

THE NATURE OF REVELATION

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the Divinity School
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the degree
Bachelor of Divinity

McMaster University

April 1951

The author holds the following degree:

B.A., 1948 (McMaster)

Thesis work under the supervision of

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PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to inquire into the nature of revelation with special attention to its 'progressive' character. Since the Bible is the record of God's self-revealing activity, therefore, an understanding of the nature of revelation has been sought within its pages. No attempt has been made to discuss the philosophical implications of revelation or its relation to reason.

The important theme of the centrality of the Christian revelation has been treated all too briefly. The subject of revelation as taking place and developing within the Christian era and the Church has been purposely omitted, not because of its secondary importance, but rather because of the magnitude of such a task.

The result of such a study as this thesis presents has been to gain a larger and more satisfying view of Sacred Scripture. No attempt has been made to appear either clever or original but rather to glean the truth about God and His ways with men both from the works of devout scholars and from the Bible. My gratitude is expressed to Dr. R. F. Aldwinckle for his help and guidance in the writing of this thesis.

CHAPTER I

THE RECORD OF REVELATION

The Bible is the record of God's self-revealing activity and of man's response to the divine initiative. An inquiry into the nature of revelation must therefore have the Biblical record for its handbook and guide. God hath spoken "at sundry times and in divers manners . . . unto the fathers by the prophets," and ". . . in these last days . . . by his Son," ¹ As the text suggests, God has not spoken merely once nor acted in a single pattern but rather "at sundry times" and "in divers manners".

The uniqueness and glory of Holy Scripture derives from the fact that its pages record, as no other literature does, the ways of God with men. It covers the range of these 'sundry times' and describes the 'divers manners' in an incomparable way. The claim of the Bible is great; it tells us about God who has come out of eternity into time to give man a first-hand knowledge of Himself.

It is of primary importance, then, that we, as seekers after a true knowledge of God, have a proper

¹ Hebrews 1:1.

understanding and appreciation of the Bible. An uncritical use of the Bible can lead to erroneous convictions and thence to erroneous acts. This is not to deny that even the most unlearned Christian, if he be a sincere reader, can glean from its pages much truth and blessing. Every sincere reader of the Bible, however, does to some extent begin to construct a framework of ideas concerning God and the ways in which God has revealed Himself. Our proper understanding and interpretation of the Bible then, is basic for an understanding of the nature of revelation.

Many questions arise in the mind of the thoughtful and candid reader of Holy Scripture. These questions betray real difficulties and to brush them aside as irrelevant is only to hinder sincere people in their search for God through the Bible.

The Old Testament in particular, confronts the modern reader with many and varied problems. The creation story as told in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis seems foreign to what modern science has to say in the realms of astronomy, geology and biology. In the realm of ethics and morality, the Bible does not seem to have one level but many. The Old Testament sometimes shows a fierce nationalistic spirit where cruelty and vindictiveness are rampant. This seems to be completely alien to the teaching and spirit of Jesus' with his message

of redemptive love.¹

Many Old Testament passages seem very remote from modern life and thought, and the question may be raised as to what is their relevance. Moreover, the Old Testament in itself is manifestly incomplete upon the testimony of Jesus himself. "Ye have heard that, it was said by them of old time But I say unto you" ² The question might be asked, "why do we retain such a large body of written record that has been superseded by later teaching?" If our claim, that the Bible is the record of God's self-revealing activity, is to be upheld and if we are to use this record as a guide to the nature of revelation, then we must discover a method of interpretation by which the above difficulties can be satisfactorily resolved and the claims of revelation can be put in a thoroughly consistent light.

There are at least three fruitful and necessary lines of approach to the Bible for a proper understanding and appreciation of it as the record of God's dealings in and through man. First we must seek to understand how the Bible came to be. It has been rightly said

¹ Cf. Psalm 137:8-9 with Matthew 18:14.

Cf. 1 Samuel 15:3 with 1 John 4:16.

² Matthew 5: 21, 22.

that "The story of the making of the Old Testament remains the essential guide to its proper interpretation".¹

Second, we must give some attention to the structure of the Bible. The relationship of the various books within the whole, the matter of chronology and historical sequence are fruitful lines of approach.

Third, we must arrive at some decision regarding the nature of inspiration. This involves the extent to which the Divine and human factors enter into the actual content and composition of Holy Scripture.

The Making of the Record

The Bible as we have it today is the result of many centuries of development. Not one but many inspired minds combined to give us the sacred record. "It is unique in the world's literature in that it gives the religious experience of a people over a period of something like a millenium and a half."² The origin and growth of the Bible can only be discussed here in very broad outline but two leading characteristics of it will enable us to understand its nature and purpose better.

The Bible is more than a record of the religious experience of a people. It contains also the history of

¹ H. W. Robinson, The Old Testament Its Making and Meaning (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1937), p. 209.

² T. W. Manson, A Companion to the Bible (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark., 1939), p. 7.

a particular people. The historical aspect of the Bible is secondary to the religious message but it can never be divorced from it. "It is essential to the understanding of this literature that we should always keep in mind the history which slowly deposited it."¹ The religious experience was taking place in history and therefore the record is anchored in actual historical events. As history is not a static or isolated phenomenon but a dynamic and moving process, so in the Bible we sense something of this growth and development.

Closely bound up with this historical aspect of Holy Scripture is its experimental character. It is more than a series of abstract principles or barren historical records. It is the experience of men and women who were living in vital relationship with God. This experimental aspect is noticed at many points in Scripture. The Psalmist utters a song of praise because God has heard his prayer (Psalm 116:1). The prophet is aware of the justice and righteousness of God and is compelled to prophesy (Amos 3:8). The apostle is moved to a high and holy ambition as he contemplates the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. (Philippians 3:10). Thus the Bible arises out of the life and experience of a people.

¹ Robinson, op. cit., p. 5.

To describe, even in a general way, how the Bible came to be, in the more technical sense of dates, books, canons, etc. is neither an easy nor a short task. In some instances, the written records lagged far behind the events and experiences which they sought to record. And "No book mediated the religion of Israel until its most creative period was passed."¹

It would seem to be true that in many instances, between the actual event and the written record, there was an oral tradition. ". . . a saying or a song, a tale or a formula passed on from mouth to ear, often through many generations before it was recorded by the artificial aid of writing."² Evidence of this type of tradition is found throughout the Old Testament and undoubtedly has formed a background for later literature. e.g. Song of Deborah, (Judges 5); the song of the well, (Numbers 21: 17-18); the song of Lamech, (Genesis 4: 23-24); Balaam's oracles (Numbers 23 & 24); Samson's riddle (Judges 14:14): It is generally agreed that it was by oral tradition these and similar types of material circulated before one thousand B.C.³

The literature comprising our present Old Testa-

¹ Ibid., p. 21

² Ibid., p. 14

³ H. E. Fosdick, A Guide to Understanding the Bible (New York: Harper & Bros., 1938), p. 301.

ment, some of it arising out of oral tradition, was reduced to writing between the periods 1000 and 100 B.C. This literature does not follow a single pattern but can be divided into at least five types - History, Prophecy, Psalms, Wisdom and Law. Because of the importance attached to history by the Hebrew and their thought of it as purposive ". . . . the Old Testament largely takes the form of historic narrative".¹

As the literature of the Old Testament, in part, tended to lag behind the events and the oral tradition, so too the process of canonization came long after the literature had been written. ". . . . behind formal canonization there lay a long process of growth in authority and veneration."² It was not until the close of the first century A.D. that the Hebrew canon was completed. "The last discussion about it was at C. A.D.100."³ And yet "not all the literature of Israel has become canonical."⁴

The New Testament writings extend from the resurrection of our Lord until about 150 A.D. Here as in the Old Testament there are traces of an oral tradition.

¹ Robinson, op. cit., p. 25

² Op. cit., p. 33

³ A. G. Hebert, The Authority of the Old Testament (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), p. 188.

