

BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY :

I. THE INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY¹

THE TITLE is not to be taken as indicating the equivalence of prophecy with prediction. It does assume that prediction holds a central place of interest in prophecy. Such an assumption would have been contested a generation ago ; in the reaction from the old view of prophets as predictors of events that had nothing to do with their own age, scholars focused all attention on the historical significance of the prophets, particularly in the spheres of politics, ethics and the cultus. It is now felt that the spokesmen of Jehovah were more interested in the supra-temporal than the temporal, in the coming vindication of the sovereignty of Jehovah rather than the movements of current politics. To the prophets, " the temporal concerns of men, struggling to assert themselves in a world of conflicting claims, were curiously unimportant ", declares Professor Norman Porteous. " On all that the prophets have to say of the relations between God and history lies the eschatological accent. For them each moment of time is significant, not primarily because of what preceded it and what is to follow it, but because of that immediate relation to God which may at any moment mean the coming of His kingdom with power."²

In the light of that Great Day judgments were pronounced on individual nations, including Israel, for Jehovah was a God of holiness. But the Day was also to initiate the coming of the Kingdom of God, for Jehovah was also a God of grace. At one time the judgment of the Day was stressed, at another its redemptive aspect, according as circumstances required. Despite, however, all that has been written about prophets of weal and prophets of woe, we find it hard to believe that any of the great succession of Biblical prophets can be confined to either class ; they looked for both judgment and mercy at the revelation of the day of God, but they naturally chose the right moments for declaring either aspect. In no prophet is this more clearly seen than Ezekiel, whose first years of ministry are almost wholly

¹ The first of two papers read at a Conference of the I.V.F. Theological Students' Fellowship, December 1947.

² Essay on " Prophecy " in *Record and Revelation* ed. H. Wheeler Robinson (1938), p. 240.

taken up with unrelieved denunciation ; even so, there are one or two indications that, for the sake of Jehovah's Name, there would be a restitution of the disgraced nation, and the latter part of his ministry is almost entirely taken up with this theme. In what follows no attempt will be made to expound the teaching of the prophets as to the nature and issues of the Day of the Lord ; instead we shall restrict ourselves to considering principles that should govern all such exposition.

I

A primary canon of interpretation, applicable equally in the prophetic writings of Old and New Testaments, is that *a prophet always sees the Day as close at hand, impinging on his generation*. This principle has been vigorously contested by conservative scholars but it seems a futile fight. Isaiah, e.g., set the deliverance of the Messiah in the context of the overthrow of the Assyrian empire (Isa. vii-ix ; x-xi, etc.). Habakkuk saw it as following on the destruction of Babylon (Hab. ii. 2-3). In Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as in Isa. xl-lv, the establishment of the Kingdom of God in glory is presented as the concomitant of the end of the exile of 586-536 (e.g. Jer. xxix-xxxi ; Ezek. xxxvi ; cf. Isa. xlix ; li). Haggai, writing after the return from the exile, foretold the advent of the Kingdom after the building of the temple, then in course of erection (Hag. ii). The same phenomenon appears in the New Testament. The Day of the Lord has now become the Day of Christ, when He shall be manifested in glory from heaven. Everywhere that Coming is viewed as near (e.g. Rom. xiii. 1 ff., 1 Cor. vii. 29f., Heb. x. 37, 1 Pet. iv. 7, Jas. v. 8, Rev. i. 3). Even our Lord has not excepted Himself from this principle : in the eschatological discourse He sets His parousia in such close connection with the fall of Jerusalem as to make it difficult to disentangle them in the versions given by Matthew and Mark ; there is, perhaps, no need to try to disentangle them ; our Lord views the one as the precursor of the other and gives no hint of any interval between. This can mean nothing less than that God, in His inscrutable sovereignty, has been pleased to disclose to man the certainty and nature of His final judgments and Kingdom but not the time of their accomplishment ; this certainly our Lord explicitly stated to be true of Himself (Mark xiii. 32). Whatever else be

adduced in explanation of this phenomenon, whether it be an accommodation to psychological processes whereby man tends to view as immediate things that come to him with overwhelming conviction, or whether there be other factors as yet dimly understood by us, we must take account of it in all our endeavours to understand the word of prophecy.

