THE BIBLICAL IDEA OF REVELATION

I. THE NATURE OF REVELATION

The religion of the Bible is a frankly supernatural religion. By this is not meant merely that, according to it, all men, as creatures, live, move and have their being in God. It is meant that, according to it, God has intervened extraordinarily, in the course of the sinful world's development, for the salvation of men otherwise lost. In Eden the Lord God had been present with sinless man in such a sense as to form a distinct element in his social environment (Gen. iii. 8). This intimate association was broken up by the Fall. But God did not therefore withdraw Himself from concernment with men. Rather, He began at once a series of interventions in human history by means of which man might be rescued from his sin and, despite it, brought to the end destined for him. These interventions involved the segregation of a people for Himself, by whom God should be known, and whose distinction should be that God should be "nigh unto them" as He was not to other nations (Deut. iv. 7; Ps. cxxxv. 18). But this people was not permitted to imagine that it owed its segregation to anything in itself fitted to attract or determine the Divine preference; no consciousness was more poignant in Israel than that Jehovah had chosen it, not it Him, and that Jehovah's choice of it rested solely on His gracious will. Nor was this people permitted to imagine that it was for its own sake alone that it had been singled out to be the sole recipient of the knowledge of Jehovah; it was made clear from the beginning that God's mysteriously gracious dealing with it had as its ultimate end the blessing of the whole world (Gen. xii. 23; xvii. 4.5.6.16; xviii. 18; xxii. 18; cf. Rom. iv. 13), the bringing together again

of the divided families of the earth under the glorious reign of Jehovah, and the reversal of the curse under which the whole world lay for its sin (Gen. xii. 3). Meanwhile, however, Jehovah was known only in Israel. To Israel God showed His word and made known His statutes and judgments, and after this fashion He dealt with no other nation; and therefore none other knew His judgments (Ps. cxlvii. 19 f.). Accordingly, when the hope of Israel (who was also the desire of all nations) came, His own lips unhesitatingly declared that the salvation He brought, though of universal application, was “from the Jews” (Jn. iv. 22). And the nations to which this salvation had not been made known are declared by the chief agent in its proclamation to them to be, meanwhile, “far off,” “having no hope” and “without God in the world” (Eph. ii. 12), because they were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenant of the promise.

The religion of the Bible thus announces itself, not as the product of men’s search after God, if haply they may feel after Him and find Him, but as the creation in men of the gracious God, forming a people for Himself, that they may show forth His praise. In other words, the religion of the Bible presents itself as distinctively a revealed religion. Or rather, to speak more exactly, it announces itself as the revealed religion, as the only revealed religion; and sets itself as such over against all other religions, which are represented as all products, in a sense in which it is not, of the art and device of man.

It is not, however, implied in this exclusive claim to revelation—which is made by the religion of the Bible in all the stages of its history—that the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that in them is, has left Himself without witness among the peoples of the world (Acts xiv. 17). It is asserted indeed, that in the process of His redemptive work, God suffered for a season all the nations to walk in their own ways; but it is added that to none of them has He failed to do good, and to give from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, filling their hearts with food and gladness. And not only is He represented as thus constantly showing
Himself in His providence not far from any one of them, thus wooing them to seek Him if haply they might feel after Him and find Him (Acts xvii. 27), but as from the foundation of the world openly manifesting Himself to them in the works of His hands, in which His everlasting power and Divinity are clearly seen (Rom. i. 20). That men at large have not retained Him in their knowledge, or served Him as they ought, is not due therefore to failure on His part to keep open the way to knowledge of Him, but to the darkening of their senseless hearts by sin and to the vanity of their sin-deflected reasonings (Rom. i. 21 ff.), by means of which they have supplanted the truth of God by a lie and have come to worship and serve the creature rather than the ever-blessed Creator. It is, indeed, precisely because in their sin they have thus held down the truth in unrighteousness and have refused to have God in their knowledge (so it is intimated); and because, moreover, in their sin, the revelation God gives of Himself in His works of creation and providence no longer suffices for men’s needs, that God has intervened supernaturally in the course of history to form a people for Himself, through whom at length all the world should be blessed.

