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SYMBOL AND REALITY IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

J. GAMBLE

BRISTOL, THE CATHEDRAL, ENGLAND

THE Bible does not offer us anything that we should call a philosophy of history, i. e. a survey of the past in which its various periods appear as stages in one continuous movement, or as the steps of a rising stair. We find in the Old Testament anticipations of the rise and fall of states and empires, but no attempt is made to connect these occurrences with each other, as a cause is connected with its effect, to show how the fall of one state prepared the way for the appearance of its successor.

The New Testament does, however, contain one book where the religious development of mankind, and its final outcome, are, not indeed expressly described or foretold, but indicated and implied. And here, as elsewhere in the sacred volume, the forecast is made incidentally, in view of a practical object. The writer lets us see his interpretation of the past, and his anticipation of what is yet to come, while he labours to strengthen the faith of his intended readers.

In reading the books of the Bible we often fail to see the wood for the trees. Many questions rise up by the way, and draw off our attention from the writer's central purpose. We lose ourselves in bypaths, and have no clue in our hands to bring us back. This may not matter so much when we are reading a narrative of events. But the loss is serious when we are following a consecutive argument in which the separate parts combine to form one carefully-planned structure.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews had to obviate a doubt which sometimes reappears in our own midst. He had to show that Christianity was not one among many existing religions, destined in its turn to pass, but that it was firmly rooted in human experience, and would to the end satisfy the cravings of the soul. The alternative may be put in the concise form: "Is Christianity a religion or is it religion?"

We may suppose the readers addressed in the Epistle, Jews by nationality who had accepted the Messiahship of Jesus, to argue thus: "By no faith was the claim to a Divine origin more confidently made than by the religion of Moses in which we were born, which gave us a law by which to live, a worship with which to approach God. Yet this religion has already passed, or is passing. We know the thrill of anguish with which the Jewish world saw the Temple, the pledge of God's abiding Presence, reduced to a ruin. Is the faith we have now embraced assured of any greater permanence? Is it anything more than another religion doomed in its turn to be superseded?"

The answer given by S. Paul would not have entirely overcome such misgivings. The great Apostle had indeed pronounced the Mosaic system to be a preparation for Christ. It was as the servant who takes the child to school and there leaves him to be instructed by his proper teacher. He had, however, more than once implied that there had been a complete breach of continuity between the old religion and the new. He had told the Galatians that if they admitted the Law's obligations they would be faithless to Christ. The two faiths were thus left as rivals or antagonists. Yet Judaism was of Divine origin, and had been the stay of patriarchs and prophets. Might not a time come when Christianity also should be found to have grown old, and to be ready to perish?

It is in his solution of this difficult question that our writer shows his profound originality. We need not confine his principle to the one religion to which he applies it. We may use it to illuminate the religious experience of mankind.

The principle is that old things do indeed pass away, but do so by becoming new. These words of Paul (2 Cor. 5 17), which he uses only in a personal sense, might, if we enlarge them, stand as a summary of the argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The old things pass, but what is of value in them is carried over, and finds a place in the new structure. The Epistle is thus the sacred illustration of a principle but for which history would be a series of disconnected fragments, and the past a mere rubbish-heap or lumber-room. It is the recognition of a continuous evolution in religious experience.

The writer has to show that the Temple worship, and the law upon which this worship rested, might be of Divine origin and yet temporary, good for a time, and yet not good for all time. To do this he makes use of the Platonic distinction between the real and the apparent. In the mind of Plato there were, as we know, two worlds, which he distinguished as "upper" and "lower," although he did not picture either of them as localities, but as states of being. To the lower or phenomenal world belonged the objects of sense-perception, the things we see and handle. These objects are in a constant state of flux or "becoming," and being so, could not be regarded as real. The upper world contains the realities which these ever-changing objects indicate or symbolize. These realities are "eternal," not in the sense of persisting changelessly through time, but in the sense that they have no relation to time. Of this distinction, which had reached him through the religious thinkers of Alexandria, our writer makes, as far as I know, an original use.

