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PERSPECTIVES

Quentin Lauer, S.J.

THE GENIUS OF BIBLICAL THOUGHT

TO THOSE who wish to understand the Christian vision of the world, the distinctive qualities of Hebrew thought are of no little significance. True, Christianity is a faith, and faith is man's response to God revealing Himself. But for thousands of years the custodians of revelation were the Hebrews. This implies that revelation is in some sense bound up with the characteristic way of thinking of the people to whom it was first given, for in revealing Himself to man, God makes use of the thought-patterns peculiar to those men who are His instruments. Only if we enter sympathetically into the thought-world of those instruments can we hope to understand the message which God has sent through them to us.

Whether or not one wishes to attribute to the Hebrews a characteristic metaphysics is unimportant (it is clear enough that they have bequeathed to us no metaphysics as a systematically formulated view of reality), but it is important that we recognize in the background of Hebrew thought an attitude toward being, against which their expressed thought is to be interpreted. The purpose of the present study is to bring out the dynamic and existential character of Hebrew thought—as opposed, for example, to the static and essential character of Greek thought. (“Opposed” here does not mean “hostile,” and to contrast Hebrew and Greek thought is not to slight the genius of Greece.) The dynamic character of Hebrew thought makes it ideal for the expression of a faith which, more than an intellectual assent to a set of propositions, is an active surrender of the whole human person to God; and this same dynamism gives Hebrew thought a certain similarity to contemporary thought with its concern for the concrete, the temporal, the historical, the evolving. Hebrew thought may not, perhaps, be suited to the kind of verification science demands, but neither is the supernatural with which it is concerned. It can, however, do what scientific thought cannot

do. It can courageously face mystery. It can even rejoice in the fact that the relationship between God and man is mysterious.¹

THE VISION OF A CREATED WORLD

IT HAS been said that, though the fact of creation is discoverable by natural reason, in reality it is not known to have been discovered before its revelation given in the first chapter of Genesis. This might be amended to read that the fact is not known to have been discovered by the logic of "Greek reason."² In any event, one of the most striking characteristics of Hebrew thought, distinguishing it from all philosophical thought not dependent on it, is that it *begins* with a recognition that the world is created. Whatever else can be said of biblical thought is ultimately traceable to this recognition. Rather than starting with a contemplation of the world and working up from it to a first principle, it starts with God, the first principle, from which all else flows.³

While the Greeks speculated about God, the Jews accepted the God revealed to them, their cast of thought making them ready for such an acceptance—whatever their experience of His mighty acts told them about Him they believed, for they did not distrust experience.⁴ Homer

1. In the course of this study I shall have many occasions to refer to several excellent works in French and German, to which I am indebted both for information and inspiration. They are: Claude Tresmontant, *Essai sur la pensée hébraïque* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1953), referred to as *Pensée hébraïque*; Claude Tresmontant, *Etudes de métaphysique biblique* (Paris: Gabalda, 1955), referred to as *Métaphysique biblique*; Thorleif Boman, *Das hebräische Denken im Vergleich mit dem griechischen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954); Johannes Hessen, *Platonismus und Prophetismus* (Munich: Reinhardt, 1939); and Oscar Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit*, quoted here in its English translation by F. V. Filson, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950).

2. It would, of course, be an oversimplification to say that all Greek thought was dominated by logic; Heraclitus is an exception which immediately springs to mind. Suffice it to say that, to the extent that Greek thought was dominated by logic, it did not discover the fact of creation.

3. That God creates the world out of nothing, Hessen has reminded us, is the scandal for all idealism, as Fichte's protest against "this Jewish superstition" shows most clearly. And that He created the world by His word is the scandal for that realism which conceives creation only according to the category of causality (*op. cit.*, pp. 218-219).

4. It changes little if we call this difference between the Hebrew and the Greek casts of thought a difference in "temperament," as Livingstone does: the result is the same. The biblical writers, he says, "show a self-submission and self-abasement to [God] which is quite un-Greek. They are obsessed with the sense of Him. He is the inspiration of all that is great and memorable in their writings. . . . [The books in the Old Testament] are continually occupied with the relations of God to man; nineteen—the Book of Job, the Psalms, the prophetic books—have no

and Hesiod, on the other hand, described the deities the Greek spirit had made in the likeness of corruptible man. Seeing something wonderful in every impulse, aspiration, virtue, or whim, the Greeks called each one god. "Their God was too much the creation of his worshippers ever to become absolute. He was a constitutional monarch whose subjects never quite forgot that they had put him on his throne."⁵

But the God of Israel cannot be a human creation: He goes too much against the natural tendencies of human thought.⁶ He is, it is true, a God with whom man can enter into dialogue, since He made him according to His image, an image to which freedom is essential, but in that dialogue man is never unaware of on which side dependence lies. We have but to page through the prophetic books of the Old Testament to recognize an awareness of God not equaled elsewhere in the world's literature. It is the consciousness that He works in and through His creatures, a consciousness which can be the result only of a vital experience, not of rational speculation. Read Isaiah's account of his calling by God (chap. 6) or Jeremiah's (chap. 1). No room there for asking questions, for "reasoning out" the situation—God has touched His prophet, and all that is left is to obey.

