

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Themes and Kinds*

#### i

WE MAY FIRST consider some of the basic qualities and limitations of the Bible in such a context.

As 'literature' it is, in many ways, remote from our present consciousness. There is no single work of comparable quality and intention (still less of current availability) with which we may compare it. We may read the Koran, or the Granth Sahib, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the Epic of Gilgamesh,<sup>1</sup> the Babylonian Epic of Creation,<sup>2</sup> the Law Code of Hammurabi;<sup>3</sup> and these, together with various anthologies, provide some material for comparisons, throw some oblique and broken light; but little more. In its range, its unity, its diversity, its two major symphonic movements of promise and fulfilment, in its avoidance (in general) of arid and now pointless narrative or gnomic reflections that are of little relevance to the West, the Bible is unique. It regards history as a straightforward linear progression, unlike the gyres and whorls of Greek thought. Yet we must realize that the great unifying force is teleological. It is a record of man's tentative and intermittent progression, through increasing awareness, through spiritual warfare and the grasping of 'wisdom through suffering', towards a comprehensive and comprehensible moral situation: 'the city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God . . .'.

But it would be wrong to minimize the difficulties: and the gap between this mass of literature and that of our own time which demands some imaginative historical leap. This is a literature of simplicity, and of simplification. It communicates thoughts and feelings arising out of limited situations. It is characterized by

<sup>1</sup> c. 2000–1800 B.C.

<sup>2</sup> c. 1750–1400 B.C.

<sup>3</sup> King of Babylon. c. 1792–1750 B.C.

profundity without complexity; at least until we are in the world of certain of the Epistles, with their Hellenistic background. The problem of evil that the Bible presents has not (with the possible exception of *Job*) the depth and complexity of the Greek dramatists, or of Shakespeare, or of such moralists as Matthew Arnold and Eliot. It makes little attempt to explore the workings of interior consciousness. Above all, it must speak largely through its own special kind of myths and images, and we must adjust ourselves to these.

From another angle it is the fragmentary history of a small tribe of the Eastern Mediterranean, which had settled by conquest a portion of what is sometimes called the 'fertile crescent'. The record of that conquest, the successive reduction of key-towns such as Jericho, the slaughter of the inhabitants, the raids, counter-invasions, oppressions and defeats, occupies much of the military narrative. This way of life is an essential part of the total pattern, as certifying the past and sustaining the promise of the future under the covenant of God. The nomadic habits of *Genesis* and *Exodus* yield to the more settled life of the cities and villages as the gains of warfare are consolidated.

Such warfare is constant: in narration, in prophecy, in the fabric of the poetry. The strategical situations of the Jews had made their country a buffer state, lying across the immemorial routes from Syria to Egypt, from Persia to the coast. They were always liable to local raids, or more massive invasions; living uneasily with their neighbours, the Bedouin of the desert, the Syrians, the Amalekites, the Philistines of the coastal plain. They were capable of undertaking, under David and Solomon, significant counter-actions of their own in order to extend the Empire. They suffered pillage, subjection, or captivity as the great empires about them rose and fell. So it comes about that much of their poetry is that of elegy, or of something verging on despair; the 'compleynt' so frequent in medieval literature. With the captivities or the occupations it was often necessary to compromise, to accept the restraints on liberty and to build their own lives in such a context.<sup>1</sup>

In such a situation, under constant pressures of every kind—military, religious, cultural, economic—from a host of neighbours—their

<sup>1</sup> e.g. their assumption of the roles of banker, accountants, middlemen, civil servants, in Babylon; even, on occasion, as political and religious advisers.

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concern is to maintain their racial integrity, already complicated by the tribal structure of their nation, and the stern monotheism of the Mosaic Law. Within this broad intention, the Law itself expands and elaborates itself into extremity of detail, ritual, and hygiene, punishments and judgments, which are essential aspects of this maintenance of identity. Like all such codifications it could and did become arid with the weight of the centuries, with custom and priestly gloss; the letter tending to rise, as always with law, above the intention or spirit. But of its essential relevance, sanity, and cogency for a people in such a situation and setting, there can be no doubt.

Their history—itsself an historical record of value, without parallel in the ancient world—is written, in general, long after the events which it commemorates. For this reason it is perceived in terms of action; the acid of time eating away all irrelevancies concerned with the emergence of human personality revealed in action, in some form of spiritual or military or judicial leadership. Of detail we have little; the imaginations of artists and sculptors have been free for centuries to depict Moses or Isaac or David, Peter or Paul or Luke, according to their personal visions and the type-figures or models of their time.

Such a narrative of action must be by its nature highly selective. It moves simply and strongly through time, its gaps omitted or compressed to throw into relief the more significant events; those that in any saga-literature find a permanent place because they are celebrated in memorable ballad or song. And here, as always in such literature, an essential part is the rehearsing of the names and places that such ballads or miniature epics have connected with events; monuments that make past warfare live again.

We must not underestimate the immense importance, to the Jewish community struggling against the Romans, or to the Puritans of Cromwell's New Model Army, of the deeds of the God of Battles; as certifying His past and present protection, and anticipating His justice for the future. Nor should we underestimate its effect to stimulate the heroic and patriotic virtues. Ulfilas, Bishop of the Goths about A.D. 350, is remembered for his version of the Scriptures, but perhaps more for Gibbon's comment:

“He prudently suppressed the four books of Kings, as they might tend to irritate the fierce spirit of the Barbarians.”

