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# Old Testament Theology as *Heilsgeschichte*

By ARLIS JOHN EHLEN

An important group of Old Testament scholars in Germany and America is currently making copious use of the term *Heilsgeschichte* and the ideas associated with it. Avoided until recently by scientific theologians as suggestive of Biblicalism and obscurantism, it has staged a comeback as a key word in some of the most respected scholarly circles. The *Heilsgeschichte* concept is newly recognized as basic to the understanding of all Biblical theology. It lies near the heart of the current enthusiastic revival of Old Testament studies, and it promises to rehabilitate the relevance of the Old Testament for Christian theology and piety to a level not attained since the apostolic age.

The aim of this article is to survey the historical course of the *Heilsgeschichte* idea and to depict its contributions down to the present. There will be opportunity to contrast its tenets with those of other conceptions regarding the meaning of history, and particular attention will be devoted to its relationship with Lutheran orthodoxy. The scope of this paper does not allow any extended discussion of the earlier periods, but at least a brief sketch will be attempted for the sake of orientation.

First, however, a preliminary definition of the expression will be in place, to be given further content and form as the story of its unfolding is set forth.

The term *Heilsgeschichte* was introduced about a century ago by Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann (1816 to

1877), but the conception itself begins with the Bible's own understanding of history. Basic to the witness of both the Old and the New Testament is the conviction that God has taken a direct hand in earthly, human affairs, particularly in a specific chain of events by which the total welfare of mankind, its salvation (German: *Heil*), is being prepared for and revealed to the world. The history of this step-by-step process is now seen to constitute the very core of the Scriptures. It may be called the *historia sacra* or, referring to its actual subject matter, the *Heilsgeschichte*: the story of the many successive words and works of God toward restoration of total well-being<sup>1</sup> to His people.

The same term, or its adjective, *heilsgeschichtlich*, may also be extended to denote any theological system which gives an important place to this Biblical understanding of history. Specifically, however, it designates a 19th-century school of theology centering around Johann Tobias Beck (1804—1878) and Von Hofmann. This circle stood in conscious opposition not

<sup>1</sup> Attention must be called to the breadth of meaning in the word *Heil*, which has to do basically with being "whole" or "hale," i. e., in good condition, not broken, diseased, or otherwise impaired. Thus the word can include any gift of God's blessing, whether "salvation" in a theological sense, personal health, or national victory. This very breadth of meaning has made the term *Heilsgeschichte* difficult to translate into English. Attempts such as "salvation history," "redemptive history," or simply "sacred history" lack some of the fullness of connotation that *Heilsgeschichte* has acquired.



only to historical criticism as then practiced but also to a felt lack of proper emphasis on sacred history in classic orthodoxy.

Finally, the concept of *Heilsgeschichte* has since the close of World War II been restored to currency by a number of Biblical (particularly Old Testament) scholars who themselves stand within the tradition of a moderate historical criticism. Their appreciation of the role which history must play in any discussion of Biblical theology is to be the final topic treated in this essay.

#### I. THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF HISTORY AND ITS ANCIENT RIVALS

The current debate on the subject of *Heilsgeschichte* is motivated, in part at least, by the desire to uncover and state more adequately the Scriptures' own understanding of history. While some interpretations and conclusions are still being debated, general agreement on most of the essentials has been reached by now. The following may therefore be accepted as the exegetical position held by the majority of Bible scholars.

The Biblical authors only show limited interest in a static description of God in His heavenly dwelling. On the contrary, the Bible generally portrays God as He comes into contact with mankind, rather than as He exists in solitary, eternal splendor. The God of both the Old and the New Testament is directly concerned with the world of His creation and particularly with man, and conversely the world of man is directly affected by God's will and words and actions. God's hand is constantly in the thick of human affairs.

Now, while it is true that several of the Biblical writers depict the scope of God's concern in universal and general terms, it

is clear that a certain limited number of specific events are held to furnish the key to the meaning of the rest. In these particular events, and in the accompanying words mediated by His chosen spokesmen, God revealed His nature and His will for mankind. His concern for the *Heil* of all humanity is expressed not so much in general pronouncements (even these are expressed within specific historical situations which color their meaning) as in particular words and acts directed toward particular people.

Thus we are given to know something of God's will for all men through His specific words and acts as He calls the individual man Abraham, guides him, and makes promises to him. When Abraham's descendants find themselves bowed under Egyptian slavery, God speaks and acts in such a way as to deliver them, give them a new land, and place them under a covenant obligation to Himself as their Savior. When they have broken the covenant and are defeated by their enemies, God places David and his descendants over them as His viceroy. Even before this kingdom's complete collapse and the exile of the people, God is holding out to His people the hope of a new beginning under a new covenant. After several promising but ineffective starts all attention comes to be focused on a particular descendant of David who is proclaimed as the representative Son of man. In His death, burial, and subsequent resurrection God reveals His ultimate intention for all mankind. The formation of a new people of God is begun, witnesses are sent out, and the fuller revelation of God in Jesus Christ is universally proclaimed as its universal applicability becomes clear. The promise is made of a final great act of world history when all



the elect will be gathered in, evil will be destroyed, and the entire creation will be restored to its pristine wholeness.

There is no difficulty in agreeing that these are the chief points in the history of God's relations with man as attested in the Scriptures. The additional details are also well known, and they likewise have their significance in the complete story. The point to be made here, however, is that it is from this story that we know the God of the Bible. This particular history selected out of the totality of world history is what gives us the picture of God upon which our faith rests. All revelation (i. e., all knowledge of God apart from natural religion) has come as a part of this specific chain of events within history, and each item of revelation gained its original meaning in the context of a specific moment in that history.

It must be emphasized that, elementary as this may seem to us who are heirs of the Scriptural understanding of history, this view of divine revelation as an actual part of real human history is unique in the world of religious thought. While this could be demonstrated also with reference to other world religions, it will be most illuminating to compare the Biblical witness on this point with its own contemporaries.

A good deal has become known about the religious beliefs and practices of the ancient Near Eastern world in the time before and during the writing of the Old Testament. Canaanite religion — which was always a threat and a temptation to the Israelites, and over against which the uniqueness of the Old Testament can best be seen — was a religion of myth and nature. The figure of Baal exemplifies both these aspects. Myth, as defined by most

students of comparative religions, denotes stories about the world of the gods and their involvement with men. Such stories are told and retold not so much for their intrinsic interest as for the reason that their ritual rehearsal helped to restore the order of things in man's own world. The myths about Baal (known to us from Ugaritic and other sources) had to do with well-being and fertility in nature — plants, animals, and man himself. These myths were not simply retold but dramatized, actually reenacted, in dance and song at the Canaanite religious festivals. In this way the people did their part to keep nature operative. The actions of the human community were thus kept in harmony with those of the gods as reported in the myths, and this in turn would ensure that the powers of the gods would be operative among them, so that the crops would not fail, the animals would bear plenteous young, and general well-being would be maintained. We need not wonder that when the Israelites entered the land of milk and honey and when the fertility of nature became all-important for their economic life, they were sorely tempted to imitate their Canaanite neighbors in the worship of Baal.

But the contrast between this nature religion and the history-centered faith of the people of Yahweh is obvious. Yahweh had made Himself known to Israel by specific promises and dramatic deeds of deliverance in their national life, not through myths connected with the ever-reoccurring cycles of nature. To be sure, this God is at the same time the Lord of nature, the Creator and Provider of all, but He has made Himself known first and foremost as the Deliverer of His people and Lord over the course of their history



among the nations. In contrast to the religion of Baal the importance of the Old Testament's emphasis on historical revelation and historical salvation becomes clear.

Another more distant contemporary of ancient Israel may be mentioned briefly because of its decisive influence on the thought of our Western civilization. The most ancient Greek religion did not differ greatly from that of Canaan in the aspects with which we are here concerned. But the classical period of Greek culture brought a new departure, the effects of which will be seen in our study at a later point. The Greeks, according to prevalent scholarly opinion today, were the only other ancient people, besides the Hebrews, who developed a feeling for history. But among the Greeks this development took quite a different form: it was humanistic, glorifying the achievements of the Greeks, rather than religious; it was cyclical rather than based on unique events aimed toward a concluding future; and it became connected with a budding philosophical and scientific interest in cause and effect, in conjunction with a debunking of the ancient religious myths. Greek historiography is therefore concerned to trace historical causes on the purely human level. It does not seek to disclose the will and guidance of God in human events, leading toward a future goal, as does the Bible. The latter is a history of divine revelation and salvation, the former a history of human achievements and failures.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For a representative treatment of the contrasts between the Old Testament faith and its contemporaries the interested reader may consult G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM Press, 1952), especially pp. 38—50; and *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (London: SCM Press, 1950).

## II. THE ECLIPSE OF THE BIBLICAL VIEW

The Old Testament view that human history is the arena in which God reveals Himself was preserved and further developed both in intertestamental Judaism (especially in apocalyptic thought) and in the New Testament. It is the latter, in fact, which places the crown on the whole history of God's dealings with mankind, showing Christ Jesus to be the hub of this history and pointing toward its ultimate culmination on the Last Day. Thus Christianity is solidly grounded in history and is set on its way as a history-centered faith.