It becomes in his hands the basis of a far-reaching doctrine of symbol and reality. The things of the phenomenal or "lower" world receive from him the significant name of "shadows." The meaning he puts upon this word needs to be carefully noted. In our ordinary speech a shadow is either something unsubstantial or something disturbing. It has the first of these meanings in Burke's exclamation: "What shadows we are and what shadows we pursue!" It has the other sense when we speak of a landscape as chilled by the passing cloud-shadows. For our writer the word has a quite

different significance. The "shadows" for him are such as a luminous body casts before when it approaches. We see the shadow long before we see the luminary itself. It grows in size and power as the luminary draws near. The real world announces its presence by a succession of these revealing shadows, which indicate the reality with greater force and vividness as the ages pass. But in no case are the shadows misleading or treacherous. They are Divinely given, and as such to be valued and cherished, although to the end they are only symbols of unseen realities.

Such is the writer's conception of religious progress. He pictures it as never-ending. Christians have fuller light than their predecessors. But they only see the real world with the eye of faith (11 1). Thus it is not that God withholds the knowledge of His life-giving secrets from the earlier generations that He may tell them all at once to their descendants. His revelations are in each case proportionate to the receptiveness of those who receive them. And for all alike the ultimate reality remains invisible until humanity has run its course (11 40).

The truth by which the writer thus illuminates the history of religion is plainly susceptible of a far wider use than that to which he needs to put it. Before we consider its applications, however, we shall do well to look at the two illustrations by which he shows how the "shadow" makes way for the "substance" (8 5; cp. Col. 2 17).

He fixes our attention upon the two institutions which, in the Jewish as in most ancient religions, stand out conspicuous. These are law and priesthood.

(a) The *laws* of early ages are, as we know, sacred customs. The custom is invested with sacred authority because of its immemorial antiquity. It must be obeyed because no one can remember a time when it was not obeyed. Even though it be mischievous it does not for this reason awaken misgivings. The teeth must be pulled out, the feet must be squeezed because they always have been. Primitive law is thus beyond criticism. The reason is not allowed to work upon it. On the other hand, our modern laws derive their whole force

from the consent of the governed. "You cannot," said Burke, "bring an indictment against a nation." When the entire nation breaks the law, the law is held to have lost its force.

Obedience to primitive laws could thus only be willing as long as it remained mechanical. As soon as reflection began obedience became burdensome and precarious. The law was only secure as long as it was not examined. When examination began, the foundations of the law began to shake. When the question came to be asked: "Why should I obey?" the answer: "You must obey because people have always obeyed" was found unsatisfying. The authority of custom broke, and the law lost its hold.

The understanding and will of the governed must consent to a law, before the law can be safe. When this consent has been given then a marked change takes place. The law which was before external passes inwards and becomes the bidding of a man's own spirit. The will of God becomes his own will. He is glad to obey. Duty becomes to him a stern, and yet a gracious lawgiver:

"Stern Lawgiver! yet thou dost wear
The Godhead's most benignant grace,
Nor know we anything as fair
As is the smile upon thy face."

The progress from the one kind of law to the other may be illustrated by that ambiguous word "sacrifice." The sacrifices of ancient religion can hardly have been more than expressions of loyalty to a tribal or national deity. The spirit of the worshipper can seldom have been deeply moved. The offering was made for, and not by him. Nothing was expected of him but that he should bear the cost. When we pass from this mechanical obedience to any of those surrenders of place, or wealth or life itself which we should think worthy of the name of sacrifice, we find that their author receives, in the sense of spiritual freedom and joy which he gains, more than the equivalent of what he surrenders. A man who pays off the load of his father's debts, a woman who surrenders some career which she loves in

obedience to a filial call, would say that it would be harder to refrain from their surrenders than to make them. Their self-abnegations lose themselves in joy.

Such is the contrast which our writer wishes to emphasize when he compares the laws of Moses, external, rigid, written upon tables of stone, with that law of Christ which the heart of the believer lays upon itself, and is the outcome of a willing conformity on his part with his Master's experience. The conformity is, like all Christian duties, self-imposed and voluntary. The believer is drawn by "the cords of a man, and the bands of love." He assents to what he does, and thus, in all his privations, he remains a free man (10 16; 8 10).

(b) The conception of *priesthood* suffers a like transfiguration. The hereditary priesthood of ancient religion makes way for a spiritual and consequently real priesthood. The authority of the real priest rests upon self-conquest and upon a knowledge of human nature (5 4, 7-10). He knows what sin is, because he has striven with it himself. He does not contemplate the weaknesses of his fellows from the standpoint of untempted virtue. He will thus seldom commit himself to unqualified condemnations, knowing that such condemnations are seldom deserved. No external appointment can make such priests. The title may indeed be conferred by human authority, but the qualifications will not necessarily follow the title. On the other hand the qualifications may be present where no human authority has intervened. Melchizedek, the priest-king of early Jewish story, who comes, one knows not whence and goes one knows not whither, who has no human credentials—he, and not the official hereditary Aaron, becomes the prototype of the Christ. The new religion, the writer would say, has not discarded priesthood. What it does is, here as elsewhere, to supplant shadow by substance, symbol by reality. Christ is the spiritual reality whom the shadow heralded. This He is, first by reason of a Divine Vocation, and secondly by virtue of that fellow-feeling with humanity which He gained amidst the conflicts and sorrows of His troubled days. Passing through this school of suffering He entered the higher world and became the eternal priest.