⁴ Robinson, op. cit. p. 185

"Behind the earliest of our gospels lies a whole generation of preaching in which the tradition about Jesus was passed on by word of mouth".¹

Paul, a man who probably had never seen the historic Jesus, appears to have been the first Christian writer. His letters to the various churches, beginning with the first and second Epistles to the Thessalonians, occupy the period from fifty A.D. to sixty A.D. The first Gospel writer appears to have been Mark, who wrote the book bearing his name about seventy A.D. The three so-called Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, have been the centre of intense study and research. Many theories have been put forward as to the origin of these Gospels. "It is almost certain that Matthew and Luke used a collection of the sayings of Jesus which is usually referred to as "Q".² Material in Mark also seems to be common to both Matthew and Luke and it is highly probable that these latter writers incorporated some of Mark's gospel into their writings.

Matthew and Luke appear to have been written about 90-95 A.D. All the other New Testament writings except these and Paul's epistles were written in the period from 80 A.D. to about 150 A.D. The Second Epistle of Peter

¹ C.T. Craig, The Beginning of Christianity. (New York: Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943), p.60.

² Ibid., p. 63

was written about 150 A.D.¹

The canonization of the New Testament as of the Old was a long process covering hundreds of years. The word 'process' properly describes the formation of the New Testament canon. "Something like a fixed canon had grown to have all the force of usage, and it was not till the second half of the fourth century that, this usage was made applicable to the whole church catholic."² Three Councils were held in the fourth century A.D. and at the latter two of these councils - Damasine (382) and Carthage (397) "the books of our New Testament, neither more nor less, are recognized."³ The Council of Trent (1545) had real significance for the Canon in that the church listed the writings and formally declared them to be a repository of apostolic and spiritual truth of which one God is author. "As Rome had settled views on the Canon by the beginning of the fifth century So great has this influence been, that even the Reformed Churches have simply retained the New Testament Canon of the Roman Catholic Church."⁴

The Catholic Bible is different from our English Protestant Bible however, in that the former has the

¹ Fosdick, op. cit., p. 302-3

² A. Souter, Text and Canon of the New Testament, (London: Duckworth & Co., 1913), p. 195.

³ Ibid., p. 197

⁴ Ibid., p. 198

Apocrypha scattered throughout the Old Testament. It was Jerome in 382 A.D. who first discovered that the Latin Bible contained a dozen or more books that were not in the Hebrew Old Testament of Palestine. Jerome left these books scattered throughout the Old Testament in his revision of the Latin Bible.

In 1534 Martin Luther was translating the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into German. He translated the Apocrypha but placed it in a group between the Old and New Testaments. This same practice was followed in later Bibles, although certain observations were put at the beginning qualifying their authority. "They are to be read not for doctrine but for 'knowledge of the history' and 'instruction of godly manners'."¹ The Apocrypha was regarded as an integral part of the King James Bible.

It was the Puritan influence that was most effective in finally rejecting the Apocrypha. ". . . while the Sixth Article of the Church of England definitely affirmed that they belonged to the Bible, the Puritan influence . . . more and more pushed them into the background".² The Apocryphal books, however, can be of real value in understanding both Old and New Testament life and thought. They are of special value in regard to the so-called 'silent years' of the inter-Biblical period.

¹ E.J.Goodspeed, The Story of the Apocrypha (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 5-6

² Ibid., p. 6-7

The Structure of the Record

Nothing is quite so important for a proper understanding of the sacred record as to see the various parts of the record in their proper relation and sequence. At this very point, the attitude and presuppositions we bring to a study of the Bible will play a most important part. It is possible to impose a particular pattern and structure upon the Bible that is not at all valid and in line with the facts.

The question immediately arises as to what is the true structure of the Bible and what is the means we may use to discover that structure? Are we justified in interpreting the Bible in the light of one or several doctrines, e.g. ethical monotheism? Are we coming nearer to a solution by allegorizing difficult passages? The assertion 'let the Bible speak for itself' is a sound one if taken seriously and its implications understood.

Since the Bible is intimately bound up with the history of a people - 'the literature is the deposit of a national life', therefore history itself should provide at least one datum line for our inquiry. This has been the approach to the Bible of so-called Higher Criticism. The foundations of this work were laid in the latter half of the nineteenth century by Graf and Wellhausen. "To him literary criticism was chiefly a means for securing

an intelligible reconstruction of history."¹ At first the work of these and other literary critics seemed to be totally destructive. The Bible was split up into many contradictory documents with no meaning or purpose. The critics were using the datum line of history, however, as the means of reconstruction and this has led to a totally different view of the Bible.

There are at least two reservations that need be made in arguing for a 'historical' approach to Scripture. The first difficulty arises out of the fact that the Bible is more than history; it is a record of religious experience and involves an interpretation that transcends the impartial methods of the scientific historian.

The second difficulty that must be faced is the fact that the Hebrew historian used a method of recording history that was very different from the modern scientific, historical method. ". . . . Hebrew writers of history adopted a patch-work or scrap-book method, wherever possible Without any developed sense of historical perspective they interpreted the past by conditions contemporary with themselves."²

In regard to the first difficulty, Biblical theology and scientific history seem to take up antithetical positions. "The conflict has involved a perplexing dilemma between a critical study of the Bible which

¹ Hebert, op. cit. p. 30

² Robinson, H.W., op. cit. p. 27

resolves it into a composite of human utterances and an assertion of the Divine character of the Bible which regards it as being therefore, free from all possible error."¹ These opposing elements are not completely irreconcilable, however, and if the tension between them is to be eased and a satisfactory solution reached, then a place must be made for both scientific history and Biblical theology in a study of the sacred record. The truth set forth by the Apostle 'that spiritual things are spiritually discerned',² is a valid one and "The study of the Old Testament from a purely secular point of view will be bound to miss everything in the Old Testament that ultimately matters".³

On the other hand, Biblical scholars cannot rule out the historical method nor fail to give the results of the scientific historian a fair hearing. "Everything that throws light on the secular history is of importance for the right understanding of the spiritual history."⁴

The Biblical student then who shares the same faith and is guided by the same Spirit as the Biblical writers and who at the same time brings 'adequate knowledge' and 'critical discrimination' to his studies should be assured of the most fruitful results in properly under-

¹ Hebert, op. cit., p. 8

² 1 Corinthians 2: 11-15

³ Hebert, op. cit., p. 129

⁴ Ibid., p. 129

standing the structure and design of the Bible.

The second difficulty, that of the different method of the Hebrew historian, should be resolved to a large degree by approaching Scripture with the two elements mentioned above, namely a critical historical method and a sharing of the faith of the ancient writers. "The literary products of this long historical development lie before us in the Old Testament not in their chronological order, but as edited, rearranged and revised for a specific purpose."¹ Only as the student approaches this literature from within the context of the faith of Israel will he discover the basic truth therein. But only as he places his findings along the datum line of a sound historical method will these results be intelligible to the modern mind.

Thus the work of sincere scholars has laid bare what we believe to be a valid structure of the sacred record. It has resulted in the so-called 'Documentary Theory'. The various parts or books of the whole have been put together from successive strata and these strata represent the developing religious sense of a people.

The results of modern Biblical criticism have definite and lasting value. This approach to Scripture will in large measure resolve some of the problems men-

¹ Robinson, op. cit., p. 10

tioned at the beginning - especially the problem of the various levels of ethics and morality. Such a method also, as will be seen, clarifies the relation between Old and New Testaments. For our purpose in this thesis, however, the greatest value of modern Biblical criticism is that it gives us the clue to the self-revealing activity of God. The nature of revelation is seen not to be final or static but developing and progressive.

The Inspiration of the Record

Since the Bible is the record of a Divine revelation, therefore both Divine and human elements enter into its contents and composition. We believe that God has inspired the writers of the sacred record but in saying this, we also acknowledge that the human element was present in some degree in the very fact that men did write the record.

