CHAPTER SIX

SALVATION-HISTORY AND THE PAROUSIA
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The interpretations of New Testament eschatology which we have now reviewed have been questioned on grounds of methodology and of theology. It is difficult, we maintain, without expressly re-interpreting the New Testament message, to evade the conclusion that the New Testament as a whole works with the concept of a salvation-history of which the Parousia is an integral part: and without resorting to a dubious methodology, it is difficult to account for the specifically future phase of this total salvation-history by referring it to the early church alone, or to one particular line of thought current within the early church. All three theses reviewed here abandon or call in question the reality of salvation-history and its overall pattern. Schweitzer abandons the reality of salvation-history for the idea of mystic communion and the inspiration of Jesus' example. Bultmann substitutes for the idea of a salvation-history the idea of a new 'self-knowledge', a new 'gnosis'. Dodd, in less radical fashion, imperils the reality of the total salvation-history by his re-interpretation of the idea of the End.

On the other hand, many scholars regard the concept of salvation-history as fundamental to the New Testament.1 We give now a brief account of the arguments in support of this view—which will serve as a postscript to the arguments already reviewed and as an introduction to our examination later of the view of those who regard the Parousia hope itself as an integral part of the New Testament message, but find the apparent insistence on its imminence problematical.

The abandonment of a salvation-historical understanding of the gospel goes back to the earliest days of the church. Both

---

Ebionism and Docetism shrank from the belief that the Divine could actually come into history, into the particularity of history in the form of an individual person: and so, in their opposite ways, they evacuated the life of Jesus of its saving quality. It is clear why Docetism should have been congenial to the Gnostics, for though fundamentally a Christological concept, it is acceptable only where salvation is thought of as mystical enlightenment (γνῶσις) where ‘the concrete is resolved into the abstract’ and ‘redemption is a deliverance from the material world, which is regarded as intrinsically evil’, and where the cosmic dimension of salvation is exchanged for individual concern for present communion with the divine and a safe destiny. The mysteries, too, intending to impart salvation through knowledge and emancipation from the fetters of human existence, had no place for a salvation-history. The struggle to affirm a real salvation-history continued through the Trinitarian debates and the Christological controversies.

Salvation-history and the Old Testament:

We have already seen that the concept of salvation-history is quite fundamental to the Old Testament. The Creation narratives are clearly written from the standpoint that they prepare for and make possible a salvation-history. The Covenant is regarded as God’s manifestation of his concern for the furtunes of Israel, and this concern is seen to accompany Israel’s history and, ultimately, to have a universal outreach. The Old Testament resolutely refuses to look upon history (even the history of other nations) divorced from the relation it bears to salvation, or upon salvation outside

---

Irenaeus ad. Haer. III: 3. 4. Justin Dial. 35.

Suppl. to Novum Test., XIII