CHAPTER I

THE BIBLE: WHAT IT IS

WHAT is the Bible?

An obvious answer would be that it is the sacred book of the Christian religion (and, in part, of Judaism), as the Koran is the sacred book of Islam, or the Vedas the sacred books of Hinduism. If we were finding a place for it in a well-arranged library, we might put it on a shelf labelled 'Sacred Books'. So far, so good. But the term 'sacred' is too vague to tell us much about the Bible, and in fact the suggested parallel with the Koran and the Vedas is far from exact.

From another point of view, the Bible is not a book, but a collection of books commonly bound up between the same covers. Among these books there is a great variety, both in form and in contents. There is prose narrative, both historical and fictitious; there are legal codes; there are proverbs and moral maxims; there is even personal correspondence. Again, there is lyrical and dramatic poetry; there is the peculiar *genre* of literature which can only be described as 'prophetical'; and there is liturgical literature, designed expressly for use in public worship. This list suggests, but does not exhaust, the range of variety.

If, therefore, we are to place the Bible appropriately on the shelves of our library, we might have to arrange different parts under different headings. Some of these would not be noticeably religious. There are large sections of the biblical literature which reflect the ordinary secular interests of mankind. In some of the greatest historical narratives of the Bible the specifically religious element is quite in the background

and the secular human interest is to the fore; for example, in the moving story of David and Absalom.[1] Again, if we isolate those parts which in our proposed classification would have to be labelled 'Religion', some of them do not appear to have any particular relevance to the religious life as it is understood by civilized men in our contemporary world; such as the detailed regulations for the ritual slaughter of animals in the Book of Leviticus.

But in fact any such dissection of the Bible into its component parts destroys the distinctive flavour which makes it what it is. It is characteristic of this sacred book, or religious literature, that in it the religious element emerges directly out of the crude stuff of human life as it is lived in its many phases; and few of these phases are unrepresented. Whatever may be the religious purport of the Bible, it is to be found in the whole range of the biblical presentation of life, human and secular as it is. Neither 'elegant extracts' nor a selection of texts for 'devotional' reading (though no doubt each may serve a purpose) could convey the rare, indeed the unique, character of the Bible as a body of religious literature.

With all its variety there is after all a real unity in this literature. It is not readily discovered by 'dipping', but forces itself upon the serious and persistent reader. When we begin to search for the principle of unity, the first thing we observe is that the whole of the varied material is strung upon a thread which consists of narrative. This narrative gives a kind of 'cavalcade' of human life through many centuries, beginning in the cloudy realms of myth and legend, and emerging into straightforward history. Upon investigation, it turns out to be the history of a single community, or social group, through many stages of development. The other parts of the Bible relate themselves naturally to this main thread of historical narrative.

1] II Samuel xv–xviii.

Thus a first approach to the unity of the whole is the recognition that the different parts have their origin in the life of a community conscious of a continuous history.

This continuity persists through changes of the most far-reaching kind. When the community first comes into view, it is a Semitic clan, or group of clans, wandering between the two great civilizations centred upon the Euphrates and the Nile. Next it appears as a nation, bearing the national name of 'Israel', settled in its own territory, and governed by its native chieftains and kings. The petty kingdoms decline and fall, and the community ceases to exist as an independent state. With the Babylonian conquest it is absorbed into the all-embracing empire of the Middle East, which under various dynasties persisted through many centuries of the ancient world. Then it reappears in a new form. A small group of returned exiles organizes itself as a partly autonomous community under the suzerainty of the imperial government. The restored community is neither monarchy nor republic. Its rulers are priests. Its legal code is the Law of God. It has its centre in the Temple at Jerusalem with a small amount of contiguous territory, but the writ of its ecclesiastical government runs through hundreds of Jewish colonies, spread over the whole civilized world, and owing political allegiance to various secular states. It is a unique kind of social and political unit, whose actual principle of cohesion is almost entirely religious, though it retains some attachment to a national and geographical centre. In the last phase of all, the national and geographical attachment disappears altogether, and we have the Christian Church. This is a 'catholic' or universal community, transcending all national distinctions in its membership, and yet it is the same community that we have traced all through.

At the very point where the continuity seems decisively broken, where the Old Testament gives place to the New,

the continuity of the society is the most emphatically affirmed. It is true that the writers of the New Testament are quite clear that Christianity is a new thing, indeed a 'new creation'[1] of God's hand; and yet it is the 'Israel of God'.[2] They make use of the old historical name. They speak of 'Abraham our father'. 'Our fathers', they say, passed through the Red Sea; received the Law from Moses; tempted God in the wilderness.[3] There is a singularly impressive testimony to this sense of continuity in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the writer claims not only Moses and the patriarchs, but such splendid savages of a primitive age as Gideon, Samson and Barak, as fellow-members of the 'heavenly Jerusalem',[4] one timeless community running through history but transcending it.

