

CHAPTER II

THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

It is necessary at this point to define clearly the limits of this essay. It is not an endeavour to deal with the whole subject of the miracles recorded in the Bible. Much confusion has, I believe, resulted from the endeavour to frame a theory of the miraculous which might be sufficiently wide to include all the miracles of the Bible. Having inductively framed such a conception, the apologist comes with it to the Gospel narratives and imposes it upon them, taking them as instances of that which he has already defined. The result has been that not a few of the essential characteristics of the "mighty works" of Jesus have been obscured by this unfortunate method.

The method pursued in this essay is quite different. We shall begin with the Gospel narratives themselves. This course, I trust, will justify itself for two reasons. First of all, there is no comparison between the Old Testament miracles and the New in their vital importance for living faith to-day. It is of little moment for faith whether Elijah actually called down fire from heaven upon the sacrifice at Carmel, whereas it is of the utmost moment whether Jesus rose from the dead on the third day.

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Secondly, I hope to show that the great majority of the Gospel miracles are associated with the teaching of Jesus about faith in a way which has no parallel in the records of most of the Old Testament miracles. They are also far more closely interwoven with the whole fabric of New Testament thought.

These reasons alone are sufficient to justify this limitation of scope, and to warrant us for the time at least in allowing the New Testament narratives to make their own impression upon us. The same reasons warrant us in setting aside from this part of our inquiry the whole traditional theory of miracle, whose rise and progress has already been noted. We shall try to start afresh from a return to the Synoptic Gospels, which speak simply of the signs, the works, and the wonders of Jesus. What we are concerned with is not whether Jesus wrought "miracles" in the sense in which Bishop Butler or Emerson, or apologists generally, have used the word, but whether He healed the sick, stilled the storm, and rose from the dead.

So much then being premised, we shall now endeavour to set forth the view of miracle contained in the Synoptic Gospels themselves.¹

Now when we enter on this inquiry, we find that we cannot reach the heart of the matter without the Old Testament. But we do not use it as our fathers used it or as did those apologists who

¹ I am indebted in this review of the teaching of Jesus to my friend Prof. A. G. Hogg's *Message of the Kingdom*, which has confirmed and developed my own reading of the Gospels.

endeavoured to compress the miracles of Jesus into one mould with those of the Old Testament. We use it in order to understand the world of thought in which Jesus and His disciples lived and acted. "The Old Testament," said Ritschl in a pregnant sentence, "is the lexicon of the New." We need to know the Hebrew inheritance of thought alike in its earlier and in its Jewish developments, if we are really to understand the thoughts and words and deeds of Jesus. For it is quite clear that in the first instance He spoke to His own contemporaries, and that we can therefore only understand His real meaning if we first make ourselves familiar with those general conceptions of God and His ways with men which were part of the common good of the Jewish people, and which Jesus shared with them. This principle is now universally recognised among all scholars. Whenever we come therefore on any mysterious or half-understood idea of Jesus, we have to consult the lexicon of the Old Testament in its Jewish edition. We apply that principle without hesitation when we are examining the New Testament ideas of sacrifice, of law, of judgment, and so forth. For our present purpose then we must ask what were the Old Testament presuppositions which governed the thoughts of the Apostles as they noted and pondered over the great deeds of their Master. Unless we do this, we shall come to these deeds with our modern presuppositions only, and the inevitable result will be that we shall miss their true meaning.

The Old Testament ideas which are relevant

and essential here for the true understanding of the Gospel narratives of the great deeds of Jesus are four in number: (1) the ideas of the Divine Covenant and its human correlative Faith as the supreme virtue of the true Israelite; (2) of the Moral Order of the world; (3) of the Spirit of God; and (4) of the Kingdom of God.

I. THE COVENANT AND FAITH

The fundamental and inclusive idea of the religion of ancient Israel was that it was in Covenant with God. We have of late become again familiar with the word, which had almost become obsolete as applied to moral and religious questions, by the solemn institution of the Covenant of the League of Nations.³ That Covenant, however, is a compact between nations. It is a bi-lateral Covenant in which the parties are on more or less equal terms. They undertake with each other to observe certain rules, and the arrangement is entered into for the common advantage. There is no "grace" in it. It was quite otherwise with Israel's Covenant. There could be no such equality between the High and Holy One and His destined people.