But other tides were already moving in the Hellenistic world, and the historical mode of thought centered in Palestine began to suffer dilution. The Gnostic disdain of all things historical found a worthy Biblical opponent in St. Irenaeus, with his pattern of historical "recapitulation." But later the theologians of Alexandria began infiltrating the church with a speculative, systematizing urge which wanted to translate all historical particularities into eternal verities. Clear Biblical statements about God's condescension to act among men had to be allegorized, just as the Greek myths had been. The rival exegetical school at Antioch held out for some time in favor of preserving the literal, historical interpretation of the Scriptures, but Greek-Hellenistic ideas were everywhere in the air. In his *City of God*, St. Augustine, for example, is able to combine an allegorical method with some elements of the Biblical view of history.

Even during the Middle Ages, the basic pattern of Biblical history was of course remembered; in fact, it could be extended to form a framework for all "secular" his-



tory, as in the system of the 12th-century monk, Joachim of Floris. In such a view of history human initiative was entirely subordinated to the divine will and plan. The greatest theological interest and labor, however, tended to be directed toward the elaboration of a system of thought rather than toward history. God was now treated as an object to be discussed and described in elaborate scholastic detail rather than as a personal subject who is known by what He has said and done and who elicits loyalty and trust on this account. All this was the unconscious heritage of a subtle but far-reaching Hellenization of the Biblical faith.

### III. SLOW RECOVERY OF APPRECIATION FOR THE BIBLICAL VIEW

In the case of the reformers, to the extent that historical processes came to their attention at all, these continued to be viewed in Biblical terms as completely dominated by God's sovereignty. Human impulse and action had little scope—an outlook totally unlike the classical Greek conception of history. But the Biblical view of a history guided by God remained rather peripheral in their theology. In this respect the reformers continued to be strongly influenced by their medieval background.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, one of the fundamental Reformation principles proved to be germinal to the development of a historical approach to the Bible. *Sola Scriptura*

<sup>3</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart* (Neukirchen: Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1956), p. 22. But see John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 139f.

means that the Scriptures alone are the source and norm of all religious authority. Hence the reformers were deeply concerned to determine precisely what the Scriptures meant to say. With this new urgency it quickly became clear that the "spiritual meaning" favored by medieval interpreters of the Scriptures could have no authoritative standing. These multiple senses (allegorical, tropological, anagogical) were only a ruse to allow taking out of the text whatever confidential "divine" information the interpreter might wish to find there. This was "enthusiasm," not obedience to the Word of God. Certainty regarding the meaning originally intended by God could be found only in the *sensus literalis sive historicus*. God speaks to us via the literal meaning of Hebrew and Greek words and within the context of the original historical situation.

This hermeneutical rule, corresponding to the *sola* of the Reformation's Scriptural principle, gave decisive importance in Reformation exegesis to the grammatical investigation of the languages and the historical study of the times. Among the reformers, it was particularly Melancthon and Calvin who stressed the thorough investigation of the circumstances of time and place in relation to the *sensus historicus* of a text. It is significant that these are two men who were most open to the impulse of humanistic thought in its application to Biblical studies. While they, too, did not see the decisive role which history plays in Biblical theology itself, it was due to the influence of humanism and the reaction against it that this viewpoint was finally recognized.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Kraus, pp. 7—10.



The rise of humanism was more or less contemporary with the Reformation, and the paths of the two movements crossed at various points, especially in a man like Melancthon. But the reformers could have little sympathy with the new conception of history which was making its appearance in secular humanism. Its source was the renaissance of classical Greek learning, and like the latter it viewed history as pivoting around man. Man is no longer subordinate to God's grand design, as the Biblical and Christian tradition insists. The interplay of forces in history is observed and presented without consideration for a personally active God.

As its techniques for historical research were gradually refined, this humanistic view eventually matured into modern secular historiography. Its offshoot in the area of Biblical studies has been the critical approach to the Bible in its whole wide array: historical and literary criticism, *Religionsgeschichte*, form criticism, tradition history, etc. While the secular historical method was not widely applied to the Bible on a large scale until several centuries after the Reformation, its seeds were already planted in the Renaissance and humanism, while at the same time the way was being cleared for a new recognition of the Bible's own view of history.

But this rediscovery, prepared for in their own way by both the Reformation and Renaissance, was to be postponed while scholars of classic orthodoxy developed other tendencies of the Reformation. In the light of our present understanding it must be admitted that Orthodoxy's approach to the Scriptures failed in this one important respect: it was unable to grasp the absolutely necessary role of history in

Biblical theology. Instead of moving in the direction of the historical mode of thinking, Orthodoxy marked the strong resurgence of an almost purely systematic, doctrinal approach. This is, of course, quite understandable when it is remembered that medieval scholasticism had also been highly systematic and quite nonhistorical. Luther had battled the medieval system on its own grounds, restoring the Scriptures alone as the doctrinal authority but not yet fully recognizing the basic historical and non-systematic character of those same Scriptures. Thus strictures which one finds directed against leaders of classic orthodoxy apply also to its predecessors;<sup>5</sup> this is not an area in which Lutheranism marked a radical departure from the soil out of which it grew.

At any rate, individual words of God continued to be understood by Orthodoxy as sources of timeless doctrine rather than as specific instances of God's  $\text{קִרְבַּן}$  powerfully entering and changing history. The Bible was regarded as a rich vein from which doctrinal prooftexts were to be mined, with each word having the same revelatory value independent of its historical setting. The study of theology was for most a matter of systematically treating a series of doctrinal *loci* rather than of tracing the historical process of revelation and redemption. We are attempting here not to caricature but to describe as accurately as possible one characteristic aspect of the classic Orthodox position, in the hope that its one-sidedness in this respect will cause the essentials of

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 66—69; Gustav Weth, *Die Heilsgeschichte* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1931), pp. 14—16.



the *Heilsgeschichte* approach—which is the subject of this essay—to stand out all the more clearly by contrast.

The other area in which a full appreciation of the aspect of history could have rendered a greater service to Orthodoxy was in the elaboration of the Reformation principle of justification through faith. We must be eternally grateful for this essential and invaluable insight of the Reformation. The danger in any attempt to supplement and carry further the achievements of the Reformation is that the depth of this personal aspect may be lost. Nevertheless, the fact that particularly the later theologians were interested almost exclusively in the individual *ordo salutis* led by default to the impoverishment of the Biblical witness in another direction. The Christian hope was narrowed into the hope of a blessed death and resurrection for the individual believer. The reality of God's presence among men was depicted almost exclusively in its reference to the individual. The coming of God's kingdom was sometimes reduced to an insignificant appendix at the end of dogmatics, where it lent a formal completeness to the system but had little to do with the essence of faith. Personal *Heilsgeschichte*, the working out of Law and Gospel in the individual's own life history, took precedence over the history of God's dealings with all of mankind. The Biblical view of history is needed to balance this exaggerated individualism by lifting the individual above himself and showing him his place in the church and society and history.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the Reformation and Orthodoxy were aware of Biblical history. In

<sup>6</sup> Weth, pp. 15f.

fact, they felt it to be the only sure structure on which to hang all that they knew of world history too. But the true significance of history as a theological factor had not yet dawned. It was not recognized that the historical outlook of the Bible was basic to its whole message. A new appreciation of history, and of the particular view of history which permeates the Old and New Testaments, was doubtless stimulated by the catalyst provided by the renaissance of the classical Greek view of history and the new advances in secular historiography which this instigated. In the meantime Lutheran Orthodoxy, like all other theological systems of the day, was denied this possibility of enriching its theology and grasping the Scriptural fullness more completely.

At the same time, however, certain circles, particularly in the Reformed camp, developed an interest in one Biblical concept which proved to be a pointer toward the rediscovery of the Biblical view of history. Reformed theologians from the very beginning had been conscious of the covenant idea and had recognized the fact that the Old Testament speaks of a succession of covenants which God made with men, culminating in the new covenant in Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> This recognition helped make possible the discovery of the historical process of revelation, by which God pulls back His hiddenness and discloses His nature and will to man step by step. The possibilities latent in this insight were first expanded into a theology of history by

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics, Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), pp. 393 to 409.



two men in the middle of the 17th century, the one Reformed, and the other Lutheran. The former, Johannes Cocceius (Koch) (1603—69) of Leyden, succeeded in putting together the grander system, known as the federal theology,<sup>8</sup> which had greater influence than that of the latter, Georg Calixt (1586—1656) of Helmstedt.<sup>9</sup>

Both these men had imbibed the concern for history which was becoming more and more dominant in the 17th-century thought world, and both saw, too, that the Bible in its own way speaks of a long historical process. Apparently independently, since neither of them mentions the other's work, they came to the conclusion that Orthodoxy's flat, nonhistorical approach to the Bible as a source of doctrine was not entirely appropriate to the Bible's own nature. Both maintained that God's preparation of man's salvation and its disclosure to man ought to be depicted as a succession of historical acts and not merely as a series of doctrinal *loci*. Both Cocceius and Calixt connected this with the successive covenants between God and man recorded in the Bible and declared this *Heilsgeschichte* to be the overall theme of the Bible.

