

## **THE REALITY OF GOD IN HISTORY**

No longer aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, it is our pleasure to ponder the mighty matters of Israelitish history—a history unlike all other histories—a history involving futurity because of the materials that went to make it up. Isaiah alludes to Israel as a nation “terrible from their beginning hitherto.” In the portion read from Joshua, we have illustration of what this means. The Amorite nations were seized with a panic on Israel’s approach. If we ask the reason of this panic, we touch the hand of God. How came it that a nation of slaves, intractable and rebellious against Moses, should inspire terror in nations great and mighty, with trained soldiers, and cities walled to heaven? Rahab indicates the answer in her speech to the spies:

*“We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when ye came out of Egypt, and what ye did unto the two kings of the Amorites that were on the other side Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom ye utterly destroyed. And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man because of you; for the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above and in earth beneath.”*

This was a perfectly reasonable explanation of the fear created by Israel’s approach. It is the only reasonable explanation of Israel’s triumph over the warlike nations of Canaan. Those who deny the miraculous cooperation of God with Israel in the Exodus, create an insoluble historical problem. The fact of the Exodus cannot be disputed; the fact of the military conquest of Canaan forty years afterwards is equally beyond question. If God were not with Israel, how came a multitude of people to subsist in the wilderness, away from all source of supply? How came they to remain in such a place at all? And how came they to be able to live in the presence of the military league formed against them in Canaan when they entered; not to speak of their total discomfiture of that league, and the overthrow of the nations that entered into it?

But God was with them. It is this fact that gives the history of Israel its meaning, both as regards the past and the future. It is the one glorious spot in the gloomy history of this our world. It was first eulogised by Moses, when he said:

*“Ask now of the days that are past, which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from the one side of heaven unto the other, whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it? Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as thou hast heard, and live? Or hath God assayed to go and take him a nation from the midst of another nation, by temptations, by signs, and by wonders, and by war, and by a mighty hand, and by a stretched out arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?” (Deut. 4:32-34)*

It is the marvel of all history that God should have formed and used and guided a nation as He did in the case of Israel, and that that nation should be extant to the present day in the very position foretold by Moses over three thousand years ago—scattered among all other nations. It is a marvel with a meaning. It is no mere episode. It is not a mere passage of history. It is part of a plan. We comprehend the plan in the light of the prophets evangelised to us by the apostles of the lord Jesus. The plan is in fact the programme of the earth’s deliverance in harmony with the honour of the earth’s Possessor and Creator. The plan consummated shows us the earth “*full of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea*”; and Israel restored, the head of a family of enlightened and happy nations, united in the service of Israel’s God. The foundation of the plan had to be laid ages ago. There had to be a gradual working up from a time when the earth was poorly peopled and overgrown with forest, to a time of immense population and extensive subjugation of the soil and occupation of the earth with cities. To replenish the earth and subdue it is the mission of the first Adam. An empty world would have been a poor theatre for the revelation of the glory of the Lord. It requires an “*all flesh*” to “*see it*

together.” And this “*all flesh*” requires in some measure to be civilised. A world of Zulus would not be a suitable basis for the interesting work of God.

While the first Adam in multitude has been doing the physical part of the preparation work—subduing the earth everywhere and fitting it for habitation, God has accomplished the other part in what He has done with Israel. He brought them miraculously from Egypt that they in the first instance might know His name and turn from the idols which all the world worshipped. Moses told them this was the object of the miracles:

*“To thee it was showed, that thou mightest know that the Lord he is God: there is none else beside him. . . . Know therefore this day, and consider it in thine heart, that the Lord he is God in heaven above, and in the earth beneath”* (Deut. 4:35, 39).

God’s message to Pharaoh reveals the same object:

*“For this cause have I raised thee up, for to show in thee my power: and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth”* (Exodus 9:16).