In the first verses of Genesis and throughout the Old and New Testa-

other subject. It is not so with Greek literature. There does not lie behind that, as an unchanging background, a struggle between the will of man and the will of God. It has no repeated protests against a backsliding people, whose ears continually wax dull and their hearts gross. And this is not due to an exceptional righteousness of the Greeks. Rather it is because religion was not the same thing for Homer or Aeschylus as for Moses or Isaiah. In their scheme of the world God was not everything. He was part of their life, an important part, but not more. He was there to lend His countenance to their occupations and interests, but not to direct, dominate, and override them. So it is even with the most religious Greeks. When Plato constructs his ideal city, the first word in his pages is not God, the first thought of the writer is not how he shall please Him. Much later in the treatise do we come to such considerations. Read the *Republic* by the side of one of the prophetic books, and the difference of temper is apparent" (R. W. Livingstone, *The Greek Genius and Its Meaning to Us*, London: Oxford University Press, 1924, pp. 58-59).

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-53. "If the Greek rejected magic, it was because he expected nothing from his gods; if the Israelite abhorred magic, it was because he expected everything from his God, trusted in Him for everything" (Hessen, *op. cit.*, p. 61).

6. "There is no chance that the biblical idea of God was fabricated by the hands or the thought of man. It contradicts, if one is to believe the history of philosophies, the natural tendencies of human metaphysics; it goes in an opposite direction, against the spontaneous intuitions recorded in the traditions of India and in Western thought. More than that, the biblical conception of God met with constant resistance among the people chosen to transmit it. Like all the other peoples of the world this people had only too strong a tendency to make itself a god 'which would go before it'" (Tresmontant, *Métaphysique biblique*, p. 182).

ments, one thing is clear: for biblical thought the world has a "beginning," and this is enough to characterize the whole biblical attitude toward the world and toward all that is in it. A world that has a beginning owes its very being to Him who is responsible for that beginning. To the Hebrew this was so evident that he felt no need to speculate on the inner principles which would explain the apparent contradictions in the world about him: its oneness and its diversity, its permanence and its constant changing. The problem itself was foreign to his way of thinking, as was the problem of reconciling sensible appearances with the rational essence behind those appearances. For a way of thinking like the Greeks', which sees perfection in unity and in multiplicity imperfection, the multiplication of beings involves a descent to imperfection, which an all-perfect being could scarcely will freely.⁷ For the Hebrew, however, it was sufficient that God made things numerous and manifold and "saw that they were good"; he simply would not allow philosophical speculation to impose upon him a problem already invalidated by what his faith "knew" about God and His creation. The Hebrew adored God, not reason.

The first major heresies to threaten the Church were precisely those which found something essentially evil in creation itself, particularly in the creation of matter. To Manichaeism, for instance, matter was evil because it was the principle of multiplicity and hence of a falling away from the perfection of the One. This was, in a way, the outcome of the Greek approach, an outcome the Greek philosopher, however, could avoid, since for him matter was eternal, not needing to be created. But the Manichaean was faced with the problem of reconciling his view of matter with revelation—the result was heresy. The other great heresy of the first two centuries was Gnosticism, whose very name indicates pride in human reason as against the humility which accepts a world as it is revealed to be. Whereas biblical thought distinguished between creation and the fall, seeing in the one the excellence belonging to God's work and in the other the evil introduced by man's misuse of the freedom God had given him, the Gnostic saw in the fall not a sin but an indispensable element for the very genesis of the world and of history. To Manichaean and Gnostic alike, matter was the source of evil, but to the Hebrew, the greatest evil was sin and its source was in the spiritual

7. It is extremely doubtful whether one can read a will activity at all into the God of Greek speculation.

realm—its type was the lie.⁸ The early Christian heresies, then, preferred to submit God to the measure of their own reasonings and to make of sin a defect inherent in the very concept of matter and multiplicity, but biblical thought dared to conceive God as creating a freedom capable of defying Him.

The Hebrew would never have belittled creatures in order to glorify their Maker; on the contrary, by recognizing their full dignity he exalted Him far more, since he was constantly aware that whatever exists does so because God created it. If he made any comparisons at all, it was the radical comparison of the mystic: God is all, the creature is nothing—but this mystical view never prevented him from taking the individual creature seriously. Again, aware that the world is created, the biblical writers did not have to speak of a duality of matter and form in order to explain finite being—why “explain” God’s activity at all? Nor would it have ever occurred to them to look for an “explanation” of God’s creative activity—creation out of nothing—in man’s creative activity, which organizes a pre-existent material: the difference was too obvious.

When the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides looked at the material world around him, his experience told him that there is in it a multiplicity of beings and that these beings move, change, grow. But his reasoning was that all this was impossible: there was only one being, underyived and unchangeable. *One*, for being could not be distinguished from being, since there was nothing in “beings” which was not being whereby they could be distinguished; *underyived*, for there could not be any coming into being, since being could not come from nothing, from not-being; *unchangeable*, for change or growth would imply that what is, at the same time becomes. For the Greeks and those who follow their thought, this is the beginning of fruitful speculation on the nature of being, multiplicity, and change. But for the people of Israel, such speculation would simply have been time wasted; no “logic” could make them contradict what their faith knew, and their faith knew that God made and makes what was not before. Greek reason would call this impossible, or at least be concerned with finding out how it was possible. The Hebrew mind, however, was not concerned with how a creation from nothing was possible; it could not even ask itself the question as to whether what *is* is possible. For if one begins not with nothingness but with the fullness of being, then the existence of other

8. See Tresmontant, *Pensée hébraïque*, pp. 21-23.

beings, with their genesis, their growth and development, does not constitute a problem; it is simply a fact.⁹