Such a Covenant can only begin by an act of pure and sovereign grace on His side. He must take the initiative and He must maintain it throughout His whole relation with His people. That He

³ I take it that we have here the Old Testament conception, mediated through Calvin, mediated again through the Presbyterian, Woodrow Wilson, to whom we owe the main inspiration of the League.

has done this transcendent thing, and that He remains faithful and constant to His grace is the sustaining conviction of Hebrew religion. It underlies the whole piety, law, and sacrifice of the people, as it underlies their whole historic life and achievement. By His pure sovereign grace, God has called their forefathers, welded their tribes into a people, given them a law and a land, and promised to be to them all that God can be, in the way of loving them, caring for them, and training them. In the strength of that initiating saving act of God they undertake to be to Him a true and faithful people. Such is the Covenant, and the Covenant relationship within which the whole religious life of Israel moves.

In the nature of the case such a Covenant could only be instituted by a historic act of God, and it was to the Covenant given at Sinai that Israel looked back as the foundation of its life as a chosen and covenanted nation. But its histories carried back the idea to the earlier stages of its life, and the priestly writer in particular thinks of that preparatory period as of a succession of covenants, with Noah and the "world's grey fathers," with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. But it was above all to the deliverance from Egypt and the Covenant made through Moses at Sinai, that the piety of Israel looked as revealing the covenant grace of God.

Now again in the very nature of the case, this whole conception of the Covenant determined Israel's highest conceptions of the soul of true religion.

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What did God ask of His people? What were the human obligations involved in this transcendent grace? We get various levels of insight here in the consciousness of Israel. In general the prevailing idea is that Israel's obligations are summed up in the words "obedience" and "righteousness." The Covenant at Sinai was not with the individual but with the nation, and the ordinary Hebrew, when he thought of "righteousness," thought of it as "a right attitude towards the existing constitution and conduct in harmony with its traditions."³ The "righteous man" is one who "occupies the right moral and religious standpoint, and carefully abstains from wickedly transgressing the great ordinance of human and Divine justice."⁴

We find this stage of piety reflected in those Psalms in which the writer appeals to his "righteousness" as the ground of his appeal to God. But the discipline of Israel's history drove its moral thought deeper. The conscience became more deeply awakened by the presence of calamity, and the finer mind of Israel came to put its whole confidence more and more in the pure grace of God. Along with this there went an ever-deepening emphasis on the necessity of faith as the supreme virtue. The one follows inevitably from the other. If salvation is only from the pure grace of God, then it can only realise itself through deepening and widening faith, faith in the God who initiates and maintains the Covenant, mani-

³ Davidson, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 274.

⁴ Schultz, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. ii. p. 23.

festing Himself in it, and in the history of those who trust Him wholly within that Covenant. "Here lies the essence of man's being right with God, his response by faith to His grace in accepting the Covenant, and the continued exhibition of this condition of mind in the man's life and conduct. The righteous acts for which he is found righteous are only the exhibition of his attitude towards God and His covenant of Grace. To be righteous is to be right, *i.e.* to be found taking towards God's Covenant, which is a thing having as its principle grace, the right attitude; and this attitude is faith."⁵

Schultz is equally emphatic as to this fundamental position of faith in Hebrew piety.⁶ The Divine life communicated by grace can be received by faith alone. Hence in the Old Testament as in the New, faith is the subjective condition of salvation.

"To surrender himself wholly and unreservedly to the Redeemer of Israel as his God, to accept the salvation embodied in the Covenant as his salvation, to acknowledge and love the ordinances of life as revealed in it as the ordinances of redemption . . . all this is what makes a true Israelite. Without this faith there is no morality, since faith in this God, as the only God of Salvation, is the first commandment." "As faith is the cause of salvation, so unbelief is the cause of all Israel's misery. It allows his conviction to be determined by what is material, by the power of the world, external

⁵ Davidson's *Old Testament Theology*, p. 279.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 31, vol. ii.

misfortune and a sense of his own strength; it is faint-hearted doubt as to the power of God, or haughty defiance of his will."⁷ It has sometimes been said that there is comparatively little use of the word "faith" in the Old Testament. As compared with its constant repetition in the New Testament, that is true. But the idea itself under different names and grammatical forms is very frequently referred to. If we take it with its synonyms, "belief" and "trust," we shall find the call for faith pervading all the deeper experience and thought of the Psalmists and Prophets, and present, moreover, as the mainstay of all heroic character and life in the Old Covenant. Therefore never was there a truer account of the religion of Israel given than that in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The writer had learned in the school of Jesus to understand the very soul of the religion of his people. The whole thought of the Old Testament turns round these two poles, the grace of God and the response of faith and fidelity on the part of man. Perfect goodness according to Old Testament religion, and this is true of the Jewish version also, is equivalent to perfect faith.