So the total narrative moves, a little spasmodically, toward its objective, the Messianic prophecy that will one day be fulfilled. Its track through history is maintained by a constant retrospective correction of the course, through back-references to its history, the national epic and its related traditions, to the immensely important perception of prophecies fulfilled. So events seem to slide like weights down taut wires, from past to present: to build up in solid masses the miniature epics in which a single purpose, or the frustration of that purpose by human stupidity or evil, is made known.

Within this overall pattern of the Old Testament we have a literature of the utmost variety. In this lies a major difficulty. Those parts of it which we might select as of significant 'magnitude' for sustained examination as literature are, too often, brief and even fragmentary. If we set aside the books of the campaigns, there are great tracts of the Bible of which the interest today seems to belong, not to literature, but to a somewhat specialized kind of ancient history. Among the 'kinds' which seem to invite a wider examination it is possible to suggest a brief and perhaps arbitrary catalogue.

There would be the whole of *Genesis*, and part of *Exodus*; not much of *Leviticus*; all *Ruth*, *Job*; most of *Isaiah*; parts of *Daniel*, *Ezekiel* (after some study), *The Song of Solomon*, *Ecclesiastes*; all, or nearly all, of the *Psalms*. Dramatic episodes, some of them handled for their human interest as well as for their didactic potentialities by the dramatists of the Mystery and Miracle plays,<sup>1</sup> Noah's Flood, Cain and Abel, Baalam's Ass, the Sacrifice of Isaac, the Wanderings in the Desert, the Temptation in the Garden. One of the most popular—it is not difficult to see why—is the apocryphal Harrowing of Hell, first found in the 'Gospel of Nicodemus' and developed by various commentators.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for its popularity are clear; for it not only gave hope to the vast body of souls inhabiting Limbo, but might be thought to settle a problem that had vexed the early Christian world. For this was an anxiety to the men of the Renaissance, who had founded their education and scholarship on the Classics, and who had seen Aristotle incorporated into the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas, Plato assimilated to St. Paul's teaching, Virgil acquiring

<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps surprising that we find no dramatization of one of the most dramatic of all stories, that of Jezebel. Was the 'moral' too obscure?

<sup>2</sup> v. Mâle, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

the character of a pagan prophet.<sup>1</sup> What was to happen in the Day of Judgment to all those who, by the accident of their birth in time, were deprived of the hope of salvation? 'Meanwhile Epicurus lies deep in Dante's Hell, wherein we meet with tombs enclosing souls which denied their immortalities. But whether the virtuous heathen, who lived better than he spake at least so low as not to rise against Christians . . . lie so deep as he is placed . . . were a quarry too sad to insist on.'<sup>2</sup>

Among other 'great' episodes which have been singled out are the Breaking of the Tables of the Law, the story of Jonathan and David, the end of Esther, Daniel; Joseph and his brethren; the satiric passage on the priests of Baal and their ecstatic attempts at the invocation of fire. Perhaps we may turn for a kind of summary to the Epistle to the Hebrews:

And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. . . . And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings; yea, moreover, of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.<sup>3</sup>

## ii

When we move to the New Testament we are in some measure in another world. The tradition is still emphasized by genealogy, reference, quotation, the triumphant or embittered recognitions of prophecies fulfilled. Often the atmosphere seems to carry a kind of gentle luminosity, as of the 'Italian Light' of the Campagna. The battle clouds, the thunder of Jahweh,<sup>4</sup> the denunciations of the prophets, have yielded to a quieter and sweeter air. The soldiery and the images of warfare are in the background. We are in a country

<sup>1</sup> On the strength of a famous passage in the Fourth Eclogue.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, *Urn-Burial*, IV, 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Heb.* 11: 32-38.

<sup>4</sup> Whom some consider to have been originally a Storm-god.

occupied by a stern but civilized nation; we are conscious always of the Roman pressures on the perimeter, but we are aware of them only in the complexities of civil administration, racial riots, judgment of the Courts. We are aware of the jarring sects, split both by beliefs and by differing interpretations of the Law, but animated always by their nationalist aspiration to rid themselves, under some leader or Messiah, from the hated Roman sway. A projection of that hope, and its chronicle, is in Josephus; forming, perhaps, a link between the Old and the New Testaments. The imagery is kinder; there is more of the 'household language'; there is, even inland, a smell of ships and nets, and we remember that prolonged ministry by the Sea of Galilee. The logic and restraint of the Greek ethos has penetrated to this world; so that in the Septuagint the Old Testament is translated for the benefit of the Alexandrian Jews who have no Hebrew, and Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic interpenetrate each other to provide subtle shadings of significance.

iii

Yet there is one profound change of theme that arises out of the New Testament. An empty grave encourages men to look into other graves, full or empty; either seeking to assure a congregation, as Donne seems to have done,<sup>1</sup> that there was no bodily salvation in it, or to build enormities of the romantic imagination by those on whom

"Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,  
And all that draweth on the tomb for text."<sup>2</sup>

The Old Testament is objective, even laconic in its view of death. Its heroes sleep with their fathers; man returns again to be dust, or withers like grass, or descends into that Sheol of which no one speaks with certainty. There is cruelty, there are even fragments of what our civilization would call the macabre; as when the dogs lap the blood from the chariots as they are washed out after the battle, or reject the hands and feet of the dismembered Jezebel. But there is nowhere, either in the Old or the New, the inflaming of a morbid imagination by the thought of the grave,<sup>3</sup> speculation on the physical circumstances of the resurrection, the central paradox of overt corruption out of which is to come eternal life.

<sup>1</sup> As, for example, in the great and terrible sermon on *Vermiculation* (*Death's Duell*, pp. 20-22).

<sup>2</sup> Meredith, *Modern Love*.

<sup>3</sup> The ghosts raised by the Witch of Endor are described in a matter-of-fact way.