Likewise, Hebrew thought was less concerned with analyzing the world into its "component elements" than it was with seeing in the functioning, growth, and development of all things an extension of God's creative activity. When Jesus said: "My Father works even until now" (Jn 5:17), His hearers had no trouble understanding Him. The world works, and since it does, God does; creation is, as it were, still going on. Matter, for the Hebrew, was not something inert; it was dynamic, because God made it so. The assertion of modern science that atoms and stars are ever coming into being, that matter is constantly in the state of genesis, would in no way have troubled him, for his confidence in God would have told him that this genesis was good. Nor would he have been troubled by the notion of evolution, since it could never have occurred to him that an evolving matter would detract in the slightest from God's creative activity. To seek to discover any special laws governing matter he would have considered superfluous; there was for him only one law ruling all finite beings, and that was the law of creation.¹⁰

Perhaps one of the most striking differences between Hebrew and Greek thought—and this too flows from Israel's faith in God the Creator—was in their attitudes toward sensible things. Whether with Plato, who saw in the things that strike the senses but defective imitations of eternal ideas, or with Aristotle, who saw true perfection in essences, universals, rather than in concrete and particular things, the Greek was inclined to stress not the individual being that exists but rather the ideal of which existing things are but particular examples. Because the Hebrew began with God rather than with the world, and because all that God does is good, he contemplated the perfection in things rather than their imperfection. He could dare to love the sensible world, because

9. "It is characteristic of Hebrew thought, as compared with Greek and Western philosophy, that it is not troubled by the negative ideas of nothingness and disorder. It is not haunted by the idea of an original nothingness which would be 'in the right' and which would have to be surmounted, or by a disorder, a chaos, which would have to be dominated and which would undermine the real with its menacing presence. The Hebrew does not begin with the empty to arrive at the full. It is not nothingness which by right is at the beginning. It is He whose name is: I am, Yahweh, the living God who created heaven and earth. 'In the beginning God . . .'" (*ibid.*, p. 55).

10. See Tresmontant, *Métaphysique biblique*, pp. 42-44.

the almighty word of God brought it into existence.¹¹ Nor did he feel constrained to reserve intelligibility to that which is either above, or abstracted from, the sensible. No dualist, he did not see in things a sensible element which is not intelligible and an intelligible element which is not sensible; he saw everything as a creature of God and as, by that very fact, intelligible. True, there were in his world angelic spirits, but he felt no need to speculate on their nature, being more concerned with their function as messengers of God.

On the other hand, and this may seem paradoxical, the people of Israel were not impressed by the beauty of sensible things in themselves. For them beauty was not something but Someone, and all things spoke to them of that Someone. Their hands have left us no paintings, no sculptures, no great monuments to admire; their one great work of art is their poetry, telling almost exclusively God's goodness toward His creatures. They had respect, no doubt, for His handiwork, but when they were in their right mind there was no danger of their becoming fascinated by it. To them things were real, but they were also signs, words, speaking of Him from whom they came.¹² Perhaps one can say that it was not the intelligibility of things they thought important, rather their transintelligibility, that is to say, He who is known through them.¹³

Yet in the Old Testament, all things point not only backward, as it were, to Him from whom they came, but also forward to Him whom they announced. From beginning to end the Bible is messianic; indeed, the whole Hebrew world of reality conspired to point toward a greater Reality to come. It is significant, too, that when the Holy One of God did come, He came as One who could be heard and looked upon, whom eyes could see and hands touch (1 Jn 1:1). True, "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not" (Jn 1:11), but their not receiving

11. "The Hebrew has the sense of the 'carnal' because in it he discerns its spiritual core. The biblical universe is the exact opposite of the Manichaean universe. To have a sense of the 'carnal,' a taste for the elemental, a sense of contemplation and of the spiritual, is all one from the biblical point of view, because the sensible world is language, it has been created by the word" (Tresmontant, *Pensée hébraïque*, p. 56).

12. Not that Israel was always faithful to the highest vision of its saints and prophets. Its history is so often a history of unfaithfulness: again and again kings and people set up an idol in place of the true God; but the genius of Hebrew thought, the supernatural inspiration of Israel's prophets, always recognized unfaithfulness for what it was.

13. See Tresmontant, *Pensée hébraïque*, p. 68; and Hessen, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-94.

Him cannot be ascribed to a faithfulness to the genius of their own thought. Those early heresies which, shocked at the thought of God in the *flesh*, denied the true humanity of Christ, were Greek, not Hebrew, in inspiration. Unwonted though this assertion may be, even contradicting so much that is said in this respect—that God should become incarnate in a sensible human nature was a logical scandal not to the Jews but to the Greeks. The great stumbling block to the Jews was the Crucifixion, not the Incarnation (see 1 Cor 1:23).

THE VISION OF MAN

IT IS the merit of Tresmontant to have pointed to creation as the great theme of Hebrew thought; he has likewise thrown new light on the biblical view of man. Because Israel believed in God the Creator—a faith so revolutionary in the pagan world—Israel could not but esteem all that God had made and could not but love man. It is biblical faith that God did not create because anything accrued to Him thereby; again, it is biblical faith that the Son did not become man for His own sake. The writers of the Bible had no doubt that God “works” for the benefit of man, and, because of this, their vision of man is important for our understanding of their world-view.

