

# HOPE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

Its Inner Presuppositions and outward Forms. \*)

## PREFACE

I must start with an observation in connection with the direct and indirect questions which are often put concerning eschatology and which in one way or another were placed on our agenda by the Preparatory Conference at Rolle; it is this: to all appearances the greater our interest in particular questions of theology, the less direct are the answers given by the Bible.

One must always bear in mind that the Bible was not written to meet our questions so far as they are conditioned by our outlook, and therefore often leaves the answer open. It insists upon the great decision for the God of Revelation and Fellowship, without determining in this decision the issues in question. Theology, if it wants to help individual Christians, must always remember its human ignorance; and the Christian for his part, even when he is convinced that the Church is led by the Spirit and that the Biblical revelation is absolutely true, should always receive the pronouncements of theologians with this reservation. And it is in this conviction that theologians must study the subject of the hope of the Christian Church.

## INTRODUCTION

He who would know and preach the Christian hope must pursue it down to its roots to get it right. So an examination of the Old Testament is obligatory. Even though the formula "promise and fulfilment" cannot always be applied so simply as is often done, it is still true that at the root of the fulfilment are to be found the Old Testament promises. But hope in the O.T. has many forms, and to appraise them their distinctive characters must be grasped in all their variety; even so they cannot be expounded without further ado, but each to be seen rightly, must be viewed in its own perspective. Old Testament hope is the epitome, the sum and substance of the Old Testament prophecy. And O.T. prophecy can be regarded as the epitome of the whole of the message of the Bible

*W. Eichrodt* has said some important things about the general meaning of the Old Testament prophecy in the introductory pages of a recent lecture on "*Israel in Old Testament prophecy*", Zürich 1951. Prophecy must not be isolated from the rest of the Scriptures. It is not a question of "the particular words of the prediction; prophecy is always concerned with the whole of God's dealing with mankind, with his re-

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\*) A Lecture given at the Ecumenical Conference at Zetten (Holland), April 15-19, 1952.

The English translation of the original German lecture was given by the Study Department of the World Council of Churches.

velation of himself in judgment and mercy. He who does not discern revelation in the Law, the History and the Prophets cannot understand biblical prophecy". "The specifically prophetic utterance, referring expressly to the future is not something altogether different from the rest of Scripture, but only a particularly clear and unmistakable expression of what is implicit in the whole Bible."

Unlike heathen prophecy where prediction is itself important, biblical prophecy is not concerned to disclose the actual future but to show "God's purpose in the whole of His dealings with His people." Hence "the heart of prophecy in the Bible is the will of God already revealed" and "its aim nothing else but to show that in the future too this God is at work to accomplish his purpose of salvation and peace."

This thought must be thrown into relief, because we are apt to isolate the words of prophecy and take them out of their context not only in the O.T. but in the N. T. as well. We should all understand clearly to start with that we cannot proceed from particular words and appropriate them, after the manner of biblicists and fundamentalists, to interpret the future; but can grasp the words of prophecy only as linked with the whole history of revelation, and indeed with the spiritual history of Israel interwoven with it.

In other words, the knowledge of God, which Israel learned through her history was decisive for the whole of Israel's religious understanding, and therefore for the Hope, as part of it.

And this bears directly too on the question of the "relation between the belief in God's providence and the Messianic expectation in the Bible", as it was put in one of the enclosures sent to us.

There is an internal, real connection between belief in God's providence and the messianic expectation even though it cannot be formulated directly but only in general terms. In a triangle there is a connection between base and apex, remove either and there could be no triangle. The base does not for that reason determine the triangle completely and thereby also the apex; the included angle may be either acute or obtuse. That is fixed not by the base alone but by the length and position of the sides in relation to it. No further explanation is needed to show that the base is essential in determining the shape of the triangle. In the same way there is an actual real relationship between belief in God's providence and the messianic expectation, although it is not possible to say that the influence of the belief is strong and direct enough to determine the expectation completely. For all sorts of triangles can be erected on one base. That in fact happened in the O.T., as regards the "messianic expectation" or rather "the expectations of the future". On the basis of belief in the One God, "He who is", a great variety of expectations arose. They could not all justify them-

selves. Some are already transcended in the Old Testament, others not till the N. T.

## HOPE AND HOPES

To review and appreciate hope in the O.T., the expectations of the future must be examined from three sides;

- (a) from their inner presuppositions, i.e. from their connection with belief in God;
- (b) from their different outward forms as they appeared in history;
- (c) from their function in O.T. religion, i.e. from their origin in history and their significance for the faith.