It is quite obvious that there are brought before us in these several representations two species or stages of revelation, which should be discriminated to avoid confusion. There is the revelation which God continuously makes to all men: by it His power and Divinity are made known. And there is the revelation which He makes exclusively to His chosen people: through it His saving grace is made known. Both species or stages of revelation are insisted upon throughout the Scriptures. They are, for example, brought significantly together in such a declaration as we find in Ps. xix: “The heavens declare the glory of God . . . their line is gone out through all the earth” (vers. 1.4); “The law of Jehovah is perfect, restoring the soul” (ver. 7). The Psalmist takes his beginning here from the praise of the glory of God, the Creator of all that is, which has been written upon the very heavens, that none may fail to see it. From this he rises, however, quickly to the more full-throated
praise of the mercy of Jehovah, the covenant God, who has visited His people with saving instruction. Upon this higher revelation there is finally based a prayer for salvation from sin, which ends in a great threefold acclamation, instinct with adoring gratitude: "O Jehovah, my rock, and my redeemer" (ver. 14). "The heavens," comments Lord Bacon, "indeed tell of the glory of God, but not of His will according to which the poet prays to be pardoned and sanctified." In so commenting, Lord Bacon touches the exact point of distinction between the two species or stages of revelation. The one is adapted to man as man; the other to man as sinner; and since man, on becoming sinner, has not ceased to be man, but has only acquired new needs requiring additional provisions to bring him to the end of his existence, so the revelation directed to man as sinner does not supersede that given to man as man, but supplements it with these new provisions for his attainment, in his new condition of blindness, helplessness and guilt induced by sin, of the end of his being.

These two species or stages of revelation have been commonly distinguished from one another by the distinctive names of natural and supernatural revelation, or general and special revelation, or natural and soteriological revelation. Each of these modes of discriminating them has its particular fitness and describes a real difference between the two in nature, reach or purpose. The one is communicated through the media of natural phenomena, occurring in the course of Nature or of history; the other implies an intervention in the natural course of things and is not merely in source but in mode supernatural. The one is addressed generally to all intelligent creatures, and is therefore accessible to all men; the other is addressed to a special class of sinners, to whom God would make known His salvation. The one has in view to meet and supply the natural need of creatures for knowledge of their God; the other to rescue broken and deformed sinners from their sin and its consequences. But, though thus distinguished from one another, it is important that the two species or stages of revelation should not be set in opposition to one another, or the closeness of their
mutual relations or the constancy of their interaction be obscured. They constitute together a unitary whole, and each is incomplete without the other. In its most general idea, revelation is rooted in creation and the relations with His intelligent creatures into which God has brought Himself by giving them being. Its object is to realize the end of man's creation, to be attained only through knowledge of God and perfect and unbroken communion with Him. On the entrance of sin into the world, destroying this communion with God and obscuring the knowledge of Him derived from Nature, another mode of revelation was necessitated, having also another content, adapted to the new relation to God and the new conditions of intellect, heart and will brought about by sin. It must not be supposed, however, that this new mode of revelation was an *ex post facto* expedient, introduced to meet an unforeseen contingency. The actual course of human development was in the nature of the case the expected and the intended course of human development, for which man was created; and revelation, therefore, in its double form was the Divine purpose for man from the beginning, and constitutes a unitary provision for the realization of the end of his creation in the actual circumstances in which he exists. We may distinguish in this unitary revelation the two elements by the coöperation of which the effect is produced; but we should bear in mind that only by their coöperation is the effect produced. Without special revelation, general revelation would be for sinful men incomplete and ineffective, and could issue, as in point of fact it has issued wherever it alone has been accessible, only in leaving them without excuse (Rom. i. 20). Without general revelation, special revelation would lack that basis in the fundamental knowledge of God as the mighty and wise, righteous and good, maker and ruler of all things, apart from which the further revelation of this great God's interventions in the world for the salvation of sinners could not be either intelligible, credible or operative.