As I said before, the Hebrew felt no need to distinguish between the sensible and the intelligible elements in all that surrounded him. His was a childlike familiarity with being, coming from his initial certitude that saying “God created all” explained all. Like everything else man was created, but he was not seen in the Greek way as a “body informed by a soul”; he was simply a “living being” (Gen 2:7), living corporeally, sensibly. The Hebrew did not search for an intrinsic principle which would explain how one person could be distinguished from another: God created more than one, and that was enough for him.¹⁴ Yet he knew too that man was not only a creature but an image of God and

14. In the biblical universe, the multiplicity of beings is no accident, nothing negative, but a sign of God's fruitful love and power. The multitude of creatures is willed, for there is excellence in their multitude and excellence in each of them. Hence it is the particular that is the existent; neither negligible nor insignificant, the particular is the bearer of meaning. God chose one particular people, for instance, to witness to His truth; to accomplish this, He chose one particular man, Abraham, at a particular time, at a particular place. And it is the biblical metaphysics of multiple and particular beings, created by a positive act of God intending their excellence, that is the foundation of Christian personalism. See Tresmontant, *Pensée hébraïque*, pp. 15-16, 69, 99; and Hessen, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

that, as such, he had a certain duality in him. This duality, however, was not so much the philosophical duality of the body and the soul that animates it, rather that of spirit and flesh.¹⁵

"Flesh," in biblical language, is simply man himself, with stress on the element of fragility essential to his earthly condition.¹⁶ Yet for the Hebrew, this was no reason to wish to get rid of the flesh as of something embarrassing. The flesh, too, was the object of a positive act of creation, and God "saw that it was good." It is most meaningful that St. John chose this very word to tell the mystery of Christ: "The Word was made flesh" (1:14); and that Jesus Himself did not hesitate to say: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man . . . you shall not have life in you" (Jn 6:54).

One might venture to approximate the biblical dialectic of flesh and spirit to that of the natural and the supernatural. But neither Jew nor Christian needs to depreciate the natural in order to exalt the supernatural, nor did it occur to either (until the Greek influence made itself felt in early Christian heresies) to lay the blame for evil on the flesh because it was material. The true Judaeo-Christian tradition is not tempted to explain away evil by attributing it to matter; rather does it recognize evil—that is, in so far as it is sin—as belonging to the spiritual order. Only the spiritual in man can sin, and the spiritual in man is the "breath" God breathed into him (Gen 2:7). It is difficult enough to see how a Plato or an Aristotle could have understood a multiplicity of spirits without bodies,¹⁷ but it is impossible to see how either could have looked upon an "evil spirit" as anything but sheer nonsense.¹⁸

Further, the Greeks would have writhed in agony at the thought of attributing corporeal passions to the soul or the soul's emotions to the body. But the sacred writers thought little of attributing weeping to the soul or joy to the bowels (Ps 118:28; Prov 23:16). It is not that they saw all things as one, that they were unaware of the distinction between the inanimate and the animate, or that they did not see the vital, biological aspect of man as different from that which transcends it. Once again, it is merely that the Hebrew felt no distrust of the sensible. Though he knew that man is different from all that is not man, he

15. See Tresmontant, *ibid.*, pp. 87, 109, 112.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

17. Medieval Scholasticism also had its problems on this score.

18. See Tresmontant, *Pensée hébraïque*, p. 101.

saw no need of breaking man down into elements in order to explain the difference. Man was created by God as a sensible being, upon whose face the Hebrew could read anger, or fear, or joy; in whose clenched fists he could read pain or sorrow; in whose walk he could see consciousness of human dignity or despondency. Hence it was natural for him to say that a man's face was angry, that his eyes had seen the glory of the Lord, or that his soul thirsted.¹⁹

Yet Hebrew thought knew intimacy not only with the sensible world but also with the supra-sensible, the "world" of God and His ministering spirits. God walked in paradise and Adam conversed with Him; Moses stood in His presence, hearing Him and answering; Job could reproach Him with the way he had been treated (Gen 3:8-12; Ex 3:4-4:17; Job 23 and 24). The Hebrew was on familiar ground, therefore, when speaking of the spirit, the higher and altogether new dimension in man (new, that is, in the realm of living creatures on earth); and therefore too his thought was a remarkable preparation for the Christian theology of grace, of man's union with God, his participation in that which is proper to God Himself. The word the biblical writers used to express this supra-sensible dimension was taken, however, from the sensible world: *ruah*, "breath." "And God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). The spirit, the breath of life in man, is not supernatural in the strict sense, but it is that which makes possible supernatural life in him, possible the encounter of his spirit with the Spirit of God. For God Himself is Spirit, and that He can dwell in man, as the biblical message proclaims, is because of the spirit He created in him. Thus God's coming into man is not like the intrusion of a stranger but is desired, and it is prepared for by the creation of the human spirit, an embassy, as it were, in the land of man.²⁰

Of the spirit there was no psychology, as there was of the soul among the Greeks—no more than there is, in Christian theology, a psychology of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. It is not to be expected in Hebrew thought, and yet there is a sense in which psychology can be of help, by enumerating all the things which the spirit is not. By so doing, psychology liberates the spiritual, as it were, somewhat as photography liberated art by doing better all those things

