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SOME LESSONS OF HISTORY
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Thank you, Dr. Belfour, for your very kind introduction. I enjoyed every bit of it. I’d better cherish these final introductions. In general, as far as speeches are concerned, I always found that speeches were like charity, “more blessed to give than to receive.” I never was a good listener. I don’t know what I’ll do when I retire and I’ll have to hear other people speak. I know I won’t like it.

The two greatest German philosophers were Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel. Both exerted a great influence. Kant’s influence was chiefly upon philosophy and other philosophers. Hegel’s influence was upon the actual course of human events. Hegel had a theory of history which was then copied with variations by Karl Marx and which, therefore, is the living philosophy of almost half of mankind, so certainly it has changed modern history. Hegel’s theory of history was dressed up in spiritual guise, but actually it was a mechanical theory. He virtually likened history to the universe itself which is governed by an unbroken chain of cause and effect. The universe is an inevitable process, and Hegel believed so is history too. It is governed by laws basically unchangeable and follows an unbroken and unbreakable sequence.

This concept of history as a universal machine never appealed to the English speaking people. Perhaps it is because we were not as tightly disciplined as are the German speaking people or, at least, the North Germans. The favorite concept of history among the Americans and English is almost diametric to that of Georg Hegel. It is an

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interesting fact that the great English essayist Thomas Carlyle and the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson both said exactly the same thing about history, namely, that history is a sequence of biographies. Now one can see at once that that is the opposite of the theory that history is an unchangeable sequence of inescapable laws. History according to the essayists Carlyle and Emerson, both of whom have become seers, is a sequence of human effort, a record of human failure and success; and if there are immutable laws, we human beings are not aware of them. Now it is really a strange thing that the first of the world's great historians, the Greek Thucydides, the author of the Peloponnesian War, gave a now famous definition of history which by the anticipation of twenty-five hundred years constituted a sort of harmony between Hegel's idea of history as unchangeable law and Carlyle and Emerson that history is an expression of human effort.

You remember that Thucydides said that history is a philosophy taught by example. The first part of this definition, that history is philosophy, must be understood in the Greek sense, that it goes by rule. But he also says it is taught by example. Whatever the rules of nature are that govern the affairs of men, they are exemplified and reveal themselves only in the lives of men. The philosophy is taught by human example. Now if that is the case, we get our notions of history by looking for the examples, and the sort of notions we get depend upon the examples we take.

Often, of course, the examples seem to contradict each other. If you would take, for example, the illustrious history of the ancient Greeks, you see a people which had absolutely no talent for solid social organization. They seem to have had no political ability to organize anything larger than the city. All their attempts at leagues and co-operations were short-lived. Yet the Greeks, with all their lack of political organizational talent, made permanent contributions to the history of mankind. Thus from the example of the Greeks we would conclude that political ability, statecraft, is basically an irrelevance in the lasting achievements of history. But if we take another example, the Romans, we find that the Romans were just the reverse. The Greeks were the artists, the Romans were the engineers. They were magnificently practical, they were geniuses in statecraft, and so good was their social organization that in spite of the fact that they had centuries of unbelievable corruption in the time of the imperial rulers of Rome, they nevertheless built the machine that lasted up to 1543, when the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire finally fell to the Turks. Thus from the Roman example one would conclude that political
organization is everything. These opposite lessons from the Greek and the Roman history are in themselves a lesson, that history is a sort of mosaic and that not one stone, not one tessera, no matter how bright it is, can give you a true picture. You have to gather all the little stones and put them in their proper order before the mosaic can appear.

Therefore my purpose this evening is to select still another example and try to find what historical implications are to be derived from it. The example is from Biblical history. It is a very difficult example because the subject is well known but known chiefly in a specific sense. We look at Biblical history always as sacred history, and we approach the text with a certain preliminary piety. As a result we forget that it is one of the most ancient of human records, and being an ancient human record, has certain specific implications which, it seems to me, apply to all of human history. Well, let us see; let us look upon the Bible as an ancient record, and see what the record says.

