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THE NOTE OF CRISIS IN BIBLICAL HISTORY

THE FREE existence of evil in a world originally created good is the great contradiction within history. How and when did this situation of duality originate? Or is it one which in the nature of things always existed? Do good and evil reign with equal right, in eternal dualism? Or has the good an original primacy over evil? The answer will determine our conception of the basic meaning of history. If good and evil alike exist as first principles, the moral values of historical action disappear. Why repudiate evil, if it is but part of ultimate reality? If, on the other hand, we acknowledge the original sovereignty of good—and therefore its eventual supremacy over evil—man's personal relations toward good and evil become full of consequence, and the goal of history a matter of first importance.

The Bible unhesitatingly proclaims the monism of good: it rejects the idea, developed formally in Zoroastrian thought, that in the nature of all things there exists an eternal dualism. Conflict, indeed, there is between good and evil, but in that conflict the good has divine right; evil is a usurper. Good is symbolised as light; evil as darkness. But the light is uncreated light; the darkness, created darkness. "God is light," we read, "and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John i. 5). All good dwells in God, or springs from God. In an absolute sense, therefore, there is none good save God (Mk. x. 18). And since beside Him there is no other god, it follows that good alone is eternal and all-sovereign.

The world, in the beginning, was, as the creation of God, pronounced very good (Gen. i. 31). As seen now, it cannot be so described. Evil is present everywhere—evil, not as calamity only, but as spiritual darkness and moral apostasy. Whence, then, came evil, and how has it acquired such potency in the affairs of men? This is not told us in the Bible, except indirectly. A spiritual apostasy from God, within a sphere higher than our own, is darkly hinted at; and with it the existence of a dread being who, because of his pre-eminence in that revolt, came to be known as the prince of darkness. But what is told us—and told us plainly—is that which concerns us as men, namely, how sin

entered human history. The story of the Fall is the account of that tragic event. The darkness had come. Hitherto, light, as eternal light, had been manifesting itself in time and space; now, a darkness alien to God's creation had intruded itself into the world of mankind.

The entrance of evil into the world was a direct challenge to the Creator, an open threat to the sovereignty of good; and as such it had to be met by decisive action on the part of God. The free-will of man could not possibly limit the sovereignty of God. Although his initial freedom gave man the tragic power to accept God or to deny God, this liberty of choice must not be construed as spiritual independence. Man's spiritual freedom was doubtless real; nevertheless, it was a freedom bounded by creaturehood. It is beside the point to say that man's spirit exists in abysmal depths of freedom, and that therefore, in the life of the spirit, it is not subject to external authority. Even if we postulate the existence of primordial depths of freedom, out of which man's spirit has birth, we cannot thereby escape the truth that the creative will of God is prior to every pre-condition of man's spiritual existence and freedom. There is an eternal wisdom, sovereign in its rule, antecedent to all depths, whether of physical nature or of spiritual being. This divine Wisdom announces Itself symbolically in the language of Scripture, saying, "When there were no depths, I was brought forth" (Prov. viii. 24). And we are assured that a compass has been set upon the face of the depth (Prov. viii. 27). Even the unplumbed depths are under His sovereignty! "It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves" (Ps. c. 3). So that evil cannot retreat before good and, in the name of freedom, lose itself in a primal void where God is not. "If I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there . . . yea, the darkness hideth not from Thee" (Ps. cxxxix. 8, 12). Though Himself light, "He knoweth what is in the darkness" (Dan. ii. 22). Whatever mysteries there are in the origin and constitution of evil, we may be sure that they do not dethrone God as Creator, or render inoperative the sovereignty of good.

If, then, the suzerainty of God over creation is absolute and proper—and the Bible claims for it nothing less—history throughout its whole movement is subject to the jurisdiction of God, and man's original defection from good, and voluntary submission to the powers of evil, was a fit occasion for the exercise of His prerogative. Immediately, therefore, upon

Adam's transgression God exercised His right of judgment. Yet justice, though swift, was not summary. Due investigation was made into the circumstances of the case; and before sentence was pronounced, guilt was established. The judgment was not arbitrary. With God as judge it might well have been so, for with Him the facts are not, as in human administration, difficult to come by. Nevertheless, in His divine wisdom He adopted a deliberate and unhurried procedure which not only vindicated the righteousness of His judgment and silenced all gainsaying but by its very restraint displayed conscious power to decree and do.