19. See *ibid.*, pp. 102-104.

20. See *ibid.*, pp. 107-110.

which are not properly the function of art.²¹ There is in the Bible not the least attempt to present a systematic psychology; what it does offer is an anthropology, an understanding of man. For the biblical writers this was necessarily the understanding of man as a person, as a spiritual being who, in his relations to God, can rise to the heights of faithfulness or sink to the depths of unfaithfulness. Not even of cognition is there any psychology in the Bible, since knowledge was for the Hebrew not the act of any distinct faculty but the activity of the whole man. Knowledge was not seen as distinct from action—it was action, and man as a totality was wrapped up in it; it was a special sort of relation with man, with things, or with God. To the Hebrew mind, then, the most intimate of human relations, the conjugal act, was the exemplar of knowledge, for nothing is known that is not loved. So we read that Adam “knew Eve his wife” (Gen 4:1).²² Thus there was nothing strange to the Hebrew when he heard the supreme unfaithfulness to God, which is idolatry—not-*knowing* God and turning to other gods—denounced by his prophets as “fornication.” But to know God was to love Him, to pray to Him, to address Him as “thou”; it was to respond to Him who had spoken first.

THE VISION OF TIME

THE “creational view” which marks Hebrew thought carries with it a unique appreciation of time. The first words of Genesis are usually translated: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” But they can also be translated: “In *a* beginning God created heaven and earth.”²³ Now, a beginning must be the beginning of something; and anything that begins is a process. It can be said that time is a required condition for process, since process implies continuous succession, and succession presupposes time. Yet it can also be said that process is a condition for time, since where there is no process there is no succession properly speaking, and where there is no succession there is no time. Again, there can be no beginning unless there be a process of

21. One is reminded of the kind of hagiography which Ida Görres has given us of St. Thérèse of Lisieux in *Das verborgene Antlitz*. In it she has turned the lens of psychology on all that could possibly be explained naturally, so that the supernatural stands out all the more sharply.

22. See Tresmontant, *Pensée hébraïque*, pp. 105–106.

23. See Tresmontant, *Métaphysique biblique*, p. 255.

which it is a beginning; and, conversely, there can be no process unless there be a beginning. This is the point at which all materialistic philosophies are forced to be irrational. They cannot admit a beginning, since a beginning implies something, or rather Someone, on whom the beginning depends. At the same time, they cannot deny process, since their materialism was designed precisely to explain process. They can and do speak of a "cyclic" process, but that is merely a mental construction devised to get them out of an embarrassing situation and having no reference to reality as we know it. Or they can say that there is no logical necessity for process to have a beginning, but this is the same as saying that according to a logic they have arbitrarily chosen, according to notions unrelated to reality, they *see* no need for a beginning. The Hebrew, however, never made the mistake of imposing his own notions on reality.

Even the language of the Bible shows that the people of Israel thought in a framework of movement, action, growth, process.²⁴ The static, obviously, needs to be expressed, but the Hebrew language does so in verbs of action. It uses the same verb to express position, such as standing or lying, as it does to express the action of getting up or laying oneself down. But how is this possible? Does one and the same word have two different, and almost contradictory, meanings? Or has it not rather one fundamental meaning from which various shades of meaning spring? Thus, Hebrew uses the same verb for "to stand up" and "to stand (in a spot)," for "to place oneself" and "to stand." "To lie down to rest" is the same as "to rest," "to seat oneself" the same as "to sit" or "to dwell." Examples could be multiplied almost indefinitely to illustrate this one point: the Hebrew thought of "being in a position" in terms of action, of doing something, of putting himself in that position.²⁵

For us, to be still and to move are somehow opposites, as the inactive is to the active; for the Hebrew, they were so closely related as to form

24. One need not be a linguistic expert to know that the language of a people reveals a great deal about its soul. "The character of a people or of a family of peoples, a race, finds its expression in its language. This is particularly true in regard to a people less developed culturally, the inner logic of whose language, and hence its connection with the psychology of the people, is easier to penetrate. In any case the Hebrew language, which to our way of thinking and feeling is most distinctive, betrays from many points of view the character of the Israelite psyche" (Boman, *op. cit.*, p. 18).

25. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

a unity.²⁶ He found an absolutely motionless state of being impossible to conceive, not because he had the scientific knowledge that matter and motion are inseparable, but because of his metaphysical view: for him "not to move" was "not to be." The Hebrew was concerned primarily neither with being (as a state) nor with becoming (as a coming into being), but with the subject of whom being or becoming is predicated; and since it is the nature of a subject to act, it was characteristic of the Hebrew that he conceived whatever could be said of a subject in terms of action. Even in so simple a thing as a comparison, what English expresses by the static "than," Hebrew expresses by the dynamic "away from": Saul was not merely a head taller than the rest of the people; he was (literally translated) "from his shoulders and upward high away from the rest of the people" (1 Kg 9:2). Most strikingly, "silence" is understood, not in our way as an absence of speaking, but as an active "keeping oneself silent," as "an activity of the subject, emerging from within."²⁷

Like Russian, for instance, the Hebrew language usually dispenses with "to be" as a copula, since it can be expressed adequately by juxtaposition alone. What we translate as "The Lord is my shepherd" is in Hebrew "The Lord my shepherd." When "to be" is used, it functions as a verb much more distinctly than it does for us: "to be" means to become, to exist, to act, and somehow expresses all these at once. Since "to be" is to become something or to do something, being in its full sense is the being of a person.²⁸ And Israel's awareness of God was always of Him as a Person. Whereas a typical Greek conception of God was the motionless perfection of being, the people of Israel knew Him as the God who acts, for to be is to act, and not to act is not to be. Israel's God, then, is the Creator; the Greek God is an object of contemplation.²⁹ For the Greek, God was an object attained at the end of a train of rational speculation; for the Hebrew, He was a Person, whom from the beginning he experienced as dynamic, as One who wills, who is

26. This recalls Alfred North Whitehead's definition of rest as motion of zero velocity: "Rest is merely a particular case of such motion [uniform rectilinear motion], merely when the velocity is and remains zero" (*An Introduction to Mathematics*, New York: Henry Holt, 1911, p. 44).