In the year 1806, a black stone was discovered in what is now Trans-Jordan. It was later called the Moabite stone or the Mesha stone. It carries an inscription by Mesha, King of Moab, who lived about nine hundred years before the present era. This is one of the few inscriptions ever found in the world that has some parallel to the Biblical text. (By the way, the stone was discovered by some Arabs who considered it a magic stone and broke it up into three big amulets, but the French scientists finally got all parts together and it is now in the Louvre.) Mesha, King of Moab, in the year 850 before the present era, describes as kings generally do, the victories which he won and particularly the arduous battles that he fought with Omri, King of Israel, to whom he refers as quite a conqueror; so it took Mesha years to overcome the invading armies of Omri, King of Israel. Now we would think that if Omri, King of Israel, was such an important soldier, the Hebrew writings would tell us much more about his glories than did the enemy Mesha, King of Moab, in his record. But when we turn to the Bible, in the Book of Kings where Omri is spoken of, we find that the Bible gives this great Israelite conqueror just two sentences: "Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord. He worshiped the idols as his father did." Then it concludes: "And for the rest of the wars and the heroic deeds of Omri, look in the book of records of the Kings of Israel." In other words, as far as the Bible was concerned, all the glorious victories that warlike kings record are relegated to a book of official records of the Kings of Israel and those books are lost!

You will recall from your reading of Scriptures that there were a number of such record books, archives, written by the King's scribes,
books of the records of the King of Judah, books of the records of the Kings of Israel, and those books are all lost. All that concerned the Bible about this supposedly great conqueror was how he obeyed or disobeyed the mandate of God. Here, then, is a strange fact: If we had to rely on the Bible itself, we would have missed a vast amount of history. The military affairs generally included in history become known to us by the sheerest accident. Yet that makes us see that the history as recorded in Scripture is in no sense a complete history, but is a carefully selected history, selected for one particular purpose: to tell what the author thought was most important to tell. What concerned the authors of the Biblical record was something specific, something rather unprecedented. The whole world at the time when the Bible began to be recorded was polytheistic, a very natural and easy mode of worship. Polytheism comes from the primitive pantheism when men personified the mountain, the river, the sky, the cloud, the sea. All this is a natural form of belief. Then, besides, they made statues of the god of the mountain and of the sea and of the river and of the wood, and people could see their god before them. It was an easy religion to believe in and to follow. The Bible began early to overcome mankind’s natural and easy polytheism and to attempt to teach a spiritual monotheism to an entire people. It is no great achievement to teach a philosopher the concept of One Mind governing the universe. Once a man achieves an orderly and logical picture of the universe, once he arrives at the idea that the entire universe is one concatenation of causes and effects (and the ancient Greeks arrived at that too), he begins to lose the pagan faith in the various gods. Once a man arrives at such a concept of a unified universe, it is not a difficult leap to the belief in one Universal Mind which rules the universe. But the Biblical attempt was more than a lone philosopher’s belief. It was an attempt to teach this subtle concept to simple folk — to farmers, to fishermen, to carpenters — and to teach them to disbelieve in the visible and to believe in the infinite invisible. It was an almost impossible task, and it took about six centuries before the easy, natural polytheism was uprooted and this one little people became the first monotheistic people in the world.

Thus the Bible is essentially the story of a grand pedagogy, the spiritual training of one people, in one direction, an intellectual training. And it was this that concerned the authors of Scripture. The fact that there was an Israelite King Omri who fought battles was quite irrelevant. The fact that he tried to lead the people back to idol worship was what concerned the Biblical historians. So the history of the Bible
might be deprecated as not being truly history at all, but only a selected series of facts relevant to the grand pedagogy of the spiritual training of the people of Israel. But then we reflect the likelihood is that all history is essentially like that. No history is ever complete, all history is selective. Consider the history of the Middle Ages: What is it but the story of the royal courts, of the knights, the battles, the occasional struggles with the Church, etc.? Yet what about the blacksmith who made the armor? How did he discover and improve alloys that should be light and resistant to the blow of the lance? What tools did the carpenters use? Did the farmers in the year 1100 in the fertile land of France know anything about crop rotation? All these things we want to know and there is nothing about it in the record. An English woman about forty years ago wanted to write a history of the medieval times exactly on the lines in which we are now interested. How did people live? What were the carpenter’s tools? She found a few records, some wills of a middle-class yeoman, and out of these rags and tatters she managed to build up a sort of a history of daily life in the Middle Ages.