But it is clear that, for Cocceius at least, the chief opponent over against which the new *Heilsgeschichte* approach stood was not a strong emphasis on static *doctrina* but rather the treatment which the Bible had recently been receiving at the hands of Hugo Grotius. This Dutch scholar treated the Old Testament as a purely

human document, to be explained in terms of secular history. God does not speak here, he argued, and only the New Testament has any theological authority.

Cocceius shared with Grotius his interest in history but refused to try to get behind and beyond the Bible's own record of events, as the latter irreverently did. In place of a humanistic, rationalistic reconstruction of history, Cocceius only wished to emphasize the historical structure attested by the Bible itself, i. e., the covenant history. He did, of course, make a clear distinction between the Old Testament and the new covenant in Christ, even to the point of admitting a certain *defectus* in the former, since the New Testament fulfillment was not yet fully knowable from the previous covenants. But instead of denying all theological validity to the Scriptures of the old covenant, as Grotius had done, he holds that the predictions of the Old Testament prophets served to compensate for the *defectus* in these earlier covenants. For the Christian interpretation of these prophecies, however, he finds it necessary to give typology an extensive role.<sup>10</sup>

The important contributions of Calixt and Cocceius may thus be summarized: Prompted by the rise of interest in the dimension of history among the humanistic thinkers of their day, and cognizant of the difficulties and dangers in the non-historical approach dominated by the idea of doctrinal *loci*, they were the first to introduce a historical mode of theological thinking. At the same time they harked back to the Reformation's insistence on the sole authority of the literal, historical

<sup>8</sup> Set out in his *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento Dei* (1648 and later editions).

<sup>9</sup> His book on the subject was *De pactis quae Deus cum hominibus iniit* (1654).

<sup>10</sup> Based on the treatment of Cocceius in Kraus, pp. 49—51.



sense of Scripture, allowing this to correct the almost completely doctrinal approach of Orthodox dogmatics as well as the overly rationalistic and humanistic approach of secular historical thought. In the idea of covenant history they found the threads of the theological history attested in the Scriptures, the *Heilsgeschichte* running its course in the midst of and above world history.

It must, however, also be clearly seen that the historical structure which Calixt and Cocceius based on God's series of covenants with man was not yet the understanding of *Heilsgeschichte* developed in the 19th and 20th centuries. The modern understanding of organic development was still lacking in any real sense, as was also the awareness that history itself may constitute revelation. Their system, which was still fighting the battle with scholasticism, did not yet relate the faith of the individual Christian in a conscious and vital way to the sacred history. Their interest in tracing God's activity through the course of time has no inner connection with their interest in the faith of the individual Christian.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV. HEILSGESCHICHTE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BIBLICISM

The federal theology of Cocceius remained influential for several centuries in certain circles, especially within the Reformed confession. But a great wave of interest in history from a critical and scientific as well as from a speculative and philosophical point of view was sweeping over European thought in the era of Rationalism, and specifically in the Ger-

man Enlightenment. This movement completely engulfed all but the most conservative Biblical interpreters, but by the same token it was preparing the way for another great confrontation between speculative historical thought and the theology of *Heilsgeschichte*. This confrontation reached its high point in the middle of the 19th century with Von Hofmann. But first we must attempt to review the new scientific and philosophical thinking about history which had by then come to the fore.

The great discovery made by the men of the Enlightenment was the nature of history. They learned to look at history as lying in the past and viewed from a distance, so that it could be judged critically from the standpoint of the present. History is a detached object susceptible of scientific study.

But history so understood includes a vast number of separate happenings, utterly meaningless if seen only in isolation from one another. Hence it was also a goal of this intellectual movement to discover the inner structure of history, the theme under which the individual events of the past and present are united. Hegel's idealist philosophy of history was the answer ultimately found for this problem in the early 19th century, and idealism also had its fateful consequences in the field of Old Testament studies. But it will be useful to look first at a forerunner of Hegel's great system for the understanding of history.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729—81) was convinced, as was fashionable in his enlightened day, that the eternal truth of religion had only become clear to man in

<sup>11</sup> Weth, pp. 17f.



his own advanced generation. Rationalistic criticism had shown the historical relativity of the Bible, against the delusions of Protestant Orthodoxy. It was impossible that the Biblical witnesses, bound as they were to their historical time and therefore completely untrustworthy, could carry eternal truth in its purity. True religion of course had been in existence from the beginning; but that only demonstrates how little it is bound to the words of the Bible.

But is there no positive relationship at all between eternal truth and the religious documents of the past? Lessing answers that there is indeed, and he constructs a speculative system to explain that relationship. This all-embracing system compares the whole of human history to the upbringing of an individual. The title of his book expresses the basic metaphor: "The education of the human race."<sup>12</sup> Mankind's gradual education is brought about by revelation, whereby God leads the human race through all the stages of past and present toward ever more perfect knowledge of the eternal truth. The entire process is carried out according to God's wise plan, the "divine economy."

The Bible has its special place in this divine program of education, for it was the chosen people of God that enjoyed His special attention in their upbringing. But at the same time the other nations were going their own way by the light of reason. A few of these achieved a high degree of self-education, while most remained rough and unpolished. In this way Lessing is able to retain a position for the Bible while at the same time casting the net of his system much wider. He works with

the originally theological idea of a "divine economy," but he turns it to humanistic ends. In place of the Biblical, Orthodox pattern of a history of salvation we are offered a rationalistic, speculative system based on the historical understanding of the era of Enlightenment.<sup>13</sup>

Lessing's portrayal of human progress as following a divine plan of education toward greater knowledge of eternal truth becomes the starting point for the Hegelian system of history known as Idealism. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770—1831) bridged the chasm which Lessing had seen between the eternal truth of reason and that lower form of truth which is historically conditioned and limited. Hegel's massive system has at its very apex the "Absolute Spirit." But unlike Lessing's "eternal truth," which had no very close connection with the actual course of history, the Absolute Spirit is continually unfolding itself within history. All of history is a living process of becoming; it is a growing organism, developing toward the goal of complete maturity. Even contradiction and conflict are seen as necessary parts of the whole process, for it is only through this "dialectic" that the Spirit is able to reach a higher level of unity as it moves toward the attainment of absolute knowledge. The possibilities open to the individual within history are strictly limited by the stage of development in which his particular time and community finds itself.

Hegel's philosophy of history was introduced into Old Testament studies by his pupil, Wilhelm Vatke (1806—82). In his major work on the Old Testament

<sup>12</sup> *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1780).

<sup>13</sup> Kraus, pp. 111—114.



religion<sup>14</sup> he attempted to show the course taken by the Absolute Spirit through the living processes of history. The innumerable chance truths of history are to be connected with the eternal truth of reason; the one involves the minutiae of historical criticism, the other the "total view." Vatke's goal is a connected "history of religion" which can be presented as a continuum of development without gaps. The task of Biblical theology, as he understands it, is to analyze and record the way in which the "idea of religion" has manifested itself in the religious phenomena of history. The manner in which the true religion is grasped and conceptualized depends in each instance on the level of development then attained. Religious myth plays a large part here as one of the most widespread and important conceptual forms which the idea of religion takes. Vatke attempts to write a history of these many individual conceptual forms and the religious awareness which each reflects. But at the same time, in true Idealist fashion, he considers these to be only the bearers or representatives of the real, universal idea of religion. Thus the history which Vatke writes is actually "no real history." His is an outspokenly docetic, nonreal understanding of history, since it has to do throughout with only the symbols of the true spiritual reality.<sup>15</sup>

The fateful importance of Vatke's introduction of the Hegelian system of history into Old Testament studies is seen in the fascination which this system held for

<sup>14</sup> *Die biblische Theologie, wissenschaftlich dargestellt: Die Religion des Alten Testaments nach den kanonischen Büchern entwickelt* (1835).

<sup>15</sup> Kraus, pp. 179—182.

Julius Wellhausen (1844—1918), whose speculative reconstruction of Israelite history along evolutionary lines has held a commanding influence over the general understanding of the Old Testament until quite recently.

Contemporary with the line of philosophical development just depicted, there was also a succession of Christian thinkers who can be seen as the direct predecessors of the 19th-century *Heilsgeschichte* theologians. These men and their characteristic ideas regarding the history of God's revelation can be treated only very briefly in this study, despite their importance for the development of the idea which we are tracing.<sup>16</sup>

Founder of this rather closely knit school of thought is the Swabian pietist Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687—1752), famous as an exegete for his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*.<sup>17</sup> He directs the Christian to see not only his individual situation as redeemed by Christ but also the whole, universal administration of history by God, the "divine economy" by which He is bringing the kingdom of God into being. Bengel is strongly interested in eschatology, including chiliasm, as the goal of God's direction of history. But it must be said that his interest lies chiefly in the formal structure of history and that this has little direct relationship to the Christian's personal assurance of salvation.