27. Boman, *op. cit.*, p. 24; see pp. 20 and 143.

28. See *ibid.*, pp. 29-30, 34-35.

29. Significant here is a contrast: when Socrates was in the grip of a problem, he stood motionless for hours; when the orthodox Jew prays, his awe and devotion make him active, make him sway his whole body to and fro (see *ibid.*, p. 166).

infinite love.³⁰ Even the attributes of God were for him active, vital attributes. He could find no better words to describe God than "the living God."³¹

Once more the difference between the static and the dynamic conceptions of reality is clear: it might be said, then, that Greek thought moves in a spatial framework, while Hebrew thought moves in a temporal framework. There seems little doubt that modern man knows he is living in a world that is not ahistorical, that the world is temporal because it is moving forward and not in a circle. In this, at least, he manifests more affinity with Hebrew than with Greek thought; and, whether he be Jew or Christian, believer or non-believer, modern man cannot simply disregard the biblical outlook on being—he has been conditioned by it. This much is clear: the world in which man lives is temporal, and its temporality is irreversible. In other words, the present is not a repetition of the past, nor will the future be a repetition of the past or present; the world of today is not the world of yesterday, no more than a man can remain a child, for man and world alike have grown and cannot go back to what they were. But if man's world is temporal, it is more than a world that changes; it is a world of constant novelty, and novelty bespeaks not merely change but creation. Thus, though it is certainly true to say that the world was created, it might also be said that, in a way, the world is being created and will be created. More than he realizes, modern man is the debtor to Hebrew thought, which gave us the good news of creation, for it is only in the light of creation that time, history, newness, make sense.

Henri Bergson has aroused us to the realization that time cannot be caught in the concepts of scientific analysis.³² Moreover, he showed that process, of which time is the "measure," is not to be grasped in terms of Darwinian or Lamarckian evolution, which have process governed by a "law of survival." He saw that the only law of process must be a law of creation, and in so doing he returned by "intuition" to the "creational vision" which the writers of the Bible had attained by faith.³³

30. See Hessen, *op. cit.*, p. 77; Max Scheler, *Vom Umsturz der Werte* (Leipzig: Der Neue Geist Verlag, 1923), II, 109ff.

31. See Hessen, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

32. Is there something more than coincidence in the fact that Bergson was a Jew?

33. One has the impression sometimes that Bergson is describing time as he found it—unformulated—in the Bible: see, for example, *Creative Evolution*, trans. A. Mitchell (New York: Modern Library, 1944), pp. 14, 180-181, 374; *The*

It is only where the idea of growth involves something more than the idea of change that time is seen as a constant forward movement, a movement which can be analyzed into concepts only if it is stopped, thereby ceasing to be what it is. Thus, apart from the development of the universe itself, in which God's creative work continues ("My Father is at work until now"), the production of any living being is creation, since it always involves more than the mere organization of matter—the beginning of *new* being.³⁴

Inseparable indeed are time and creation, in the sense that we could not speak of time in any meaningful way if there were no creation, no beginning. The biblical consciousness of time, however, would seem to tend even further and to suggest that without time there would be no creation, in the sense that one condition of creation as such is that it be in time, that it be continuous.³⁵ It might, of course, be argued that, absolutely speaking, God could have created everything at once, but there is really not much point in speaking of absolute possibilities, since that always implies our knowing more about possibility than we do; an "absolute possibility" is what we can think of, not necessarily what can be. Might we perhaps say, then, with Tresmontant, that "time enters as a determining factor into the very logic of the real"; that time is needed for the world of finite beings to move from the pre-living to the living, from the pre-conscious to the conscious; that certain physico-chemical conditions on our planet had to exist before life could appear; that the earth had to be readied before man was made?³⁶ Since God's ultimate purpose in creating is to communicate Himself to His creatures, not only to spirits but to spirits-in-flesh, might there not be a "logic" of communication demanding that God, though He communicate Himself with sovereign freedom, does so to a creature of flesh only after He has progressively rendered it capable of receiving that communication, which at the highest level is a participation in the divine life itself? In any case, even though the last word on the evolution of creatures has not been said and may not be for a long time, a vision of God's creative

Creative Mind, trans. M. L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 17; *Time and Free Will*, trans. F. L. Pogson (New York: Macmillan, 1910), p. 98.

34. See Tresmontant, *Métaphysique biblique*, pp. 79-81.

35. The Hebrew did not "argue" rationally to the necessity of God's "causality" in all that takes place in the world; he was simply vividly aware of God's presence in every event, every word, every thought.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

work which embraces the idea of non-mechanical evolution, far from "diminishing" His sovereignty, is rather its sublime unfolding.