II. THE MORAL ORDER OF THE WORLD

The second great principle of Old Testament religion which we must grasp if we are to understand the works of Jesus, is that there is a Moral Order of the world.

The supreme achievement of the Hebrew race

⁷ Schultz, vol. i. p. 36.

in human history was its identification of the supreme Power over all things, in which all religions have believed, with the Power which manifested itself in the moral ideal. The genius of Israel finds its highest expression in the great saying of Jeremiah, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his strength, let not the rich man glory in his riches, but let him that glorieth glory in this that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the Lord, which exerciseth loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord" (ix. 23-24).

The Old Testament history and literature is the record of that supreme discovery of the ultimate nature of the Universe. It led inevitably to the most sweeping Monotheism, for there can only be one Highest, and in the very nature of the case the morally ideal One must be intolerant of gods or godlings on a lower ethical plane.

But the moment Monotheism came to its own, the problem of evil raised its formidable head. There is no problem of evil for animists or polytheists. There is no need for a devil, it has been caustically said, in the pagan religions, seeing that his functions were always efficiently discharged by one or other of the pantheon. But the moment the Hebrew came to believe in One Holy Righteous and Gracious God, he had the problem before him. How was he to explain the tragic elements in human life, disease, calamity, sorrow, labour, premature death? The first and fundamental idea of the Hebrew apologetic was that all the tragic

elements in human life were due to the sin of man. At first this was applied with naïve simplicity of faith to the individual as well as to the national life. Whenever disaster befell any one, the conclusion was drawn that in some way that man had broken the law of Jehovah, and was suffering for his sins. But the facts of life were too strong for the theory, and so there arose for the Hebrews that specific form of the riddle of the world on which they spent so intense and prolonged a labour of thought, the problem of the sufferings of the righteous. Out of that turmoil of faith seeking to hold fast its supreme treasure, its master intuition of the moral perfection of its God, arose that great book which is the chief imaginative glory of Hebrew literature, the Book of Job. It was impossible after that to maintain the all too narrow theory of the earlier time. But Job gives no solution other than the appeal to the greatness of God's ways and the glory of the earth and heavens, and the assurance of faith that there must be an answer to the riddle. The Second Isaiah brings the solution a stage further with his marvellous intuition of the Suffering Servant and the vicarious character of the sufferings of the righteous. Finally, the assurance of the future life, in which all riddles are solved, comes glimmering up upon the horizon. But what we have in all this development of thought and emergence of new ideas of the first spiritual magnitude is not the abandonment of the original idea that the tragedies of human life are the result of human sin, but its expansion.

This is the central thought of the Hebrew

apologia, remaining constant through all the different stages through which it passes. Disease, premature death, poverty, famine, pestilence, national defeat, disaster, captivity, all the ills to which flesh is heir are constantly described in the Old Testament as due to man's folly and sin. The Hebrew never accepts them as part of the unchangeable nature of things. He is persuaded that they have no permanent place in God's world, and that they ought not to be, and would not be if only men with all their hearts turned to God. What is of capital importance for our present inquiry, they have no place in the coming Messianic order.

This fundamental idea is held with astonishing tenacity through the entire course of Hebrew literature. Its roots, of course, lie deep in the central thing in his religion, his idea of God, as perfectly ethical and as Almighty. Holding this faith he could not do other than interpret history as manifesting God. He must find God's character disclosed in what he believed to be God's providence.

Now, whatever we may think of this interpretation of life, it obviously conserved certain truths of the utmost importance. It enabled Israel to maintain an unquenchable vitality and courage throughout the tremendous discipline of its history, because it enabled it to hold fast the faith that God was really on the side of life and progress.