Closely connected with Bengel was Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702—82),

<sup>16</sup> The contributions and mutual connections of the men about to be mentioned are succinctly overviewed in Weth, pp. 17—43, on which the following account is based.

<sup>17</sup> First published in 1742. His study of the theology of history is presented in *Ordo temporum* (1741).



who provided the theology of history with a philosophical foundation, although his system<sup>18</sup> was concerned more with the Bible's concepts than with its history. Philipp Matthaeus Hahn (1739—90) sets forth a kenotic Christology, taken up again by some of the later *Heilsgeschichte* theologians, and a "theology of heaven" as the real source and goal of the sacred history.

A complete presentation of the Biblical history, after the manner of Bengel, was laid out again by Magnus Friedrich Roos (1727—1803).<sup>19</sup> He found the unity of creation and redemption to lie in Christ, and his theology was more Biblical and less speculative than that of Oetinger and Hahn.

The theologians already mentioned all belonged to the closely knit group of Swabians around Bengel. Their influence, however, extended also to other German-speaking areas. One such circle centered in Duisburg in the Rhineland, under the leadership of a physician and lay theologian, Samuel Collenbusch (1724—1803). His most important follower and interpreter was Gottfried Menken (1768 to 1831) of Bremen, who succeeded in basing personal faith on the events and goals of sacred history.<sup>20</sup> In the midst of this vale of tears a Christian whose faith is grounded in Scripture detects God's hidden ruling and longs for the eschatological establishment of the heavenly kingdom. Further to the east, in Leipzig, lived the only man in this early *Heilsgeschichte* group to hold

<sup>18</sup> Designated as a "*Philosophie der biblischen Grundbegriffe*."

<sup>19</sup> In his *Einleitung in die biblischen Geschichten* (1774).

<sup>20</sup> In *Versuch einer Anleitung zum eigenen Unterricht in der Heiligen Schrift* (1803).

an academic professorship, Christian August Crusius (1715—75). He believed that there is a history of heaven and hell, both understood in a real, spatial sense, paralleling the *Heilsgeschichte* on earth.<sup>21</sup>

The most original and advanced thinkers among those who may be classed as early representatives of the theology of history are Hamann and Wizenmann. Johann Georg Hamann (1733—88) held<sup>22</sup> that Christianity has to do with God's gracious activity rather than with moralism, and with historical truths of the living God valid for a particular time rather than with the eternal truths of human rationalism. God's condescension to man in the Scriptures and in historical events is compared with the Incarnation.

The man from this group who represented the most thoroughgoing theology of history and who most fully anticipated the 19th-century developments in *Heilsgeschichte* was Thomas Wizenmann (1759 to 87), also a Swabian.<sup>23</sup> He believed in the unity of true philosophy and genuine theology; but this is possible only when knowledge other than that which is verifiable through the senses is excluded. Thus Wizenmann was against all rationalistic, speculative, and moralistic systems. God is not an idea, the result of thought, but a

<sup>21</sup> His ideas were presented in the *Hypomnema ad theologiam propheticam* (1764—78).

<sup>22</sup> Especially in his polemical pamphlet *Golgotha und Scheblimini* (1784). On Hamann see, besides Weth, pp. 32—35, also Kraus, pp. 103—105.

<sup>23</sup> Wizenmann's ideas on the subject were expressed in his *Göttliche Entwicklung des Satans durch das Menschengeschlecht* (1782), against Lessing; *Die Resultate der Jakobischen und der Mendelssohnschen Philosophie* (1786); and especially the uncompleted *Die Geschichte Jesu nach dem Matthäus* (1789).



living Being who brings about a real relationship to Himself by a process of history. This history is the primary thing, and the testimony to it given by the Scriptures is already one step removed; theology must be interested primarily in the former rather than in the latter.<sup>24</sup>

It is worth noting once more that the succession of men just portrayed as the 18th-century forerunners of *Heilsgeschichte* theology were almost all at home in the Pietistic movement, although they form a special direction within that trend. This means that they shared much common ground with Orthodoxy and confessional theology; yet they opposed the nonhistorical, doctrine-centered thinking of Orthodox dogmatics and also its *a priori* inspiration theory and its one-sided emphasis on the individual.

On the other hand, this group certainly felt itself more basically and bitterly opposed to the thinking of the Enlightenment, with its enthronement of human reason above all else, its moralism detached from the revelation of God's grace, its criticism of Biblical history, and especially its claim to possess a natural religion of "eternal truth." It would, of course, have been impossible for these men to have totally escaped the influences of the era of Rationalism, and some of their attitudes toward history were recognizably molded by the spirit of the age. Nevertheless, they consciously felt a gulf of separation between rationalistic thought and their own.

After tracing both the speculative ap-

<sup>24</sup> This tendency to relegate the Scriptures themselves to a lesser importance than that enjoyed by history is also met with later. The problem seems to be solved, however, by the way in which some of the modern proponents of *Heilsgeschichte* speak of the Word.

proach to history championed by philosophers such as Lessing and Hegel and the beginnings of a theological history of revelation, we are now prepared to discuss the high point of *Heilsgeschichte* theology attained in the middle third of the 19th century. With Johann Tobias Beck and Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann we are faced with a truly new era in the development of a theology of history, one which cannot be understood without some knowledge of both the streams of thought which we have described. While Beck and Von Hofmann were of course very directly indebted to the school of thought beginning with Bengel, their system of *Heilsgeschichte* also owes a great deal, even if largely negatively, to the idealist philosophies of history set forth by Hegel and his contemporary Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775—1854) in the first third of that century. Other influences which make themselves felt in the theology of Beck and Von Hofmann, such as the emphasis on personal experience and religious self-consciousness promoted by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768—1834) or the renewal of interest in Reformation and confessional theology following the tercentenary of the Reformation in 1817, need only be mentioned in passing for our purposes, since we are here interested primarily in the understanding of history in their thought.

Beck and Von Hofmann are certainly the chief representatives of the theology of *Heilsgeschichte* in the 19th century, and we shall look at their systems in considerable detail. But in no way did they stand alone among their contemporaries. Particularly Carl August Auberlen (1824 to 64), professor at Basel, deserves mention



on the same level, for he, too, developed a full system based on the *Heilsgeschichte*. But the 19th century was in general the "great century for history," and of those who still believed in divine revelation at all many accepted the *Heilsgeschichte* approach to the Scriptures in whole or in part. Nevertheless, it was Beck and Von Hofmann, along with Auberlen, who gave their theological systems the specific character of a history of revelation and who wove the many individual thoughts concerning the theology of history into a system which was able to combine dogmatic, exegetical, and historical studies into a higher unity.<sup>25</sup>

Beck, professor at Tübingen, was on the one hand a mediating theologian, not basically interested in dogmatic and confessional distinctions, and on the other hand a Biblicist, convinced that the Bible itself is sufficient as an objective norm for theology, over against confessionalism as well as Schleiermacher's subjectivism.<sup>26</sup> As far as his theology of history is concerned, Beck was a true successor of the earlier Swabian line begun with Bengel. Beck himself also recognized certain influences from Hegel, though he became increasingly critical of the Hegelian philosophy.

The starting point for Beck's theology is the kingdom of God, which he understands not as an earthly entity but as heavenly, existing from all eternity as the one true reality. The most important characteristic of the kingdom of God is righteousness, for God Himself is the essentially

Righteous One. This heavenly realm penetrates into the history of lost, sinful mankind in the form of a special sacred history, the purpose of which is to guide mankind over the centuries into the eternal kingdom. God Himself does not actually enter human history in order to effect this, but He works rather through a "world-immanence" centering in Christ, who is the Son and the Logos, active both in creation and in redemption.

The salvation wrought through Christ is described in terms of the righteousness of God. On earth it takes the form of an incipient new creation affecting both body and soul and bringing about an ethical transformation. The ultimate goal is reached only in eternity, but already within history it begins to take form in a gradual process of development brought about by an unfolding of revelation. The eternal religion of truth makes its effective way among the false religions in "systematic progress" toward the goal of complete righteousness. Beck likes to describe this development by analogy with the processes of growth in nature.

By the coming of Jesus the previous revelations of both grace and wrath were united into a "higher principle of righteousness." Jesus is the Righteous One, who makes the world righteous. The goal both of mankind as a whole and of the individual Christian is the attainment of righteousness. It must be made clear that for Beck this is attained not so much by God's declaring the sinner righteous for the sake of Jesus Christ (the *Christus pro nobis* of confessional Lutheranism) as by God's rendering him more and more righteous, in a process not to be completed until the heavenly kingdom is

<sup>25</sup> So Weth, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> O. W. Heick, *History of Protestant Theology*, Vol. II, in J. L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1946), p. 146.



reached. Thus Beck lays much stress on ethics, although he agrees that perfection is not possible in this world.