(a) The essential inner presupposition for Israel's hope is the belief in one living God, i.e. the belief that God stands in a relationship with the life of man (represented by the people of Israel). This relation is not natural but a "*Berith*", a Covenant. God is the God of the community. He is also the God of history, for He determines life and death. God has a purpose for His people, as He had for Abraham whom He called, a purpose for the salvation of the people and also of the world. *Procksch* says rightly: "Israel's belief in God has an element of futurity in it." "But this future is for the believer no unknown precarious destiny, but the victory of Jahve over the nations of the world, and therewith the victory of his chosen people." <sup>1)</sup> The inner presupposition lies hid in God's name; at all events it is expressed in the solemn declaration of Jahve's name in Exodus 3, where He says of Himself to Moses: "'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh", "I am that I am"; by this He declares to Moses His actual Being, His presence, which means also His presence with His people. <sup>2)</sup>

Israel's belief in God and its name for God includes power and providence, fellowship and presence.

Its hope, its confidence for the history of the people and the life of the individual, is grounded on the rock of its belief in this God of Israel, in Jahve.

So Israel's expectation of the future is inextricably bound up with its belief in God's providence and fellowship.

(b) But on this rock constructions of all sorts can be built, as St. Paul says of the one foundation which is Christ on it one can build (1. Cor. 3, 11ff.) "Gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay stubble, each man's work shall be made manifest: for the day will declare it, because it is revealed in fire". It was so with Israel; on the foundation of God's revelation many designs for the future were shaped; some of these have proved their worth; others could not maintain themselves and had no lasting value in the sight of the Spirit of God.

<sup>1)</sup> *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 1951, p. 582.

<sup>2)</sup> *Th. C. Vriezen: 'Ehjah'a asher 'ehjah*, Bertholet Festschrift, 1950

So it is important to learn to know the types of Israel's expectations, as they occur in the O.T., that is to see the various outward forms and their function in the biblical history of revelation and to test their significance for its belief.

On the varieties of future expectation in the O.T., a few short notes may suffice, as I have no intention of producing all the material. One must not place all hopes on the same denominator, as is often done, e.g. on the denominator of messianic prophecy; for there are expectations in the most varied departments of life, painted with all sorts of colours. One certainly cannot distinguish them all, because expectations, assuming very different shapes, are often the expression of the same belief. Thus messianic prophecies and more general expectations of salvation have grown out of a common soil. That is also why the forms expressing hope are interwoven in various ways, even though they may have sprung from quite different circles.

Some expectations of deliverance centre round a political figure, either David, or the house of David, or a future prince of salvation, others assume the aspect of a general period of bliss, either a time of universal or cosmic peace, or one of immense fertility. These modes of expression have a history of their own, and may be either typically Israelite (e.g. connected with the house of David), or derived from the common ideas of mankind, in particular of oriental peoples (notions of a time of immense fertility, or of cosmic peace, including animals). So expectations such as Gen. 49 and Numbers 24 strike us as characteristic prophecies of Israel in the style of the early political prophets in which the national components is still blended quite naively with the religious; these or similar expectations formed the background for national hymns (such as we find in certain psalms) and for the belief in the Day of Jahve which Amos had to attack; or rather, he had to show that it could only be looked for after the judgment, and then only in fragments.

In the prophets forms are juxtaposed which later study can hardly reconcile. This has led critics to postulate the appearance of particular expectations in particular prophets; it is supposed, for instance, that Amos after his pungent strictures on the current belief in the Day of the Lord would no longer cherish a national-political hope or expect great fruitfulness or fertility, as does Amos 9. But when these expectations are seen together in perspective, one cannot deny that they could have co-existed in the prophet's mind <sup>1)</sup>.

In Isaiah the most diverse forms are found side by side and in combination, so that spiritual growth in the prophet may and should be assumed. If one may assign Chapters 2, 7, 9, 11 and 16, for instance, to

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<sup>1)</sup> cf. also V. Maag: *Text, Wortschatz und Begriffswelt des Buches Amos*, 1951. p. 248 ff.

Isaiah and explain them as referring to the Messiah, as I think one should, then a connection between chapters 16, 7, 9 and 11 can only be recognised if they belong to different moments in the prophet's long life. While in Chap. 7 Immanuel is expected soon, in Chap. 11 hope in the House of David is not only postponed to a distant future, but drastically revised; salvation is no longer expected from the present dynasty of David, but from a shoot out of the stock of Jesse and a branch out of his roots. <sup>1)</sup>).