Any inquiry into the nature of inspiration must move within the limits of the Divine and human elements. Inspiration can never be all of one and none of the other. The real problem is to determine in what degree each element is present in the total process. Our inquiry will be assisted by considering briefly the various theories of inspiration that have arisen as men have attempted to set limits to the Divine and human factors.

Since the Bible possesses an authority that no other

literature has, men have sought to protect and retain this authority by allowing a maximum place for the Divine element in their theories of inspiration. This has resulted in so-called 'mechanical' or 'dictation' theories of inspiration in which man was simply the passive instrument upon which the Divine spirit played.

This theory of inspiration has its roots in Jewish thought. ". . . . to the Jews every word and letter of the Scripture was sacred. When Moses went up into the Mount he found Jehovah making the ornamental letters in the book of the Law."¹ In the second century A.D. we find this theory still held - the human writer is likened to a pen in the hand of God or to a musical instrument upon which the Spirit of God plays. "These comparisons can be found in some of the second-century fathers such as Justin Martyr and Athenagoras who uses the similes of a harp or flute."² This mechanical and verbal theory of inspiration has been held in varying degrees until our modern era where it is still retained by numerous fundamentalist sects.

Most modern scholars deny the validity of such a mechanical and verbal theory of inspiration. A comparison of quotations taken from the Old Testament and made in the

¹ M. Dods, The Bible its Origin and Nature, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), p. 110.

² Hebert, op. cit., p. 23

New Testament, alone is sufficient ground for denying any verbal inerrancy. The sayings of Jesus himself, as they are recorded by the Gospel writers show a dissimilarity of actual words.¹ Such a theory seems to be more in line with pagan methods of divination. It seems to relegate the mind and will of man to an obscure position. Whereas the evidence of Scripture itself seems to allow a place for the human faculties to exercise themselves. (see Luke 1: 1-3)

Most theories of inspiration other than the extreme mechanical and verbal ones have been merely modifications and have tended to allow a larger and more important place for the human element. Some of these modified theories have attempted to separate the 'thought' of Scripture from the actual words. It is claimed under this view that the former is inspired, whereas the latter are due to human instrumentality. St. Augustine held to a form of this theory, ". . . which holds that the truths uttered in Scripture are Divine, while the imperfections are human".²

Another modified verbal theory has held that there is inerrancy in matters of conduct and doctrine whereas many other details may not be inerrant. "This theory was

¹ Cf. Matt. 6:9-13 and Luke 11: 2-4

² Dods, op. cit., p. 120

held by Erasmus, Grotius, Baxter and the great mass of German theologians."¹

In regard to these theories it may be questioned whether we can draw an arbitrary line between thoughts and words, conduct and doctrine. It may be asked further, "How is it that accuracy can be guaranteed in matters of doctrine and conduct and then the writer in the next instance lapses into inaccuracy in other details?"

Many more theories and 'views' of inspiration have been put forth during the Christian era. In our modern era especially, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme and Holy Scripture has been placed by some in the same class as the religious literature of other religions. Some hold that great poetry is worthy to be ranked with Sacred Scripture as inspired and perhaps exceeds certain parts of Scripture in lofty thought.

In all of these theories, it is to be noticed that we are moving between the two poles - Divine and human. Perhaps the Church and Christians must take the same attitude toward the inspiration of Scripture as the various Church Councils have taken toward the character of Jesus Christ. Divine and human - there are the limits within which we can inquire but beyond which we dare not tread.

There are two principles which can be laid down as valid and helpful for an understanding of the nature and

¹ Ibid., p. 121

extent of inspiration. "I know that the Bible is inspired because it inspires me."¹ This principle is a thoroughly sound one with which to approach the problem of inspiration. It is not concerned with psychological processes but rather with results. The Bible does inspire the sincere reader. We can look back over the centuries and see in point of fact that the Bible has lifted men to higher levels of life and thought. It has been a light and a lamp to the feet and path of men and nations. The canonical Scriptures, as they have come down to us, represents the united consent of many minds that this is an inspired and inspiring literature. In connection with this latter thought of canonicity, it appears that ". . . there does not seem any point at which we can stop until we get back to the intrinsic quality of the truth which the Scripture contains."²

"The Bible is an inspired book, for further details read the book." This second principle is also a sound approach to Scripture. For if we believe that the Bible is a unique book above and beyond all the literature of this world and that it is an inspired book, then by what criterion are we to judge or speak of inspiration? It is altogether illogical to bring a mechanical, verbal, plenary or any other preconceived theory by which to judge the

¹ Moody, D. L.

² Robinson, op. cit., p. 206-7

Bible. "It is, then, only from the Bible itself we can learn what an inspired book is."¹ No one can read the Bible thoughtfully and still remain dogmatic as to any theory of inspiration.

Since the Bible is only the record of the revelation and not the revelation in the fullest and highest sense, therefore our study of the nature of revelation must be primary and a study of the record secondary. While the record will remain our chief source and handbook, nevertheless it is not primarily the centre of our study. This is by way of acknowledgment that the above study of the record is manifestly inadequate as such. The conclusions we have reached in this brief study however, should be of real value as we inquire into the nature of revelation.

¹ Dods, op. cit., p. 105

CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF REVELATION

If revelation is defined as the self-revealing activity of God, then a serious inquiry into the nature of revelation must consider both what was revealed and how it was revealed. In this chapter the content and means of revelation will be treated independently but as a matter of fact, they are intimately connected and dependent the one upon the other.

God was revealing knowledge of Himself to men and therefore the idea of God that men have held should give us the clue to the nature of revelation. The use of the term 'idea' must not mislead us. We are not using 'idea' here in the same way that it was used in Platonic philosophy. It means nothing abstract, impersonal and remote from life. "It cannot be too forcibly emphasized that the Christian apprehension of God is not the product of philosophic speculation".¹ Rather, the idea of God as found in the Biblical record arose out of the issues of life itself. We must therefore go back beyond the literature to the history and behind the history to the life and experience of men and seek to understand the religious ideas which dominated them. In this instance it is the dominating idea of God in which we are interested.

¹ R.F.Aldwinckle, The Christian Conception of God, ed. by E.A.Payne, Studies in History and Religion, p. 144.

The Biblical Idea of God

The title is a misnomer in a sense because the Bible presents us not only with a great variety of ideas about God but also ideas that are at some points directly opposed to one another. We can only gain a comprehensive and valid idea of God from the Biblical record by seeing it in the light of its historical development.

There are several mountain peaks in the historical development of the idea of God from which we may survey the landscape traversed and see the horizons ahead. As the past profoundly affects the future, so here in the realm of revelation events cannot be held in isolation. There are points at which particular emphases break through however and for the sake of brevity we can only consider these points.

The primitive religion of the Semitic nomadic tribes seems to have passed through the stages of naturism, ancestor worship, animism and polydaemonism. Trees, streams and springs, stones and mountains were all objects of worship. Relics of animism are reflected in the stories told about the patriarchs. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob pitched their tents near some ancient sacred place and built altars there.¹ Some Old Testament authorities find evidence for polytheism in early Hebrew religion by

¹ Genesis 12:6ff., 13:18; Exodus 3:2ff.
Deut. 33:16.

the various names used for God, e.g. El, Elohim, Elyon, Shaddai.¹ Thus contrary to the opening chapters of Genesis the early religion of the Hebrews was not a monotheism. "The idea of the unity of God came late to the Semite as it comes late to other people".²

A high point and decisive moment for the history of the idea of God was when at Mount Sinai under the leadership of Moses, Jahweh and the tribes of Israel entered into a covenant of mutual allegiance. The Old Testament presents divergent views on the question of the origin of Jahweh, God of Israel. The late priestly document P holds that it was to Moses that God first made himself known as Jahweh.³ The document J holds that Jahweh was not a new god at all but long known to the Hebrew people.⁴ The Kenite theory has been put forward as a likely hypothesis that Jahweh was originally the tribal god of the Kenites and was introduced to Israel by Moses through his father-in-law Jethro a Kenite.⁵ The important point from our standpoint, however, is not these secondary questions but "the development of the idea of God under the name Jahweh, as historically manifested in intimate relation to

¹ H.P. Smith, The Religion of Israel. (New York: 1914), p. 14, 15ff.