Parallel with the processes of history stands the Bible, not simply as a document testifying to the history of revelation, but itself constituting revelation. The Bible too is a living, organic whole, a complete system. Biblical concepts therefore are to be studied not only in connection with selected individual passages, but by synthesizing all Biblical statements about the subject into a "total concept."

In summary, Beck's system postulates a real, transcendental kingdom of God as both the effective power and the goal behind a planned, organically developing history of revelation and an individual Christian life with an ethical emphasis.<sup>27</sup>

Von Hofmann was the foremost exponent of the famous Erlangen school of theology. This means that he was consciously concerned with the Lutheran confessional heritage. The Erlangen theologians, among whom were also Harless, Thomasius, Franz Delitzsch, and others, were out to achieve "a new way to present the old truth," i. e., a creative synthesis of the Lutheran heritage with the new learning.<sup>28</sup> Von Hofmann himself was a product of the reaction of religious thinkers against the dominant rationalism in the first half of the 19th century, as was the Erlangen

school itself. His original conversion introduced him to a nonconfessional and very personal type of Christianity, although with strong Biblical and historical interests. Only later did he consciously turn to Lutheranism. As a student, the influence of the great historian Leopold von Ranke (1795—1886) drew him into the study of history.

All this makes Von Hofmann an especially many-sided and independent representative of the theology of history. He differs from those already treated in that he adds to their concerns the factors of personal religious experience as a source from which to unfold one's theology (cf. Schleiermacher) and a stronger Lutheran consciousness. Partly because of these factors his was the one true *HEILSGESCHICHTE* theology, because he was more interested than they in salvation as the content of the history of revelation. In fact, it is only with Von Hofmann that we find an extensive use of the term *Heilsgeschichte*.

For Von Hofmann<sup>29</sup> *Heilsgeschichte* begins in the eternal will of God, which desires to bring man into communion with Himself. It is this which brings God to act in human history. We cannot know or describe God independently from history, but only as the One who is actively working in history. Like Beck, Von Hofmann understands the course of history as

<sup>27</sup> This summary is paraphrased from Weth, p. 72. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 72—81, for Beck's entire system; also Kraus, pp. 191—196. Beck himself presented his theology of history in *Einleitung in das System der christlichen Lehre* (2d ed., 1870) and in many other works.

<sup>28</sup> Heick, p. 131. The quotation alludes to the title of Von Hofmann's work, *Schutzschriften für eine neue Weise, alte Wahrheit zu lehren* (1856 and following).

<sup>29</sup> His system is presented primarily in these three works: *Weissagung und Erfüllung* (1841 to 1844); *Der Schriftbeweis* (1852—56); and *Biblische Hermeneutik*, ed. posthumously by W. Volck (1880), trans. as *Interpreting the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959). George Stoeckhardt, a prominent exegete of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, reflected the influence of his teacher, Von Hoffmann, throughout his life.



an organic process of growth and development. It has a strongly teleological and eschatological character, since it is moving toward an eternal consummation. Hence Von Hofmann devotes much attention to the problem of prophecy and fulfillment. All of history is a prophecy, and all of history is at the same time a fulfillment. As history unfolds, its meaning becomes more and more clear in both these respects. Everything in history is in itself an activity of God, but it also looks toward God's ultimate activity; and everything in history is fulfillment, but only partially so, for it still longs for the ultimate fulfillment.

Each individual phenomenon in history stands at a particular stage in the development of the *Heilsgeschichte*, and thus its meaning is relative to that stage. Man's capacity for understanding God's words or deeds at a specific point in time is conditioned by the education and development through which he has previously been led by God. This applies to prophecy through historical event, but equally also to prophecy by word, which never goes beyond the prophetic content of the historical events with which it is associated.

The coming of Jesus Christ marks the "beginning of the consummation." All earlier history in event and word is aimed at this target, and all further history goes out from it. Christ Himself, as eternal God and the power effective in history, was the center of history already before His incarnation, so that the advance information about Him in the Old Testament may be described as information which He Himself supplied. As the prototype of the goal toward which the world is moving, Christ is the means by which communion between God and man becomes historical

reality. In His own person He depicts the new attitude of man toward God (He humbled Himself even unto death) and of God toward man (He was raised and exalted to perfect communion with God the Father). Salvation comes through this humiliated and exalted Christ by His mediation of personal communion with God to the congregation of those who believe in Him. He is the pledge to them that this communion will become a perfect one in eternity, toward which the final history of the world is moving by stages.

This divine system of history is to be derived out of the Scriptures, which constitute the "literary monument" of the sacred history. It is the *Heilsgeschichte* itself that is primary. The Scriptures are secondary, the faithful deposit of the historical development of revelation. The proof of their inspiration lies in the fact that every utterance they record and every deed they report is seen to have its necessary place in the development of the *Heilsgeschichte* and thus is proved to be of God. In his treatment of the Bible as a thoroughly and specifically historical book, Von Hofmann is the most consistent and logical of all the theologians of revelation-history so far considered.

The *Heilsgeschichte* is, according to Von Hofmann, closely related to the faith of the individual Christian, for as a member of mankind he is drawn into the history of the developing communion between God and mankind. He is made a member of the church, within which this history takes place. Thus the individual Christian feels himself completely surrounded by this history and by the promised future, so that he sees his own experience of



regeneration as an integral part of it. In fact, it is also possible, as Von Hofmann demonstrates, to proceed in the opposite direction when setting up the theological system. Beginning with his own experience of the reality of God's communion with him in Christ, the theologian can unfold the entire history of revelation in its essential features. Although this principle reflects the influence of Schleiermacher, Von Hofmann does not have in mind the theologian's subjective feelings but the factual evidences of God's working in the individual through Christ, which are seen to point to the same history of God's activity as that known from the Bible or from the church's theological consciousness.

The essential content of Von Hofmann's theology of history may thus be summarized: It has to do with the *Heilsgeschichte* of a communion between God and man, mediated through Christ and realized in progressive historical stages; this *Heilsgeschichte* is experienced as a certainty and a unity in the individual's own regeneration, documented in the Scriptures, and made a reality in the historical church.<sup>30</sup>

#### V. THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY RENAISSANCE OF HEILSGESCHICHTE THOUGHT

Soon after the time of Beck and Von Hofmann, thinking in terms of a Biblical *Heilsgeschichte* went into almost complete eclipse among scholarly theologians. Only the great Old Testament professor at Leipzig, Franz Delitzsch (1813—90), was sym-

pathetic to the Erlangen school and continued to plead for a "supranaturalism" in Biblical history.<sup>31</sup>

Otherwise the latter half of the 19th century must be characterized as the era of *Religionsgeschichte* and of the problem of "religion" in general. The fast-growing body of knowledge about other religions and the recognition that these can be properly studied as purely historical and cultural phenomena led scholars to approach the Old Testament records on the same level. The thought of divine revelation falls out of the picture, and the developmental theory is applied everywhere in such a way as to make all religions the product of human evolution. Scholarly diligence is expended on the psychology, sociology, and history of religions, with little thought left for the divine element in which a theology of the Bible is interested. Studies in "Israelite religion" consciously eliminate the theme of *Heilsgeschichte*. On such a basis it was no longer possible to trace a real unity in the Old Testament, but only successive periods, each with its own level of religion separated from the others.

But as the 19th century drew to a close, a few scholars began to search tentatively for a new theological, *heilsgeschichtlich* orientation toward Old Testament studies. This was done with much reservation because the results of the study of religion as a many-sided human phenomenon had to be taken into account even when its humanistic bias was renounced. Hence it was now impossible simply to reinstate

<sup>30</sup> Based on Weth, pp. 81, 92. Von Hofmann's entire system is presented in Weth, pp. 81—94; also in Kraus, pp. 207—210.

<sup>31</sup> Especially in his "last testament," *Messianische Weissagungen in geschichtlicher Folge* (1890). See Kraus, pp. 210—221.



the grand, unified system of 19th-century *Heilsgeschichte* as a straight-line advance toward God's goal for history.

Justus Köberle (1871—1908) was one of the first voices of this post-*Religionsgeschichte* interest in the theological aspect of the Old Testament.<sup>32</sup> He proposed that belief in an actual revelation by God does not exclude recognition of a human history of Israel's religion. In fact, the reality of revelation can be demonstrated, though only to faith, by careful study of the connected workings in all aspects of Israel's history. Comparison with data concerning the religions of the nations surrounding Israel will only make the fact of revelation all the more clear. God's revelatory work shows itself in Israel's life by that nation's peculiar historical experiences, by the peculiar prophetic interpretation given to these, and by the peculiar way in which this interpretation affected the life and religion of the whole nation. In contrast to the 19th-century *Heilsgeschichtler*, Köberle does not feel compelled to emphasize the unity of God's revelatory process or to exaggerate the material connections within Israel's history. An impression of the unity arises by itself, he holds, as the endless variety of the different persons and periods of the Old Testament is studied. Thus the study of human *Religionsgeschichte* and theological *Heilsgeschichte* are to be combined.<sup>33</sup>

By the beginning of World War I

<sup>32</sup> Cf. his "Heilsgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Betrachtungsweise des Alten Testaments," *Neue Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, (1906), pp. 200 ff.; and *Sünde und Gnade im religiösen Leben des Volkes Israel bis auf Christum* (1905).

