

THEMES OF THE BIBLE

By IAN HISLOP, O.P.

IN recent years the study of the Scriptures has tended to be subordinated to other interests. These interests, often of great value in themselves, have begun to dictate the way in which the Scriptures were read and thus have provided various ways of looking at the Scriptures which amount to complete interpretations. We are all familiar with the 'source book' view of the Bible, with the Christianity-not-mysterious standpoint, and more recently with an apocalyptic interpretation which owes as much to a temperamental dislike of Hegel as it does to Scriptural sources. One grants that it is inevitable—since the Bible is addressed to all in every age—that each of us should respond to it in our own distinctive way. It is not suggested that each of the movements in modern Biblical study—in spite of their patent exaggeration—has not contributed something to our understanding of the Bible. What is suggested is that contemporary views of the Scriptures rest on theories about the Scriptures rather than on the Scriptures themselves, and that these theories often rest on premises which are not derived from the Scriptures, but are themselves the products of a non-Scriptural world view. There is, then, a danger that what is being said to us through the Scriptures comes to us in a contaminated form if we rely only on the secondhand—on current books about the Bible.

This sets a practical problem. There are persons—I fancy—who, because of the difficulty, and indeed danger, that is involved in any individual attempt to render to oneself the meaning of a book so complicated and important as is the Bible, in effect renounce it. Almost deliberately they render their acquaintance with the Bible mediate. It is only allowed to appear in the form of proof texts in works of Dogmatics and as embodying positions which works of Apologetics support.

The trouble about this is that works of that nature no doubt render, in the cases in question, the significance of a Scriptural doctrine, but they do so in a language which is somewhat different from that of the Bible. The distinction is this: The Scriptures are written in the language of primary proclamation, while dogma

and apologetics are concerned with explanation in precise conceptual terms, with a sort of second order language. If one attends only to the explanations then not only is the impact of the Scriptures on the mind mediate, but the intrinsic force of the image-laden and dramatic language in which they are written is missed. True enough, such is the vivifying power of faith, many are able in their prayer to reach what the Scriptures convey without much knowledge of the writings themselves. This, however, appears as a really satisfactory state only among the very simple and very holy. Most of us are self-conscious and do read and thus fill our minds with the concepts of explanation, with current theories of life, and then find ourselves confronted with the language of the Liturgy, with the traditional spirituality of the Church which make use of terms and images which appear to us both obscure and difficult. For many this is an understatement; the terms involved are regarded as not only obscure, they are passed by as dead and irrelevant. In consequence people tend to fall back on works of devotion which, however illuminating as psychological studies or commentaries on revealed truth, are in fact only of secondary value as mirrors of divine truth.

It might be thought that this statement was intended to lead up to an affirmation of the Bible-for-the-Bible's-sake and the Bible-alone position. This is not the case, as this too is one of those partial views from which we need to escape. The Bible comes to us within a context, it is traditioned by the living voice of the Church, it lives as the expression of the Word within the Mystical Body. All that is true and is not questioned. What one is asking is how its words can convey anything to our minds, for whom all words have been twisted by the vulgarities of print and microphone, whose sensibility has been blunted, if not killed, by the drab materialism of an economic world. One knows that something is there, which one misses, but how can we escape from our blinding blinkers?

The answer is, I think, in essence very simple. The Bible is, for the most part, concerned with great themes which, once they are recognised, provoke an immediate response. The great central images and ideas, which constantly recur, and which underlie so many other passages, have an intrinsic force and dramatic quality all of their own. The word of God—that 'saying' whereby he created all things—is his 'word' to the Prophets, the Wisdom in

which all things are created, the salvific word spoken in time, in the flesh—Christ himself.

In order to discover these themes the Bible needs to be approached in the right way. It is not a reference book, or simply an interesting historical document; it is a unique story. It is the story of God's dealings with man, a history that is also a conversation. The story of the Journey of mankind from the Garden, through sin, captivity and desert to the promised Land, a story in which man on his journey comes to appreciate more and more the true nature of the promises of God. It is the history of how God dealt with a particular people—but it is history written for our instruction and every detail on their journey is of relevance for us. We too have to leave the 'flesh-pots' of Egypt, we too grumble in the desert, and for us too there is a Rock, from which living waters flow.

The language of the story is basic and serious. It is primitive, in the fundamental sense, and it is that note that prevents us refining it with all the sophisticated technique of the literature of escapism. It is impossible, too, to sentimentalise so long as one sticks to the text.

The attitude of mind in which the Bible should be approached is simply that of faith willing to listen to the presentation of truth from the God-ward side in a language that makes no compromises. If the Bible be read, not just as a pastime for the idle hour, but as *the* Book, then the themes which make it up will very swiftly emerge.

How dull was all that talk which was inflicted on us as children about the size of Solomon's Temple—or indeed the details of the journeys of St Paul. All that is interesting enough to the scholar—and perhaps to most of us at some stage—but it is secondary. What St Paul said is of immense importance—his teaching on the conflict that sin creates in man—and does he not here pick up the theme of the war between the flesh and the spirit, of which the Old Testament is full, and of which the wars of the children of Israel may be taken as a figure? The discovery of the exact date when he said this or that is trivial in comparison.

Or take the Temple—not that cardboard horror of my infancy—but the theme, the idea. The Temple is the holy place of God, built of precious stone for a dwelling place of the most High. The earth, the whole cosmos is the Temple; made by him, it is a

sign of his glory. The God, who is lifted up above the firmament, is present as ruler and governor of the whole of that creation, which yearns for him. Throughout the Bible the theme is filled out. The tent or tabernacle is the sign of God's presence, and the mysterious power of God is present in the midst of his people. The Spirit, which led the people through the desert, comes and dwells in the holy tent and, later, sanctifies the house of God built by Solomon. The tent and the Temple are signs—as the burning bush was a sign of the presence of him who is—of the unique Creator, the Holy One of Israel. Isaias in his vision saw the glory of the Lord filling the Temple, and the angelic host proclaiming that the splendour of God filled the whole earth (one thinks at once of the vision of the shepherds). How wrong the Jews were about *their* Temple, about trying to confine God to one place, we learn from Jeremias and St Stephen. How human loyalties can corrupt religion and turn the worship of the Creator into a glorification of the creature. How right they were in their hope we learn from St Paul with his doctrine of the Temple. A Temple in which there are no divisions of race or status; a Temple that is built on faith; a Temple that is pure and holy, that is our body under the dominion of grace, our souls in which the Holy Spirit dwells as in a house. A Temple that is the Church in which mankind is built up upon the sure foundation of the Rock, which stands firm against chaos and storm; a Temple held together by a precious corner stone; a Temple with pillars—the sturdy pillars of the faith of the apostles. 'Edification': how trite it sounds at first when we read it in our blind way, but what a magnificent idea it is—the building up of the Temple in which the Holy One is to dwell. The Temple of Herod is gone—and never was of much interest in itself; but a greater than *that* Temple has come—the presence in the flesh of God made man. The whole doctrine of the Temple in the Bible centres upon and leads up to that figure, who is the presence itself, and by meditating on the theme one comes to see how he is all that the Temple stood for, and far more beside.

If we read the Bible quite simply—but with faith—we shall discover, not simply great themes, but the meaning of this human life of ours, a meaning often obscured by too much clever talk and argument about trifles.