Here is the profound contrast between Indian and Hebrew thought, the pessimism of the one and the fundamental optimism of the other. The moment we come to believe that the evils of life

are irremovable except by the escape from life, we doom ourselves either to stoical resignation or to ascetic mysticism. But if we believe that these evils are removable by the escape from sin, we enter, as did the Hebrews, on a long and ascending pathway of progress and hope, impelled by the faith that the nature of things is on our side.

We do not owe this idea to the story of the Fall. Rather do we owe the story of the Fall to the hold which the Hebrew idea had on the mind and soul of the nation. It is the mythical embodiment of a fundamental faith. Rightly understood, in fact, the main intention of the Fall story is not so much to show how sin entered the world, as to show how labour, weariness, pain, and death found a lodgment in God's world. It expresses the radical Hebrew faith that these tragic shadows are not part of the enduring substance of things as God ordained them. They are alien elements which have entered from without by the unbelief and weakness of man. The tempter wins a lodgment by inspiring mistrust in God. We have here surely the obverse of the Old Testament valuation of faith as the supreme virtue, and the very tragedy of the story is the product of that fundamental optimism of the Hebrew faith which lies at the heart of all true Theism.

III. THE SPIRIT OF GOD

The third Old Testament idea which underlies the Gospel story is that of the Spirit of God. We must, of course, dispel from our minds the thought of any real anticipation, at this early stage of

revelation, of the Holy Spirit as a personality. The Old Testament conception is that of a Divine Potency, God in creative action in nature and in human life. The Hebrews had a much broader idea of the range of the action of the Spirit of God than is the case in our current religion. We think of the action of the Divine Spirit as confined strictly to the moral and spiritual life, but they thought of the Spirit as working along the whole range of human activities, bodily, mental, and spiritual. In general the action of the Spirit is thought of as theocratic. All special gifts that pertain to the furtherance of Israel's highest life, the genius of Aholiab and Bezaleel, who designed the Tabernacle, of the heroes and judges whom God raised up to preserve the independence of Israel, of the rulers who governed it and the prophets who purified its religion, are ascribed to the vitalising powers of the Spirit. But it is a natural extension of this principle to find the action of the Spirit everywhere in the world, for the world exists for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

In his striking book on *The Spirit in the New Testament*, Professor Scott points out that the idea of the Spirit as operative in the natural world finds its chief expression in the opening chapter of Genesis, where the Spirit of God is depicted as brooding on the face of the waters of primeval chaos, and calling into being the ordered ranks of being, and finally the ascending grades of life, vegetative, animal, and human.⁵

⁵ Cf. Bergson's *Élan vital*. Is there any racial inheritance traceable here?

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In particular is this the case with the wonders of life. Man's whole life is thought of as sustained by the Spirit of God, which animates and sustains in being his physical organism. The author of the Book of Job declares, "If He gather unto Himself His spirit, all flesh shall perish together" (Job xxxiv. 14, 15). We have here the same idea as is expressed in Genesis vi. 3: "My spirit shall not always strive with man forever, for that he also is flesh: yet shall his days be an hundred and twenty years." Taken in its context the passage obviously means that human life only exists by the indwelling of the Spirit within the human frame, what we would to-day call the anabolic force of life prevailing over the katabolic forces of decay.

In the 104th Psalm the Spirit appears as the vivifying influence in all creatures. "These wait all upon Thee . . . Thou takest away their breath, they die and return to the dust. Thou sendest forth Thy spirit, they are created; and Thou renewest the face of the earth" (Ps. civ. 27, 29, 30). The idea sometimes is that all forms of life are derived from the spirit. "They have all one spirit, and man hath no pre-eminence over the beasts." Elsewhere it is man alone to whom life is communicated by the Spirit. "My life is yet within me and the spirit of God is in my nostrils" (Job xxvii. 3). "But there is a spirit in man. The breath of the Almighty giveth them understanding" (Job xxxii. 8). "The Spirit of God hath made me and the breath of the Almighty giveth me life" (Job xxxiii. 4). Life as it exists in man would seem to be regarded as some-

thing of higher nature which has entered for a time into an earthly being. At death it returns to its Divine source, "to God who gave it" (Eccles. xii. 7; cf. Job xxxiv. 14).⁹