Only in Eden has general revelation been adequate to the needs of man. Not being a sinner, man in Eden had no need of that grace of God itself by which sinners are restored to com-
munion with Him, or of the special revelation of this grace of God to sinners to enable them to live with God. And not being a sinner, man in Eden, as he contemplated the works of God, saw God in the unclouded mirror of his mind with a clarity of vision, and lived with Him in the untroubled depths of his heart with a trustful intimacy of association, inconceivable to sinners. Nevertheless, the revelation of God in Eden was not merely “natural.” Not only does the prohibition of the forbidden fruit involve a positive commandment (Gen. ii. 16), but the whole history implies an immediacy of intercourse with God which cannot easily be set to the credit of the picturesque art of the narrative, or be fully accounted for by the vividness of the perception of God in His works proper to sinless creatures. The impression is strong that what is meant to be conveyed to us is that man dwelt with God in Eden, and enjoyed with Him immediate and not merely mediate communion. In that case, we may understand that if man had not fallen, he would have continued to enjoy immediate intercourse with God, and that the cessation of this immediate intercourse is due to sin. It is not then the supernaturalness of special revelation which is rooted in sin, but, if we may be allowed the expression, the specialness of supernatural revelation. Had man not fallen, heaven would have continued to lie about him through all his history, as it lay about his infancy; every man would have enjoyed direct vision of God and immediate speech with Him. Man having fallen, the cherubim and the flame of a sword, turning every way, keep the path: and God breaks His way in a round-about fashion into man’s darkened heart to reveal there His redemptive love. By slow steps and gradual stages He at once works out His saving purpose and molds the world for its reception, choosing a people for Himself and training it through long and weary ages, until at last when the fulness of time has come, He bares His arm and sends out the proclamation of His great salvation to all the earth.

Certainly, from the gate of Eden onward, God’s general revelation ceased to be, in the strict sense, supernatural. It is, of course, not meant that God deserted His world and left it to
fester in its iniquity. His providence still ruled over all, leading steadily onward to the goal for which man had been created, and of the attainment of which in God's own good time and way the very continuance of men's existence, under God's providential government, was a pledge. And His Spirit still everywhere wrought upon the hearts of men, stirring up all their powers (though created in the image of God, marred and impaired by sin) to their best activities, and to such splendid effect in every department of human achievement as to command the admiration of all ages, and in the highest region of all, that of conduct, to call out from an apostle the encomium that though they had no law they did by nature (observe the word "nature") the things of the law. All this, however, remains within the limits of Nature, that is to say, within the sphere of operation of Divinely directed and assisted second causes. It illustrates merely the heights to which the powers of man may attain under the guidance of providence and the influences of what we have learned to call God's "common grace." Nowhere, throughout the whole ethnic domain, are the conceptions of God and His ways put within the reach of man, through God's revelation of Himself in the works of creation and providence, transcended; nowhere is the slightest knowledge betrayed of anything concerning God and His purposes, which could be known only by its being supernaturally told to men. Of the entire body of "saving truth," for example, which is the burden of what we call "special revelation," the whole heathen world remained in total ignorance. And even its hold on the general truths of religion, not being vitalized by supernatural enforcements, grew weak, and its knowledge of the very nature of God decayed, until it ran out to the dreadful issue which Paul sketches for us in that inspired philosophy of religion which he incorporates in the latter part of the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans.