In the O. T. hope in the house of David retreats steadily, although it never completely fades. Hence some Jewish exegetics maintain that the Messiah is not a necessary figure in expectant faith (though this idea is rejected by orthodox Jews; cf. *Maimonides'* tenets of belief and e.g. *Friedländer*, "Die Jüdische Religion"). In Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Deutero-Isaiah and Zachariah other fresh and louder strains replace the messianic. As the political crisis approaches, the expectation becomes more spiritual, more profound, and hope is drawn more and more from the certainty of God's presence with His own and from the renewed experience of being the People of God.

The conviction of Jahve's victory is never lost, but how His people Israel share it, is seen in a quite different light.

From the time of Isaiah (or Amos) it is no longer the whole nation which will live to see this victory, but the remnant which will be saved from condemnation and purified; in Deutero-Isaiah this remnant is called to be the Ebed Jahve, and summoned to serve the world by bringing to it the knowledge of Jahve's Torah.

But later in the preaching of Deutero-Isaiah this Ebed-Jahve too takes a new guise, as the prophet recognises that to tread the path of God demands the "offering for sin". So that the last step is taken towards the spiritual knowledge of God and of His victory in the world. God, the Victor, remains the centre of faith; but participation in God's kingdom is granted to him who in faith shares in the Ebed-Jahve's offering for sin.

So Israel's expectation of judgment and suffering is increasingly consecrated, i.e. it is connected more and more clearly with God, and participation in God's victory, is linked with the inner spiritual sharing in God's will. The following may be regarded as the peaks: Amos 5 (Zephaniah), Isaiah 9; 11; 2 (Micah 4). Jer. 31, Ex. 30, Deutero-Isaiah; Zach. 2; 8; Joel 3.

(c) Yet rightly to understand the O.T. expectation of salvation, it must be seen in direct connection with the situation in which it arose. The last two points (b) and (c) can in fact only be studied with their in-

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<sup>1)</sup> cf. also *M. Buber: Der Glaube der Propheten*, 1950, p. 213 ff.

ner unity in mind; real understanding can be reached by discussing the form of the conceptions and their function together. For in the O.T. we learn to know God as the Living One, as the God whose will and work are always creating something new. He is immutable in the sense that His will always includes the good of mankind, but at the same His work is always "marvellous in our eyes".

Therefore it will be seen that the word of God is dynamic in that it shows its power and creates something new, and equally that it is never unalterable in the sense that it is axiomatic like the theorem of Pythagoras which is constant wherever it is applied. The word derives its value, not from itself, but from the situation out of which it was born, and can be rightly understood only in that connection. The O.T. makes it clear, and that is part of its profound importance for us, that not every believer's hope for the future, indeed not every prophetic expectation even when it proceeds from and is in harmony with historical revelation, can be used simply in its historical shape in the pictures of the future we hope for. It was the great error of the "false prophets", to forget that God's nature is holy and active, and to seek to bind Him to the theories they established on the basis of revelation. <sup>1)</sup>

This error is the origin of the conflict between the "false" and the "true" prophets of Jahve, which gave birth to the difficult problem never clearly solved in the O.T. of the right sign or mark of "true" prophecy. The possibility is already clearly recognised in the O.T. that one may start from God and His word, from His revelation in history or through His spirit and yet find oneself on a wrong track (Is. 29, 13f). The false prophets cling to their conviction because it is based on a belief that is legitimate from the point of view of their history and religion.

There are hopes for the future in the O.T., for example, which are rooted in the most strictly orthodox tenets of belief, and which yet had to be rejected absolutely by those prophets whose word has come down to us.

We may remember Hananiah in the days of Jeremiah: the hope for the eternal, Holy Zion, the expectations connected with day of Jahve in the time of Amos. These hopes had perhaps been drawn from the psalms sung in the Temple — which may not have had a very different content from those we know in the O. T., *Mowinkel* was quite right in this. There is in the O.T. a perennial hope, an assured belief in the O.T. "National Church". It was the prophets' task to dispel this expectation. A hope like this, which identified the spiritual with the national driving forces could not be the outlook through which God proposed to give His people life.

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1) Cf. *G. von Rad: Die falschen Propheten*, Z. A. W. 1933.

So one can learn clearly from the O.T. that a positive anticipation deduced from older words of God may itself be the greatest of delusions, the most distressing self-deception and the deepest deception in religion.