Never forgetting that time implies creation, that it too is God's creature, I have asked if the creative action is itself somehow temporally conditioned. Whether or not such a relation can be proved, it seems at least to be the tacit presupposition of much of biblical writing, and this precisely because the Bible is conceived throughout in the framework of the supernatural, which means ultimately a supernatural communication of God to His creatures. For the Hebrew, history is God's work; it is creation, it is revelation: there is no separating history, creation, revelation.³⁷ Hence, in the light of biblical history—which in the Old Testament points toward a future event, the advent of the Messiah, and which in the New Testament goes out from that same event—is it possible to speak of time as purely incidental to creation? There can be no question, however, that the work of salvation, which crowns that of creation, involves time, as man passes from fall to redemption, from sin to glory. Surely the biblical concept of *kairos*, the God-given moment, the time, or period of time, appointed and designed by God for any salvific event (be it the witness of God's love on the cross or the final reaping of the good sown by the faithful, be it God's promise come true in the Apostle's preaching or the beginning of God's judgment—1 Tim 2:6; Gal 6:9; Tit 1:3; 1 Pet 4:17), surely this concept seems to imply that one time prepares for another, and this again for another.³⁸

There is one more feature in the Hebrew view of time which separates it from both the Greek and the scientific concepts of time and likens it to the Bergsonian view. For the Hebrew, the tripartite division of time into past, present, and future could not be represented by a line on which the present is a *point* separating past and future. The notion of a mathematical instant had no meaning for him, since an instant is not time nor a part of time but an abstraction, an assigned division between times, one of which is no longer and the other of which is not yet. The "dimensionless instant" raised for the Greeks, very much as it does for scientists and all abstract thinkers, many interesting problems, problems

37. See Hessen, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-96.

38. Tresmontant, *Métaphysique biblique*, pp. 127-130. It should be remembered that biblical history has a sense which "scientific" history cannot have; it is essentially a "history of salvation," which is primarily concerned with the passage from the fall to the participation in divine life.

which did not exist for the biblical mind. In the Bible the present is that which is actual, that which is acting, whether the period of acting be short or long. Hence original sin is said to be still present, because it is still acting. The past is that which is no longer acting; the future is that which is not yet acting. God is the eternal present, because He is ever-present act; all times are before His eyes at once, and a thousand years in His sight are like a watch in the night or like one day, and one day is like a thousand years (Ps 89:4; 2 Pet 3:8).³⁹

Linguistically speaking, Hebrew does not have past and future tenses properly so called; there is simply action, which from the point of view of the speaker can be looked on as complete or incomplete. It might be said that there is only one time, that this time is continuous, and that there are aspects of it which are relative to persons, whether to the speaker or to the one with whom the narrative is concerned. In order to understand this view, we have to realize that, unlike Western thought, to which space is primary and time is conceived according to movement in space, the Hebrew conceived time vitally and personally, in relation to a subject. No abstraction, biblical time is identical with that which happens in time. Thus day and night are not conceived cyclically but according to a subjective experience. Day is light, night is darkness; the sun, moon, and stars are not "heavenly bodies" but "lights," the sun ruling the day, the moon and stars ruling the night (Gen 1:5, 16).

Time is continuous; hence, Boman explains, the life of the people of Israel, though it lasts for hundreds and thousands of years, is one life. Thus the poem which describes the lot of Jacob's sons speaks of them now as persons, now as tribes (Gen 49). And the prophets view patriarch and people together as one; the people is simply called "Jacob" (Is 41:8; Os 12:2). No less is it a wholly Hebrew way of thinking when St. Paul sees the turning to Christ of a future generation of Israel as the salvation of all Israel (Rom 11:26).⁴⁰ Time is continuous, but it does not last forever. A man's years are as brief as a sigh; all flesh is grass, and grass withers; heaven and earth will pass away (Ps 89:9; Is 40:6-7; Mt 24:35). But this knowledge brought no gloom to the people of Israel, for they knew that the word of Yahweh shall stand forever, that He is an everlasting Rock, the Creator of the ends of the earth, who does not faint or weary (Is 40:8; 26:4; 40:28).

39. See *ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

40. See Boman, *op. cit.*, pp. 111, 118-120.

THE GOSPEL AND TIME

THERE seems to be an anomaly in the New Testament's having come down to us in Greek. St. Luke excepted, of course, it was written by Jews who thought as Jews and who, save for St. Paul, had not been to any great extent "hellenized." On the other hand, the anomaly is providential. As, in our times, the Church may well be destined to assimilate Eastern thought, so she was destined to assimilate Greek, and then Roman, thought; and the language of the New Testament was, as it were, a first step in this direction. Still, it is Hebrew thought that dominates the writings of the evangelists and apostles, a fact well illustrated in the New Testament attitude toward time.

God is the eternal present, which is to say He is "outside" time. And outside history He remained, in a sense, throughout the Old Testament, directing it by His providence, though even in the days of old, by revealing Himself, by calling patriarchs and prophets, by acting in the life of the people of Israel, God entered into history by His word. In the Incarnation, however, God entered into time in a way altogether new, taking upon Himself a history and identifying Himself with His own creation. Both His revelation and His entrance into history became more "tangible," for here it was the substantial Word of God which became His living revelation and, in becoming incarnate, became historical. Yet God's entry into history is not an event like other events in the over-all history of the world. Redemptive history, of which Jesus Christ is at once the central figure and the central event, is not properly speaking a "part" of general history; rather is it that which gives to general history its ultimate significance.⁴¹

Fundamentally, the temporal line of redemptive history is one and the same in New and Old Testaments, beginning with the first going forth of creatures from the hand of God and ending with the return of creatures to God. Creation itself is historical, but it is revelation which gives to this history a specific structure. According to that structure history is a continuous line of events, but, unlike a history conceived apart