Behind even the ethnic development, there lay, of course, the supernatural intercourse of man with God which had obtained before the entrance of sin into the world, and the supernatural revelations at the gate of Eden (Gen. iii. 8), and at the
second origin of the human race, the Flood (Gen. viii. 21.22; ix. 1–17). How long the tradition of this primitive revelation lingered in nooks and corners of the heathen world, conditioning and vitalizing the natural revelation of God always accessible, we have no means of estimating. Neither is it easy to measure the effect of God's special revelation of Himself to His people upon men outside the bounds of, indeed, but coming into contact with, this chosen people, or sharing with them a common natural inheritance. Lot and Ishmael and Esau can scarcely have been wholly ignorant of the word of God which came to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob; nor could the Egyptians from whose hands God wrested His people with a mighty arm fail to learn something of Jehovah, any more than the mixed multitudes who witnessed the ministry of Christ could fail to infer something from His gracious walk and mighty works. It is natural to infer that no nation which was intimately associated with Israel's life could remain entirely unaffected by Israel's revelation. But whatever impressions were thus conveyed reached apparently individuals only: the heathen which surrounded Israel, even those most closely affiliated with Israel, remained heathen; they had no revelation. In the sporadic instances when God visited an alien with a supernatural communication—such as the dreams sent to Abimelech (Gen. xx.) and to Pharaoh (Gen. xl. xli.) and to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. ii. 1 ff.) and to the soldier in the camp of Midian (Jgs. vii. 13)—it was in the interests, not of the heathen world, but of the chosen people that they were sent; and these instances derive their significance wholly from this fact. There remain, no doubt, the mysterious figure of Melchizedek, perhaps also of Jethro, and the strange apparition of Balaam, who also, however, appear in the sacred narrative only in connection with the history of God's dealings with His people and in their interest. Their unexplained appearance cannot in any event avail to modify the general fact that the life of the heathen peoples lay outside the supernatural revelation of God. The heathen were suffered to walk in their own ways (Acts xiv. 16).
II. The Process of Revelation

Meanwhile, however, God had not forgotten them, but was preparing salvation for them also through the supernatural revelation of His grace that He was making to His people. According to the Biblical representation, in the midst of and working confluent with the revelation which He has always been giving of Himself on the plane of Nature, God was making also from the very fall of man a further revelation of Himself on the plane of grace. In contrast with His general, natural revelation, in which all men by virtue of their very nature as men share, this special, supernatural revelation was granted at first only to individuals, then progressively to a family, a tribe, a nation, a race, until, when the fulness of time was come, it was made the possession of the whole world. It may be difficult to obtain from Scripture a clear account of why God chose thus to give this revelation of His grace only progressively; or, to be more explicit, through the process of a historical development. Such is, however, the ordinary mode of the Divine working: it is so that God made the worlds, it is so that He creates the human race itself, the recipient of this revelation, it is so that He builds up His kingdom in the world and in the individual soul, which only gradually comes whether to the knowledge of God or to the fruition of His salvation. As to the fact, the Scriptures are explicit, tracing for us, or rather embodying in their own growth, the record of the steady advance of this gracious revelation through definite stages from its first faint beginnings to its glorious completion in Jesus Christ.

