

CHAPTER XII

PAUL'S UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY

WE turn now to Paul's interpretation of the significance of Jesus and of the events of salvation history. Any consideration of his thought must, of necessity, start from his Jewish background and his conversion experience. Living as a Pharisee of the Pharisees, striving to attain to righteousness by a full obedience to the Law, he was apprehended by the living Christ on the Damascus Road and his whole life reorientated. That experience involved the basic intuition that the heavenly Messiah and the man Jesus were one and the same. In the Man of Nazareth he had met the "promised One" who was to come, and whose coming would usher in the Kingdom of God; and his own experience of new life "in Christ" led him clearly to the belief that already God's Kingdom had descended upon those who were united to the Son of God by faith. For Paul, everything in history and in the universe centred in Jesus, His Cross and Resurrection, where God had acted to translate men out of the Kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of the Son of His love. In Christ the whole meaning of history is laid bare, the purpose of God is unveiled and the redemptive activity of God finds its consummation; nothing that men can desire or hope for can be found apart from Him. It becomes evident from a study of the Epistles that the Apostle was convinced that the Age-to-Come had, with the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus, already begun in time; and thus he stands in the succession from Jesus Himself as interpreted by the Synoptic Evangelists and the Primitive Church.

I

Certain ideas underlie the pattern of his thought. First of all, there is this conviction that, since the Messiah had come, the Age-to-Come had already dawned. Jesus had ushered in the Age of salvation for which the prophets hoped,¹ and inaugurated a new age which had supervened upon this present age.² Yet this conviction that the Messiah had already come had to be reconciled with the fact that the world still continued in evil and sin, suffering and death. In some way God's Kingdom had come into this world, and yet the full deliverance which the Jewish Apocalyptic had anticipated did not seem to be realized. That it had come,

¹ 2 Cor. 6: 2.

² 1 Cor. 10: 11.

Paul was convinced by his own experience of the new life, which sprang from his recognition of Jesus as Messiah, and by his consideration of the experience of his fellow Christians, in whom the fruits of the Spirit¹ were manifested. The Primitive Community had seen in the experience of Pentecost a confirmation of the prophecy of Joel that in the last day God would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh, and was thus convinced that the Age-to-Come had dawned; likewise Paul found in the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christian men and women an indication that they were already realizing the joys and blessings of the Messianic Era. So the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us,² and the supernatural life of the Kingdom is a present reality. Men and women were living now in an era in which the two ages conjoined, or rather overlapped.³ Thus the hope of men was already fulfilled, but only in part, and this partial fulfilment waited upon the full consummation in which the Kingdom would be manifested in its full glory and the whole of sin and evil be done away. Christian men must still live with hope, the hope that one day their faith would be vindicated and their life and the history of the world be consummated, but they already had an assurance on which to build. They had an earnest of their future inheritance in the consummated Kingdom of God as a present possession,⁴ and, when Paul used the word "earnest", he meant a sample guaranteed to be of the same quality as the "bulk" yet to be delivered.

When we turn to this eschatological aspect of Paul's thinking, we find, as Dr. C. H. Dodd⁵ has shown, that there is a marked development in it. Slowly his emphasis moved from the future consummation to the heavenly life lived here and now. Quite evidently in the Thessalonian Epistles he believed that the final consummation of the Kingdom was imminent, although he warns the Thessalonians against undue expectation, since the Man of Sin must first be revealed. Even in First Corinthians we find him declaring that some of his converts will be alive when the Lord comes again: "We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed."⁶ With the Epistle to the Romans the emphasis has come down much more on the life here and now as one in which the life of

¹ Gal. 5: 22.

² Rom. 5: 5.

³ 1 Cor. 10: 11.

⁴ 2 Cor. 5: 5; 2 Cor. 1: 22; Eph. 1: 14; cf. Rom. 8: 23.

⁵ *Bulletin of the John Ryland Library*, Vol. 17, No. 1; Vol. 18, No. 1. This view has not met with universal agreement, but it seems generally acceptable provided we allow for the fact that eschatological elements are found in his later writings (cf. Phil. 1: 6; 3: 20, 21). What Dodd helps to elucidate is the increasing emphasis upon the present and its opportunities and a decreasing preoccupation with the ultimate consummation, to which Paul still held in his later writings.