This process of judgment is illustrated also in the succeeding measures of divine justice down the ages. Sin is allowed time in which to reveal its true character, until a crisis is reached, when God intervenes to assert the sovereignty of righteousness. Movement succeeds movement, each ending in catastrophic judgments, which proclaim in unmistakable fashion the divine control of events. By these intermediate judgments God holds back the full development of evil until history shall have completed its course, and by them teaches men to anticipate the final judgment, when all history will be brought under his authority.

The instruments of judgment are drawn from many sources. Creation and history alike provide means for the display of God's power. "All things serve His might." The forces of nature, animate or inanimate, are instruments of His will—earthquakes, locusts, plagues, pestilence and "stormy wind fulfilling His word". From the moral circumstances in which they function, these natural agencies are seen to be supernaturally regulated. The finger of God is recognised in them, and they smite the conscience of the wrongdoer with the sense of retributive justice. It is not a sufficient objection to say that these phenomena can be referred to natural causes; it must also be explained how it is they appear with such precision in a given set of circumstances and operate therein with such peculiar moral fitness. Incidents like the crossing of the Red Sea, the collapse of the walls of Jericho, the great hailstorm in the days of Samuel, and the famine of Amos's prophecy, cannot be accounted for on natural grounds alone. Call them natural phenomena if you will, but they are more than that: they are phenomena timed to coincide with particular historical circumstances, and this it is which gives them moral and spiritual significance. They can only be explained on the ground of supernatural control.

The elements of history, not less than those of nature, may, if God so ordain, become the instrument of judgment. The scourge of war has not infrequently been instrumental to divine judgment upon a nation. Not that war is of God. For war, in an absolute sense, is neither pre-ordained of God, nor inevitable to man, save as a result of man's sin. Like the law of divorce, it has been allowed because of the hardness of men's hearts; but it was not contemplated in the beginning (Matt. xix. 8). Nevertheless, it subserves God's government of world affairs, and in Old Testament times was recognised as a divine visitation upon the nations. The deliverance of Israel from Amalek, the long-delayed judgment on the Canaanite nations, the overthrow of Pharaoh and his hosts, the capture and fall of Babylon in the days of Cyrus—these and many other such incidents demonstrate a divine superintendence of events and a powerful and planned control of history.

Primarily these catastrophic breaks into history have the character of "revelation", and are so described in the writings. They are something "made known" or "revealed". The phrase is used as a simple verb in the book of Habakkuk: "In the midst of the years make known" (Hab. iii. 2). This is revelation, not in word, but in historical action. In the book of the Psalms also, and in the prophecies of Isaiah, similar instances occur, usually in association with the related ideas of retributive justice and saving mercy.

The Lord hath made known His salvation; His righteousness hath He openly showed in the sight of the heathen (Ps. xcvi. 2).

My salvation is near to come, and My righteousness to be revealed (Isa. lvi. 1).

Through these mighty acts God made His presence known, and showed "the victory of His right arm" over the powers of evil. They were days of the Lord, man's day having run its course. In their catastrophic energy age-long growths of evil were broken up, and new epochs established in which salvation was brought to His people. They were thus genuine signs of a supreme Will above the movement of history. They acted as solvents upon "dispensations" when these had served their end and further developments were due. Through them the old order was liquidated and the new set up. And over all these judgments with their powerful historical reformations we are ever conscious of the sovereign presidency of God.

These crises carry into effect various complementary purposes. They have, in the main, a threefold end. According to the point of view taken, they may be described as revelation, retribution, or redemption. As revelation, they are termed in Scripture "wonders", or "wonderful works of the Lord"; as "mighty acts"; or as something "made known", or "revealed", or "manifested". As acts of retributive justice, they are spoken of as "the righteousnesses [or righteous acts] of the Lord"; or as "the victory of His right arm". Again, as redemption, they are "the salvation of His people", or "the deliverance of His people", or "His saving mercies". This threefold relation—to God, to evil, and to God's people—may be illustrated from actual history. In the account of the Flood, we have direct action by God, the overthrow of a corrupt world, and the salvation of Noah and his household. In that of the Exodus, we again have divine intervention, the destruction of the wicked, and the deliverance of God's people. In that of the fall of Babylon, God's hand is seen, impiety is punished, and the chosen race restored. In all three, and in numerous like situations, the principle of death and resurrection, of divine power within and beyond catastrophic judgments, is seen at work, with the separation of the righteous from the wicked as a final issue.

