The Biblical View of Right Action

There is a text in the book of Proverbs which embodies precisely the biblical perspective on the question of right action. "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." (Prov. 14:12 and 16:25). It is not an easy text to grasp. The difficulty lies in its directness, clarity and simplicity. It is one of those texts that cut to the core of the matter leaving any reader wholly to his own devices who will not himself aim for the middle. Scripture does not entice.

A man might read this text and preen himself on his meticulous devotion to the law as the sure mark that he is not deceived about right action. Another, reading the same, will compliment himself that he is above such concern, that questions of right or wrong are generated by the sick; that the text is correct--in fact amazingly up to date. What surer way to psychological disaster, he says, than to curtail spontaneity in favor of rectitude!

Each has pleased himself on his interpretation and by his pleasure shown infallibly that he has misunderstood it. Literally, the text reads in Hebrew, "There is a way which is pleasing before a man...." The wise man who uttered these words has said nothing to suggest that a right way is necessarily a miserable one. He does say that a wrong way can appear so as to promise pleasure and that such a promise cannot be fulfilled.

The biblical saga is replete with events from the beginning of

the Old Testament to the closing of the New which move cumulatively toward the one event of the God-man whose Person becomes the very ground of right action itself and not merely its exemplar. If by the word biblical one means to point to a body of literature whose theme is salvation and not simply a deposit of texts which can be conveniently arranged to suit one's confessional preference, then he is in a position, perhaps, to approach the biblical view of right action correctly. The Bible is essentially dramatic; and necessarily so since its subject matter is destiny. It is much less concerned in thinking about salvation than in pronouncing upon that stance from which one properly works out his salvation with fear and trembling. While it is no stranger to objective truth as that which binds universally every being within the limits of finite freedom, the Bible, like all world scriptures, speaks first and foremost to the individual person, to a thou and the abiding crisis of personal decision. The evidence for this appears decisively in such biblical expressions as "Choose ye this day...." "What must I do in order to be saved?" "He who is not for me is against me." And so on. Such expressions are not appropriate for all occasions. For instance, one would not address them to a little child, nor to a madman. Yet both the child and the madman are equally subject to the indifference of such sublime principles as the laws of contradiction and causality. Such biblical expressions embody what Kierkegaard has called "concerned truths." They announce themselves according to one's personal clock of destiny.

They do it modestly, as befits a personal relation, but just on that account they are so easily rebuffed. Still, their retribution is nonetheless sure for all the ease with which they are overlooked and patronized. Unless one is prepared to remain concerned in "concerned truths" he has no hope of attaining to the biblical standpoint and our text from the book of Proverbs must remain essentially unintelligible to him.

The biblical concern for right action begins with the clear story of man's deliberate defection from it. To put it simply, man fell because he refused to see God as the beginning and end of the question of right action. The entire biblical body of literature is devoted to pronouncing upon the way man ought to take toward recovering that standpoint.

Rather than proceed by constructing a definition of right action and deducing or inferring from it--a method rarely come upon in the Bible--it will accord better with biblical style if certain major themes are traced and related to the question of right action. Naturally, one will likely begin such a review by moving from the Old Testament to the New and attempt to see a development in both continuity and discontinuity between them. In this way the biblical concern for history will not be overlooked nor the discontinuity in the major events of revelation.

The preeminent emphasis upon obedience emerges from the beginning with Adam's disobedience judged; Abraham's obedience in faith; to Isaiah's consummate vision of Israel as the obedient suffering

servant of God; to the obedience of Jesus Christ and the apostles. A glimpse of the ground of this obedience from first to last ought materially to assist a grasp of the biblical view of right action.

There is hardly a person familiar with the Bible who does not take for granted that the story of man's passage virtually begins with his disobedience. Not only that, but it has long since become fashionable to try to defend that rebellion. Whether from the pulpit one hears that disobedience deplored or from the psychologist he finds it extolled, rarely does he associate himself with it. It all seems too remote--perhaps even unbelievable. Nonetheless it remains the case that, biblically speaking, each of us stands under the verdict: Thou art Adam. Thou art the one who chose a way that appeared pleasing, yet it is a way of death.

How is it, then, a way of death? The answer is simple, clear and direct--it is a way of seeming, a way of pure fantasy. It is a pure contrivance, an attempt uncalled for on the part of a finite being to become like the infinite being. It is the attempt to become this with no help whatsoever, no favor from the One Who Is, the Infinite, the Eternal and the Free. This is the way which, before it is taken, seems pleasing; and on the strength of this fantasy we choose it.

One ought not to fool himself that this is an explanation. To the contrary, it is no such thing. The choice is essentially causeless--or we must abandon the biblical notion that the creature's will is free to nihilate the good on its own intiative. Absolutely nothing

coerces man to do this. To put it simply, only God can bring being from nothing with His eternal "Yes" from which all creation flows. Yet He has given man a first initiative to say "No" and to say it freely by not-willing God's "Yes." It is man's opportunity to do this. It is not on that account his right since our seeming pleasure in that "No" leads remorsely to death. For all that God permits His love to be rejected, His justice remains eternally secured.