What we are most interested in we cannot find in the history of centuries ago because the history is always selective. It is a record of what those who had charge of the records considered important. Maybe this is inevitably so and maybe we should say that the only history worth while are these bits and pieces, the different bits and pieces from the different civilizations. Thus the first lesson, it seems to me, about all history found in an implication in Biblical history, is that it is always selective, it always reflects the order of importance in the minds of those who recorded it.

Now let us turn in another direction: In the year 1798, Napoleon made his great surprise invasion of Egypt. There was enough reminiscence in him of the philosophers and scientists of the pre-revolutionary days that he took scientists with him to measure the pyramids, to measure the colonnades at Karnak, etc., and as a result of that, you know, came the great volumes of the Inscriptions of Egypt, one of the great monuments of the older mechanical archaeology. But the greatest discovery in Napoleon's time was not made by the scientists but by a lieutenant with a squad of men who saw a stone sticking up in the sand near one of the outlets of the Nile, the Rosetta outlet. He had the men dig it up and saw that there were three different kinds of writing on it. The stone was sent to Paris and the Orientalist Champollion began to study it. The three languages were the ancient hieroglyphic (the ancient Egyptian) which no one
could read; then there was the demotic, a sort of halfway language, and then Greek. The story is well known, how after a long struggle Champollion finally deciphered the hieroglyphics. Thereupon he published a little vocabulary, the meaning of the signs, the falcons, the birds, whatnot. Immediately all the museum people went to their museum cases where they had fragments of Egyptian hieroglyphics that no human being had been able to read. They started at once to decipher bit by bit and gradually the science of Egyptology began.

People interested in history make much of the importance of keeping records. No records were kept more meticulously than the records of ancient Egypt, and no monuments to hold inscriptions on their interior walls were greater than the pyramids which may yet be the last remaining human monument on earth. There was true recorded history, but when Champollion rediscovered the reading of the hieroglyphics, it was the first time that ancient Egyptian history spoke again to mankind after a silence of fifteen hundred years. Egypt, with all its monuments, with the power of one of the greatest nations in antiquity behind these records, simply fell asleep like Rip van Winkle for fifteen hundred years at least, and the records so carefully kept had lost their meaning.

The experience of Egypt's records repeated itself in Mesopotamia. A gallant, adventurous young Englishman in the year 1840 or so, named John Rawlinson, was a soldier for the East India Company. The East India Company did its trading with what we now call Pakistan and northern Persia. In northern Persia there is a mountain called the Behistun Rock. It is almost unapproachable. There is a steep slope of loose stones for about a hundred feet up and then the rock becomes vertical and looks like a huge blackboard. On this vast rock-face there are three inscriptions in three languages, old Persian, later Persian, and on top the old Babylonian-Assyrian cuneiform. This old cuneiform, the wedge-shaped writing, was much farther spread over the ancient world than Egyptian hieroglyphics, because the Babylonians, and after them the Assyrians, and again the Babylonians who used this wedge-shaped writing, had conquered all that part of the world and they were also great traders. There are business records and contracts and all sorts of day-by-day dealings which were written in cuneiform, and tablets and seals of cuneiform were found in all museums, but no one could read them. This brave Englishman climbed that hill from the back, let down by rope to face that inscription, and he copied it. Of course nobody knew any cuneiform then — how could he copy it correctly? He made what the archaeologists call a
“squeeze.” The word is used widely in England where they are very enthusiastic about recording old brasses in the churches. They get the inscription by a “squeeze.” You put a sheet of paper on the old brass with its faded, illegible inscription and you run your pencil across it to blacken the entire sheet. The part where the letters are stands out white. Now young Rawlinson made such a “squeeze” of the whole trilingual inscriptions on the Behistun Rock, took it to England, and he himself finally deciphered the old Babylonian cuneiform. Again the museum curators rushed to their cases, took out the old seals, thus the science of Assyriology was born.

