Change and Revaluation in The Bible

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It was often said of good Pope John that in summoning the Council he unleashed stronger forces than he had bargained for; there were suggestions that at the end he felt these forces to be beyond his control and overpowering him. There is sometimes a naive enthusiasm in those who are most eager for renewal which blinds them to the problems raised by this renewal. One sphere in which the problems are acute and puzzling is that of the biblical renewal. The problems centre round the paradox which is overstated by the often-heard cry: 'How is it that we are encouraged to read the Bible more and more, while at the same time we are told that less and less of it is true?' The paradox is overstated in this form, for what we are told is not that less and less of the Bible is true, but that less and less of it is to be taken at its face value, that less and less of it can be understood without considerable training, that not all of it is of equal importance, some passages or even whole books being of very peripheral value for the Christian life, while others teach some idea which is crucial amid a waste of folklore or rabbinic legalism. The dilemma is at its most puzzling at two moments, readings in the Mass and private reading of the scriptures.

It is commonplace that the world of the Old Testament was very different from ours, that their forms of expression are very different from the ones we use today. But have we really come to terms with these truths in our attitude to scripture-reading? The story of how Jacob won his father's blessing by a trick combines the memory of the patriarch's reputation for oriental cunning (a quality obviously highly acceptable to the inspired story-teller) with an etiological myth about the two rival peoples of Israel and Edom. Jacob-Israel and Esau-Edom were sprung of the same semitic stock; we would call them sister-nations rather than brothers. There was enmity and rivalry between them from the time that Israel passed through Edom on the way up from Egypt. It was then that Israel won the fairest part of Edom's inheritance, the plains of Edom beyond the Jordan. Only later, perhaps, did the difference in character, so marked in the biblical tale, become apparent, as Edom remained a fierce hunter on its wild hills, while Israel settled down to become a soft agricultural people. But the main point of the story, the complete triumph of Jacob over Esau, refers to the events only shortly preceding the literary composition of the narrative at the court of Solomon: under David the army of Israel had subjugated the

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whole territory of Edom and incorporated it into David's empire.

The story is, then, an allegory of gradual territorial aggrandizement; to the ancient Israelite reader it no doubt conveyed the lesson that David's victory over Edom was predestined from the birth of their respective ancestors; to Augustine it conveyed the lesson—*non est mendacium sed mysterium*—that God chooses whom he will, even the younger brother. But the former lesson has only the slightest value for a Christian reader, and the latter hardly lies obvious on the surface to the normal reader. It acquires plausibility only from a knowledge of the theology of the writer of this chapter of Genesis, who habitually stresses the divine freedom of choice, and especially the choice of the naturally weaker or less favoured. But we can expect such knowledge from every Christian reader of Genesis? Without a considerable previous training the reader is first struck by the dubious morality of Jacob's action, here and throughout his career. He may well wonder how the word of God can seemingly approve it —unless he happens to know that Hosea (12 : 3-4) has a reprimand for Jacob's supplanting his brother. If the reader has the fairly elementary knowledge that most of the stories of the patriarchs include folklore to a greater or lesser degree, and realizes that the story is merely an allegorical history of the two peoples, he may well find it barren reading. There seem to be no valid half-measures between the level of the simple Bible-story reading and a fully developed study of the theology of the various currents in the Pentateuch. The former is too little to ask, the latter too much.

It is the historical books which make the hardest reading. Superficially, of course, they are the easiest, with their racy, often disedifying stories. But it needs a very deep love of and sympathy with the Chosen People to experience the thrill, felt by those for whom the books were written, at Jahweh's wonderful care of his own, in spite of their waverings and infidelities. For this is the overriding theme of these books, which alone welds the disparate stories into one, and makes them still relevant. One can see how this deep-seated sense of Jahweh's abiding covenant-relationship to his people could anguish St Paul, as he wrestles with the problem of the salvation of his people in the Epistle to the Romans. But is this sense still real enough to a Christian, bound to the people of Israel by no national ties (and so lacking the additional interest excited by a history of his own nation), to carry him through those lengthy books?