To the Jewish worshipper the spectacle of the high-priest, raising the curtain and entering once a year within the veil, can hardly have been more than a ceremonial incident. The spirit of the Christian disciple follows Christ, not at long intervals, but habitually into the Presence of God. The intervening veils—whether they are thought of as fleshly or spatial—for the writer makes use of both conceptions (9 19; 4 14) are penetrated or overcome. The spirit approaches God, feels its oneness with Him, and enjoys the sense of pardon, and the peace of eternal life.

Such is the view of man's religious history which we reach with the help of this deep-thinking writer. The history, as he sees it, is a progress towards a real or eternal world. In the progress symbols, or, as he calls them, shadows make way for realities. The spirit becomes more and more conscious of itself, is more deeply moved and more firmly held, by the worship it offers and the law it obeys. What was mechanical becomes spontaneous, what was perfunctory becomes heartfelt. The movement is towards greater reality, because it is towards a larger and more intense spiritual life.

The goal of the whole progress—the heavenly or eternal world—cannot be brought within the reach of our present vision. It cannot be pictured in terms of space or time. It is not a locality, nor is it an endless succession of years. But it is not an hallucination, or fancy. It is the consummation to which the whole history of the spirit of man points.

From this higher world we are separated by no spatial or temporal obstacles. No deep gulf is fixed between earth and heaven. The veils which once obstructed access have been done away by the passage of Jesus, on behalf of humanity, into the heavens. All who look to Him, and learn His great lesson, may follow Him and share His eternal life. To do this they need above all to see the eternal world and to live in its presence (11 27; 12 1, 2).

What makes such vision difficult is the tyranny of visible things. Overpowered by this tyranny we sell our heavenly citizenship for a mess of pottage (12 16). If we could look through the things seen to the things unseen, or, in other

words, live in the world of reality and not in the world of appearance, the occurrences of the passing day would, for us as for Paul, work out an exceeding weight of glory (2 Cor. 4 17, 18).

Such vision can only be the outcome of spiritual habit. The will must be brought into exercise (12 1). There are no short cuts to the desired end. The power cannot be gained by escaping from the contrarities of every-day life, and seeking shelter in seclusion. This would only be to repeat the experience of the early solitaries. Nor must the soul be thought of as imprisoned within the body, and panting for its release. Body and soul form one organism, and both must be used as instruments for reaching the heavenly vision (cp., e. g., 13 4, 9).

One great help in the life-long struggle thus ensuing is the sense of companionship. The present runners in the race of life are surrounded by a large number of consenting witnesses, near though invisible. They were not faultless or blameless heroes. They represent various moral codes, and some of them hardly even reached the low standard of the rough ages in which they lived (11 31, 32). The value of their testimony arises from the fact that they trusted their aspirations, and thus earned a reward greater than they knew (11 39, 40).

Such is the hope of immortality as it is here presented. The goal of man's pilgrimage is a spiritual and not a material city. He moves on into ever-widening hopes, and more exalted visions, and he thus learns to believe that God keeps in store for him things greater than he knows how to pray for (11 40). He may try to visualize the object of his desire by the aid of the pictorial imagination, and dream of years which never end, of streets of gold and gates of pearl. These images are good in their time, but gradually fade in the growing light. The vision itself is, however, no illusion. It is a sure prophecy, proving itself by the great things it enables those who trust it to accomplish, and pointing onwards towards a state of being of which the spirit has, in its best moments, convincing assurance.

Thus, if human life be judged by its visible achievements,

the civilizations it builds up, it may indeed be a temple destined to be buried beneath the débris of a universe in ruins, but if the aspirations of man be taken into account, as surely they must, for they are as certainly a part of our nature as our bodily appetites are, then the history of these aspirations—the part they have already played, the fulfilments they have already received—enables us to disregard the downfall of the material temple. It then becomes the prophecy of another and better fabric of which it was only the revealing shadow.