We ask, then, may this note of crisis be found in the death of Christ? Is the death of Christ the spiritual centre of all history? Has that death the quality of revelation, that is, of God's distinctive personal action? Has it that of "justice", that is, of evil fully exposed and finally judged? Have God's people found therein eternal deliverance from the powers of evil? We have abundant evidence that the death of Christ had this character. The Lord Himself so interpreted His death. In St. John's Gospel we have His own words:

Now is the judgment [Gk. *krisis*] of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out (John xii. 31).

Throughout His public ministry there runs a deep consciousness of an hour to come in which He would meet in decisive conflict the rulers of the kingdom of darkness. This period of crisis is always associated with the circumstances of His death and resurrection. Scriptures not a few testify to this fact.

The hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners (Matt. xxvi. 45).

This is your hour, and the power of darkness (Luke xxii. 53).

Now is My soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour (John xii. 27).

The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me (John xiv. 30).

The prince of this world is judged (John xvi. 11).

. . . that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil (Heb. ii. 14).

This is quite in keeping with the general language of Scripture, both of prophets and apostles. For the sufferings of Jehovah's Servant were to be, in some mysterious sense, a revelation of the arm of the Lord, by which many would be justified from their iniquities, and evil be so vanquished that He would "divide the spoil with the strong" (Isa. liii. 12).

The event would reveal itself conspicuously as an act of God.

All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD. . . . They . . . shall declare . . . unto a people that shall be born, that He hath done this (Ps. xxii. 27-31).

The stone which the builders rejected is become the headstone of the corner. This is the LORD's doing (Ps. cxviii. 22 f.).

One needs only to read in the book of the Acts to see that the apostles discerned in the death and resurrection of Christ the very hand of God, and the illimitable effects of that death in a salvation worldwide in scope and eternal in duration. To show this fully would be to quote from almost every page in the New Testament; whether its teaching be accepted or not, it is the plain intention of the Bible to interpret the death of Christ as "the consummation of the ages" (Heb. ix. 26) and to claim it as being in truth God's judgment of the world, a judgment wherein He demonstrates His authority over evil and manifests His grace and power in salvation.

Is this interpretation of the death of Christ in accordance with historical fact? Or do we exaggerate when we say that His death was, historically, an event of the first magnitude, followed by results catastrophic in character? Are we justified, for example, in comparing it with an overwhelming disaster like the Flood or with an epoch-making crisis such as the fall of Babylon? May it not be that this interpretation of the facts is due to subjective reasoning, induced by religious beliefs? Or are there indeed historical indications that the orthodox view is founded on

objective fact, that in the death of Christ (though no universal cataclysm seems to have taken place and Roman history rolled on without apparent interruption) something happened which placed all history under the judgment of God?

Jewish history provides an answer. If, as Scripture teaches, the course of Israel is the clue to wider developments in the sphere of history, this is not surprising. Moreover, the Gospels contain a wealth of material illustrating the point now raised. They reveal that one of the almost immediate consequences of the death of Christ would be the devastating overthrow of Jerusalem, and the dispersal of the Jewish race among the nations of the world. Only a few decades passed before this was actually fulfilled, and its extension in history continues right down to our own day. This judgment presents itself as an inevitable consequence of the rejection of Christ. It came into force in the act of the crucifixion. Later history is the outworking of that doom, whose first effects are seen in the fall of Jerusalem.

This moral relation between the death of Christ and the world dispersal of the Jew is not a theory which originated in the Christian conscience after the event had taken place. To reason thus is either to forget the plain words of Christ, or to attribute casuistry to the writers of the New Testament. No doubt the fall of Jerusalem made a profound and lasting impression upon the Christian theology of that day, but it did so because it was a powerful reminder of the truth of the Lord's own words. For it is noteworthy how often in the closing days of His earthy ministry He spoke of this consequence of His death. How deeply He was affected by the thought is evident from the peculiar solemnity of His words in regard to it. The following passages should be carefully read and considered:

And when He was come near, He beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee: and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation (Luke xix. 41-4).

Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers . . . that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation (Matt. xxiii. 32-6).

This is your hour, and the power of darkness (Luke xxii. 53).

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When ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. . . . For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. . . . And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled (Luke xxi. 20-4).

And they were instant with loud voices, requiring that He might be crucified. . . . And Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they required. . . . And there followed Him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented Him. And Jesus turning to them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for Me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. . . . For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry? (Luke xxiii. 23-31).

Through these formal intimations Christ taught that in His death the Jewish nation would be brought under judgment. They are not isolated utterances spoken under the pressure of the moment, but are the climax of earlier teachings and warnings, given especially in parabolic form. In the parables of the wicked husbandmen, and of the nobleman whose citizens refused his rule, we can read predictions of the nation's rejection of Christ, and of the retribution that would follow upon it. And did not the children of Israel themselves raise the tragic cry, "His blood be on us, and on our children"? Together, these Scriptures testify to the crisis-character of the death of Christ and to its historical sequel in the sufferings of the Jewish race among the nations of the earth, even down to our own day.

This leads us to enquire whether similar sufferings are yet to be experienced and on a larger scale. If the Jewish nation is suffering in consequence of the rejection of Christ, will the Gentile world escape? Scripture shows that it will not. If judgment has begun at the house of God, what shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel? (1 Pet. iv. 17). This accords with ancient prophecy, which warns the Gentiles:

For, lo, I begin to bring evil on the city which is called by My name, and should ye be utterly unpunished? Ye shall not be unpunished: for I will call for a sword upon all the inhabitants of the earth, saith the LORD of Hosts (Jer. xxv. 29).

The distress of nations in the latter day, culminating in the great conflict of Armageddon, with its accompaniment of world-wide famine and pestilence, is no imaginary premonition of evil to come, but the logical consequence of a crisis which has brought the whole world under the judgment of God. The cross is therefore in a very real sense the end of natural human history. The outworking of the catastrophe extends into still unaccomplished

time, and will only be realised in the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord; but the event itself has already taken place.

The Gospels confirm this. In the Lord's predictive teaching the judgments which are to take place at the Second Coming are associated with His rejection and sufferings.

But first He must suffer many things, and be rejected of this generation. And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man: . . . the flood came, and destroyed them all. Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot . . . it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed (Luke xvii. 24-30).

Here indeed we have some striking parallels with familiar historical crises.

In the sermon on the Mount of Olives is found an unexpected allusion to a passage in Jeremiah. Had the Lord at that time been meditating on the important prophetic Scriptures dealing with the fall of Babylon, and tracing in them a wider application? The fact that the passage is not given as a set quotation but is simply adapted to the circumstances of the Second Coming is remarkable, and shows that within the Lord's mind a parallel existed between the fall of Babylon and the tragic features of the great day of wrath yet to come. The two passages may be compared.

And let not your heart faint [A.V. margin], and ye fear for the rumour that shall be heard in the land; a rumour shall both come in one year, and after that in another year shall come a rumour, and violence in the land, ruler against ruler (Jér. li. 46).

And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: . . . for nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom (Matt. xxiv. 6 f.).

Thus it is no exaggeration to speak of the death of Christ as a world-crisis. Though it transcends them, it belongs to the same order as the great days of the Lord in Old Testament history. This judgment, however, unlike those, is absolute and final: in it human history has been accomplished and sealed up.

In all these historical "judgments" evil is overwhelmed and overcome. But beyond the catastrophe lies always a vista of glorious triumph. The new earth upon which Noah and his family stepped out, the rejoicings of Israel upon the further bank of the Red Sea, the restored hopes of God's people returning

from exile, all point to the principle of resurrection as that upon which God will at once secure His victory over evil and bring His people into the freedom of salvation. The resurrection of Christ, likewise, is that which makes the "judgment" effective. It crowns the crisis with victory. The resurrection is God's assurance to all that the judgment will become universally operative (Acts xvii. 31). So that in the death and resurrection of Christ we have a complete and final answer to the problem of the presence of evil in a world originally created good. Even now the situation created by sin has been, from God's viewpoint, brought fully under control, and we are assured, therefore, that evil in all its manifestations shall be finally and effectually subdued. Explicitly, "we see not yet all things put under Him"; implicitly, we do see this, since "we see Jesus . . . crowned with glory and honour" (Heb. ii. 8-9). HE is the guarantee of our faith in the ultimate triumph of good, and of the discomfiture for ever of the forces of evil.