II

A second postulate, directly dependent on the first, is that *all descriptions of the Day of the Lord and the age it initiates are given in terms of the prophet's circumstances and environment*. This holds good in regard to the *historical setting* in which the prophet places the Day. He declares its effect on nations with which he is in contact, both smaller states like Edom, Moab, Ammon and the like, and great empires like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. These nations are singled out for mention because they are the historical powers bounding the prophet's horizon, the constituent elements of the world of his day. The attempt of some modern expositors to show that they must be reinstated at the End-time, whether the smaller tribes of Syria or the empires of Rome and Babylon, is a fantastic procedure, due to ignoring the first canon of exegesis that we have laid down.

The principle has a further application in respect of the *nature* of the Kingdom proclaimed by the prophets. They saw that the Kingdom was to triumph over every form of social tyranny and false religion. True to their type, they did not present this truth in the abstract ; they described the day when every man shall possess his own vine and fig tree and none shall make him afraid ; Jerusalem is to be the centre of earth and all nations will go up to its temple and pay homage to the one true God, keeping feasts and offering sacrifices (e.g. Isa. ii. 1-4, lxx. 21-3, Zech. xiv. 16-21). Contrary to tenets popular to-day, these visions will never be fulfilled in the letter, but we believe that they will be fulfilled in principle, in the overthrow of all social tyranny and the conversion of the world to the one true Faith. A striking example of the necessity of this mode of interpretation is seen in the elaborate description of the Kingdom of God contained in the closing chapters of Ezekiel. In the triumphant Kingdom he sees a new temple wherein is perpetually enacted a revised form of the sacrificial system of his day. Some

expositors accordingly believe that the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem at the end of the age and the sacrificial system reinstated for the whole period of the Millennial Kingdom. To many of us, such an interpretation comes in no way short of nullifying the Epistle to the Hebrews, in particular making nonsense of Heb. x. 1-18. With the New Testament in one's hand, it is impossible to look for the fulfilment of Ezek. xl-xlviii except in the sense that revealed religion shall be purely followed in a world cleansed from evil, a prospect, however, enough to rejoice the heart of any child of God ! In passing, it may be noted that this seems to be John's method of handling Ezekiel in the New Testament Apocalypse : in his vision of the consummated Kingdom, Jerusalem is measured and described somewhat as in Ezekiel, but it is no earthly city ; a river of water of life, and trees of life lining its banks as in the earlier prophet, find a place here, but they are spiritual, not sensual realities ; the enemy that seeks to overthrow the City is still called Gog and Magog, but they no longer originate from the Middle East but symbolise the anti-God forces of the whole world (Rev. xx. 7-8). The picture of Ezekiel has thus been lifted out from the temporal world of his generation into the realm of the spiritual and universal.

III

A third important principle involves the so-called conditional element in prophecy : *the Day of the Lord is certain, but its effects, both for judgment and blessing, depend on the attitude adopted by the subjects of prophecy, whether it be repentance or hardening of heart.* The principle is stated with all desirable clarity by Jeremiah :

At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up and to break down and to destroy it; if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; if it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them (Jer. xviii. 7-10).

The prophet immediately applies it to his own people with an exhortation to repent, that the prophecies of woe might be averted (Jer. xviii. 11 ; cf. also xxvi. 12-13, Ezek. iii. 18-21, xxxiii. 13-20). Since many utterances of the prophets concern the doom of unrighteous peoples, one could say that such prophecy

was given in order that it might not be fulfilled. The Book of Jonah was written with this thought in mind : Jonah's message was one of unrelieved gloom, without even an appeal for repentance, " Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown ". His chagrin at the non-fulfilment of the prophecy is the whole point of the story ; he was sent to preach a doom that God wished to be averted through the repentance of the people concerned ; and that is what God always wants when He sends His messengers with a note of warning.

