

# **AN OUTLINE THEOLOGY OF THE BIBLE.**

## **INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.**

The following is a simplified theology of the Bible. It is a broad outline. It highlights only some significant elements in each period of development.

Unlike all other world religions, which claim to come from a revelation and which, have a history; the Judaeo-Christian revelation IS a history. The history of Islam, for instance, is concerned with how the experience of Mohammed affected the people of his time and of how the influence of his teachings caused the great expansion of Islam. It all stems from his initial impetus. With the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the revelation unfolds from Abraham to Jesus and develops through many deeds and words inspired by God, at different times in the history. All of which culminate in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Word made flesh.

There is a common pattern. The initiative is always God's. There follows a reaction on the part of those who are the object of God's words and deeds. That reaction can be positive or negative. The freedom of humans is not compelled. Either way, questions are raised and the memorial of what has happened becomes a tradition, a handing down. With each new initiative of God, the tradition grows, is modified and further developed. New insights as to God's purpose fill out the revelation. Finally the revelation comes into full focus when the Light "that enlightens all men was made flesh". (John 1:9,14) The whole is the work of the Holy Spirit and consequently the various writings of the Bible come into being, are handed down, developed and preserved, under the inspiration of the same Spirit. The Bible is God's word, through the Judaeo-Christian tradition to all creation.

When God acts in history there is the limited content of deed or word. At the same time there is the personal mystery of God. God always speaks himself. It is in the context of God's personal mystery that the revelation unfolds. It is this, which invites an even deeper involvement of each human being in God's purpose for humankind.

There are distinct periods in the unfolding of the revelation. The broadest division comprises:

1. The patriarchs.
2. The exodus and the sojourn in the wilderness.
3. The entry into the Promised Land and the time of the Judges.
4. The time of the kingdom and the kingdoms.
5. The destruction of the kingdoms and the exile in Babylon.
6. From the restoration of the exiles to Christ.
7. The fulfilment of the revelation in the Word made flesh.
8. The sending of the apostles and the Church's mission.

## **THE PATRIARCHS.**

God chooses ABRAHAM and enters into a covenant with him and his family. On God's part the covenant is a promise of:

- a) Descendants through whom a great blessing will come to humankind and
- b) a land.

The response required of Abraham and his family is belief in God and belief that the promises will be fulfilled.

This covenant promises, therefore, HOME and FAMILY, our two basic human needs.

## **THE EXODUS AND THE SOJOURN IN THE WILDERNESS**

The Patriarchal traditions end with the family of Jacob/Israel migrating to Egypt because of famine. After a time of prosperity, they come under persecution. They are forced to labour in building work.

God chooses MOSES to rescue his people from their Egyptian slavery. With mighty deeds and outstretched arm he brings them out of Egypt into the wilderness. At Sinai he makes a covenant with them. He will be their God and they shall be his people. Their vocation is to be holy as God is holy – to show forth the holiness of God to all peoples. How? By keeping the Law which God gives to them through Moses. They agree – 'we will do all that the Lord has bidden us'. The covenant is ratified by sacrifice. God undertakes to lead them to the Land promised to Abraham and his posterity.

At Sinai there is an awe-inspiring theophany or manifestation of God's presence, in signs and wonders. When God speaks it is the personal mystery of God, which is revealed in the words, and deeds of the revelation.

The conduct of the people, during their sojourn in the wilderness, is a mixture of rebelliousness, infidelity and repentance. God, however, remains faithful to his promises. They fear rejection.

A new generation is born and grows to maturity in the desert. Their whole existence is under God. His presence among them is evident in the Tent, which is pitched in their encampment. This Tent is the centre of their worship and the place of meeting, through Moses, between God and his people.

Eventually, under Joshua, they come to the river Jordan. The Promised Land of Canaan lies before them.

## **THE ENTRY INTO THE PROMISED LAND AND THE TIME OF THE JUDGES**

The land is invaded and, at the end of the campaign, the covenant is renewed. The people of Israel settle down. Each of the twelve tribes was allotted a territory. In

times of crisis, leaders – the Judges- are raised up by God, to rescue God’s people. God is faithful to his promises but they become involved in the idolatry of the other races that inhabited the land. God is faithful but they are unfaithful.