The succeeding history of Israel trends to the same point. The knowledge of God was kept alive by the ministry of the prophets, and His requirements by the Mosaic service. When Christ appeared, there was an extension of the work. A miraculously-attested embassy going out from Judea in the name of Christ, summoned “*all men everywhere to repent*,” and to “*turn to God from idols, to serve the living and the true God, and to wait for his son from heaven*”. Though the result of this appeal was not very bountiful as regards widespread and effectual “*repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ*,” yet a humanising effect was produced in vast communities of the human race. The basis of European civilisation was laid in the substitution, in 300 years, of State Christianity for Paganism as the religious constitution of the Roman Empire. The work of the apostles while it accomplished the primary object of taking out a people as the associates of Christ in his coming glory, has indirectly reclaimed the population of Europe from a state of utter barbarism to a state of comparative enlightenment, in which they are more fit to be operated upon by that dispensation of judgment and instruction which is about to come into force in all the world.

The nation, “*terrible from their beginning hitherto*,” is a nation whose future is bound up with this coming dispensation. Though “*meted out and trodden down*,” God has not cast them off for ever. This He cannot do, for He has pledged His word to the contrary:

*“If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel, for all that they have done”* (Jer. 31:37).

*“Though I make a full end of all nations whither I have scattered thee, yet I will not make a full end of thee: but I will correct thee in measure”* (30:11).

When this “*correction in measure*” has reached its appointed limits, the nation terrible from their beginning hitherto will become terrible again in the same way. Israel is again to be employed as the instrument of those wonderful acts by which the world, at the coming of Christ, is to be taught righteousness. So, Zechariah testifies, as you know, in the language of prophecy uttered in the past tense:

*“The Lord of hosts hath visited his flock the house of Judah, and hath made them as his goodly horse in the battle: . . . and they shall be as mighty men, which tread their enemies in the mire of the streets in the battle: . . . and I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph, and I will bring them again to place them; for I have mercy upon them: and they shall be as though I had not cast them off.”*

A direct parallel is drawn in Micah between these coming days and Egyptian deliverance:

*“According to the days of thy coming out of the land of Egypt will I show unto him marvellous things. The nations shall see and be confounded at all their might: they shall lay their hand upon their mouth, their ears shall be deaf. They shall lick the dust*

*like a serpent, they shall move out of their holes like worms of the earth: they shall be afraid of the Lord our God, and shall fear because of thee” (7:15).*

In the prospect of these things, we have been made personally concerned by the adoption of which we have become the subjects in the obedience of the gospel. Before that adoption, we had no connection with them. We were Gentiles “*afar off*,” and without hope (Eph. 2:12); but now in Christ Jesus we have been brought nigh, and are fellow-citizens with the saints, and partakers of the covenants of promise. This language is expressive not merely of a change of mind and disposition in ourselves, but a change in our relation to those outward coming events which will shortly fill the world, first with woe, and then with blessing. The saints, as you know, are to “*execute the judgment written*” (Psa. 149:9; Dan. 7:22; 1 Cor. 6:2), and they are to sit on the throne with Christ, and rule the world in righteousness (Rev. 3:21; 2 Tim. 2:12; Isa. 32:1; Dan. 7:27).

To this high destiny we have been called by the gospel. For the realisation of it we are waiting in patient hope. We have need of patience. Men regard our expectation as chimerical, and worse; nature seems to mock our hope; time prolongs and the heart is liable to sicken. Let us be on our guard. Our fitness for the house of Christ hangs upon our endurance to our little end:

*“Whose house are we if we hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end” (Heb. 3:6).*

None but those who lose their hold on the facts will let go the hope. The hope is sure and the hope is great. The word of divine consolation says,

*“Yet a little while and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry”—*

That is, he will not tarry always. He had to tarry a while. It was part of the plan. It was “*needful*,” said Jesus, and for more reasons than we in our short-sightedness can at present realise. But the tarrying is not so great as it seems. It seems long to us because we are small. Our conceptions of things are not the standard of measurement in the case. The plan is a plan of God, and we must look at it from the standpoint of Him with whom a thousand years are as a watch in the night. From this point of view—

*“The triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the hypocrite but for a moment.”*

David truly says,

*“Yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be. But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.”*

The day was when Moses performed the wonderful works of God in the sight of Israel. Israel became familiar with the marvels: their effect waned: Israel growing disobedient came under punishment, and the time passed on. A long interval of inaction elapsed. The day came when Jesus, walking among men, said:

*“I am the light of the world: he that believeth in me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.”*

Men listened to his words and were struck, for he spake as one having authority and not as the scribes: but the effect was not deep. His wonderful words and works became common things; and those who profited by them crucified him. The miraculously-attested testimony of his resurrection filled the Roman world for a while with light and hope; but evil men prostituted the privileges of the apostolic age for their own exaltation. They grew accustomed to and then slighted the presence of the apostles. The apostles died: the light went out: a corruption of their doctrines became popular: the times of the Gentiles prevailed in all their darkness: and now we have come on the scene. Let us not mistake the appearance of things. The state of things we have opened our eyes upon is utterly transient. The state of things we now see will shortly be no more seen for ever. The day will as certainly come as the days that are past, when the voice of Christ will again be heard, but this time with power and with enduring effect—an effect that will make him the accepted head of all mankind and the possessor of the utmost

bounds of the earth. If we remain steadfast in this gloom, ours will be the glory when it dawns. Well might Paul say,

*“Cast not away therefore your confidence, **which hath great recompense of reward.**”*

Paul addressed this exhortation to some who had suffered much more than we are ever likely to do. He says they *“endured a great fight of afflictions,”* and became a gazing stock of the ignorant through the reproach attaching to their profession of the faith, and *“partly while they became companions of them that were so used.”* Not only does he show us that they had been great sufferers; he acquaints us with the way they took it; ye *“took joyfully the spoiling of your goods.”* It is for us to look back and realise this. The brethren of whom Paul writes these things were in their day flesh and blood like ourselves, with all the sensibilities, and affections, and anxieties, and fears of which we find ourselves possessed. The picture of their joyful submission to spoliation ought to be of some use to us. It ought to help us the more easily to endure the suffering that comes to our lot, for doubtless our position is a position of suffering though not of the same order as that of our brethren of the first century. We suffer reproach on account of our hope; we suffer disadvantage on account of the law of Christ which separates us from the friendship of the world, and unfits us for fighting on equal terms with the world, the battle of the present life; we suffer deprivation in being forbidden to resist evil or follow pleasure. Our whole course is one of self-denial—*“strangers,”* not at home where we are; *“pilgrims”*—passing on to another destination. Therefore, like the Hebrews, we have *“need of patience.”* It comes with the contemplation of those who have trodden the same path before us, but especially in the contemplation of the results of our course. Jesus himself was strengthened from this source:

*“For the joy set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame.”*

There is great joy set before us. Unutterable joy is involved in the consummation expressed in the few words with which Paul completes his sentence:

*“Ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye **might receive the promise.**”*

This receiving of the promise is the receiving of the things promised; and what they are the gospel has caused us to know. They comprise every good and desirable thing which it is possible for the heart of man to conceive, and which it is impossible for the heart of man to conceive. We look into the earth and behold darkness and sorrow in the toiling and stricken masses of mortals who barely manage to live, and whose life at that is ignoble, joyless, and burdensome. We listen to the promises; they tell us of the purpose of God to spread a feast of fat things for all people, which will make the nations glad and sing for joy, and call its founder blessed. We survey with agony the prosperity of the wicked, and the pomp and renown of men who have no claim to honour but the possession of riches, which they heap to themselves in a towering monopoly, protected by law which knows no mercy for the poor, and takes no account of justice. The promises give us the prospect of an hour when God will overturn the house of the wicked in the tempest of His anger, and set up the house of the righteous in all the earth in its place. We contemplate our own feeble natures, and our own dwarfed, and pinched, and narrowed surroundings, yearning to bless, but powerless to lift a finger in alleviation of the misery around us. The gospel tells us to wait a little, and this poor body will be regenerated and immortalised; and power and wealth put into the hands of the sons of God everywhere, for the blessing of all families of the earth. There is no evil we can think of that a cure is not provided for in the gospel; no good we can desire but what is embraced in its covenants. Having been put in possession of this most blessed hope, let us hold fast the confidence of it with the tenacity inspired by the conviction of its truth, and the certainty that at the last, it will burst upon the world in glory, like the sun long hidden on a cloudy day.

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