But the principle works in another direction. God's promises are made, whether specifically or tacitly, on the assumption of the faithfulness of those who should receive the blessing. The promise to Abraham is given in Gen. xii. 1-3 apparently as an unconditioned statement ; yet Gen. xviii. 17-19 implies that the covenant will be carried out because God knows Abraham will be faithful (" I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment ; to the end that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him "). The institution of circumcision was a recognition of this principle ; if it was neglected, as was deliberately done on certain occasions in Israel's history, the offending parties cut themselves off from participation in the blessings of the covenant. The Law was given at Sinai as the overt expression of this principle of God's dealings with His people : " Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me from among all peoples : for all the earth is mine : and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation " (Exod. xix. 5-6). The covenant with David was a means of bringing to pass God's side of the covenant made at Sinai. When it was announced to David, no explicit condition was laid down (2 Sam. vii. 8-16, though cf. *vv.* 14-15) ; when, however, David repeated the terms of the covenant to Solomon he made a significant addition, " If thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail thee (said he) a man on the throne of Israel " (2 Kings ii. 4). A similar condition is laid down by Jeremiah when addressing King Zedekiah (Jer. xxii. 4-5). It is instructive in this connection to read Ps. lxxxix. 30-45, where the psalmist quotes the prophecy concerning David's seed and is bewildered by its apparent lack

of fulfilment. Jeremiah declares that it shall find its perfect enactment in the Messianic Kingdom (Jer. xxiii. 5f.).

From these data we deduce the important conclusion that the promise to the Jews that they should be the people of God and heirs of His Kingdom is conditioned by obedience to His will as embodied in the Law and declared by the prophets. Their refusal to keep the covenant resulted in the dispersion of the Northern Kingdom (721 B.C.) and afterwards of the Southern (586 B.C.). When the Messiah finally appeared to the Jewish nation and was rejected by them, they paid the penalty of forfeiting their status as the peculiar possession of God and the promises regarding their possession of the Kingdom of God. Our Lord declared it in unequivocal terms : " The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof " (Matt. xxi. 43). The " nation " is, of course, His Church, composed historically of a Jewish nucleus, the " remnant " so frequently mentioned in the Old Testament, and expanded to contain in one all peoples of earth ; so that Peter can apply the promise made to Israel at Sinai to the Church (1 Pet. ii. 9-10), which is now the Israel of God (Gal. vi. 16) in contrast to Israel after the flesh (1 Cor. x. 18), Jews being now unworthy even to bear the name of Jew (Rom. ii. 28-9). The Kingdom of God, both now and in its future glorious state, belongs to the Church (Rev. v. 9f.: xx. 4-6).

This line of interpretation has, from apostolic times, been the normal view of the Church, despite notable exceptions. It still is the view of the Church, in face of vehement assertions to the contrary on the part of dispensationalist teachers, who for long have regarded themselves as possessing a monopoly of sound instruction upon prophetic truth. Their protest is based on the understandable conviction that God must fulfil His word, but it ignores God's clear statements that the fulfilment of that word has conditions which man is responsible to carry out ; if those conditions are not observed, then God finds another channel for the performance of His word. Note, He does not abrogate prophecy, He fulfils it in another way.

IV

This prompts us to lay down a further proposition : *descriptions of the Day of the Lord and its issues are subject to*

modification by fuller revelations given to subsequent generations. Such modifications are not cancellations of the prophetic word but amplifications, glimpses of broader streams of grace than the narrower rivulets of former days. This again may best be illustrated by developments in Scripture of the terms of the Abrahamic covenant. In Gen. xii and xiii its blessings are stated to involve the greatness of Abraham's seed, its prosperity and its possession of the land of Canaan ; i.e. they are mainly material blessings. In the New Testament exposition of this covenant, its spiritual implications are drawn out and the other elements ignored (see Rom. iv. 3, 6-12). On the other hand, instead of the inheritance consisting of a small stretch of territory, the land of Palestine, Abraham's seed is to inherit the world, i.e. the universal Kingdom of God (Rom. iv. 13). And the seed is no longer the Jewish nation but Christ and the Church of all nations (see Gal. iii. 16, 28-9, where the term "Christ" almost certainly indicates Jesus and His Church, the Messianic Community).

We must beware, however, of reading this kind of developed teaching into the first utterances of prophecy. When God spoke to Abraham He spoke of Israel, the Jewish nation, not of the Catholic Church. So also the prophets had no idea of the Church in the New Testament definition and they never described it ; that was "the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it hath now been revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (Eph. iii. 5). In this respect the literalist expositors of the Old Testament have just cause to complain against the tendency to read the Church of God in places where it is not thought of ; what they do not seem to grasp, however, is that the promises to the old Israel have been engulfed in the greater promises made to the New Israel ; not annulled, we repeat, but enlarged. By the grace of God, the old Israel shall yet find its place in the purpose of God, but not on the old terms ; it can only be within the sphere of the New Israel wherein distinctions of race are forever abolished.