Therefore the relationship between God's providence and the messianic belief in the Bible is not uninterrupted. One can say already on the strength of the O.T. that the Church must be very careful in her preaching about hope both to the world and the Churches. Although she knows that God is the Lord of history, she cannot bring the hope that, either for nations or for all mankind, their history will end in a happy restoration of their ways of life or of particular parts of them; these always belong to a particular historical situation.

Neither the Old nor the New Testament proclaims a happy future for the nation or for mankind in general. If one hears their message to its end, one must admit that they convey rather a present restlessness in order to speak all the more definitely of a real hope which is given in God and His Kingdom.

Accordingly, in the prophet's message salvation cannot be separated from judgment, as is unfortunately so often done in modern theology; political or ethical reasons are adduced realistically for judgment, traditional or spiritual sources for salvation; but in their essence they belong together; it is true that the former always seems rather to presuppose a particular historical situation, the latter a more definitely future one (although it cannot be called simply eschatological); but yet on a long view the two are intimately connected.

In any case hope in the Bible is not an unclouded but a fractured expectation of salvation, not only in the sense that it foretells a crisis, a judgment which will test the whole of life, but also that only a remnant (some hold only a small remnant) will be saved and be the beginning of a new nation.

Nor can one deny that the foundation of all prophetic preaching, i.e. in the canonical O.T., is judgment. Amos, and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel too, begin their prophetic task when they learn of God's word, so that a remnant of the people will be saved and a new beginning can be prepared. They believe themselves compelled to utter something decisive, that they are bringing it to pass, in fact are provoking a crisis (Is. 6). In this way their preaching is geared to history: the judgment and break-through of the new Kingdom is seen on the historical plane; that is why their message could produce an upheaval like the Deuteronomic reformation. So the biblical preaching is pre-empted by a profound seriousness though not without distinct hopefulness. Out of the living faith in God a firm "and yet" is born. The staggering conviction of judgment has purged the hope of the false national driving

force and transformed it into purely religious confidence. The Messiah as Saviour becomes more and more a spiritual prince, a bringer of justice and of the knowledge of God.

And the prophet, starting from this message of judgment and salvation, knows that he is called to summon the people to conversion.

The prophets are convinced of God's leading and redemption on the plane of history, of his judgment immediately impending, of the remnant to be saved and the awakening of a new people; but *on that account* they know also what needs to be said most sternly: "Repent ye, the day of the Lord is at hand".

This is in general the characteristic note of all the O.T. prophets. The judgment they see impending does not paralyse but stimulates them to activity. For the future is always decided by God in view of past doings. God makes no decision apart from man, with whom He holds covenanted fellowship. Even when they are sure what will come, the prophets speak conditionally (cf. e.g. Jer. 22, 1-5, 13-19; Hos. 6). They stress so strongly the necessity of a moral and religious life in obedience to the will of God that they have been considered as preachers of morality, as creators of "ethical monotheism" and so forth. But their fundamental assumption is neither moralism, nor ethical monotheism (which cannot explain the message of judgment and salvation), but their conviction that the expected day of Jahve, the great crisis, involving judgment and salvation is approaching its fulfilment; the idea of repentance and conversion fits easily into this preaching. The prophets did bring in a new element by relating the expectation of the future to contemporary events: but introduced nothing new, such as a revision of ethics, into the O.T. idea of God; at the most they grasped the decisive ethical significance in it. They knew quite simply in their own day that in the approaching Kingdom of God, not Israel but God stood first. If they understood God a little better than their contemporaries and their forefathers, it is principally because they discovered what God's holiness really is; because they knew truly that God is God; and that His will only must be done in the life of the people and of each, and that it will be done in the world. In the call to repentance also, the preaching concerning the future, the O.T. and the N.T. agree completely and this element should be pushed more vigorously into the foreground in the preaching of the Church to the world and to the Church itself.

Here a remark may be made with reference to the discussion for which we are asked to prepare. It seems a proper concern on the part of the Americans, warmly supported by the young churches in the East, when they ask that more stress should be laid on the duties prescribed for Christians by the eschatological message, notwithstanding



the risk that a programme of directives may dominate the faith and prevent its attaining the true hope. European theologians on the other hand are exposed to the danger of accepting apocalyptic ideas for the present time and so severing this world from the Kingdom of God, unlike the prophetic "fishers of men". This means more than that the message of human responsibility should be linked directly with either the idea of progress or with expectation of the final victory of Christ. The important point is that the Christian Church should understand afresh what obedience to God's will actually involves, namely suffering, and that only expiatory suffering opens the door to hope, which is the assurance of communion with God.