This is the point at which the first Adam in each of us faces the question of right action. It is the biblical point somewhere on our road to death. And it is no doubt why nearly one Bible verse in four concerns the theme of salvation.

There once lived a man, a fellow-traveller, who well knew this road to death. Yet he was not slow to discern a sign upon the way; and this sign became for him a fork in that road. The turn he took then became also for him the road to life. His name was Abraham--the man we call the father of faith. There is no use in trying to make his act of obedience intelligible as an act proper to the natural order. As an act of faith his obedience is informed with a supernatural energy. Such an act is available to any man provided he will, but the act as from Abraham is non-transferrable. Each man must offer his own Isaac and it remains between him and God as to who and what that Isaac is. There is no handicap race to God in which one finds himself fortunately placed at the starting line ahead of Abraham. The biblical road to life begins in the

sacrifice of that which is dearer to one than his own life. Who could doubt that Abraham would gladly have given his own life for Isaac? Yet there is no hint in the story that such a proposal entered his head, so strict was the faith that informed his obedience.

After his inconceivable act of faith Abraham gives some hint of how he came to look upon it all in retrospect. He called the place of his sacrifice by the name of: the Lord will see, or provide. (Gen. 22:14). And with this we are introduced to the first principle of biblical right action: the willingness to let God see or provide for us, rather than following the illusion, the way whose appearance pleases us.

We say, with gratitude to Aristotle for the definition, that prudence is the right judgment about what to do. But, biblically speaking, there is no attaining to such judgment until one has offered God his Isaac.

The history of Israel is one long struggle with its legacy from father Abraham. It is the struggle, especially through the prophets, to attain to a life directly under God. It is never imagined by Israel that she chose God for herself. Yet His choice of her in no way coerces her to obey His rule and even the climax of Old Testament Israel's spirituality in Deutero-Isaiah's incomparable vision of the Suffering Servant still leaves an open question. Prophecy may encourage faith in God's power to dispose the future in favor of God's people who must in the meantime suffer vicariously

and redemptively for God, but how shall a man live in the present possession of eternal life?

There is just no categorical answer to this question until the event which Christians call the Incarnation. Through that ultimate generosity and unsearchable sacrifice the roles are reversed. Man who has vicariously suffered for God now sees God Himself suffer for man--but not as a rejected lover, or deserted leader. Henceforth man's nature is caught up into the divine life and shares in its eternal actuality now that Jesus Christ the God-man has become man.

We are now in a position to examine the question of biblical right action in its consummate expression. We can observe it in a much misunderstood parable--the story of the Good Samaritan. The context of the story indicates clearly what it is all about. A certain lawyer asks Jesus, "Master what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks him what is written in the law and the lawyer replies with the well known summation. One is to love God with all heart, soul, strength and mind--and one's neighbor as himself. Then Jesus provides the Key to the story to follow by saying, "This do and thou shalt live. It has now become a question of life and death and not one simply of neighborliness or altruism or some expression for a vague love of mankind.

Now follows the well known story of the man who while travelling was attacked by thieves and left half dead by the wayside. A priest and a Levite pass by. They will not help him, but deliberately walk

past on the other side. Next a certain Samaritan comes by, has compassion on the stricken man, attends his wounds and takes him to an inn and pays all expenses. Having concluded the story Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of the three showed himself neighbor to the fallen man?" The lawyer answers, "The one who showed mercy on him." Jesus then says, "Go, and do likewise."

The genius of the story lies in its being wholly unexpected throughout. There is no hint of the commonplace in it. The priest and Levite are faced with the unexpected. So is the Samaritan. So is the wounded man. The lawyer himself is drawn into the drama as a participant, as one who is given no chance for second thoughts any more than were the priest, Levite and Samaritan.

There is a moment when each man's world totters back and forth on the brink of a new event, when the unexpected might be born, when the Kingdom of heaven might break through as did God's voice when he asked the old man for his only son Isaac.

We are not told whether the lawyer came to live a changed life--nor is it important to know since the reader himself is the lawyer who must have no second thoughts about right action before the unexpected within the everyday. When the Kingdom of heaven is at hand there is no time for conjuring another and apparently more pleasing way.

With the coming of the God-man there is no more need to repose one's hope, as did Israel of old, in some consummation of history for He said that the Kingdom of God cometh not with observation, it is

not here, not there, but is within you. (Luke 17:20-21). He Himself is that hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

It is not difficult to see that biblically speaking, the ultimate principle of right action is that divine actuality, that present immanent possession of any person who wills to possess it. Such a possession does not induce one to destroy the Law or the Prophets, but neither does it conduce to one's simply repeating them. To share in the life of the One who brought them to their full meaning is to live out their full meaning in oneself. For on that day, He has said, ye shall know that I am in the Father, and ye in me, and I in you (John 14:20).