IV

The fourth Old Testament idea in the background of the thought of the Gospels is that of the Messianic Kingdom. In this Hebrew "Utopia," as it has been called, we find all the three thoughts of the Divine grace, of the moral order of the world, and of the Spirit presupposed and blended, fused together by that passionate vitality of faith and hope which is the very finest spirit of Israel. Its roots lie deep in the people's faith in the abiding Covenant grace of God. It was impossible for the true Israel to believe in the defeat of the purpose of its God, or to be content with the condition into which its own sins had brought it. Indian thought, face to face with the eternal riddle of the world, sought escape from the whole tremendous coil of evil for the individual by the way of Thought, as in the Vedanta; Stoicism, in the wide and dreary prison of the world, also sought deliverance for the individual by teaching indifference to fortune. But by virtue of its faith in the Covenant Israel sought its deliverance by other roads. Its Theistic faith compelled it to trace its own tragic fortunes not to any necessity in the scheme of the world, but to its own misuse of its freedom. The roots of its tragedy

⁹ E. F. Scott, *The Spirit in the New Testament*, pp. 38, 39.

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were not in God's world but in itself. They were therefore removable. There is a fundamental and far-reaching difference here. The view of things which denies sin is really, paradoxical as it may seem, far less hopeful than that which frankly admits the verdict of conscience. If man is the determinate victim of the world, then there is no hope for him save in submission. If he has departed from the true order of the world, or has not yet reached it, the whole outlook is incomparably more hopeful: the tragedy is in principle removable, there is hope in God.

So in the Theism of Israel this hope found expression in the idea of the Messianic Kingdom. This hope, which gleams intermittently through the prophetic writings and in the prophetic histories, finds very varied forms of expression which need not be dwelt on at this point in any detail. But in every form the deliverance is conceived of as coming from the grace of God. In Jeremiah it takes form in the great idea of a new Covenant, less outward and legal, more comprehensive and inward, wrought in the hearts of men by the power of God. The coming deliverance is primarily thought of as a reconciliation and reunion of the nation with God. In Isaiah, Israel, set free from its foes to worship its God, is thought of as in the foreground with the assenting nations of the world around it. But the outward curse is broken also. Sorrow, disease, and death disappear with sin in the highest forms of the Messianic hope. The life of heaven, in a word, comes to earth. This deliverance is always thought of as coming from the grace of

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God, but the way can be prepared for it by repentance, obedience, and faith.

In many of the relevant passages the deliverance is thought of as coming by a personal Deliverer, the Messiah or Anointed of the Lord. He is conceived of as richly endowed with the life-giving Divine Spirit, and through His mediation that Spirit is poured out on men.

Here we have already, as it were, projected on the screen of the future the outlines of the Figure whom we see in the Gospels.

We have been describing the four Hebrew presuppositions, but our inquiry would be incomplete if we did not ask the further question, What changes happened to this picture in the Jewish version of Hebrew religion? Changes there were, but they do not seem to me to affect in any material way the broad outlines of the picture which has been sketched. The piety of the Old Covenant remains, but becomes more legal under the influence of Scribe and Pharisee. Yet faith in the Covenant God of Israel remains as the essential root of the Jewish piety. However burdened that faith may be, it persists, and great emphasis is laid, for example, upon its power to hasten the coming of the Messianic Age, a point of great importance, as we shall see presently when we come to the study of the Gospels.

The old and deeply rooted belief in the association of sin with tragedy remains and is deepened. Every true Jew believed in the judgments of God, and in the deep association of sin and premature death, death being the reflex of sin. The hope in

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the immortality and blessedness of the righteous, which was so prominent in the Jewish period, grows. Finally, the idea of the Messianic reign is emphasised, and, as in the earlier Scriptures, is always conceived of not only as the reign of holiness and righteousness, and the saints who embody these virtues, but as a time when the curses of death and disease are abolished, when the alien yoke of the heathen is broken, and the whole dark kingdom of evil, with the sway of the devil and his angels, is finally overthrown.

This Jewish version of the Hebrew solution of the riddle of the world is the background of all the life and thought of the Gospels, and it is in this setting only that the narratives of our Lord's great deeds and their place in His whole revelation can really be understood.

We are not concerned here with the truth of that view, or how far it is believable by modern men. That question will arise at a later stage. At present we are concerned simply with the question of what that view in its completeness really is. Our inquiry is historical and exegetical, and is the necessary preliminary to these later stages. It may be that the view which will finally emerge from our historical discussion is more believable and has more significance for our faith and life than either of the two theories which have been examined in an earlier chapter.