Now here, again, one of the greatest civilizations of the past had been silent for at least fifteen hundred years and none of the careful recording of archives did any good; no one could read them, they were dead. Thus it is remarkable that these greatest of all ancient civilizations, Egypt and Babylonia, with all their careful record-keeping, fell asleep for fifteen, sixteen, seventeen centuries. They might as well never have existed, or at best they were two more added to the dead civilizations of the Near East which is virtually a cemetery of history. While these powerful civilizations vanished from the human ken, the Bible was written by a little folk, in a little country, the football of the invasions between Egypt and Mesopotamia, the people that amounted to nothing politically and hardly had a century of peace in their much-invaded little land. But it was only their literature which never lost touch with the consciousness of mankind from the very day it was written!

Now here surely there is an historical puzzle that cries aloud for a solution. First of all there is a bit of a miracle in that those writings in their early days could have been preserved at all. After all, the great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, whose writings we now have, lived just before the Babylonian Exile, and the Babylonian Exile meant an emptying of the entire land. Let us visualize a people dragged across the northern desert in captivity, as all conquered people were taken in antiquity. The spoils of victory in ancient days were, of course, different from modern spoils of war. When Soviet Russia conquered East Germany, they would come to places like Jena or Dresden and take the great machinery and transport it into Russia. In ancient days there was no such accumulation of capital. The only valuable capital was the muscle and skill of men. So all conquerors took whatever wealth they could get, namely, human workers whom they dragged into exile. Now imagine this people dragged across the desert, most of them illiterate since reading and writing were rare. They carried their few precious
possessions, a pot, a pan, or a pillow. But somebody cared enough to take those writings of the prophets with them into exile, this man a fragment, that man a fragment, and to Babylon they carried them. And so finally they were preserved for us.

It seems to me that this contrast in fate between Babylon-Egypt and Israel-Judea gives a rather important lesson in history, namely, that archives will last only as long as there is a government to maintain and protect them. But empires fade, archives vanish or become unreadable. Literature lives only, in spite of change, when the texts matter much to people. That particular writing, the Scriptural writing, became the property of Christianity, yet remained the property of Judaism. So these cherished writings were copied constantly. There never was a lack of thousands of copies. In every synagogue they were read at the service, in every church; in the early Church, the Scripture was read constantly. No one could become a minister of the early Church unless he knew the Psalms by heart. Only because they were cherished and therefore taught from teacher to pupil, from parent to child, they did not die and moreover, did not need governments to maintain them.

This, then, is clear about all historical records: What is recorded is always selective, so what is preserved is only what matters. History is therefore never complete and perhaps it should not be complete. The trivialities fade away. Vital things remain. The only sad thing about this clear fact is that when our interests change, things that we would like to have had recorded are now forgotten forever.

But that we cannot help. This is the nature of history. In fact, what Plato taught, history always teaches. Plato's teaching that the idea is real and the material object is only the shadow of the ideal was perhaps hard for his disciples to grasp at first because it seems on the face of it that the tangible object has actual reality and that an idea is by its very nature ephemeral. But we can imagine old Plato, the poet-philosopher, explaining his doctrine to his pupils, standing on the porch of his house, on the heights outside of Athens. He says to them, “You see that house over there, its marble shining in the sun? It looks real, does it not? But how real is it actually? Enemies may come and burn it or it may be destroyed and the owner may want to build another in its place. But the mental idea of that house can create another house, and as long as the concept of house remains, the object can be recreated. Thus the idea is the more enduring; it is more real than the tangible object.”

So it seems to me that the implications of history in Scripture are
Platonic in essence. The material thing, the records of battle, the inventories of wealth accumulated, the cities built, all these things are often not even in the official record, or if they are in the record they are forgotten. It is the mental, the ideal, which outlasts the physical and the material. The things die — the idea, the spirit, lives!