

THE MYSTERY OF THE SCRIPTURES

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We speak of the wisdom of God embodied in a mystery, that hidden wisdom which God devised before the ages unto our glory.—I Cor. 2, 7.

CHRISTIANITY comes to us with the claim to be the revelation of a mystery. Our Lord in the gospel speaks of the 'mystery of the Kingdom of God': and declares that this has been made known to his disciples (Mark 4, 11). St Paul speaks of the gospel as a 'revelation of the mystery, which in ages past was kept secret, but now has been made manifest and through the writings of the prophets has by the command of the everlasting God been made known to all the nations' (Rom. 1, 4). Elsewhere he speaks of 'the mystery which has been hidden from former ages and generations, but now has been made manifest' (Col. 1, 26): and again of 'publishing to the world the plan of the mystery, which had been kept hidden from the beginning of time in the all-creating mind of God' (Eph. 3, 6). What, then, are we to understand by this mystery, and in what does its revelation consist?

We must understand in the first place that it is a mystery in the proper sense of the word; that is to say, it is something that in its very nature is beyond our comprehension. The whole universe is in a sense a mystery, and we ourselves are a mystery to ourselves. No human mind can penetrate to the inmost essence of any created thing, much less into the depth of any human soul. However much our knowledge of nature increases, we still must remain ignorant of its final purpose and of the ultimate destiny of man. However far the human mind may go towards the knowledge of absolute Being, it still has to confess that Being itself is unknowable and that the highest wisdom is to acknowledge our ignorance. Only if the Absolute were to reveal itself, if the Mystery were to make itself known, could we have any certain knowledge of it. But here again we are confronted with a problem. If Being itself, the absolute Reality, totally transcends our comprehension, we can never know it as it is.

If, then, the mystery of Being is to be made known to us, two

things are necessary. The first is that it should be made known in terms that are comprehensible to us; the second is that our minds should be raised to understand the meaning that is hidden beneath these terms. Now this is what we find in the revelation of Christianity. The divine mystery is made known to us by means of a series of symbols. Our Lord himself spoke of it as the 'kingdom of God', and he habitually made use of Parables in order to expound it. Now the 'kingdom of God' is a symbol derived from the Old Testament, and it is linked with a whole group of symbols by which the mystery is gradually unfolded throughout the Old Testament. Thus at the birth of Christ we are told that 'he shall be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God shall give him the throne of his father David, and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end' (Luke 1, 32). We have here a series of symbols, the 'throne of David', the 'house of Jacob', the 'kingdom' and the 'Son of the Most High', all of which can be traced back to their origin in the Old Testament, and which cannot be understood apart from this. But the meaning of these symbols does not lie on the surface. In order to understand them we need a special insight. It was this insight which our Lord communicated to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, when, we are told, 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he began to interpret the words used of himself in all the scriptures' (Luke 24, 27). It was this understanding of the Scriptures which was communicated to all the Apostles at Pentecost, and which comes down to us with the tradition of the Church. Thus St Paul, after describing the 'mystery' as something altogether transcending the human understanding, 'What eye has not seen, what ear has not heard, what has not entered into the heart of man, all these things has God prepared for those who love him' (1 Cor. 2, 9), then goes on to say that these things God has made known to us through the Spirit. It is the communication of the Spirit, of God's own wisdom to us, which alone can enable us to penetrate the meaning of the Scriptures and to understand the mystery which is revealed in them.

The symbolism of the Scriptures is, therefore, of a special character, but the lines of its interpretation are laid down for us in the Scriptures themselves. Already in the Old Testament, as Père Daniélou has pointed out in his great work on this subject,