The Second Advent, then, is the sequel to the death and resurrection of Christ. The death of Christ, which is judgment, will be expressed historically in the great day of wrath; the resurrection of Christ, which is victory, will be realised in the subsequent manifestation of the Kingdom of God. The fact that Christ, the living One, became dead, and is now alive for evermore (Rev. i. 18), makes judgment and victory an accomplished reality to faith. Believers look on the world as already judged, and hold as their reasonable hope the certainty of the manifested Kingdom of Christ and the glories of the age to come. Wrath is appointed for the world, but concerning those who have received Christ it is written:

God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him (1 Thess. v. 9-10).

Therefore it is also written that we are called

. . . to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come (1. Thess. i. 10).

But if, through the resurrection power of Christ, believers will experience the glories of the coming Kingdom, it is equally sure that unbelievers will suffer the doom of sin. The same crisis which means salvation for the righteous means judgment for the wicked.

No doubt the fact of this ultimate judgment, with its terrible consequences for the ungodly, raises difficulties, intellectual and moral, in our minds. We are ready enough to assent to the suppression of evil in the abstract: we shrink from the implications of its suppression in the individual. Yet apart from personality sin has no existence. Sin is not something abstract. It is the activity of a living will, human or demoniacal, and is always identified with the person through whom it is expressed. Its reprobation, therefore, must inevitably affect that person. Problems connected therewith rise from our very limited view of things. God alone can have eternal views of such a subject. He, and He only, can measure the righteousness of His eternal judgments.

Eternal judgment is not annihilation, which denies the persistence of personality; neither is it remedial suffering, which underestimates the malignant strength of man's evil will (see Rev. xvi. 10-11). Eternal judgment is God's vengeance upon sin. This is not vindictiveness, for the word translated "vengeance", as Greek scholars remind us, signifies literally "that which proceeds out of justice". This proceeding of justice involves, among other things, the compulsory subjection of evil to the will of God. There is no anarchy in the eternal prison-house. Hell, not less than heaven, shall acknowledge Christ as Lord, and bow to His rule (Phil. ii. 10-11). In judgment God gives His active decision upon the free actions of man and binds them within that decision. So that when man comes under judgment his initial freedom, which is freedom within the limits of creaturehood, is still further circumscribed and becomes freedom within the limits drawn by that act of judgment.

The death of Christ has brought men within the scope of such a judgment. It is within this limitation that man now exercises his freedom and choice. The will of God directs the course of moral and spiritual law, and determines their issues. God is the arbiter of human destiny.

Walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment (Eccles. xi. 9).

Men are shut up to the acknowledgment of God's authority. Eventually all things will be subdued to God, whether things in heaven, or things in earth, or things under the earth (Phil. ii. 10). The witness of the Scriptures expressly declares it, and in pledge thereof points to the session of Christ at the right hand of God.

The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit Thou at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool (Ps. cx. 1).

. . . Jesus Christ: who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto Him (1 Pet. iii. 22).

For He must reign, till He hath put all enemies under His feet. . . . And when all things shall be subdued unto Him, then shall the Son also Himself be subject unto Him that put all things under Him, that God may be all in all (1 Cor. xv. 24-8).

And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia! for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth (Rev. xix. 6).

The full significance of the death of Christ as an instrument of judgment can only be measured by this vision of God, enthroned over all, blessed for ever.

A vision so elevated cannot but call forth an ascription of power and majesty to Him to whose ways these great judgments bear witness. How can this more fitly be rendered than in the language of Scripture itself?

Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is Thine; Thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and Thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour came of Thee, and Thou reignest over all; and in Thine hand is power and might; and in Thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. Now, therefore, our God, we thank Thee, and praise Thy glorious name (1 Chr. xxix. 11-13).

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