² Ibid., p. 13.

³ Exodus 6: 3.

⁴ Genesis 4: 26.

⁵ See T.J. Meek, Hebrew Origins, (New York & London: Harper & Bros. 1936), p. 86ff; and H. E. Fosdick, A Guide to Understanding the Bible, (New York: Harper & Bos., 1938), p. 3, 4.

to Israel".¹

Some of the characteristics of Jahweh, the mountain god of Sinai, may be noted. He was a storm god and Israel's first experience of Jahweh was accompanied by thunder, lightning and the mountain smoking.² He was a god of war who fought for his people and led them to victory.³ He was a tribal god who loved Israel jealously but hated her enemies.⁴

A gross anthropomorphism characterised this early conception of Jahweh and indeed continued far down in Israel's history. Jahweh was thought of as walking in the garden of Eden;⁵ eating and talking with Abraham;⁶ and wrestling with Jacob.⁷

The morality and conduct of Jahweh in this early concept are also significant. Yahweh was a capricious god who sought to kill Moses for no apparent reason at all.⁸ In the realm of national life Jahweh was a ruthless god who

¹ H.W. Robinson, The Religious ideas of the Old Testament (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 53.

² Exodus 19:18, 20:18.

³ Exodus 15:3; Joshua 10: 13,14; I Samuel 17:45.

⁴ Exodus 17:16, 23:22; Joshua 11:20.

⁵ Genesis 3:8

⁶ Genesis 18:1ff.

⁷ Genesis 24:30.

⁸ Exodus 4: 24-26.

showed no love or mercy to individuals or nations who were outside the bounds of the nation of Israel.¹

When the tribes of Israel passed into the land of Canaan many factors converged to profoundly affect and alter their concept of God. This was a great transition period in the life of Israel. The tent and temporary abodes of the nomadic life were to give way to the village, town and permanent dwelling place. For the first time, Israel was to encounter an agricultural and commercial civilization.

The gods of the land of Canaan were gods of agriculture and their favour was a sure guarantee of fertile soil and an abundant harvest. With these various local baals were associated many degrading features. Prostitution was practised at the local shrines to encourage the fertility of the soil. A syncretism between the religions of Canaan and Israel was inevitable.

One important result of this syncretism was that Jahweh in many instances became associated with the local baals and began to be worshipped at various 'high places'. Previous to this the presence of Jahweh had been confined to the Ark, which had served as a 'bridge' from Sinai to Canaan.²

In other directions Canaanitish Baalism was not so beneficial to the concept of Jahweh. Jahweh the mountain

¹ Numbers 21:2,3; Joshua 5:20,21; I Samuel 15:2,3.

² Numbers 14:41-45; II Samuel 6:2-5, 12-15.

god of Sinai while ruthless and powerful in war was regarded as chaste, austere and the core of the social solidarity of Israel. But now, "Subtly yet unmistakably, the idea of Jahweh as a Person standing in moral relation to Israel was in danger of being transformed into that of a nature god, with none of the sterner virtues of the battlefield,--"¹

With the introduction of the prophetic consciousness in Israel, we find one of the high points in the whole history of the idea of God. The conflict between Jahweh and the baals became explicit in the ninth century under Elijah. In his contest with Queen Jezebel we sense the tension that existed between not only the nomadic and agricultural but the nomadic and the commercial classes.²

In the eighth century the prophets Amos, Hosea and Micah raise the conception of Jahweh to still higher levels and fill it with new meaning. These men were contending for a spiritual and moral conception of God as over against a material and immoral one. Under these and other prophets, we find the idea of God reaching the level of a practical monotheism.

The Exile was a great formative influence for Israel's conception of God. It was out of this great social upheaval and calamity that Israel extracted some of her greatest thoughts about God. Monotheism becomes decisive

¹ Robinson, op. cit. p. 58.

² I Kings chapter 21.

and explicit in the prophet of the Exile - Deutero-Isaiah. "Deutero-Isaiah. . . . drops the keystone of the monotheistic arch into its place, for all the future of Israel."¹

Not only was an ethical monotheism reached during the Exile but the idea of God was thoroughly universalized and spiritualized. Out of the very of Israel's bondage came this high and holy conception. ". . . . a monotheism, however lofty, which depended on the existence of any shrine was not purely a spiritual faith The city and temple, therefore, went up in flames that Israel might learn that God is a Spirit, and dwelleth not in a house made with hands".²

When we come to the New Testament we find that the idea of God has both old and new meaning. Certainly all the lines of thought concerning God in the Old Testament converge upon the New and break in all their fullness in the person of Jesus Christ. "His God was the God of the supreme prophetic passages - spiritual and universal, caring for all mankind across all boundaries of race and nation a God of grace and forgiveness as well as of justice and retribution"³

The new elements in the idea of God in the New

¹ Robinson, op. cit., p. 60

² G.A.Smith, The Book of Isaiah (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Doran & Co., 1927), VII. P.44-5.

³ Fosdick, op. cit., p. 40.

Testament are not so much due to what Jesus taught that was new but rather his taking of the old idea at its highest and treating it with a thorough moral earnestness and sincerity. Thus in Jesus and Paul we find ". . . . a really effective monotheism and universalism with the inwardness of moral values understood in the deepest sense."¹

One of the most striking features of the New Testament is the way in which men began to think of God not primarily in terms of Jesus' teaching about God but rather in terms of Jesus himself. Jesus becomes ". . . . the image of the invisible God."² In His face was ". . . . the light of the glory of God "³ He was God incarnate ". . . . the Word made flesh. . . . "⁴ Thus "His character became central in the idea of God and the concept of God was thereby Christianized".⁵

The Biblical idea of God then can only be adequately described in terms of expansion, development and progressive growth. Such are the conclusions forced upon us by our even brief survey.

¹ Aldwinckle, op. cit., p. 146.

² Colossians 1:15.

³ II Corinthians 4:6.

⁴ St. John 1:14.

⁵ Fosdick, op. cit., p. 46.

The Media of Revelation

The media of revelation determine both the central point of revelation and the heart of living religion. God makes Himself known to man through some particular medium, therefore an understanding of the medium is important for the nature of revelation. The medium in its fullest and highest expression alone can answer the cry of the human heart "Oh that I knew where I might find him".¹ Vital religion and the highest form of mediation are therefore inseparable.

The Bible, especially the Old Testament, reveals a great variety of media by which God and man met. This inquiry into the means of revelation can be saved from the vagaries of mere speculation and conjecture by relating it to the Biblical record. The realm of mediation is one that is beyond easy or exact definition but in the Biblical record, we discover a long history of the process whereby God and man have met. This dependence upon the Bible as a reliable record of religious experience is one of the major differences between religious faith and speculative philosophy.

The various media in the Bible do not stand out with the same definiteness as the content of revelation - the idea of God. No absolute line can thus be drawn

¹ Job 23:3

between them; only particular emphases and forms can be noticed.

Physical media occupied a prominent place in the early religious life of Israel. Jahweh God of Israel made Himself known to His people through outward signs and physical events - especially through the activity of nature. It was by means of a burning bush that Jahweh appeared to Moses in the vicinity of Mount Horeb.¹ The glory and presence of Jahweh upon Mount Sinai were associated with a cloud and fire.² Yahweh went before the Israelites in their wanderings as 'a pillar of a cloud by day' and 'in a pillar of fire by night'.³ It was Jahweh who caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind and allowed the Israelites to go through dry shod.⁴ In the early religion of Israel, fountains, trees and stones were given a prominent place. A well was regarded as a living thing in a nomadic song.⁵ The wind in the trees was regarded as a sign to begin battle.⁶

¹ Genesis 3:2.