Sacramentum Futuri, the Prophets begin to regard the events of the past as types or figures of events to come; and in the New Testament the whole history of Israel in the past comes to be interpreted in the light of the mystery which has been revealed in Christ. The classical example of this is to be found in St Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians where, after recalling the events of the Exodus, he says: 'When all this happened to them, it was a symbol; the record of it was written as a warning to us, in whom history has reached its fulfilment' (1 Cor. 10, 11). In this phrase 'history has reached its fulfilment' we touch the heart of this mystery. The symbolism of the Scriptures is essentially an historical symbolism. This is what differentiates it from all other symbolism. St Thomas in the first question of the *Summa Theologica* asks 'Whether sacred scripture should make use of metaphors', and he replies that it is natural for man to come to the knowledge of spiritual things through material things, because all our knowledge begins with the senses. It is right therefore, he concludes, that in sacred scripture spiritual things should be communicated to us by means of metaphors taken from the material world (I, i, 9). He then goes on to remark that it belongs to God who is the author of sacred scripture to use not only words as signs of things, as men ordinarily do, but to make the things themselves signify something else (I, i, 10). Thus it comes about that the actual events of the Old Testament are signs of events which were to come. The symbols of the Scriptures therefore are not merely signs; they have their roots in history.

This historical character of Christianity is a scandal to Mr Aldous Huxley, and to other exponents of the *Philosophia Perennis*. For them the sacred mystery is essentially independent of history, because it is altogether beyond time. For them 'liberation' consists in an escape from the world of time in the realisation of the timeless state of absolute Being. This is, in fact, the doctrine which underlies the Perennial Philosophy in all its forms. Neither the Indian, the Chinese, nor the Greek philosopher had any philosophy of history. For the Indian, as for the Greek, time is an endless cycle of change; to escape from the cycle by realising his true and eternal nature is man's only hope. But though it offers a high ideal for the few, this still leaves the mass of mankind in its misery, and gives no meaning to history. But the Christian religion is essentially historical; it finds its expression not in a philosophy

but in a history. For the mystery of Christianity is the revelation of the transformation of history, the passage of time into eternity. It is a revelation of the meaning of history. This is why St Paul in the passage we have quoted says that in us 'history has reached its fulfilment'. So our Lord began his preaching with the words 'the time has been fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand' (Mark 1, 15). 'The kingdom of God' comes at the crisis of human history: it is itself the fulfilment of all history. So St Paul in the Epistle to the Ephesians writes: 'It was his loving design, centred in Christ, to give history its fulfilment by resuming everything in him' (Eph. 1, 10). With these words St Paul reveals the full extent of the mystery; it is not only all men but all things that have been 'resumed' in Christ. It is the fulfilment not only of the history of mankind but of the universe. The revelation is concerned with the destiny of the whole material universe, of this world of space and time. This is the mystery 'hidden in God from the foundation of the world' which St Paul declares that he has been commissioned to reveal: it is this that we have to understand if we are to fathom the mystery of the Scriptures.

We have, therefore, to consider the sacred scriptures as the revelation of a mystery in symbolic terms. The mystery itself is beyond our comprehension, for it is the mystery of God himself, but it is God revealing and communicating himself to man. In primitive religion the sacred mystery was revealed in the form of a myth, that is a symbolic story representing the action of God in nature and in human life, and mankind endeavoured to enter into communion with the mystery by means of ritual and sacrifice. In the *Philosophia Perennis*, the natural religion of mankind, the mystery was recognised as an infinite and eternal order of Being, absolutely transcending this world of space and time, and yet reflected in the whole course of nature and of human history. But now the sacred mystery reveals itself by its action in history; it intervenes in the course of human affairs. History itself is given a new direction and its true meaning is revealed. It is seen no longer merely as the reflection of the eternal order, but as itself undergoing a transformation. Time and space and the whole material universe are shown to be involved in a movement which is bearing them forward into eternal life. The sacred mystery is revealed, therefore, not in a myth but in a history, not in a philosophy of Being but in an Act. The Old Testament is therefore a

symbolic history, the story of a divine intervention in history, of the Act by which history itself is being transformed. While the story of the Old Testament is thus literally and historically true, it is at the same time symbolic of man's eternal destiny. The events of the Old Testament are not merely historical events: they are 'signs' of events which infinitely transcend them. The meaning of these events is only gradually revealed, but as it is unfolded it is seen to lie beyond the sphere of history altogether. It lies in the sphere of the divine reality itself. At the same time these symbols do not only reveal the meaning of the mystery, they communicate it to us. We have ourselves to pass through the events which they signify in order that we may participate in them and experience their reality.