So express is its relation to the development of the kingdom of God itself, or rather to that great series of Divine operations which are directed to the building up of the kingdom of God in the world, that it is sometimes confounded with them, or thought of as simply their reflection in the contemplating mind of man. Thus it is not infrequently said that revelation, meaning this special redemptive revelation, has been communicated in deeds, not in words; and it is occasionally elaborately argued that the sole manner in which God has revealed
Himself as the Saviour of sinners is just by performing those mighty acts by which sinners are saved. This is not, however, the Biblical representation. Revelation is, of course, often made through the instrumentality of deeds; and the series of His great redemptive acts by which He saves the world constitutes the preëminent revelation of the grace of God—so far as these redemptive acts are open to observation and are perceived in their significance. But revelation, after all, is the correlate of understanding and has as its proximate end just the production of knowledge, though not, of course, knowledge for its own sake, but for the sake of salvation. The series of the redemptive acts of God, accordingly, can properly be designated "revelation" only when and so far as they are contemplated as adapted and designed to produce knowledge of God and His purpose and methods of grace. No bare series of unexplained acts can be thought, however, adapted to produce knowledge, especially if these acts be, as in this case, of a highly transcendental character. Nor can this particular series of acts be thought to have as its main design the production of knowledge; its main design is rather to save man. No doubt the production of knowledge of the Divine grace is one of the means by which this main design of the redemptive acts of God is attained. But this only renders it the more necessary that the proximate result of producing knowledge should not fail; and it is doubtless for this reason that the series of redemptive acts of God has not been left to explain itself, but the explanatory word has been added to it. Revelation thus appears, however, not as the mere reflection of the redeeming acts of God in the minds of men, but as a factor in the redeeming work of God, a component part of the series of His redeeming acts, without which that series would be incomplete and so far inoperative for its main end. Thus the Scriptures represent it, not confounding revelation with the series of the redemptive acts of God, but placing it among the redemptive acts of God and giving it a function as a substantive element in the operations by which the merciful God saves sinful men. It is therefore not made even a mere constant accompaniment of the redemptive
acts of God, giving their explanation that they may be understood. It occupies a far more independent place among them than this, and as frequently precedes them to prepare their way as it accompanies or follows them to interpret their meaning. It is, in one word, itself a redemptive act of God and by no means the least important in the series of His redemptive acts.

This might, indeed, have been inferred from its very nature, and from the nature of the salvation which was being wrought out by these redemptive acts of God. One of the most grievous of the effects of sin is the deformation of the image of God reflected in the human mind, and there can be no recovery from sin which does not bring with it the correction of this deformation and the reflection in the soul of man of the whole glory of the Lord God Almighty. Man is an intelligent being; his superiority over the brute is found, among other things, precisely in the direction of all his life by his intelligence; and his blessedness is rooted in the true knowledge of his God—for this is life eternal, that we should know the only true God and Him whom He has sent. Dealing with man as an intelligent being, God the Lord has saved him by means of a revelation, by which he has been brought into an ever more and more adequate knowledge of God, and been led ever more and more to do his part in working out his own salvation with fear and trembling as he perceived with ever more and more clearness how God is working it out for him through mighty deeds of grace.

This is not the place to trace, even in outline, from the material point of view, the development of God's redemptive revelation from its first beginnings, in the promise given to Abraham—or rather in what has been called the Protevangelium at the gate of Eden—to its completion in the advent and work of Christ and the teaching of His apostles; a steadily advancing development, which, as it lies spread out to view in the pages of Scripture, takes to those who look at it from the summation backward, the appearance of the shadow cast athwart preceding ages by the great figure of Christ. Even from the formal point of view, however, there has been pointed
out a progressive advance in the method of revelation, consonant with its advance in content, or rather with the advancing stages of the building up of the kingdom of God, to subserve which is the whole object of revelation. Three distinct steps in revelation have been discriminated from this point of view. They are distinguished precisely by the increasing independence of revelation of the deeds constituting the series of the redemptive acts of God, in which, nevertheless, all revelation is a substantial element. Discriminations like this must not be taken too absolutely; and in the present instance the chronological sequence cannot be pressed. But, with much interlacing, three generally successive stages of revelation may be recognized, producing periods at least characteristically of what we may somewhat conventionally call theophany, prophecy and inspiration. What may be somewhat indefinitely marked off as the Patriarchal age is characteristically "the period of Outward Manifestations, and Symbols, and Theophanies": during it "God spoke to men through their senses, in physical phenomena, as the burning bush, the cloudy pillar, or in sensuous forms, as men, angels, etc. . . . In the Prophetic age, on the contrary, the prevailing mode of revelation was by means of inward prophetic inspiration": God spoke to men characteristically by the movements of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. "Prevailing, at any rate from Samuel downwards, the supernatural revelation was a revelation in the hearts of the foremost thinkers of the people, or, as we call it, prophetic inspiration, without the aid of external sensuous symbols of God" (A. B. Davidson, OT Prophecy, 1903, p. 148; cf. pp. 12-14, 145 ff.). This internal method of revelation reaches its culmination in the New Testament period, which is preëminently the age of the Spirit. What is especially characteristic of this age is revelation through the medium of the written word, what may be called apostolic as distinguished from prophetic inspiration. The revealing Spirit speaks through chosen men as His organs, but through these organs in such a fashion that the most intimate processes of their souls become the instruments by means of which He speaks His mind. Thus at all
events there are brought clearly before us three well-marked modes of revelation, which we may perhaps designate respectively, not with perfect discrimination, it is true, but not misleadingly, (1) external manifestations, (2) internal suggestion, and (3) concursive operation.