The Church[5] in its worship still preserves this consciousness of continuity. We sing Hebrew Psalms. We read lessons from both Testaments. The language of our prayers is drawn from all parts of the Bible. On Easter Eve, in those churches which follow the traditional Western rite, they sing the hymn called *Exultet*, which commemorates God's dealings with His people in history. 'This is the night in which Thou didst first lead our fathers, the children of Israel, out of Egypt, and didst make them to pass dryshod through the Red Sea.' 'Our fathers': the Church means it seriously. That is part of *our* history. The doings and sufferings of these people are of a piece with our experience within the Church of God at the present day.[6] When in the New Testament the old historic name 'Israel' is applied to this continuous community, it

1] II Corinthians v. 17. 2] Galatians vi. 16.
3] I Corinthians x. 1–11. 4] Hebrews xii. 22–23.
5] 'Christ's Holy Catholic Church, that is, the whole congregation of Christian people dispersed throughout the whole world.' This definition (from the 55th Canon of the Church of England) is presupposed throughout this book.
6] See, further, chap. vii, pp. 155 *sqq*.

means now not any racial or national group, but simply 'the People of God', that is to say, a community defined solely by its relation to the eternal King of the Universe. It is this conception which in the end gives the Bible its unity.

The Church, then, conceives itself as the continuing embodiment of the historic 'Israel of God', and we receive the Bible from the hands of the Church. We cannot receive it from anywhere else. If you ask why this particular collection of just these sixty-six books (or eighty, if you count the Apocrypha), and no others, form the unity which is the Bible, the only answer is that these have been handed down by the Church as its 'Scriptures'. These writings have their being, as they had their origin, within the life of a community which traces its descent from Abraham and Moses, from prophets and apostles, and plays its part in the history of our own time; and the Scriptures not only recall its past, but serve the needs of its day-to-day existence in the present.

It is possible to isolate for study one portion or another of these writings. Some have been studied as records of folk-lore, or as documents for the history of primitive culture. Some parts are valuable as sources for oriental history, others for social conditions under the Roman Empire. The modern study of the 'forms' of literature, their origin and early development, has found an exceptionally rich field in the biblical literature, so varied as it is, and extending over so long a period of time. In fact, the several biblical documents are a treasury of materials for scholars in various fields of study. In recent times this specialization has resulted in brilliant illumination of biblical problems from many points of view. But it has also tended to obscure the important fact that the Bible is a definite body of literature, with its own intrinsic unity. Having grown up with the life of a social-religious group, and bearing its stamp all through, it can be adequately understood only in relation to that group life in its changing phases,

including the life of the Christian Church down the centuries and in the present age.

It is a misfortune that in the course of controversy since the Reformation the authority of the Bible has been set over against the authority of the Church, and the Church against the Bible.[1] In reality, the very idea of an authoritative Canon of Scripture is bound up with the idea of the Church.

Let us examine that statement, with the New Testament in view, to begin with. Here we have twenty-seven writings, comprehended under that one title. Why are these particular twenty-seven here? They are not the whole of early Christian literature, by any means. They are a selection out of a larger body of writings, some of which have come down to us, while others were lost, though some of these have been rediscovered by modern archaeologists. It is probable that the impulse to the selection and definition of this particular body of literature was a part of the general impulse towards consolidation which we can trace in the history of the Church in the period after the apostolic age. At that time the continuity of the Church was threatened by extravagances and eccentricities of belief and practice within, as well as by persecution from without. In response to these dangers the Church set out to consolidate its own life and beliefs.[2] Its organs of consolidation were the Rule of Faith (which underlies the historical creeds), the Ministry, and the Canon of Scripture. The term 'canon' means 'norm', or 'standard'. The twenty-seven writings are the norm or standard of Christian faith and life, set forth as such in response to the need for clear definition.

It would, however, be misleading to imagine this process of selection in terms of a panel of experts reviewing a great mass of existing writings, admitting this and excluding that. It is true that some of the minor writings were the subject of long

1] See chap. II, pp. 20–23. 2] See chap. IV, pp. 68–69.

discussion before they were admitted, and in the course of this discussion some writings which are now outside the New Testament were for a time tentatively admitted into it, but finally rejected. But the important writings, those which give the New Testament its character (about twenty of them), already form a distinct body of literature as soon as we have clear light upon the Church in the second century. Some of the steps by which they came together can be dimly traced; but we can say with confidence no more than this, that the Church intuitively acknowledged the authority of these particular works. It did so quite naturally, because the impulse to select was no different from the impulse that had originally led in various ways to the composition of the works. In the language of the New Testament itself, it was to 'bear witness' to certain central realities that the New Testament writings were first composed, and subsequently compiled into a Canon of Scripture.