We can see this most clearly if we consider the symbol by which our Lord himself chose to reveal the mystery, that of the 'kingdom of Heaven'. The origin of this symbol is to be found in the promise which was made to David: 'When thy days are fulfilled and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will raise up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his Kingdom. He shall build a house to my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be to him a father and he shall be to me a son And thy house and thy kingdom shall be made sure for ever before thee; thy throne shall be established for ever.' (2 Kings 7, 13-14.) We have here the prophecy whose fulfilment was heralded at the birth of Christ; the source of the 'house' and the 'throne' and the 'kingdom' and the title of 'son' are clearly revealed. But in the Old Testament these terms were understood in a material sense; even the prophets never get wholly beyond it. But when we come to the New Testament a profound change takes place. We see all these terms transferred on to another plane. The kingdom of God is declared to be 'not of this world'; the sonship of Christ is shown to belong to another order of being altogether from that of David. And yet, and this is something which we must never lose sight of, while the order of history is thus totally transcended, yet the continuity is preserved. The kingdom of heaven, while in its essential nature it is beyond time and history, is at the same time the fulfilment of history. Thus the very first words of our Lord's public preaching were, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand'. We have here the same idea of the 'fulfilment of history' as we

found in St Paul. The kingdom of God comes at the 'crisis' of human history; it is the event to which everything else has been leading. But at the same time it is a 'mystery', for though it has its beginning in time, its fulfilment is not in time but in eternity. That is why it always appears so mysterious. In one sense it can be said to have already come, while in another sense we are taught to pray, 'Thy kingdom come'.

Perhaps the word which best describes the mystery of the kingdom is its 'imminence'; in the words of the gospel it is always 'at hand'. It marks the 'presence' of the eternal order in time, of the real order beneath the flux of phenomena. In the words of Mr T. S. Eliot, it is the 'point of intersection of the timeless with time', the 'now' of eternity breaking in upon the world of 'becoming'. And yet, though the kingdom of heaven is ever present, there is nevertheless a point at which we can say in a definite sense that it 'came'. There is a note of urgency throughout the gospels, the expectation of an event which is about to take place. Our Lord declared to his disciples, 'Believe me, there are those standing here who will not taste of death before they have seen the kingdom of God' (Luke 9, 27); and as the hour of his passion draws near this sense of the imminence of the kingdom seems to grow stronger, until at the Last Supper he declares, 'I tell you, I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine again till the kingdom of God has come.' (Luke 22, 18.) Finally, at the hour of his death, in reply to the touching words of the thief, 'Lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom', he replies, 'I promise thee *this day* thou shalt be with me in Paradise.' (Luke 23, 43.) The word 'Paradise' introduces one of those symbols of the 'mystery' which need to be studied at length, but here it is sufficient to remark on the significance of the words 'this day'. Here we reach the point at which we can say that the kingdom of God has in a final and definitive sense 'come'. There can in fact be no doubt that the event to which the whole of the gospel has been moving, the consummation in which 'history reaches its fulfilment', is the Resurrection. It is the moment at which Christ passed through death into life; when the barrier of the phenomenal world was broken and the day of eternity dawned. We cannot exaggerate the importance of this event in the history of the world or its significance in the scheme of Christianity. It is the moment at which our human nature passed beyond this world of space and

time, and death the supreme obstacle was finally overcome.