The dangers from which God protects them are sporadic raids rather than attempts to conquer them. With the advent of the Philistines, however, the threat becomes more serious. The people ask the last of the Judges, Samuel, for a king.

### **THE TIME OF THE KINGDOM AND THE KINGDOMS.**

God chooses SAUL to be their king. Samuel anoints him. Saul over-reaches himself and offends against his position as the anointed of the Lord. God chooses DAVID. David respects the anointed character of Saul and only after the death of Saul does he succeed to the kingship. Samuel also initially anointed him king. At first he became king over the southern part and then, finally, over the whole land. God made a covenant with David that his kingdom would last forever. SOLOMON succeeded David and built the Great Temple in Jerusalem to replace the Tent of Meeting.

After Solomon the kingdom was split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

The basic covenantal relationship whereby God would watch over the people and they, for their part, would strive to fulfil their vocation to be a holy people was characterised by God’s continuing fidelity but a growing record of infidelity on the part of the people. Because of God’s faithfulness, his mercy and his compassion, the people no longer expected to be rejected. From fear of rejection they became complacent. They presumed on God’s faithfulness and loving-kindness. Their worship was hollow. The liturgy of the Temple was elaborate and, at times, magnificent. It consisted of sacrifices and holocausts but was empty of any intention of really serving God according to the Law. Religious observance was, generally speaking, in externals only.

Enter the pre-exilic prophets. Their characteristic formula was ‘Thus says the Lord God’. They call to repentance and the genuine keeping of the Law. They warn of disaster if their message goes unheeded.

There were two kings, Josiah and Hezekiah, who attempted a reform, but on the whole the message of the prophets was ignored.

### **THE DESTRUCTION OF THE KINGDOMS AND THE EXILE IN BABYLON**

The prophets’ warnings of disaster, however, were fulfilled. Assyrians destroyed the Northern kingdom first. Then the Babylonians conquered the Southern kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem was taken, the Temple of Solomon razed to the ground and the leaders of the people taken off to exile in Babylon.

In exile the people of God asked themselves what had happened? They were God’s chosen people and yet God had abandoned them. They began to consider their past. Their history was a history of God’s dealings with his people. Their history was a

revelation of God's purpose for his people. They began to look again at all their traditions in order to discover what God had been revealing.

God raised up prophets in the exile. Their message was one of hope and the promise of being restored to their own country once again. In due course their prophecy was fulfilled.

The majority of scripture scholars teach that it was during the exile that the traditions of the people were edited and their writings, to that date, were formed into the books of the Old Testament, which are still with us today.

The Hebrew Creed was drawn up. The Israelites are God's chosen people. Their God is the creator and ruler of all that exists and of all the peoples. He is the almighty. He is a God of compassion and mercy. He calls all peoples to holiness. The chosen people are to proclaim his call to holiness to the nations. The ability to be holy, as God is holy, does not lie with humankind. It is a gift of God. At the creation of humankind they are given access to the Tree of Life, which enables holy living, but they had rejected God's gift of grace. Now, they must wait upon the restoration of God's gift. One is to come who will enable true holiness of life. He will be priest, prophet and king. He will be sent by God. He will be the Tree of Life.

### **FROM THE RESTORATION OF THE EXILES TO CHRIST.**

The Persians under Cyrus conquered the Babylonians. Those in exile were allowed to return to the Promised Land and rebuild their Temple. It was, of course, a pale shadow of the great Temple of Solomon.

The post-exilic prophets brought a message of encouragement. From then the people were to live in expectation of a future salvation. The prophecies were difficult to interpret and there were many different and conflicting expectations.