² Exodus 24: 16,17.

³ Exodus 13:21.

⁴ Exodus 14: 21,22.

⁵ Numbers 21: 17,18.

⁶ 2 Samuel 5: 23f.

Not only was nature in all its various forms and manifestations regarded as the medium through which God could and did speak to Israel but also certain mechanical and material objects were used. The casting of the sacred lots Urim and Thummim and the use of the ephod illustrate this. David inquired of Yahweh by means of the ephod.¹ Saul similarly used the sacred lots to determine Jahweh's will.² The use of such methods as these for determining the divine purpose continued for many centuries in Israel's history. We see a reflection of this in the 'casting of lots' to replace Judas Iscariot in the apostolic company.³ Such an illustration as this reminds us that ". . . . ethical insight cannot be graded on the basis of the calendar".⁴

Since physical media and especially the manifestations of nature are to the fore in the early history of Israel, we must not assume that Jahweh was a nature god. "The Jahweh of the Old Testament was not a nature-god".⁵ It is true that in many of the primitive religions nature served as a substratum and natural phenomena served as

¹ I Samuel 30: 7-8.

² I Samuel 14: 38-42.

³ Acts 1: 24-26.

⁴ H.E.Fosdick, op. cit., Introd. XIII

⁵ H.W.Robinson, Redemption and Revelation, (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1942), p. 130.

the chief media of contact with the spirits or gods who were revealed in nature. But "The use of primitive mythology in Nature - theophanies and related passages need not imply that the historic belief in Yahweh ever passed through a phase comparable with that of the Babylonian creation myths, or the Vguitic mythology".¹

Jahweh was distinct from Chemosh the mountain god of Moab and the many other nature gods in that He freely chose Israel. Jahweh and Israel entered into a covenant relationship that was ethical, based upon grace and free choice rather than geography and circumstance. While Jahweh was regarded as acting through and in some sense immanent in nature, he was never bound by it; he transcended nature. Jahweh came to be both ruler and creator of the nature through which he manifested himself.

The physical media cannot be isolated from other media either historically or religiously. They are intimately connected with and dependent upon a particular medium, that of the prophetic consciousness. The remarkable feature of the religion of Israel lies in the fact that they started with Jahweh and from their knowledge of Him, they worked outwards to the facts of both nature and history. The various nature-religions notably Greek religion, on the other hand, started with the facts of nature and worked inwards. Their conclusions

¹ H.W.Robinson, Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament, (Oxford: Clarendon Press., 1946), p. 43.

resulted in a nature religion and a polytheism.

Israel arrived at this starting point by means of the prophetic consciousness. "This means that when we would trace the most essential part of the Old Testament religion back to its most essential element, we find a man standing in the presence of God," ¹ The many physical events that were interpreted as acts of God received their interpretation from a prophet. At Sinai Moses was "the unique channel of the revelation, the essential interpreter of whatever physical phenomena mediated it". ² Thus we see how closely connected were the physical media and the medium of the prophetic consciousness. The latter was needed to interpret the former without which interpretation they would have no significance for either religion or revelation.

The prophet was much more than an interpreter of nature. He was primarily an interpreter of history. We begin to realize the magnitude of the prophetic faith when we see the prophet interpreting historical events as acts of God. Jahweh was working out His divine purpose through political and social circumstances as well as through the natural world. The call of Abraham, the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea, the covenant at Sinai - all of these

¹ H.W.Robinson, (ed.), Record and Revelation, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 314.

² H.W.Robinson, Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament, op. cit., p. 41.

events and many more were regarded by the prophet as being performed by the guiding hand of Jahweh -god of Israel. "Thus we are warranted in saying that in the prophet, history like Nature and human nature, became conscious of its own deepest and highest meanings".¹

A prophetic consciousness was present in the life of Israel from the earliest period. Before the eighth century the nabi' was the recognized prophet of Jahweh. The nebi'im were professional religionists characterized by ecstatic and sometimes irrational experiences. These were not organized to the degree in which the priesthood was but they frequently appeared in groups and were sometimes referred to as 'sons of the prophets'.²

The purest and highest form of prophetic medium was that which disavowed any relation to, or dependence upon, a 'professional' class or system. Amos was simply a herdsman called to speak to Israel for God.³ The prophet Isaiah, at first felt unworthy to be the mouth-piece of God.⁴ Jeremiah believed himself incapable of speaking for God but the inner compulsion was too great.⁵

¹ Ibid., p. 164

⁴ Isaiah 6: 5.

² I Samuel 10: 10; I Kings 22: 6. ⁵ Jeremiah 1:6, 20:9.

³ Amos 7: 14, 15.

There was a continuous development however from the earliest nabi' to the later classical prophets. "Yet it is clear that the classical prophets valued the intelligible content of their oracles far more than the abnormal phenomena" ¹

The prophetic consciousness as a medium of revelation becomes explicit and reaches its high point in the writing prophets of the eighth century. While the prophetic consciousness, as has been noticed, was present in Israel's history from the beginning nevertheless a change in emphasis is apparent. The experience of Elijah at Horeb is a fine illustration of the transition from physical to psychical media. "And behold the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice."² "Prophecy was in process of becoming more consciously psychical in its medium, hearing the articulate word, in place of seeing the physical event."³

It is not possible to completely analyze and understand the prophetic consciousness as a medium of revelation.

¹ Ibid., p. 176.

² I Kings 19: 11, 12.

³ Robinson, Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament, op. cit., p. 44.

It belongs to that mysterious realm where God and man actually meet. One only understands the experience by entering into it and sharing it. While intuition, imagination and sound knowledge do contribute to this medium, nevertheless it transcends these to a large degree. "The realm in which the prophetic consciousness operates is supremely that of moral truth."¹ The prophetic consciousness is the highest type of media, apart from the revelation in Jesus Christ, because it involves and depends upon the moral consciousness of man made in the image of God.

The question of the validity of the prophetic media is an important one. Since the prophetic medium operates in the realm of the moral and spiritual, its validity must be tested in this way. The prophets in early times were regarded essentially as 'fore-tellers' and a true prophet under this definition was one whose prophecies were verified by the event. Little or no ethical significance was attached to the prophecy. The prophecy of the eighth century became more in the nature of 'forth-telling'. That is, the declaration of the righteousness, justice, mercy and holiness of Jahweh to a wicked and perverse generation.² This is not to deny

¹ Robinson, *Redemption and Revelation*, op. cit., p. 153.

² e.g. Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah.

the predictive element in later prophecy but it is to say that the emphasis and criterion of true prophecy was a morality in tune with Jahweh - god of Israel. The contest between true and false prophets is clearly seen in the writings of Jeremiah. He denounced the immorality of those calling themselves prophets.¹ "It is above all, this indifference to moral good or evil in the social life of the people that stamps them as impostors when they speak in the name of Him who is of eyes too pure to behold iniquity."² The prophetic utterance stands or falls by its intrinsic worth and looking back over the centuries serious thinkers have always agreed that the great prophets of Israel sounded an authentic note.

Some consideration must be given to the priest as a medium of revelation in Israel's history. The prophetic emphasis was more to the fore than that of the priest and might be regarded as more important but the two must be recognized as complementary. The prophets may be regarded as 'mountain peaks', in the history of revelation, bridging the gap between God and man. The priest, however, represents the level ground, the substratum, covering a greater period of Israel's history than the prophet. "Prophecy of the higher kind belongs to little more than a couple of centuries. Priesthood endured from the earliest

¹ Jeremiah 23: 13,14.

² J. Skinner, Prophecy and Religion, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1922), p. 191.

days of Israel's national history down to the close of that history in A.D. 70 . . ."¹

The particular and unique emphases of the priest are very difficult to determine for several reasons. The priest does not stand out as the prophet does with his own personality stamped upon his message. "The identity of the priest is usually merged in the continuous life of a hereditary and corporate body."² Considerable editorial work was done upon those documents which best illuminate the office of the priest and thus the many strands of thought are difficult to determine. e.g. "the Holiness Code" (Leviticus chapters 17-26).