Particularly stony will be his path through Kings and Chronicles. The chief interest of the author of the former, on which he bases his criterion for judging the worth of the kings, is the law of the centralization of cult at Jerusalem and the abolition of all other shrines. The author of Chronicles rewrites much of the same history from the point of view of a sacristan or master of ceremonies. The theological themes of these two works were relevant enough in their own time; the major editing of the book of Kings occurred in connexion with

the great purification of cult which went with the centralization of all worship at Jerusalem; Chronicles was written to provide a justification of the post-exilic liturgy of the temple. But their relevance to us today is not immediate; it is only through the relevance of the history of the chosen people as a whole, in their journey towards the Messiah. This is not to say that individual passages of these books do not have their lesson to teach us, but only that the lesson which the compilers of the books intended to teach those who read them is not one which is centrally important to Christians today.

The problem becomes in a way worse when we reach the gospels. It would need a great deal of courage to look at the gospels through the eyes of their authors. From St Paul it is clear enough that Jewish Christians retained their Jewish attitudes of scriptural interpretation, and the methods of exegesis which they had learnt from their teachers. Whether the apostles actually set out to be Christian rabbis, evolving and then teaching a Christian oral Torah, comparable to the Jewish oral Torah which we now possess in Talmud and Midrash, is more controversial; some Scandinavian scholars would maintain so. Certainly some of Paul's exegesis seems today remarkably tortuous and even irrelevant. We can rely on his teaching while still querying his methods of expressing it.

The evangelists' hermeneutical principles—and so those of the early Christian community as a whole—play an unexpectedly large part in the gospels. The gospels are no mere histories of the life of Jesus, nor yet inventories of his teaching, though this element plays a certain part. Humanists or good pagans enraptured by the moral elevation of the gospel message are barking up a different tree from the evangelists. A vital element in the apostolic teaching, clear already from the speeches of the Acts of the Apostles which give us a glimpse of the earliest teaching of all, was that Christ fulfilled all the promises of the scriptures. But this lesson was largely expressed in two ways which have little appeal to us nowadays, by showing that Christ possessed—to a far higher degree—the powers possessed by the great figures of the Old Testaments, and by showing that his life corresponded to countless little phrases of the Old Testament, which were therefore considered to be 'fulfilled' in his person.

Thus the lesson which Matthew intended to teach by his chapter 2, with its visions, flight into Egypt, star and magi, and their consequent problems of historicity, is that Christ is a new Moses and a new Israel. This he expresses by telling how his early life corresponded to theirs. The lesson would be obvious to a Jewish Christian who knew his rabbinic tales and was versed in the rabbinic way of teaching. The ordinary Christian reader of the scriptures is less sure of hitting upon the true meaning; and, if he does, he may think that being a new Moses and a new Israel is not a basic element in Christ's fulfilment of the scriptures. It requires a considerable biblical culture, a profound appreciation of the biblical viewpoint, to realize its

importance. Another case in point is the feeding of the five thousand. Whatever the facts at the basis of this event, the narrative as we have it—according to two slightly different traditions in Mark, with different numbers—hinges upon the demonstration that Christ is greater than Moses, who provided food for his people in the desert, and than Elisha, who (2 Kings 4 : 42-44) fed a mere hundred men with as many as twenty barley loaves. It is no mere pretty story of Jesus' care for the comfort of his followers, but a piece of strict theological argument after the rabbinic manner. Hence also the details (e.g. it took place 'in a desert place' though there was green grass for the people to sit on; the desert is a reminder of Moses).

The green grass of the multiplication of loaves brings us to the evangelists' other important way of expressing that Christ fulfilled the scriptures. Since the story begins with a reference to Jesus having pity on the multitudes as sheep which have no shepherd, it seems highly likely that the little detail of the grass, far from being merely picturesque (an eye-witness detail, as the old commentators stressed), is an allusion to Psalm 23, the messianic shepherd leading his sheep to green pastures. The climax of this method of petty allusions is reached in the passion narratives; this is not unexpected, for it is above all by his passion and resurrection that Christ fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament. But it is the evangelists' way of teaching this which is less than informative to us.

A major factor in the formation of the narratives of the passion—probably the most primitive single block of the gospel tradition—was the desire to show the fulfilment in Christ's passion of chance phrases of the scripture, originally written with a definite reference to some other event in the time of their writer. For instance, Matthew (27 : 24) changes Mark's wine mixed with myrrh (a narcotic) into wine mixed with gall, in order to show the fulfilment of Psalm 68 (69) : 21, the cry of distress of a just man persecuted. John emphasizes that Jesus is the paschal lamb by pointing out that the instructions for the paschal lamb ('You shall not break a bone in it') are fulfilled in his case. But we want to say that it is not the correspondence of this minute detail which makes Jesus the paschal lamb of the new covenant; he would still be this if his bones had been broken. The evangelist's way of expressing his lesson does not convince us.

