New Testament makes sense of it, but only by recognizing in it the entry into history of a reality from beyond history. Thus history becomes “sacred” history. Whenever the Gospel is proclaimed, it brings about a crisis, as in the experience of the individual, so also in the experience of whole communities and civilizations. Out of the crisis comes a new creation, by the power of God. Every such occasion is the “fullness of time” in which the Kingdom of God comes. Thus history

reveals its meaning as an order of redemption and revelation. Full meaning is not reserved for the last term in a temporal series, which supersedes and abolishes all previous stages in the process. Every situation is capable of being lifted up into the order of "sacred" history. In any given situation there are factors at work belonging to the empirical order—the forces of nature, the minds and wills of men—but the ultimately constitutive factor is neither nature nor the spirit of man, but the Kingdom of God.

Finally, the Kingdom of God is constitutive of history just because it is itself beyond history, and comes in history; for no purely intra-historical factor could give absolute meaning to the process of which it is a part. All history is bounded by the death of the body and the final extinction of human life on earth. Beyond that boundary the Kingdom of God exists eternally, taking up into its fullness the whole rich content of the historical process, as Christ is believed to have carried up His humanity to "the right hand of God". The temporal order, which is the "body" of the human spirit on earth, is "raised in glory" in the eternal order. That is the ultimate destination of the historical process. We believe in the life everlasting.

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Louis B. Jennings  
2717 River View Ave  
Huntington, W. Va.

JUN 27 1964

Frank Finkbeiner  
12947 Oak Park

Palos Heights

JUL 11 1964

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