<sup>33</sup> Kraus, pp. 345—347.

a number of scholars had become interested in the new search for theological orientation in Old Testament studies. A group of them began the *Kommentar zum Alten Testament*, under the editorship of Ernst Sellin. It was to combine a good foundation in historical criticism and the methods of *Religionsgeschichte* with a "theological direction of sight." Some of the men associated with this work were Paul Volz, Otto Procksch, Rudolf Kittel, Albrecht Alt, and Friedrich Baumgärtel.

Outside the field of Old Testament scholarship itself there was further discussion taking place on the question raised by Adolf von Harnack (1851—1930) when he asked whether the Old Testament with all its very human history and embarrassing stories should any longer be retained by the church as part of its Holy Scriptures. The question seemed to pass by the Old Testament scholars quite unheeded, but a circle of New Testament theologians, gathering around Martin Kähler (1835 to 1912)<sup>34</sup> and his pupil Hans Emil Weber (1882—1950),<sup>35</sup> took up the cudgels. Influenced by the 19th-century *Heilsgeschichtler*, they went farther yet in emphasizing the close relationship between God's revelation and all the events of human history. The stress is no longer on the *Heilsgeschichte* as an unbroken continuum of suprahistorical imposed from above on man's daily struggles. Instead, Kähler likes to point to the analogy between the incarnation of Christ and the "inhistoriation" (*Geschichtswerdung*) of God's salvation (*Heil*). Jesus is not a supernatural being

<sup>34</sup> Cf. his essays "Zur Bibelfrage" in Vol. I of *Dogmatische Zeitfragen* (2d ed., 1907).

<sup>35</sup> In his *Bibelglaube und historisch-kritische Schriftforschung* (1913).



who merely appears to be a man (docetism), but He is God joined with human flesh in one divine-human person. Just so, God's perpetual incarnation includes His condescension in bringing His salvific acts right down into the thick of man's own world and in revealing His salvation plans in the processes of man's own history. At the same time Kähler upholds the continuity of this developing revelation from God's point of view; thus Jesus can refer to the Old Testament as testifying to Himself, regardless of the historically conditioned situation of its witnesses.<sup>36</sup> A Biblical and theological position related to Kähler's was that of Adolf Schlatter (1852—1938).

Incomparably more influential than Kähler's school was the new theological interest in the Scriptures stirred up in the years between the two world wars by Karl Barth (b. 1886).<sup>37</sup> Barth is no *Heilsgeschichtler*; at times, in fact, he speaks against the *Heilsgeschichte* approach when he wants to emphasize the fact that the Bible confronts us with the living God in our own present existence, here and now. Yet his influence has been largely responsible for an upsurge of concern in recent times for the Bible's theological content, and this in turn has provided the climate in which many scholars can again speak of *Heilsgeschichte*. Furthermore, some areas of Barth's interest are close to those with which the *Heilsgeschichte* approach is directly involved.

Significantly, Barth did not come to his

<sup>36</sup> Kraus, pp. 353—355.

<sup>37</sup> Works specifically on the Bible as God's Word include *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (1925), and his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Vol. I, Part 2 (3d ed., 1945).

theology of the Word via a conservative, confessional background. His training thoroughly acquainted him with the methods and results of historical criticism, and he continues to recognize their validity in his system. But from this position, directly in the midst of the scholarly theological world, he stood up and pointed to a single factor which could bring fresh understanding to all areas of contemporary theology: the Word of God. The Bible, so long understood as a musty document of religion and piety, was now seen to have a power within itself. Sooner or later it brings the reader face to face with the Word to him from God—from God who is the Wholly Other, not a mere product of the human mind. This Word steps out of a history long past and creates a new history in which the reader or hearer himself is directly involved. To be sure, the Bible is a very human document, a product of its own time in history, and this is what makes historical criticism of it both possible and necessary. But it has a very special content, and this is what its authors were interested in and what still grips us today. Exegesis must work in the recognition that this material was a testimony to God's Word in the past and can again now become such a testimony. Hence proper exegesis can take place only within the church.<sup>38</sup> Barth's theology of the Word brought to Old Testament circles a much stronger emphasis on the genuinely "theological" aspect of the Scriptures. What God has done and still does came more into focus again after many years of one-sided attention to the purely human elements in history and religion.

<sup>38</sup> Kraus, pp. 378—382.



Parallel to Barth's new theological emphasis, and partly stimulated by it, there was between the two world wars a general revival of interest in the theology of the Reformation. One voice among many was that of Wilhelm Vischer (b. 1895),<sup>39</sup> who carried Barth's insights regarding the Word of God in the church even farther and demanded a return to the Reformation's understanding of the Old Testament as a witness to Christ. The Christian church, he said, stands or falls by its recognition of the unity between the two Testaments, for the decisive element in the apostolic proclamation was that Jesus is the Messiah of the Old Testament. An honest philological and historical exegesis of the Old Testament should show that Jesus is actually the hidden import of those writings. Like Barth, Vischer called for a strictly scientific, historical study of the texts, even though such studies themselves are relative and absolute validity can never be ascribed to them. And he recognized that modern research has helped us read the Old Testament writings with a better understanding of their history and of their own special character. Such studies are necessary if we are to do justice to the fact that God spoke His Word in particular historical circumstances.<sup>40</sup>

Prepared in advance by Barth, Vischer, and the revival of Reformation insights, the German Evangelical Church then experienced the *Kirchenkampf*, the persecution and temptation to apostasy under National Socialism (1933—45). The experience of the church under the cross led

<sup>39</sup> *Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments*, Vol. I (3d ed., 1936).

<sup>40</sup> Kraus, pp. 387—389.

to a high point in the appreciation of the Old Testament's divine message. The Old Testament was discovered anew by many as the book of God's pilgrim people, on the march in the midst of idolatry and judgment but continually being granted the privilege of hearing the voice of the living God. This experience, too, helped bring German scholarship to the point where a theology of *Heilsgeschichte* could make a new appearance after World War II, on a broader base than ever before.<sup>41</sup>

The extent of the change that has occurred can be measured by the frequency with which the word *Heilsgeschichte* itself is now used in a completely positive sense by respectable theologians writing in German (and recently even in English!). It must be remembered that from the time the term was introduced by Von Hofmann until at least the thirties of this century, *Heilsgeschichte* denoted for all but a small group of scholars a thoroughly outmoded, unscientific, and uncritical methodology. It is true that the emphasis on *Heilsgeschichte* still is rejected by an important group of theologians, but now it is done from the point of view of the existentialist theology championed by Rudolf Bultmann. This rejection of the term reflects a new and basic cleavage on the modern scene, and learned exponents of both sides have wide followings.

Within the limits of this article, we can refer only to some of the most important of our German contemporaries who operate with a theology of *Heilsgeschichte*, as well as to several of the voices now being heard on our side of the Atlantic. We shall first introduce the men and then

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 389, 392—394.



sketch in rather broad terms the modern understanding of *Heilsgeschichte*.

As author of one of the first and most influential of the newer theologies of the Old Testament which reflect an interest in the history of revelation we must mention Walther Eichrodt of Basel.<sup>42</sup> The only other modern Old Testament theology which rivals his in scope is that of Gerhard von Rad of Heidelberg.<sup>43</sup> Several non-German works along similar lines are those by the Dutch Old Testament scholar Theodorus Christiaan Vriezen<sup>44</sup> and the French Protestant Edmond Jacob.<sup>45</sup>

We must also refer to a debate on Old Testament hermeneutics carried on since 1952 in the pages of several journals, notably *Evangelische Theologie*. While many important contributions to the question of *Heilsgeschichte* have been made in this series, we shall mention only Von Rad, Martin Noth, Walther Zimmerli, Claus Westermann, and Friedrich Baumgärtel.<sup>46</sup> Some of these men are also involved in

<sup>42</sup> *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Ehrenfried Klotz, 1957—1961). Available in English under the title, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (London: SCM Press, 1961—).

<sup>43</sup> *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1958—60). Available in English under the title, *Old Testament Theology*; trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper, 1962 to ?).

<sup>44</sup> *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, trans. S. Neuijen (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958).

<sup>45</sup> *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock (New York: Harper, 1958).

<sup>46</sup> Articles by these and others have now been brought together in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, translation ed. James Luther Mays (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963).

the preparation of a major new commentary series, the *Biblischer Kommentar—Altes Testament*,<sup>47</sup> the ultimate goal of which is to contribute to the church's understanding and proclamation of its message.