Such examples are enough to show how deeply imbued is the gospel tradition with the Jewish technique of midrash—bringing out the meaning of a person or event by describing them in terms of a former person or event—a technique which is wholly foreign to our modern way of thinking. Each generation must have its own technique of expressing truths which are important to it. At the present day we are in revolt against the scholastic technique, which we find 'meaningless' or 'irrelevant'. But are those who are most vocal on the theme of the return from scholastic jargon to the pure waters of the Bible aware of the extent to which the gospels are instinct with

rabbinic jargon? Is the biblical way of thinking any less opaque to modern man than the scholastic? It is certainly less obviously strange, but the only result of this is that we think we have penetrated to the meaning of the Word of God when we have in fact barely scratched the surface. If scholastic jargon were used we should at least know that we had failed to understand. Not only in the matter of historicity is the work of demythologization necessary; we must demythologize the concepts too, even such basic ones as that of the paschal lamb or redemption, the one expressing a truth in terms of ancient nomad customs, the other using language more real to Paul's city-dwelling audience, that of the enfranchisement of slaves.

After these reflections we may be tempted to conclude that the whole of the biblical movement is a misplaced development; the scriptures can never be understood by the layman (priestly or non-priestly), encouragement to read the Bible in private is the result of naive enthusiasm, the new week-day lectionary for the liturgy was a barren venture; only trained scholars can hope to understand the Bible. But it would be rash indeed to dismiss as misguided a movement which has played so large a part in the attempts at renewal made, both within and outside the institutional Church, in so many ages. Whenever there occurs a movement of reform it is accompanied by a return to the scriptures. This cannot be without the guidance of the holy Spirit.

One theme has run through the examples which we have considered: fulfilment in Christ. This was the one thing necessary, which gave sense to Jewish history. The triumph of Jacob-Israel is a part of the history of the chosen people because it was an instance of their unstoppable destiny which was to culminate in Christ. It is the end-point which is all important. Even Kings and Chronicles draw their importance from it; at the time of the author of Kings the centralization of the cult at Jerusalem seemed the all-important means of preserving the fidelity of his people to Jahweh; for the author of Chronicles the temple liturgy was the guarantee of continuity with David and with the promise to his heirs. In all these cases the single incidents are like the dots which go to make up a line: they receive their significance from being part of the line; it is the pattern which counts, not its components. This is why Jacob's firm grasp of the inheritance is approved; his easy going brother was no fit guardian of the destiny of Abraham's descendants. This too is the lesson which the evangelists taught by their curious rabbinic exegesis; it is almost true to say that they were interested in no other aspect of Christ than that he brought fulfilment of all things, that he ushered in the final act of the world and accomplished the destiny of Israel.

At the same time the diversity of ways in which this lesson is presented is in itself instructive. At one time the message is enshrined in folklore, at another in legislation, at a third in liturgy, at a fourth

in the tortuous scholasticism of the rabbinic schools. Only by learning the same message by all these means can we come to appreciate that each of these is a temporary vehicle of the same central truth, each of which was valid for its time before giving place to its successor.

At moments when the institutions of Christianity are questioned this cannot be without its relevance. How much of our ways of thinking, of expressing and of living the message of Christ is the product of special circumstances, and so subject to change? In answering this question which she puts to herself, the Church is interpreting to herself for this age the message which she learns from the Bible: fulfilment is in Christ, not necessarily tied to particular ways of thinking and acting which have at any one time been the ways of finding this fulfilment. In the Old Testament the institutions and the instruments by which God draws his people on towards Christ show immense variety, even the savage destruction of conquered cities, the fulminating threats against other foreign states which may seem to offer Israel an alternative refuge to Jahweh, serving this purpose. These are acts which a later generation regards as barbaric; yet there is no doubt that they were sanctioned by Jahweh in their time. Is it stranger that the Israelites should show their devotion to God's cause by ravaging a village or two, than that Christians should show their zeal by the Inquisition and its methods—not only in the Middle Ages? The vehicles of grace to one generation can act as impediments to another.

The story of the Old Testament is the history of the variety of ways in which God's love showed itself to men, aiming ever at the Messiah, and of the variety of ways in which Israel's fidelity to God and to his promises showed themselves. It is the story of how God wooed men, in strange and unexpected ways pursuing his destined spouse, and of the response, sometimes enthusiastic, often half-hearted, of men. It is a love song in a foreign language. The language has changed, but the love song still remains.