In the earliest period the priest made use of the sacred oracle, the Urim and Thummim.³ The term 'torah' seems to have its origin in this mechanical means of determining Yahweh's will. Over a long period of time the origin of the term 'torah' was lost sight of but it "acquired the general meaning of any particular revelation of the divine will . . . and ultimately came to be applied to the Pentateuch as embodying the fullest and most authoritative statement of that will."⁴ The whole system of law and justice came to be regarded as being under divine

¹ Robinson, Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament, op. cit., p. 199.

² Ibid., p. 199

³ Deuteronomy 33:8-11.

⁴ Robinson, Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament, op. cit., p. 203.

sanction and its decisions as divine revelation.

The task of determining what part the priest played as a medium of revelation in Israel's history is a large and complex one. It is sufficient here to say that the priest, through the ordinances, ritual and sacrifice of his office was constantly bringing God and man near to one another. Finally the ordinances were reduced to a written revelation and they became fixed and stereotyped. The Torah was regarded as infallible coming from the very hand of God. It was this condition which stifled the prophetic voice in Israel.¹

The New Testament and the Primitive Church agreed that God sufficiently and supremely revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. The implications of this conviction are that Jesus Christ is not only the highest but a unique medium of revelation. In the Christian revelation, God was using human personality to reveal Himself to men. Since human personality is the highest category of human experience because it gathers up within itself volitional, emotional and rational functions, therefore revelation through personality is the highest form of revelation.

The question will arise however as to how the Christian revelation differs from revelation through the prophetic consciousness. We have seen above that in the

¹ For a thorough discussion of the part played by the priest as a medium of revelation see Ibid., p. 199-230.

great prophets of Israel, God was revealing Himself through the moral consciousness of men, in fact, through their whole and total personalities, i.e. the volitional and rational functions, etc. The question might be asked - does the revelation in Christ differ from that through the prophets merely in degree or is there something unique in Jesus Christ?

This point is of vital importance for the Christian faith. If the revelation in and through Jesus Christ is not in a real sense unique then His claim to supremacy lies only in the fact that "He perceived and taught eternal religious truths . . . more clearly, powerfully, and definitely than anyone else had ever done."¹ If Jesus Christ was only a supreme prophet, a religious genius or a pioneer in human living, then we cannot say that the revelation in and through Christ was a unique and supreme revelation.

We have noted before (p. 35) that the prophetic consciousness in no small degree transcended the rational and speculative 'faculties' of the prophet and entered that realm of the spirit where mysteriously but no less actually the 'word' of God comes to man. There is a distinction in the Old Testament between the prophet and

¹ E. Brunner, Revelation and Reason, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1941), p. 99.

What Jesus was, what he taught and finally what he did upon the Cross are all to be regarded as the Christian revelation. In the brief span of thirty-odd years he fulfilled the three-fold office of prophet, priest and King. He alone could do this because he was God made manifest in the flesh. Jesus Christ is therefore the supreme mediator - 'the one mediator between God and man'.¹

As the Biblical idea of God could only be described in terms of expansion, development and progressive growth, so too the media of revelation must be seen in this light. The development has proceeded from the physical to the spiritual, from the magical to the moral, from outward signs to inner certainty. ". . . lower practices have been taken up into higher forms of religion They have not been left in mere juxtaposition".²

The media of revelation and the idea of God are intimately related. Conceptions of Jahweh only arose as high as the particular medium allowed. But once a higher medium was employed and a higher conception of Jahweh was reached certain men were never content to fall back to the lower forms. The nature gods of Canaan were doomed in the presence of Jahweh the God of the prophetic

¹ I Timothy 2:5.

² Robinson, Record and Revelation, op. cit., p. 313.

consciousness. "The Christian would claim that the person of Christ holds its unique position in his faith and worship because this highest category of his experience provides the highest conception of God which he can form".¹

¹ Robinson, Redemption and Revelation, op. cit., p. 107.

CHAPTER III

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

The nature of revelation both in content and form has been seen to be progressive. In this last chapter we shall seek first to understand what is involved in describing revelation as progressive and also why the self-revealing activity of God had to take on such a progressive and unfolding character. In the second place we shall consider the centrality of the Christian revelation. Since the Christian revelation occupies a unique and central place in the Biblical record and in the life of the Church, therefore its relation to the 'progressive' aspect of revelation must be considered. In conclusion we shall seek to assess the value and validity of this theory of progressive revelation. Some theories of revelation which offer an alternative approach to Scripture will also be briefly considered.

Disclosure and Discovery

The historical study of the Bible has led us to the conclusion that revelation has been progressive. Throughout the history of Israel from Sinai to Calvary, we have noticed change and development in man's knowledge of God and all the forms of religion that accompany such

a knowledge. In the light of our Christian faith, we believe that the revelation in the New Testament is a truer one than that given in the Old Testament. The development has proceeded from a knowledge of God that contained error to a knowledge that more closely approximated to the truth about the personality of God.

When the term 'development', 'expansion' and 'progressive' are used to describe revelation, certain obvious difficulties are immediately seen. 'Progressive' means an advance from something worse to something better; from a position of error to the place of truth. Revelation, however, is the self-revealing activity of God, and "The essential fact in revelation is the real activity of God."¹ The personality of Jahweh, the mountain god of Sinai, has been seen to be greatly different from, if not contradictory to, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament. Under a theory of progressive revelation, we are forced to conclude that Israel's conception of Jahweh at Sinai included a large amount of error. How then are we to speak of this conception of Jahweh as a revelation - 'the real activity of God'? Was God deliberately giving to his people false conceptions about Himself?

The obvious answer to these and kindred questions is that Israel was forming certain ideas about Jahweh - ideas which at first contained a large amount of error

¹ H.W. Robinson, The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 216.

and a small measure of truth. In brief, what we have is not so much revelation on the part of God, as discovery on the part of man! When we define revelation as 'progressive' the tendency is to make it progressive discovery by man of certain ideas and notions about God. "We have therefore to meet the charge that we are abandoning belief in a real revelation of God of Himself to men, and substituting a gradual process of discovery."¹

In the subject of progressive revelation, as in the kindred topics of inspiration and the Incarnation, we must take into account both Divine and human activity. We must move within the limits set by the Divine Disclosure and the human discovery. Progressive revelation can never be all of one and none of the other. Both elements are present in varying degrees. We may apply these two limits to a particular situation in the Old Testament and see how both are essential for a theory of progressive revelation.

The story of how Jahweh sought to slay Moses by a wayside inn because of his uncircumcised son, represents one of the 'low' points in Israel's conception of God.² First, if we regard this incident as an absolute revelation of God, - a disclosure of His purpose and character toward Moses, then the conclusion is that Jahweh was both immoral and capricious according to our Christian conception of

¹ C.H.Dodd, The Authority of the Bible (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1928), p. 270.

² Exodus 4: 24-26.

God. Second, if we take the other position and assume that Moses, or the writer, was merely framing certain ideas and notions about God then the conclusion is that they were completely mistaken about the character and will of God. If this latter assumption is the correct one then we may ask, "by what right has this story of complete error a place in Sacred Scripture, and furthermore how are we to explain the organic relation of this incident with other incidents in the Old Testament and with Israel's history as recorded in the Old Testament?" We may ask a further question at this point - "If progressive revelation is explained solely in terms of human discovery, then what influence or series of influences has led Israel to form these particular notions about God and how are these notions organically related in the history of Israel?"

We conclude, therefore, that in a theory of progressive revelation both the Divine activity and the human discovery must be taken into account. It is conceivable that in particular situations and at particular stages of Israel's history, the one of these two limits may be more to the fore than the other. It would be difficult if not dangerous, however, to try to determine in what degree both are present in any situation. Rather "The line of demarcation between man's approach to God and God's approach to man may be indecipherable."¹

¹ Robinson, op. cit., p. 217.