There grew up a religious movement. Those imbued by its spirit have been characterised as the Poor of Jahweh. They understood that, although riches were a blessing from God, they were dangerous. They tended to foster pride and reliance on earthly goods rather than upon God. Consequently they wanted to live with a frugal sufficiency. "Two things I beg of you, do not grudge them before I die: keep falsehood and lies far from me, give me neither poverty nor riches, grant me only my share of bread to eat, for fear that surrounded by plenty, I should fall away and say, 'The Lord – who is the Lord?' or else, in destitution, take to stealing and profane the name of my God." (Proverbs 30:7-9)

They accepted that they were called to live according to the Law of Moses but they also understood that their striving to so live would fall (far) short of genuine holiness, which could only come from above. They lived in hope of a future Messiah who would bring salvation. The revelation of God's purpose for humankind – true holiness of life in intimacy with God – was their desire. Equally the revelation of their inadequacy before that purpose, a radical inadequacy, due to the fault of the creature, was also clear. But their whole history proclaimed that God, in his own time and in his own way, would redeem his creation. They lived in hope.

## **THE FULFILMENT OF THE REVELATION IN THE WORD MADE FLESH**

The Word was made flesh and pitched his tent among us. God walked with his creatures offering them familiar friendship in the garden of his creation. During his life on earth that offer was largely refused. On the mountain of the Beatitudes, the new Moses (Jesus) greeted the Poor of Yahweh and promulgated the new Law. How happy are the poor in spirit: theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The way to holiness begins with accepting our poverty of spirit. But that is only the beginning – we must live with it meekly and with gentleness. Happy the gentle: they shall have the earth for their heritage. Living according to the Spirit of the Poor of Yahweh the true quality of our loss of integrity, our sin, begins to emerge. We can do nothing without grace. We are encouraged to embrace this truth. Happy those who mourn: they shall be comforted. The sight of our unholiness, sustained by the promise of comfort generates an overwhelming desire for wholeness and uprightness in God's eyes. Happy those who hunger and thirst for what is right: they shall be satisfied.

It is THE way up the mountain of God. It is the way of self-emptying, the way of self-renunciation, the way of the cross. It opens our eyes to the true state of humankind. Just as we are in need of total mercy so is everybody else. That realisation enables us to become instruments of mercy. Happy the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them. The more the merciful open their hearts to others in order to help them along the way of the beatitudes, the more they grow in love and the more their hearts are purified. They begin to see God's way of infinite mercy and love, actually at work in their own lives and the lives around them. Their hearts are purified by their merciful living, by their giving mercy and receiving mercy. Happy the pure in heart: they shall see God.

A time comes when this process comes to fullness. The wayfarer becomes totally at one with God's way of redemption. No longer is it an object of faith, which is little understood. The light of true wisdom brings the understanding, which calms every fear. It brings a deep inner peace, which becomes an influence for peace in the world. Happy the peacemakers: they shall be called sons of God.

However, there are many who do not wish to recognise and mourn their sinfulness; they will not accept their poverty of spirit. To such those on the way of the beatitudes are an enigma and a reproach. They react against them and persecute them. Happy those who are persecuted in the cause of right: theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Our Lord promulgated the new Law. The old Law was given through Moses, grace and truth has come through Jesus Christ. But is this new way possible? Our Lord not only promulgates the new Law but also lives it. He is Poor in Spirit, intent only on doing, in perfect accord with the Holy Spirit, the will of his Father. He is meek and gentle of heart. He takes upon himself the sin of the world and experiences its deadly virus in the agony of Gethsemani. He hungers and thirsts for the holiness of all in his agony on the cross – 'I thirst'. He reveals the victory of the new way in his resurrection. He brings with him the merciful forgiveness of sin and sends his disciples to bring that mercy to all. His human heart is filled pure love for all, as he makes intercession for all, at the right hand of his Father. He sends the Spirit of his Love into the world to bring his peace, a peace that the world cannot give, to all who

accept it. His heart is pierced on the cross, the symbol of the sufferings caused by the persecution of those who reject his love.

### **THE SENDING OF THE APOSTLES AND THE CHURCH'S MISSION**

The Revelation is complete. The offer of redemption has still to become effective in all time. The instrument of that work is the Holy Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, working in history through the Church. We are privileged to be partners in that work. First of all by seeking to live according to the way of the beatitudes and then helping others to enter upon and persevere in the way shown to us by the Lord.

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