The idea which underlies the compilation is well indicated by the title given to the twenty-seven writings. We speak of 'The New Testament', or, more properly, 'The Holy Scriptures of the New Testament'. The word 'testament' here represents an expression which occurs frequently in the Hebrew of the Old Testament and in the Greek of the New. It is usually rendered, in our current versions, by the word 'covenant'. A covenant is a transaction, an agreement or contract between two parties, by which relations between the two are regulated, and by which a certain status is established. The biblical writers, in both main parts of the Canon, speak of a 'covenant' between God and man.[1] In the nature of things, such a covenant cannot be exactly like an agreement on equal terms between man and man. The idea is that God, the eternal King of the Universe, intervenes in human affairs to set up a certain enduring relation of a unique character

1] See chap. III, pp. 39, 41–42, 45–46; chap. IV, pp. 79, 96–97.

between Himself and those men who will accept His terms. It is a relation going beyond that fundamental creaturely relation which all His works necessarily bear to their Creator. The Scriptures of the New Testament, or in other words the documents of the New Covenant, are the authoritative record of that act of God by which He established relations between Himself and the Church; and they are the charter defining the status of the Church as the people of God, the terms upon which that status is granted, and the obligations it entails.

You will observe that in the attempt to answer the simple question, What is the Bible? (or in particular just now, What is the New Testament?) we have been led inevitably to the profound religious conception of God's 'covenant' with man. We cannot avoid it, if we are to find a definition which expresses its specific character, and assigns the grounds upon which these particular writings were formed into a canon.

Before proceeding further, there is one point which should be made clear. From what has been said, it is clear that the Scriptures of the New Testament grew up within the life of the Church. Their selection out of a larger body of writings was a function of its growing corporate life, in response to a developing situation. Consequently the Church is prior to the Scriptures of the New Testament. On the other hand, the 'covenant' ('testament') itself, that act of God which is attested in the Scriptures, is prior to the Church, for without it there is no Church. This mutual relation between Church and New Testament is fundamental.

To proceed: the 'New Covenant' implies an older covenant with which it stands in contrast. It is as 'The Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament' (covenant) that we receive the thirty-nine books which form the first part of the Canon.

It will be well here to clear up the question of the place of

the so-called Apocrypha, those fourteen books[1] which are, so to speak, half in and half out of the Old Testament. The Old Testament properly so called is the corpus of books, written and handed down in Hebrew (or in the kindred Aramaic), which were received as Scripture in the first century of our era by Hebrew-speaking Jews, representing the central tradition of Hebrew and Jewish religion. The 'apocryphal' writings were handed down in Greek (though some of them were originally written in Hebrew), and they were accepted by Greek-speaking Jews as part of their authoritative 'canon', along with the Hebrew Scriptures in a Greek translation. The attitude of the Church to what we may call the Greek-Jewish canon, as distinct from the Hebrew-Jewish, has varied at different periods and in different communions. What is important is the fact that the intention was to acknowledge as authoritative the sacred canon of the Jewish religion, whether this canon was defined more narrowly or more broadly. In fact, the Canon of Holy Scripture in the early Church, before the New Testament writings were collected, or even written, was simply the body of sacred writings taken over from Judaism. When New Testament writers refer to 'the Scriptures', they always (with two exceptions, in late-written books) mean what we call the Old Testament (with or without the Apocrypha). To this they refer with the greatest respect for its authority.

The Scriptures of the Jewish religion, then, are received by the Church as the sacred documents of the Old Covenant, setting forth God's relations with His people in the centuries before the coming of Jesus Christ. They record the inception of the covenant in the calling of Abraham, its establishment under Moses in the giving of the Law, and the vicissitudes, changes and developments in the relations of the covenanted

1] Fourteen as reckoned in our English version. There are some variations in the count.

people with their God, before the coming of Christ. Such is the main theme of the Old Testament, alike in narrative, poetry and prophecy.

In many of its writings we meet with a recurrent suggestion that the existing relations between God and His people under the covenant are in some measure incomplete or inconclusive. This sense of inconclusiveness grows, partly through the shock of a series of national calamities and their challenge to faith, and partly through deepening apprehension of what is implied in the idea of a covenant between God and man. It is put into words by one of the greatest of the prophets. Jeremiah spoke of a 'new covenant' which God would establish the other side of the disaster which he saw approaching.[1] The course of history gave to these words outstanding significance. The New Testament writers are unanimously of the belief that they have witnessed the establishment, by act of God, of the new covenant by which the relations between God and man escape all inconclusiveness and enter into their final phase. The new covenant does not simply supplement or modify the old; nor does it simply supersede it. It 'fulfils' it.

This idea of 'fulfilment' illuminates the paradox of newness and continuity to which I referred earlier. It carries two implications regarding our understanding of the biblical writings.

First, it is in the process of fulfilment that the Old Testament becomes intelligible. We of the present age are not the first to find difficulties in the Old Testament, for they are patent. The defective morals of some of its personages have caused much embarrassment. It contains incongruities and contradictions, not merely in matters of fact, but in spiritual outlook and moral valuation. The attempt to explain them away satisfies no alert and intelligent reader. We begin to understand them when we see them in their place in a process

1] Jeremiah xxxi. 31–34. See chap. III, pp. 45–46.