There can be no doubt that in the mind of St Paul and of the early Church the Resurrection marks the supreme revelation of the mystery. In the Epistle to the Romans he speaks of it as an 'act of power' by which Christ was 'marked out as Son of God by resurrection from death' (Rom. 1, 4); and in the Epistle to the Ephesians he refers to 'that mighty exercise of power which he showed when he raised Christ from the dead and bade him sit at his right hand above the heavens' (Eph. 1, 20). This reference to the 'right hand' of God is based on the symbolism of the Psalms and signifies precisely that Christ has passed beyond this world, 'above the heavens', and has entered into the divine or eternal order. We find the same expression in the Acts of the Apostles, when St Peter says that 'God has raised this man Jesus from the dead; we are all witnesses of it; and now exalted at God's right hand he has claimed from his Father the promise to bestow the Spirit' (Acts 2, 33). It is to be noticed how the emphasis here is on the human nature of Jesus, which has been raised from the dead, because this event marks the ascent of our human nature beyond time and space. This brings us to the last element in the revelation of the mystery. Christ has passed into the eternal order of being not for himself but for us. In him and through him our human nature has entered into a new mode of being and it is the very purpose of his resurrection to communicate this new mode of being to us. This is what is signified by the sending of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost a new order of being was manifested on earth. The sacred mystery which had been manifested in the person of Christ was now to be manifested in his 'Church'. The gift of divine life which he had won for mankind was now communicated to his disciples: now in a new but definite sense it could be said that the 'kingdom of God had come'. Thus the first 'coming' was in the person of Christ culminating in the moment of his resurrection. The second 'coming' was to his Church on the day of Pentecost. But there still remains a third 'coming', which St Peter refers to in the Acts of the Apostles as the 'time of the restoration of all things'.

This is the final phase of the mystery, which is revealed by St Paul in the Epistle to the Ephesians, when he says that he has made known to us the 'mystery of his will', 'in the dispensation of the fullness of times', or as Mgr Knox translates it, 'to give

history its fulfilment', by 'resuming' or more literally 'by bringing all things to a head in Christ' (Eph. I, 9-10). We have here the same idea of the fullness of times' or the 'fulfilment of history' as we found in the gospel. The event which was to fulfil all history took place in a certain sense at the Resurrection of Christ, and in another sense on the day of Pentecost; but its final phase has to wait till the end of the world. For it is only then that the whole of this order of space and time will pass over into that new order of being into which Christ entered at the Resurrection. It is not only all men but 'all things' that have been 'resumed' or 'brought to a head' in Christ. He is the 'head' not only of mankind but also of the universe. The whole of that movement of time which was set in motion at the creation of the world is 'resumed' in him. With this event the phenomenal world passes into the world of absolute Reality, the world of 'becoming' into the world of Being, the material into the spiritual, the human into the divine. This is the ultimate 'mystery' of Christianity, the 'coming' of the Kingdom of God. This is the mystery which is revealed in all the Scriptures, and which we have to grasp, if we are to penetrate their meaning. It is revealed, as we have seen, in certain symbolic forms, like the Kingdom of God itself, which have their roots in the Old Testament and which are only gradually unveiled. We have therefore to endeavour to trace the gradual unfolding of these symbols through the Old Testament and see how they receive their final significance in the New. But these symbols are not only the means by which the mystery is revealed; they are also the means by which we ourselves are enabled to participate in the mystery. Thus it comes about that the Old Testament is symbolically the history of every man.

It represents the history of mankind in its journey through this world towards the Land of Promise or the City of God. We have each of us to pass through the Red Sea and under the 'Cloud'; we have each to share in the Exodus and become partakers in the Law and the Covenant; we have each to enter into the Kingdom, to take our place at the marriage of the King and to stand to worship in the Temple of the 'living God'. Now the sphere in which all these mysteries are carried out is the Church, and the means by which we are initiated into them are the Sacraments. For the Sacraments are, in the words of Père Daniélou, 'the continuation in the present time of the great works of God in the

Old and the New Testament and the prefiguration of their accomplishment in the world to come'. We have therefore to establish a connection between the different phases of the history of the Old Testament and the phases of the Christian life which are represented by the Sacraments of the Church. There are therefore no less than four 'meanings' to be unfolded in the Old Testament. There is first of all the literal and historical meaning, which forms the basis of all, for we must never forget that divine revelation is a history. It is concerned above all with the transformation of the historical order, of this world of space and time, and of our individual human lives. But secondly the Old Testament represents the 'sacramental' order of this world in which we live, the journey of every Christian through the sacraments of the present life, the stages of his ascent to God. Thirdly, it represents the mystery of Christ, the Incarnation, the Redemption, and the Kingdom of God, in which all the events of the Old Testament find their temporal and historical fulfilment. Finally, it represents the 'new creation', that new order of Being to which the whole of the present order of space and time is moving, which is the fulfilment of the work of Christ and the consummation of the history of the world.