We may now ask the question and seek to understand why the self-revealing activity of God had to be of such an unfolding and progressive character. Why was such a large place given to human discovery and the inevitable error that went with it?

The divine revelation was made through the life of the people Israel. It is possible to compare the developing religious experience of Israel to the growth of a child. A child receives knowledge gradually and at first imperfectly. As he grows, he interprets and records the knowledge he receives more accurately. The history of God's dealings with Israel is thus to be regarded as such an educational process. "The men through whom the revelation came were themselves being educated, and educational advance is necessarily from less to more."¹ The Apostle Paul held that the revelation through the law was in the nature of a 'guardian' or 'schoolmaster' to bring men to the higher and truer revelation in Christ.²

The idea of progressive revelation as a kind of educational program in the life of Israel must not, however, be carried too far. We are apt to assume under such a view that the men at the beginning of this divine program of instruction were intellectually and sensibly less

¹ Robinson, op. cit., p. 218.

² Galatians 3: 24; 4:2.

than what we are. However ". . . it is very doubtful whether the essential faculties of human nature have improved since prehistoric times" ¹ It is important to remember in this connection also, that there had to be various stages of revelation. When Israel was living in a nomadic state, it was subject to that particular society and environment and however intellectually and morally alert certain men were, nevertheless, both the form and the content of their thinking were prescribed by that nomadic way of life. Israel was constantly being led out into an ever widening area of reality, e.g. from a nomadic to agricultural and later to commercial society, etc. The response of Israel to God's self-revealing activity was, therefore, necessarily conditioned by each of these particular environments. The revelation was not absolute but rather relative to both human faculties and needs in each particular environment.

There is a further reason why the revelation had to be of such a progressive character. While in the Bible ". . . from the most primitive to the most advanced stage, it is never doubted that God takes the initiative", ² nevertheless in a very real way God requires human co-operation. We are aware of the deep mystery of God's

¹ Dodd, op. cit., p. 272.

² Ibid., p. 271.

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¹ Dodd, op. cit., p. 272.

² Ibid., p. 271.

plan and purpose for men when we realize that He requires the obedience and help of human instruments. ". . . God's purposes are such that they can be achieved only through the fellowship of man'. . . Not only, then had the revelation to be progressive, for the sake of those who first 'discovered' it, but also for the sake of Him who gave it."¹

Progressive revelation then might be regarded as a 'pathway' along which both God and man were journeying. In the whole of Israel's experience and in every situation, the two factors of both human and divine activity were present. From the human side, it must not be assumed that men were discovering more about God merely because of intellectual enlightenment. It was rather the pathway of man's obedience in which the moral and spiritual factors were present as well as the intellectual awareness. Neither must it be assumed that such progress was inevitable, ". . . there is a contingent element in revelation, namely, that which is derived from human freedom".² Progress at certain points became regress, because Israel was not fulfilling the conditions of obedience and loyalty to the will of God.

It is both significant and inspiring to realize that God was never without a 'witness' in Israel's history.

¹ Robinson, op. cit., p. 218.

² Dodd, op. cit., p. 276.

Some man or group of men would invariably arise to point the nation forward. How are we to explain the presence of such individuals who had both insight and loyalty to God? It would be an injustice to them and to God to describe them merely as religious geniuses. What they were and what they accomplished can only be explained in terms of the grace of God.

The Centrality of the Christian Revelation

In the preceding chapter, we have concluded that the revelation in Jesus Christ was both unique and original. He was the highest type of medium; in Him was combined both message and Messenger. He was 'declared to be the Son of God with power'. It is important however, in interpreting the Bible in terms of progressive revelation, to recognize the continuity of the Christian revelation with the revelation in the Old Testament.

In this section, we shall consider the relation of the Christian revelation to the Old Testament. Several important questions arise concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ in relation to the former revelation. How does He fulfill the expectations of the prophets? How does He consummate progressive revelation in the history of Israel?

We must also consider the Christian revelation in relation to the future. If God was revealing Himself

supremely in Jesus Christ, are we then to look for any further and higher revelation?

At the end of the Old Testament period Judaism was confronted with certain unavoidable antinomies. These had been growing up in its religious life over the centuries and appeared finally as real difficulties. One of the sharpest issues was that between nationalism and universalism in their religious life. Judaism had arrived at the position of a lofty monotheism. There was one God who was all powerful and wholly good. Such a conviction led to the conclusion that all people must be under the control and care of such a God. But God had revealed Himself to a 'chosen people'. "He made known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel".¹ The Jewish people were loathe to allow the 'foreigner' a similar relation to God as they themselves enjoyed.

The particular issue between nationalism and universalism emerges at several points. The Book of Esther reveals "the fiery heart of Jewish nationalism in the third century B.C." whereas the Books of Ruth and Jonah make an appeal against racial pride and prejudice. Even Isaiah of the Exile with his vision of a world-wide salvation, retained an ardent nationalism. Thus Judaism had reached a strangely contradictory position "a God at once

¹ Psalm 103: 7.

national and universal, deity of a special people and yet deity of the universe pledged to the ultimate victory of his purged and redeemed people and yet the savior of all mankind."¹

This same antinomy is carried over into the New Testament but it finds a solution in the Christian Church. In the Epistle to the Galatians we see the issue at its sharpest. St. Luke in his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles gives us the best historical survey of the gradual resolving of the problem. The barrier of Israel's narrow nationalism was broken down and Peter, the devout Jew, came to the conclusion that ". . . . God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him."²

This particular antinomy in Judaism finds its solution in the light of the Christian revelation. "The emergence of the idea of a religious society of mankind transcending all accidental divisions was actually due to the New Testament experience of Christ as Saviour of men in their simply human need."³

We have considered only one of the many contradictions that faced Judaism in the Old Testament period.

¹ H. E. Fosdick, A. Guide to Understanding the Bible, (New York and London: Harper and Bros. 1938), p. 34.

² Acts 10: 34,35.

³ Dodd, op. cit., p. 211.

Some provisional answers were being given to these problems by the prophets and men of faith and insight but no final solution was reached apart from the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Christian Church. The issue between a transcendent and immanent Deity finds its solution in 'the Word who became flesh'. The issue between the ideal righteousness of God and the suffering of men is resolved by the New Testament conception of 'the Suffering Servant'. The issue between Divine love and justice finds a final answer at the Cross.

'The trysting place - where Heaven's
love and justice meet.'¹

We can begin to see the essential continuity of the Christian revelation with the Old Testament revelation from this consideration of the antinomies of Judaism. Jesus Christ answered its unanswered questions and therefore the Old and New Testaments are intrinsically and historically inseparable. Jesus Christ has fulfilled the expectations of the prophets but not in any mechanical or predetermined fashion. The relation of prophecy and fulfillment, the Old and the New, ". . . rests not on precarious interpretations of the text, 'behold a virgin shall conceive', but on the whole course of Israel's history and on the implicit prophecy of Israel's religion".² The continuity of the

¹ For a detailed discussion of the major antinomies of Judaism and the way in which they were resolved by the Christian Revelation see Dodd, op.cit., p. 206-223.

² Robinson, op. cit., p. 226.

Christian with the Old Testament revelation must be looked for in broader outline and on firmer foundation than any such 'proof-text' method.

The Christian Church and its witness for nearly twenty centuries presents abundant evidence that the revelation in Jesus Christ not only had its roots in the past but is intimately connected with the future. Hence the question of a 'higher' and more complete revelation beyond that made in Jesus Christ becomes pertinent to Christian theology. The early Church soon discovered that it had to give explanations and frame doctrines after the resurrection. The Jesus of history had become the Christ of faith. Any answer to the question regarding 'progress' beyond the historical revelation in Jesus Christ must inevitably use theological terms and doctrine and would lead to a discussion that is primarily theological. One of the most important doctrines would be that of the Holy Spirit and His relation to Jesus Christ. In this thesis, any such discussion can not be entered into, but there are several observations that can be made that will clarify the issue.