III. Modes of Revelation

Theophany may be taken as the typical form of "external manifestation"; but by its side may be ranged all of those mighty works by which God makes Himself known, including express miracles, no doubt, but along with them every supernatural intervention in the affairs of men, by means of which a better understanding is communicated of what God is or what are His purposes of grace to a sinful race. Under "internal suggestion" may be subsumed all the characteristic phenomena of what is most properly spoken of as "prophecy": visions and dreams, which, according to a fundamental passage (Num. xii. 6), constitute the typical forms of prophecy, and with them the whole "prophetic word," which shares its essential characteristic with visions and dreams, since it comes not by the will of man but from God. By "concursive operation" may be meant that form of revelation illustrated in an inspired psalm or epistle or history, in which no human activity—not even the control of the will—is superseded, but the Holy Spirit works in, with and through them all in such a manner as to communicate to the product qualities distinctly superhuman. There is no age in the history of the religion of the Bible, from that of Moses to that of Christ and His apostles, in which all these modes of revelation do not find place. One or another may seem particularly characteristic of this age or of that; but they all occur in every age. And they occur side by side, broadly speaking, on the same level. No discrimination is drawn between them in point of worthiness as modes of revelation, and much less in point of purity in the revelations communicated through them. The circumstance that God spoke to Moses, not by dream or vision but mouth to mouth, is, indeed, adverted to (Num. xii. 8) as a proof of the peculiar favor shown to Moses
and even of the superior dignity of Moses above other organs of revelation: God admitted him to an intimacy of intercourse which He did not accord to others. But though Moses was thus distinguished above all others in the dealings of God with him, no distinction is drawn between the revelations given through him and those given through other organs of revelation in point either of Divinity or of authority. And beyond this we have no Scriptural warrant to go on in contrasting one mode of revelation with another. Dreams may seem to us little fitted to serve as vehicles of Divine communications. But there is no suggestion in Scripture that revelations through dreams stand on a lower plane than any others; and we should not fail to remember that the essential characteristics of revelations through dreams are shared by all forms of revelation in which (whether we should call them visions or not) the images or ideas which fill, or pass in procession through, the consciousness are determined by some other power than the recipient's own will. It may seem natural to suppose that revelations rise in rank in proportion to the fulness of the engagement of the mental activity of the recipient in their reception. But we should bear in mind that the intellectual or spiritual quality of a revelation is not derived from the recipient but from its Divine Giver. The fundamental fact in all revelation is that it is from God. This is what gives unity to the whole process of revelation, given though it may be in divers portions and in divers manners and distributed though it may be through the ages in accordance with the mere will of God, or as it may have suited His developing purpose—this and its unitary end, which is ever the building up of the kingdom of God. In whatever diversity of forms, by means of whatever variety of modes, in whatever distinguishable stages it is given, it is ever the revelation of the One God, and it is ever the one consistently developing redemptive revelation of God.

On a prima facie view it may indeed seem likely that a difference in the quality of their supernaturalness would inevitably obtain between revelations given through such divergent modes. The completely supernatural character of revelations