

THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN QUMRAN AND IN PAUL¹

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THE history of Israel is a history of tragedy, but of tragedy survived; of destruction, but of destruction followed by restoration; one might almost say it is a history of annihilation followed by resurrection. We are perhaps accustomed to thinking of it as a history directed by God, or (after a few lectures in our first year) a history written up as though directed by God, a history written by obstinate men who refused to face the facts, not even the fact that as a nation they were destroyed and had ceased to exist, men who saw God in everything, for whom God was connected with everything in their experience, certainly with both their suffering and their triumph.

This way of looking at it may help us to understand the Bible and is no doubt correct as far as it goes. Is it possible to go deeper, and perhaps thereby to give a more correct account of the matter? It is easy to say that the Deuteronomists, the Chronicler, Ben Sira, the author of Wisdom and so on, all in their different ways editors and interpreters of biblical material, saw God as the one who punished Israel for her sins and then restored her after punishment, each with varying emphasis on one or the other. It is less easy to give an account of or, better, enter sympathetically into, the experience of being punished and being restored, and of experiencing both as coming directly from God. Yet when we do consider this aspect—the personal aspect—of the events, we find people behaving in a way very intelligible to us in our own experience. Richard R. Niebuhr was thinking along similar lines when he wrote recently :

What Israel and the moral history of the individual show as a common experience . . . is the need to appropriate the suffering involved in personal existence—the distensions and distractions and even failures that the pressures of society and nature induce—as the signs and symptoms of the creating activity of God. Both Jesus' contemporaries and the present-day reader of the gospels exhibit a need of a visible and assimilable demonstration of the way in which a human

¹ The Manson Memorial Lecture delivered in the University of Manchester on the 7th November 1968.