The early church was not content to allow its faith to become a static thing. St. Paul realized the necessity of knowing Christ in other terms than that of the flesh and of a past historical event.¹ The writer of the Fourth

¹ II Corinthians 5:16.

Gospel believed that Jesus Christ had more to say than had been said during His earthly ministry, therefore His Spirit must continue to lead into all truth.¹ The Christian Church has always believed that the Spirit of Jesus Christ has been leading obedient men and women into larger and higher areas of life and truth. This conviction is obviously linked with the belief that the Jesus of history is now the living Christ whom we know by faith. Under this conviction then we may conclude that there has been 'progress' beyond the historical revelation in Jesus Christ.

As over against this preceding observation, we may consider another truth which in no way contradicts but rather complements the former. The Christian church has moved forward to greater achievements and attained to a larger measure of truth when it has related itself to and thought in terms of the Jesus of history as He is found in the New Testament. Not only do all the lines of Old Testament thought converge upon Jesus Christ and find their answer and fulfillment in Him, but also our religious convictions and moral life as Christians points back to Him. "When moral and religious advance is made, it is not true to say that it antiquates the teaching of Jesus;

¹ St. John 16: 12-13.

on the contrary, it presents itself as a fresh unfolding of what Jesus meant".¹

Thus we may look back to the Jesus of history and forward to the Christ of faith. In the former we see God performing certain decisive acts, once and for all, for the redemption of all mankind. In the latter, through the Spirit, we are led to a higher knowledge of and obedience to the Eternal God.

An Evaluation

The view of revelation as progressive has many positive values. One of the major advantages of such a view is the help it gives in properly interpreting and understanding the Bible. The apparent contradictions between the conception of God in the Old and in the New Testament, the many levels of morality and ethics, the unscientific views of the world and of man are resolved in the light of historical development. The unity of the Bible and its value as a whole is preserved. It must be realized, however, that the unity of Scripture is the unity of history rather than of theological doctrine. The Church has placed itself in a precarious position when it has attempted to find a uniformity of doctrine throughout Holy Scripture.

¹ Dodd, op. cit. p. 282.

God has 'spoken and revealed Himself 'in divers manners' and therefore the Bible does not say the same thing at the beginning as at the end. If a uniformity of doctrine is looked for then history becomes a 'stumbling-block' and the historical differences in the Bible are a constant embarrassment. The general position of Christian orthodoxy since the time of the Reformation has been to identify ". . . . the word of God with revealed doctrine, and regard the acts of God alongside His Word, as subordinate to it".¹ The result of attempting to find a uniformity of doctrine in Scripture is that allegorizing is substituted for scriptural exegesis. This is not to deny a place to idea and doctrine in Sacred Scripture but it is to affirm that the idea and doctrine are anchored in history and must be understood in the light of historical development. The Bible is a unity - the end is intrinsically and historically related to the beginning. It is ". . . . a unity of divine revealing action. The different forms of revelation are not the same, but the one presupposes the other and without this presupposition neither is intelligible".²

The view of revelation as progressive has the further value of making for a sound and satisfactory

¹ E. Brunner, Revelation and Reason, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1941), p. 195.

² Ibid. p. 195

Christian 'philosophy of life'. Revelation is progressive; it is God coming to man; it is the pathway of man's obedience to the Divine will. All of this implies life and dynamic movement as the Bible fully reveals. This conception of revelation is vastly different and issues in a different outlook upon life than that view of revelation which simply accepts certain doctrines as absolute and final revelations of the Divine purpose. "It makes all the difference in the world whether we have to do with a God who "comes", who stimulates us to "run in the way of His commandments", or with a God who is conceived within a doctrinal system, as the sum total of existence and truth".¹

It is important for the living of the Christian life and for the future of the Kingdom that we have a proper conception of God's self-revealing activity. The Christian life is not a "state" or merely the acceptance of certain creeds but rather it is to march with God and His people along the road of life. The New Testament frequently refers to the Christian life as a movement, a striving and pressing forward to the goal.² A view of revelation as 'progressive' then, will point forward as well as look back. It will affirm that God still 'comes' to men and that there are tasks yet to be completed. It

¹ Brunner, *Ibid.*, p. 194.

² I Corinthians 9: 24, Philippians 3: 14, Hebrews 12: 1.

will glory not in what has been finished but rather in what has been started!

There are at least two points in a theory of progressive revelation such as we have considered, at which criticism will be levelled. By some these will be regarded as points of weakness and by others they will be described as erroneous.

First, "The critical view of the Old Testament seems to many to exclude the reality of revelation, by surrendering the history to purely naturalistic, or, at any rate, purely human factors".¹ There have been exponents of progressive revelation who have placed an undue and unwarranted emphasis upon the human side of the process. Revelation has been completely 'displaced' by human discovery and achievement. The unfolding of ideas which the Scripture records have been explained in humanistic and naturalistic terms. The Bible and the religious experience of Israel have taken on an evolutionary character from which the idea of the Divine initiative is excluded.

Such a view of revelation was bound to call forth a reaction and present-day Barthianism represents the other extreme position. Under this view the human factor is reduced to a minimum and revelation is lifted altogether

¹ Robinson, op. cit., p. 216.

to the Divine sphere, in an attempt to escape from the former humanism and subjectivism.

It is inevitable that views will oscillate between these two extremes but it is still true that the truth lies somewhere between the two. We gain nothing by reducing the human factor to a bare minimum. "However transcendent God is, the point at which He reveals Himself to us must be a point at which He becomes intelligible to us, that is, a point at which there is kinship between His nature and ours".¹

A theory of progressive revelation which is considerate of both 'revelation' and 'discovery' will seem to be unduly humanistic to the average lay Christian at first. Most thinking Christians, however, will begin to realize the magnitude of the Divine purpose. God has granted to mankind the gift of free choice and the opportunity of co-operation in His work, based upon man's moral and spiritual obedience. God has made a great venture of faith in man. Man can respond to, or reject the Divine offer. In the light of such a view of God's ways with men most Christians will say with Paul, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out".²

¹ Robinson, Redemption and Revelation, (London: Nisbet and Co. Ltd., 1942), p. 165.

² Romans 11: 33.

Second, a theory of progressive revelation will inevitably be criticized because it involves error. The word of the Lord to Saul was that he go and slay the Amalekites - the men, women, infants and animals.¹ Was this an explicit command of God to Saul or was Saul mistaken in what God had spoken? A theory of progressive revelation claims that this experience of Saul contained error. The critic asks - "how can God's commands be erroneous".

Let us consider some of the alternatives to the theory of progressive revelation. The old orthodox position would say that this was an absolute command of God. Such a belief makes God immoral and contradicts the character of God in the New Testament. So called 'dispensationalism' would say that God was acting in a dispensation of 'law' rather than 'grace' and such a command was permissible under that dispensation. The result of such a position as this is that God apparently changes both His mind and His moral character periodically. Such a view violates the Divine character and is an untenable position.

This problem of error has been considered in the beginning of this chapter pages 44 and 45. The conclusion reached was that both Divine disclosure and human discovery were present and necessary in progressive revelation. Both truth and error are present in varying degrees. "If

¹ I Samuel 15: 1-3.

we accept the principle of historical development at all, we must admit the universality of error".¹ The admission of error in God's dealings with men raises less difficulties and presents a more consistent total view than any of the alternatives mentioned above.²

It is important in a consideration of the place of error in revelation that we distinguish between the relation of truth to error and evil and good in the moral realm. Error as we have been considering it is not to be equated with moral evil. "There can be no reconciliation of moral evil with the purpose of God Error, however, is something which springs not from man's will, but from the necessary conditions under which it is exercised."³

¹ Robinson, op. cit., p. 25.

² For a good discussion of the part played by error in the religious experience of Israel see Ibid., chapter II.

³ Ibid., p. 36.

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