This was discovered in the O.T. by the prophet who had himself been the most deeply stirred by the thought of the new time to come, who himself most eagerly expected a national revival and was perhaps the most bitterly disappointed by the event of his day and the unbelief of people. The Second Isaiah was led even more deeply into the secret of God's ways, and understood the only path by which the Kingdom of God will come, through national purification and expiration, through the suffering of the innocent in God's sight, through vicarious suffering. Only thus shall the servant "see his seed" and "justify many" and become a blessing to renew his people and astonish the nations.

We see the path traversed by the O.T. hope; it comes from the shining heights, then goes down into the murky depths, yet conveys by this means a realistic understanding of divine salvation.

In early days faith in God provided a placid assurance of blessedness for all (Gen. 49, Num. 24) but in the ensuing time of troubles it was learned that men can have experience of God's kingdom only on spiritual and moral terms. Therefore the prophets know that only a remnant will survive judgment: while the Messiah will come forth from a shoot out of the stock of Jesse and will live in the spirit of God. But when after God's judgment the remnant in exile refuse to stand up and those who have been delivered show no signs, or hardly any, of being a remnant, then the last great prophet of the Exile achieves again a fresh insight; he understands the need for a second redemption, the demand for purification, for propitiation for the sins of the people, and so for the suffering which alone can rouse the people to new life; the vicarious suffering of him who will purify His people. So at the end of the spiritual pilgrimage, purification and propitiation are definitely brought to the centre of the expectation and thereby the hope completely changes its shape, and takes the form of salvation. Only in Christianity is the insight carried further, for then one individual, Jesus of Nazareth, pursued this road to its end, and so in Him something new is created.

We know what happened in history to the Second Isaiah's expectations of salvation. The last and deepest insight met with but

little response in Israel. One can hardly find any illusions to it in the course of theology before Christ. In fact it is the old imagery of a political Messiah which returns again and again and holds the spirit of the people in thrall. Beside these political expectations, there are others to be found, more spiritual and apocalyptic, which create, for instance, in the book of Daniel, the figure of the Son of Man. This becomes more and more, whether understood of the community or of an individual, the type of the future deliverance. This expectation of salvation is applied also to personal lives, in which two lines of development can be distinguished; the one is apocalyptic and leads to the thought of personal resurrection (Is. 26; Dan. 12), the other finds assurance in the certainty of God's presence even in death (Ps. 73).

Thus we learn from the O.T. that the community which knows the hope for God's Kingdom is not only confronted time and again with crises and thus summoned to penitence and conversion, but is also called to suffering as the Servant of God and in the same character predestined to glory.

The message of biblical hope, at any rate as seen from the point of view of the O.T. can only be expressed :

(a) in the joyful certainty of the hope that God is living and beside us to help.

(b) in the assured certainty of salvation that the world is God's and that He will reveal His Kingdom now and in the future.

(c) in the inevitable conviction that the world is far removed from God's reign of peace and justice, and indeed that the more eagerly the faithful desire to carry the standard of God the greater the resistance aroused in the world.

(d) by calling the Church and the world to conversion, because only he who obeys God's will can share in His Kingdom.

(e) therefore the Church should bring the message of hope to the Church and the World only while reminding men at the same time of Ebed-Jahve who has consummated the work of propitiation and taken away the sins of the world, God is the God of life and He will be known as such by those who are ready to lose their life to serve Him in the steps of the Crucified and Risen.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS.

There are always risks in preaching the coming Kingdom of God. The risks become serious both when the preaching is tied to events in this world, and when it is detached from this life.

But one will not go astray nor mislead others so long as it is God's Kingdom that is preached, the Kingdom of Him Who is the sole hope of the faithful, whether one or many, and admits His own here and now. The succession in the Old and New Testaments of different

forms of hope should make theologians very modest and cautious in constructing the shapes of the future kingdom and preaching any particular shape.

Yet the Christian witness should not speak of our hope so cautiously as to reduce it completely to generalities. That would merely induce a superficial optimism. Therefore one must find in Christ, the Crucified and Risen, the pattern of Christian faith and expectation.

Perhaps the Church's sure faith and hope might be expressed by a variant of the familiar words of *Blumhardt*: "Victory is to the Crucified", i.e. our hope is the Kingdom of God, our way to it is Jesus, the Crucified, who calls us to fight and suffer in order to bring the world to holiness.

Groningen,

Th. C. VRIEZEN.

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