⁶ 1 Cor. 15: 51-52.

the Age-to-Come can be realized. We are already given in the Spirit of Sonship an earnest of the complete fulfilment of our hope. Much of Paul's concrete ethical teaching, in which he deals with home and business problems, is to be found in the later epistles, especially those written during the Roman captivity, and there we find him stressing the fact that these relationships can be baptized into Christ. Whereas in earlier days he dealt with such issues always with his eyes upon an imminent Parousia, now he is much more concerned with the fact that the End of history has entered into history in Jesus and that Christians may enjoy its benefits. Dr. Dodd places the pivotal point of this change of outlook in the period of the Corinthian Epistles and finds its cause in a spiritual change in Paul's inner life. This we need not enter into, but it is significant that after this change we find the Apostle beginning to develop a doctrine of history, especially in the Epistle to the Romans.

2

The Coming of the Kingdom in Jesus is set by Paul in a framework of human sinfulness. He sees the whole creation groaning and travailing in pain together until now, and man, bound in the fetters of sin, travailing with it.¹ He tacitly accepts man's universal sinfulness as the basis of his thought. An examination of his own sinful nature and of the lives of his fellows leads him to the conclusion that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God".² There is, indeed, in all men a sinful perversion of will so that they do that which they would not, and do not accomplish that which they ought.³ Man is a fallen creature, in desperate need of redemption.

In consequence, Paul's view of man and of history, apart from the new life in Christ, is embodied in two complementary conceptions. On the one hand, all men are in Adam, through whom sin had entered into the race and produced rebellion against God's plan. The hall-mark of humanity and thus of human history is its universal sinfulness which entered the race in Adam's sin. "Adam is, in a certain sense, the archetype of all humanity; what happens to him happens to all men".⁴ Thus Adam is representative man, and behind the idea we may see the consciousness of human solidarity which has already been noted in Old Testament thought. When we ask how the sin of Adam could affect his descendants, we are really missing Paul's point; his argument is that all men are bound in a unity with Adam and that like Adam

¹ Rom. 8.

² Rom. 3: 23.

³ Rom. 7: 19.

⁴ J. Weiss, *History of Primitive Christianity*, London, 1937, Vol. I, p. 434; E.T. of *Das Urchristentum*, 1914.

all men have sinned and come short of the glory which God gave them at the time of creation. On the other hand, all men are in "the flesh". The natural or psychical man is flesh and not spirit. The flesh seems to have been conceived by Paul "as a uniform, cohesive being in which the individual, in a certain measure, shares".¹ Thus he thinks of a man as individualized flesh and speaks of the works of the flesh,² the desire of the flesh³ declaring that those who are *in the flesh* cannot please God.⁴ Life in the flesh does indeed spell death, and it would appear that the flesh is something which is at enmity with God, paralysing the good desires of men, "for the flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary one to the other so that ye cannot do the things that ye would."⁵ The flesh seems to have been the visible, material part of man, and thus should have been morally indifferent, but it has fallen under the domination of Sin, and here Paul differentiates between Sin (ἁμαρτία, which rarely⁶ occurs in the plural) and acts of sin (ἁδικία).⁷ Sin is a demonic being, existing quite apart from the sinner, and thus it does not denote his sinful status but an invasive power capable of taking up its abode in his "flesh". Man is thereby in bondage to sin, in its thrall,⁸ sold under it like a bondman;⁹ it reigns as king in the realm of death,¹⁰ for its own entrance into the flesh made possible also the entrance of another demonic power, death.¹¹ Here Paul gives an explanation of the presence of Sin in human nature parallel to his idea that it entered through Adam's sin.

Sin was not, however, the only objective force disturbing and wrecking human history, but there were other demonic powers, "world-rulers" or elemental spirits, which Paul variously described as the elements of this world, spiritual rulers of darkness in high places, principalities, and the like. These were estranged from God and capable of separating man from Him; Paul seems to have thought of a world of angels in rebellion against God and holding men in bondage. They were the "powers of this age" and their god was Satan, the "god of this world", whom God would finally defeat and whose power is limited to this age alone. We have here a connection with Hellenistic thought and its belief that the stars were personal powers in the heavens which controlled the destiny of man. Through the weakness of the flesh these

¹ J. Weiss, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 606.

² Gal. 5: 19.

³ Gal. 5: 24.

⁴ Rom. 8: 8.

⁵ Gal. 5: 17.

⁶ The plural form is found in Rom. 7: 5; 11: 27; 1 Cor. 15: 3; Gal. 1: 4; Eph. 2: 1; Col. 1: 14.

⁷ ἁμαρτήματα is used for an act of sin in Rom. 3: 25; 1 Cor. 6: 18.