We cannot stay to discuss further the principle of development. It can be observed throughout the whole gamut of eschatological thought in the Bible. Its recognition would have saved the Church from many pernicious teachings on immortality which are widely current to-day ; men would have seen that it is a wrong principle to make the square pegs of New Testament doctrine fit into the round holes of Old Testament phraseology ;

the only way it can be done is by mutilation of the former, a procedure which men have not hesitated to do, with disastrous results. The same observation, however, may be made regarding views of the Kingdom of God. Evangelical scholars have yet to recognise that the process of explication and development is still going on within the New Testament to its culmination in the Book of Revelation ; the process is paralleled in all other doctrines and is accorded recognition in them, but not so in this department of theology. Its result is seen on the one hand in a hesitation to admit the doctrine of the Millennium and in another direction in a fear of recognising clear hints as to the nature of the intermediate state ; on both doctrines conservative scholars are neither clear nor happy.

V

Lastly, a word must be added about the use of symbolism in prophecy. There is no universal principle that can be laid down, though we may venture to suggest that symbolism in the Bible is meant to help and not to muddle its readers ; our exegetes have all too often turned the tables for us in this matter ! The poetry of the prophets is the spontaneous expression of their feelings, it is not a complicated language drawn up by code experts. The idea has somehow got abroad that the prophets used a scale of symbols with a fixed meaning ; e.g. earth, sea, floods represent peoples in a settled state, convulsed state, and in motion respectively ; a mountain is a large kingdom, an island a small one ; geography thus takes on a quite unexpected significance ! And of course we must not omit that a day equals a year ! By this means any prophetic passage can be provided with a kind of Moffatt's translation for the uninitiated ; unfortunately such " translations " differ widely, resulting in the prophets being made to declare exactly what men have wanted them to say ; prophecy has thus been reduced to buffoonery and its serious study discredited in the minds of people of a more sober cast of mind.

The most able discussion of this question that the present writer has seen occurs in A. B. Davidson's *Old Testament Prophecy*.¹ He lays down three principles for interpreting prophetic language, which I shall recount.

Firstly, *prophecies are to be read with the literal meaning in view*. That was how they were intended to be read. Making due

¹ Pp. 159-241, but see especially pp. 167-83.

allowance for the poetic and parabolic elements that are freely used, the language of prophecy is not obscure. This opposes the view that prophecy is not intended to be understood before the event ; such a notion has only been concocted in opposition to the adherents of a literalistic interpretation who exercise no caution and ignore the principles outlined above. The dictum "prophecy is pre-written history" is untrue, but neither is it a corollary of taking the prophet at his word.

Secondly, *if there is reason to think that the prophet speaks in figurative language, we are to find out the basic ideas which he is expressing through this means.* Especially does this apply to descriptions of the extraordinary phenomena of the Day of the Lord and of the glories of the consummated Kingdom.

Thirdly, *we have to be prepared to separate, where necessary, the content of a prophecy from its form.* This applies to all those descriptions of the consummated Kingdom given in terms of the Old Testament dispensation. It is unwarrantable to interpret them as adequately fulfilled in this age ; it is equally contrary to the teaching of the New Testament to apply them without change to the age of the triumph of the Kingdom of God on earth. The essential prophecy is to be separated from the form in which it is given, the latter being transient.

The fact that some prophecies have been fulfilled in a literal fashion is no argument against these principles ; there are many others of the greatest magnitude that incontestably have not been fulfilled literally and, in view of the bringing of the Church into being, never can be fulfilled in such a manner. Admittedly it is not easy to put these principles into practice ; it can only be done in the light of Scripture as a whole. But if the Word of God is seen to be greater than the measure of our particular intelligence, demanding the utmost of what we do possess, we surely should not complain. Such a realisation should inspire in us greater humility, together with a greater zeal to grasp for ourselves something of the treasures of the prophetic Word that lie hidden for every earnest student of Truth.

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