The first American scholar to make himself heard internationally on the theological meaning of history in the Old Testament is G. Ernest Wright of Harvard. More recent contributions by James M. Robinson and many others could be mentioned.<sup>48</sup>

A basic facet of common agreement among all those who work positively with the concept of *Heilsgeschichte* is their interest in serving the proclamation of the church today. This is an interest which they share with the *Heilsgeschichte* theologians of a century ago, but it was not a strong motive among most of the "scientific" Old Testament scholars from the 19th century up to World War II. No present-day scholar of the *Heilsgeschichte* orientation would, of course, be willing to violate his scientific conscience as he serves his church, but it is significant nevertheless that the *Heilsgeschichte* viewpoint has come to have complete academic respectability. The factors mentioned earlier, and undoubtedly others as well, have opened the minds of scholars to the possibility of a belief in divine revelation and specifically to the Old Testament's revelatory content. And since the Old Testament has a divine message, the Biblical scholar has the obligation to aid the church in uncovering and interpreting it.

<sup>47</sup> Neukirchen: Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1956 and following.

<sup>48</sup> Titles by these men will be mentioned in later footnotes.



A further result of the same trend of thought is the rise of interest in throwing off presuppositions and getting at the Old Testament's own message as far as this is possible. The decades of research in comparing the Old Testament with other ancient records have also been leading in this direction. Scholars now wish to point up not only the common ground uniting the Old Testament with the phenomena of other ancient religions but also the peculiarities of the former which set it apart from all other religious literature.<sup>49</sup> Any reconstruction, it is now agreed, must work out from what the materials themselves say and must be wholly appropriate to them.<sup>50</sup> This requires a radical willingness to listen to the text before making conclusions.

One conclusion which is now almost universally accepted on the basis of careful attention to the text's own message is that history is an absolutely fundamental interest of the Old Testament itself. This conviction could be documented almost at random from the writings of the men under discussion. Thus Jacob writes, "The special characteristic of Biblical revelation is that God binds Himself to historical events to make them the vehicle of the manifestation of His purpose."<sup>51</sup> Eichrodt similarly declares that the Biblical revelation is of such a nature that it "proclaims not a closed totality of doctrine but a

<sup>49</sup> Cf. the significant title as well as the content of G. Ernest Wright's study, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (see above, fn. 2).

<sup>50</sup> *Sachgemäß* is a favorite adjective expressing this concern for an approach that is appropriate to the nature of the materials.

<sup>51</sup> *Theologie* (see fn. 45), p. 188.

divine reality becoming manifest in history."<sup>52</sup> Von Rad holds that

The faith of Israel is on principle founded upon a theology of history. It understands itself to be based on historical events, and to have been formed and reformed by facts in which it saw Yahweh's hand at work. Even the predictions of the prophets speak of events, the only difference being that they lie in the time ahead of the witness instead of behind him.<sup>53</sup>

It ought to be clear, however, that historical events have no theological significance by themselves; they need to be interpreted. The hand of God in human affairs is not literally visible or tangible to the objective observer. But when a word from God is heard before, during, or after the event, then the revelatory meaning of the event becomes clear and can be either believed or rejected. Thus even Wright, who otherwise stresses event over word, can say

In the Bible every historical event is always interpreted by the historian and the prophet, by those who were present at the time and by the successive generations of religious worshipers in the community of faith.<sup>54</sup>

Eichrodt cautions against isolating God's activity in history from the witness of faith which interpreted it and responded to it in spoken and written words. At the same time he insists that the primary importance of historical facts must be stressed as a corrective against the misuse of the

<sup>52</sup> *Theologie* (see fn. 42), I, 343. Translation by present writer.

<sup>53</sup> *Theologie* (see fn. 43), I, 112. Translation by present writer.

<sup>54</sup> G. Ernest Wright and Reginald H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1960), p. 11.



Old Testament as a source book for a propositional system of doctrine.<sup>55</sup>

Martin Noth goes to extreme lengths in making a clear division between the historical event and the interpretive Word. His very important work on Israel's history is told in completely human terms, with no theological or suprahistorical components whatsoever. At the same time, he explicitly recognizes that in Israel's history (as in any other) there is much that simply cannot be explained scientifically, for lack of evidence.<sup>56</sup> But in another study, which goes into the theological implications of the fact that Israel was totally immersed in and conditioned by the history of its times, Noth makes it clear that he sees the actual revelation of God imparted by the word that accompanies the event rather than by the event itself. The interpretation of a piece of history is not immediately obvious; it must be given by God. Here Noth very appropriately quotes Luke 8:10.<sup>57</sup>

Since the events reported in the Old Testament as well as the very words themselves are part of real history, it is agreed on all sides that both are fully subject to modern critical-historical scholarship. This is an area in which the modern *Heilsgeschichtler* deviates from his 19th-century namesake, who stood in conscious opposition to the practitioners of historical

criticism in his day. But today's historical criticism is no longer so exclusively "negative," and its vastly improved and expanded techniques are capable of being used by those who in no way share the philosophical bias of its earlier exponents. Present-day *Heilsgeschichte* theologians all understand themselves as modern heirs of historical criticism, and such men as Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth had already gained worldwide fame as critical scholars before their views on *Heilsgeschichte* were clarified. The principles of historical criticism are part of the scholarly conscience of these men, and they find themselves unable to deny their applicability to such a totally historical book as the Old Testament.

This openness toward both historical criticism and the Old Testament message that God has revealed Himself in history would seem to raise a difficult problem. What about the obvious discrepancies between the two pictures of Israel's history? Von Rad states the problem very acutely,<sup>58</sup> but sidesteps it by deciding that as theologians we are interested only in the Old Testament's kerygma about God's activity in history, that is, the theological interpretation of its meaning and not in the way history actually happened according to the modern view. Nevertheless he is able to say,

Also the "kerygmatic" picture—and that even where it departs greatly from our historical-critical picture—is founded in actual history. . . . In fact, it is rooted in a level of historical experience so deep that it is totally out of the reach of the historical-critical approach. . . . In a cer-

<sup>55</sup> *Theologie*, I, vii.

<sup>56</sup> Martin Noth, *Geschichte Israels*, 2d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954, trans. as *The History of Israel*, Stanley Goodman (London: A. and C. Black, 1958), pp. 9, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Martin Noth, "Geschichte und Gotteswort im Alten Testament," in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1957), pp. 242—247.

<sup>58</sup> *Theologie* (see fn. 43), I, 113f.



tain sense, its foundation [in "actual" history] goes even deeper [than that of historical criticism], only that in these traditional materials the factual historical data can no longer be separated from the spiritualizing interpretation, which penetrates everything.<sup>50</sup>

Thus the two views of history do not ultimately exclude each other but serve differing interests while nevertheless being based on the same historical events.

The new exponents of *Heilsgeschichte* are one with most modern interpreters in rejecting the 19th-century urge to construct a grand, organically related, total system of history. This implies a renunciation of both the historical critic and the *Heilsgeschichtler* of the past century, for the one adopted the Hegelian dialectic and the developmental theory as his pattern, while the other similarly erected a continuous structure of history without gaps and without allowance for contrary evidence in the materials. System building in the 20th century confines itself to much more modest goals. It must have a closer empathy for its Old Testament raw materials, allowing for discontinuities as well as continuity where the evidence dictates. For this reason there is no grand system of *Heilsgeschichte* being propounded today in the sense of Beck's or Von Hofmann's.

For the same reason most present-day Old Testament scholars prefer on principle to begin with the Old Testament materials by themselves and to emphasize their open-endedness rather than to start from the presupposition of a closed system rounded

off by the New Testament revelation in Christ. Only after the Old Testament's own content and structure have been fully worked out on the basis of its own witness is the connection with the New Testament to be drawn. The nature of this connection is a point of much debate, as will appear below, but most would feel that the discussion of Old Testament theology itself should not be disproportionately burdened with this debate.

It is, however, more widely recognized than ever before that no study of an ancient document can be carried on completely without presuppositions, whether these are theological or philosophical in origin. While some 19th-century presuppositions have now been consciously eliminated, their place is taken today by others derived from the New Testament, from Reformation theology, from existentialist philosophy, or from other sources.

In this modern age when the existential question "What does it mean for me?" is continually being asked, it might be expected that the men under discussion would seek to show how the individual believer is affected by a faith which sees God as having acted in past history. It must be remembered that Rudolf Bultmann and many other disciples of existentialism would see here the decisive objection to a theology of *Heilsgeschichte*, and would insist that past historical fact (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) is irrelevant for the faith of modern man.