41. The birth, life, and death of Jesus of Nazareth are events in time, which historical method can verify. That Jesus of Nazareth was the Word-made-flesh can be verified only by faith—historical method can say nothing for or against it. Thus, in so far as the events of Jesus' life on earth are historically verifiable, they are a part of general history. In so far as they have a significance which transcends the "scientifically" verifiable, they belong to a history which is unique.

from the divine plan of salvation, it is a continuous line which has a "mid-point," one central event, from which all other events, before and after, derive their significance. In the Old Testament, that event is the coming of the One who is to come; in the New, it is the coming of Him who is come—the Incarnation which has taken place,⁴² or, in a phrase of Cullmann's, "the Christ-event."⁴³

For Jew and Christian alike, all creation prior to the coming of the Messiah leads up to this event and is conceived in terms of it; all creation after the event flows, and derives its significance, from it. The Jew looks forward to it with hope, but for the Christian, the hope is already fulfilled, the event has taken place and is ever present to his faith. Not that he is without expectation, for he hopes in the future glory. But his life is not centered there; though the end is still to come, the center has been reached. To use Cullmann's illustration, the decisive battle of a war may have been won early in the war, and yet the war goes on. The crucifixion and the resurrection were that decisive battle, that center. Thus creation itself is a revelation leading up to the concrete presence of the Word and continuing as an unfolding of that presence. The world is at once a continuous creation and a continuous revelation, and as both it is temporal, historical.⁴⁴

For both Jew and Christian the Bible is something more than a recorded history; it is a prophetic revelation about history.⁴⁵ Hence more than the historian's eye—faith is needed to assent to the central affirmation of biblical history, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And once redemptive history is seen as a supernatural revelation, the manner in which Old and New Testaments are integrated becomes clear. In no way did the significance of the Old cease with the coming of the New, for as St. Paul says, the Old Testament was written *for us*, "for our

42. When I speak of "Incarnation" in this context, I have in mind not merely "And the Word was made flesh," rather the whole context: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." Hence the Incarnation here is the *presence* of the Word of God in the flesh, which is also the total event constituting the presence of the Word of God in history.

43. See Cullmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 90, 107-114.

44. See *ibid.*, p. 84. "The Word, the Logos, is God in His revelatory action. Nowhere, however, is God's action revealed more concretely than in the history which, to speak theologically, presents in its innermost nature the revelation of God to men" (*ibid.*, p. 24).

45. See *ibid.*, p. 98. Unfortunately the English language has only one word, "history," to express two concepts: the actual process of events or the "organic" growth of the world, and the record in language of that process. In German the first of these is expressed by the term *Geschichte*; the second by the term *Historie*.

instruction" (Rom 15:4).⁴⁶ It tended toward the New, though it was only the New that revealed this, its splendor. Its witness remains, that is to say, the Old and the New are not contemporaneous.

The Old Testament offers another part of the redemptive history than does the New. It is itself first of all a unique story of what once happened. But its meaning for redemptive history is recognized only when this entire section of time is placed in relation with the unique, once-for-all event of the mid-point, and this relation may be understood only as a relationship conceived in a strict time sense, between *preparation* and *fulfillment*. To find the witness to Christ in the Old Testament does not mean, then, to find the Incarnation of Jesus in the Old Testament. It means rather to learn, upon the basis of our knowledge concerning the incarnate and crucified Christ, how to understand the past events of redemptive history as preparation for the Incarnation, and the Cross.⁴⁷

Paradoxically enough, distinguishing the Old and New Testaments this way permits us to unify them most profoundly. It is not a unity of an artificial identification; rather is it the unity of integration into one historical process, into one total and progressive revelation. Thus, the history of creation and the history of redemption are united into one indivisible whole, because creation and redemption form one line of divine action flowing from God's goodness, through God's Word. "From Him, and through Him, and unto Him are all things" (Rom 11:36).

All dualism between creation and redemption is here excluded. In the New Testament there cannot be, in addition to the Christ-line of redemption, another and separate God-line of creation. Rather, the redemptive process receives its world-wide significance not only from the broad base of departure and the broad final goal, but also from the universal outreach of the event at the mid-point, the event in which the narrowing reaches its climax precisely for the sake of the redemption of all. For primitive Christianity, there is only the one line of divine activity; it is that one of which it is said from beginning to end: everything *from* God and *to* God, and everything *through* Christ, through the Word, "through Him."⁴⁸

Thus the good news of creation is taken up into the good news of redemption. There can therefore be no place in the spiritual life of a Christian for a flight from the world as from something evil. The God who

46. See also Rom 4:24; 1 Cor 9:10; 10:11.

47. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

"saw that all He had made was very good" (Gen 1:31) is the same God who became man "that they may have life, and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). With reverence, then, can the Christian look at the world. He embraces it because in it God has revealed Himself; he embraces it because it has "already been drawn into the redemptive process";⁴⁹ he embraces it as a historical world, which has "a beginning" and continuously tends toward an end, which end is glory in God. But his affirmation of the world remains always guarded. For men are free, so that the world in its tending to God can become disoriented. To this extent the Christian remains critical in regard to the world, not to the world as God's work, which is good, but to the world, in so far as it contains deviations from the one unique line running from creation, through redemption, to its final goal "in Him." Never can the Christian forget that, if this world, if history, has a beginning, it will have an end, and that his destiny is not to end with it.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 212.