⁸ Rom. 6: 20; Gal. 3: 22.

⁹ Rom. 7: 14.

¹⁰ Rom. 5: 21.

¹¹ 1 Cor. 15: 56; Rom. 5: 12.

demonic beings found lodgment in man and exercised dominion over him. By his reason, in which even natural man shared in the divine Spirit, man was able to know God and to understand His law, which was written on the human heart. Instead he bowed down and worshipped material forms, "changing the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image" and "exchanging the truth of God for a lie".¹ Because of this, God gave men over to the lusts of their hearts and the elemental powers came to dominate their lives. The human reason became reprobate and man's natural instincts perverted so that they were "against nature". By putting the material in the place of the spiritual, man sold himself under the powers of darkness, and history became a scene of conflict and strife. Thus Paul had to face the age-long quest of the Greek world—"Was there any escape from this present evil world?" Man needed deliverance from Sin and from the powers of darkness which through his flesh had dominated his life, perverted his ψυχή and distorted his reason. History presents us with a solidarity of the human race in sin; all men are "in Adam", "in the flesh", and from the domination of Sin they must be redeemed.

3

Within this framework of human sinfulness and cosmic demonries, the Apostle sets the course of salvation history,² re-interpreting the Old Testament story in the light of Christ, who is the centre of history and whose Cross and Resurrection mark the climax of the divine redemption. Everything begins in the divine promise to Abraham that in him all the nations would be blessed. God would fulfil His plan in Abraham and his seed, and here Paul emphasizes the fact that *seed* is in the singular. So Israel is the chosen of God, but the visible Israel is not necessarily the true Israel; there is a divine process of selection and of election at work in history. Thus Ishmael was also the seed of Abraham, but Isaac was the chosen of God. Again, the calling of God came, not to Esau, but to Jacob, so that it was written: "Jacob I loved and Esau I hated."³ When we look for a purpose in this seeming favouritism we must recognize that everything is of grace. It is God who calls, and so it is not a matter that man wills but of God who has mercy. From this it is an easy step to a hard form of predestination doctrine, and it is not surprising that Paul becomes obscure; he even goes so far as to state that God calls some and hardens the hearts of others. He is, however, careful to point out that what determines the true heirs of Abraham is a

¹ Rom. 1: 18-32.

² Rom. 9-11 and Gal. 3 are important here.

³ Rom. 9: 13.

reproduction of that faith and obedience which Abraham displayed: "Know therefore that they which be of faith, the same are sons of Abraham."¹ Gradually, this process of divine selection worked in history, narrowing down its scope to a remnant and ultimately to Christ, in whom the redemption of men and their reconciliation to God is achieved.

Between Abraham and Christ the Law operated, but it failed to give men their inheritance. Instead of being a blessing it brought men under a curse because they disobeyed it. Thus Israel came under bondage to the Law and through that bondage the power of sin increased. The Law brought the knowledge that a thing was wrong, but it did not hinder men from doing the wrong, because the law is "weak through the flesh".² What it did was to bring home the sense of shame and guilt so that sin became conscious transgression; it came in as a parenthesis to increase transgression, for by it sin became imputed and its wrong was brought home to the conscience. So, with their growing sense of guilt, men now became aware of their moral helplessness. Hence the Law, with its seeming contradiction of free grace and pardon and with its emphasis upon recompense and retribution, became a *παιδάγωγός* to bring men to Christ, increasing in their hearts the consciousness of their sinful bondage and making possible their reception of that free act of divine forgiveness, the possibility of which it seemed to deny. The Law was an interlude in history, necessary by its disciplinary action for the divine purpose of redemption, and standing between the period of the original promise to Abraham, given freely by the divine grace, and the redemptive inbreak of that divine grace in Christ.

The promise to Abraham that in him all nations shall be blessed is fulfilled in Jesus. Impotent through their sin, the Jews could not form the true Israel, and by their reliance upon the Law for their justification they hindered the unveiling of the sons of God, the remnant of the Promise. But Christ is the *seed* of the original promise, and by His death He brings men into their inheritance so that they become sons and heirs of God. "When the fulness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, that He might redeem them which were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."³ By His perfect obedience, where others were disobedient, Christ redeemed men from the curse of the Law. What the Jews could not do under the Law by their own efforts is granted to them; the divine grace comes into action and justifies them freely, not on their own merits, but through what Christ has done, restoring them to the divine fellowship and giving the inheritance promised to Abraham.

¹ Gal. 3: 7.² Rom. 8: 3.³ Gal. 4: 4-5.