Apart from the general agreement among scholars oriented toward *Heilsgeschichte* that a purely existential theology constitutes an unbearable narrowing of the much more comprehensive view of

<sup>50</sup> Von Rad, I, 473f. Eichrodt states an almost identical view in *Theologie*, II, x—xi, but seems to think that Von Rad does not really agree.



the Biblical proclamation,<sup>60</sup> several of them have offered new Biblical insights which aid in understanding the individual's participation in a history-centered faith. Martin Noth introduces the concept of *Vergegenwärtigung* (reactualization or representation), by which he means to describe the intended effect of a device used in ancient Israelite worship.<sup>61</sup> It is a way of making the saving presence of God real to the people just as it must have been when the great redemptive acts of God originally took place. To this end, Hebrew worship included at times the actual dramatization of parts of the original event. For example, at Passover each Israelite family was to kill a lamb and eat the meal as it was done at the time of the exodus. Then in answer to the inevitable question "What does all this mean?" (Ex. 12:26), the entire story of God's activity for His people in the exodus was to be recited, with the inclusion of the threatening and promising words of God that had accompanied it. In this way the historical event and its meaning were brought vividly into the present (i. e., were *vergegenwärtigt*) for the participants and made as meaningful for them as though they had originally experienced it themselves.

Wright and Robinson have contributed to an understanding of how a history-centered faith actually changes the attitudes of those who share it. Wright shows that the manner of apprehending God

through historical experiences in the Old Testament provides a basic thought structure for both the community and the individual. Since Yahweh has demonstrated His sovereignty over the world and His grace by saving Israel and making her His own people under a covenant, the faithful individual within Israel will perceive all of life as being dominated and structured by these same basic metaphors. God will not appear to him as the sacred snake or cow, or as the unseen force behind phenomena in nature, but rather as the personal Lord who stands in the relationship of a suzerain to his vassals. Thus the very structure of the Old Testament faith, with its emphasis on human history and human relationships, will make its impact on the individual's attitudes toward God and his neighbor.<sup>62</sup> In a fundamentally similar thought, though carried out in quite a different way, Robinson points to a particular item in the framework of Israelite and Christian life. He studies the rather constant formulae for blessing or thanking God after a happy occurrence and concludes that these reflect the same basic outlook on life as do the theological statements about God's activity in the *Heilsgeschichte*. Here, too, then, the individual's attitude is intimately connected with the Biblical theology of history.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, the attitude toward the New Testament on the part of the scholars

<sup>60</sup> So in the words of Eichrodt, *Theologie* (see fn. 42), II, x.

<sup>61</sup> See the translation of his article, "The 'Re-presentation' of the Old Testament in Proclamation," in Claus Westermann, ed., *Essays* (see fn. 46), pp. 76—88.

<sup>62</sup> See G. Ernest Wright, "History and Reality: The Importance of Israel's 'Historical' Symbols for the Christian Faith," in Bernhard W. Anderson, ed., *The Old Testament and Christian Faith: A Theological Discussion* (New York: Harper, 1963), pp. 176—199.

<sup>63</sup> See James M. Robinson, "The Historicality of Biblical Language," *ibid.*, pp. 124—158.



who are interested in Old Testament *Heilsgeschichte* must be noted. We have already observed the fact that the modern scholars no longer begin their entire systems with the explicit presupposition of the climactic historical activity of God in Christ Jesus, as did those of the 19th century. Several reasons for this may be suggested. In the first place, one seldom meets a man in the modern academic world, particularly in Germany, who professes competency in both the Old and the New Testament. To this may be added the fact that it has been particularly the Old Testament scholars who have found themselves forced by the materials which they study to recognize the eminently historical character of the Biblical faith. The New Testament, of course, is equally history-centered, though here the focus of attention is concentrated on the Christ event, but New Testament studies in Germany have been dominated by the antihistorical, existential approach of Bultmann.<sup>64</sup> Above all, perhaps, is the consideration that a modern critical Old Testament scholar will want first to exhaust the possibilities of the Old Testament evidence, following conscientiously wherever it leads, before making the leap across into the New Testament. Whatever the reasons, the current concentration on the study of that portion of the *Heilsgeschichte* which lies within the Old Testament has brought out all the more clearly and convincingly the basic unity between the two Testaments. The exact nature of this unity, however, is still a much discussed question.

<sup>64</sup> But note such eminent New Testament *Heilsgeschichtler* as Oscar Cullmann and Ethelbert Stauffer.

Bultmann himself has attempted to show that the connection between the Testaments is only a negative one. Various Old Testament ideas and hopes ended in self-contradiction and complete failure, and this made it possible for God to come on the scene with an *eschaton*, an entirely new creation, in Christ Jesus.<sup>65</sup> But no true *Heilsgeschichtler* can view the relation between the Testaments in so one-sided and negative a fashion. Friedrich Baumgärtel, to be sure, does see a great deal of discontinuity amid the admitted continuity. He sees the continuity as resting not in the historical processes themselves but in the fulfillment in Christ of the "basic promise" in which all Old Testament faith had been grounded. This was God's covenant promise, "I am Yahweh, your God (and you shall be My people)," with all its implications. Though this basic promise, according to Baumgärtel, received characteristically Old Testament (and hence un-Christian) elaborations, its real import is nevertheless proclaimed by the New Testament to have been fulfilled in Christ.<sup>66</sup>

Walther Zimmerli, Claus Westermann, and Gerhard von Rad all prefer to make the connection between the Testaments on the basis of the onward-surfing movement of Old Testament history, which bears within itself the signs of leading ultimately into the New Testament. This movement consists in the constant inter-

<sup>65</sup> Bultmann, "The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Faith," in Anderson, pp. 8—35; and "Prophecy and Fulfillment," in Westermann, *Essays*, pp. 50—75.

<sup>66</sup> Baumgärtel, *Verbeissung: Zur Frage des evangelischen Verständnisses des Alten Testaments* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1952).



play of divine promise and divine action. God's promises were often fulfilled in the course of Israel's history—and yet not completely fulfilled. Every time the people were satisfied that they had already received what had been promised, another word from God would make clear that His promise actually has a further, deeper meaning. Zimmerli observes that the content of God's promises is so varied that one cannot ascertain from the Old Testament what God's basic, ultimate will may be; in the New Testament, however, it becomes clear that the promise is finally and definitively fulfilled in Christ.<sup>67</sup> Westermann contributes a provocative analysis of the history of the Old Testament promises, pointing out how they changed in content with the changing spiritual condition of Israel.<sup>68</sup> Von Rad carries the continual renewing of promise and fulfillment a step farther. Each divine action, each fulfillment, leads to the expectation of a new and even greater act of grace in the future. The old act corresponds to this new one as prototype to antitype. This process continues within the Old Testament until the ultimate saving act of God comes to be pictured in a radical, eschatological character. Then comes the New Testament, which sees in the coming of Christ that final, radical fulfillment of which all previous fulfillments were mere types. Thus the relationship between the two Testaments is "typological," in a spe-

cific, historical sense of that word.<sup>69</sup> Von Rad's cautious reintroduction of typology, a method much loved by earlier *Heilsgeschichte* theologians, has launched a further debate as to its appropriateness.<sup>70</sup>

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The remarkable rise of interest in Biblical *Heilsgeschichte*, it seems to the present writer, is a great stride forward toward a more perfect understanding of God's self-revelation to His people Israel and to us. Many issues are still to be clarified and many problems remain to be solved, but it seems possible already to make a few suggestions regarding the theology of history as it should affect practical parish life in the church of today.

The instruction we give to confirmands and to new members of the church will reflect what we consider to be the most important elements of the Christian faith. Does it coincide with what the Scriptures attest to be most important? Does it highlight the dynamic, history-based faith of the Bible, which knows and glories in the things that God has done in the past and sees in them the assurance of His acting for us now and in the promised future? Should not a connected survey of Bible history be included in the course? The most significant elements of that history are already alluded to or prefigured in the highly important verse which introduces the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6) and which our newly regained ap-

<sup>67</sup> Walther Zimmerli, "Promise and Fulfillment," in Westermann, *Essays*, pp. 89—122.

<sup>68</sup> Claus Westermann, "Zur Auslegung des Alten Testaments," in *Vergegenwärtigung: Aufsätze zur Auslegung des Alten Testaments* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1955), pp. 88 to 120.

<sup>69</sup> Gerhard von Rad, "Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament," in Westermann, *Essays*, pp. 17—39.

<sup>70</sup> For example, Walther Eichrodt, "Is Typological Exegesis an Appropriate Method," *ibid.*, pp. 224f.



preciation for the ancient covenant form can no longer permit us to omit.<sup>71</sup>

In the area of worship, the Christian church has a rich source of blessing in the annual cycle of lessons commemorating the New Testament redemptive events. Provision of an equally history-conscious cycle of Old Testament lessons is strongly

to be recommended. Preaching should aim to make the hearers conscious of the place in history and the reference to history of the particular word of God on which it is based. What place does the understanding of God's Old Testament *Heil* occupy in our preaching? Many other areas could yet be mentioned. In all our life and thought the Christian perception of reality is determined by the knowledge that there is a God who directly touches human affairs and whose Son entered our human history and transformed it.

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<sup>71</sup> On the covenant formulas in the Old Testament as reflecting ancient Near Eastern prototypes, see George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: The Biblical Colloquium, 1955); and Klaus Baltzer, *Das Bundesformular* (Neukirchen: Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1960).