

Is the Bible the Source of our Knowledge of God?

Lectures by

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President of the Temple Society 1911-1934

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Christian Rohrer (1860-1934)

Born on 20 March 1860 at Neuffen, Württemberg, Germany, Christian Rohrer was destined to become the leader of the Temple Society.

When he was six years old, his parents emigrated with their family to the North Caucasus region in Russia for religious reasons. As an eleven-year-old, he was sent to Jaffa, Palestine, where he came into direct contact with Christoph Hoffmann (1815-1885), who was to influence his life deeply.

In Jerusalem, Christian Rohrer became an assistant teacher at the Templar school *Lyzeum Tempelstift* and continued his studies under Hoffmann. In 1884 he went to Germany to complete a course in philosophy at Tübingen and became editor of the *Warte des Tempels*, the Society's newspaper, in Stuttgart.

Back in Jerusalem, he was appointed principal of the *Lyzeum Tempelstift* in 1898 and entered what was to be a happy marriage with Anna Eppinger in 1902. Following the death of Christoph Hoffmann II, Christian Rohrer was elected President of the Temple Society in 1911, to succeed the man whose deputy he had been since 1904.

The Temple Society and its members owe much to Christian Rohrer's leadership qualities, determination and circumspection; these were severely tested during the First World War and during the upheavals of deportation to Egypt and the new beginnings in Palestine.

Christian Rohrer was a great believer in education as an essential step to spiritual development. He worked tirelessly for the improvement of educational facilities and promoted dialogue among the teachers. In the lecture series at hand, he spoke about conscience, nature and history, as well as about our understanding of religion. He did not accept the Bible as the only source of knowledge of this kind. He held that there need be no contradiction between religion and science. He considered conscience and reason to represent godliness and that harmony between body and spirit was our aim.

Christian Rohrer was not only deeply committed to his work within the community, but also fostered contacts with other organisations and people of a wide spectrum. He represented the Temple Society at the Congress for Free Christianity and Religious Progress in Paris (1913) and Prague (1927). Without hesitation, he always took a stand against anything that threatened the Temple Society's concept of the 'kingdom of God' as the ultimate aim of all human development.

Condensed from "The Temple Society: An Overview"

Foreword

My husband C. Rohrer, president of the Temple Society, gave six talks in the autumn of 1929 and in the spring of 1930 in Jerusalem about the topic *Is the Bible the source of our knowledge of God?* These lectures – presented in a generally intelligible and purposely popular way – were attended by listeners from all German Templar colonies in Palestine. Since my husband had not put his expositions down in writing, I attempted to reconstruct his talks from my notes and gave him the result of my work for his perusal. He acknowledged that I had captured the spirit of his lectures.

Following repeated requests after his death on 31 May 1934, I reviewed my notes and supplemented them, wherever they seemed lacking, from what I remembered of my husband's private conversations and explanations. Even if language and modes of expression now no longer match those of the originator's expositions, I am nonetheless certain that his spirit pervades this small booklet, which may provide clarity to many a person about questions concerning the Bible and religion.

Anna Rohrer, Jerusalem 1935



Anna and Christian Rohrer

I

The Origin of the Bible

The Bible is probably the most hotly disputed book in the world. This in itself is proof of its outstanding significance. But it is not the only – or the most important – source of our knowledge of God, as is often misguidedly believed. **Therefore it is just as large an error as it is a dangerous one to believe that merely being conversant with the wording of the Bible guarantees proper knowledge of God and his will.** Unfortunately, this error is widespread, and was so even at the time of Jesus, for he reproached his people by saying: “Have you not read the scriptures?” when in fact they could recite large parts of them by heart! His harsh judgment was a consequence of their behaviour, for if they had understood the spirit of the scriptures, they would have recognised the will of God contained in them and their conscience would have compelled them to believe the words of Jesus and respect him, who had chosen to take this will of God as the guideline in his life.

How could it happen that they overlooked the most precious element of the scriptures? – **They allowed themselves to be satisfied with literalness and relied on the wording without investigating the meaning or spirit of the scriptures. The leaders often did this for selfish reasons, the majority from mental inertia, the worst enemy of the human race.** They were also conceited about their knowledge of the letter and, in their spiritual pride, considered themselves more pious than and hence superior to others, as illustrated in Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. That is why mere memorisation of the Bible and clinging to the letter is completely against the spirit of the Temple Society.

Understanding the Bible properly, that is, to recognise what is of eternal value in it, requires a source for the knowledge of God, one that I would call the **primary**, the **first** and **most important** source, which rests within people themselves, and without which they are helpless in the face of all the other, **secondary** – or second-rate –

sources. This source is our **conscience**, which supervises our **reason** and is served by it. (Conscience might also be termed religious awareness or religious intuition). This source wells in every human being, but must always be fed, lest it weaken or fade away completely. This is why the voice of conscience is not equally strong in all people; the more it is nurtured, that is, the more you practise listening to it, the louder and more clearly it raises its voice and helps you to gain the right insights. The more you utilise this source, the more successfully you will be able to use all the other sources.

The Bible seems to me the most important of these other, secondary sources. However, if it is to be of any use to us, we must approach it without prejudice.

The Bible is a book that has evolved gradually. It is a collection of writings across a time span of about 1500 years, counting from the oldest, the Song of Deborah, to the latest, the books of the New Testament; authors of great diversity contributed to its genesis. **To say that all the writings in this book are God's words exclusively is a more than arbitrary assertion**, for not only important insights about the will of God are to be found in these scripts but, amongst much else, also accounts of the history of Israel and other nations from the Creation of the World onwards until 100AD.

The **Old Testament** consists of 39 books, not counting the Apocrypha, and is simply an anthology of Israelite writings and literature which, like any other, reflect the level of each writer's knowledge. However, the Bible does not contain *all* the literature of the people of Israel; much was lost, such as the Book of the Wars of Yahweh and the Book of Righteousness, among others. Apart from these, there was an officially kept chronicle of the Kings of Israel and Judah [*Reichs-Chronik*], of which the Books of Kings and Chronicles are mere extracts, and it is readily conceivable that there may have been a rich selection of other writings as well.

We now want to trace briefly how the compilation of the writings contained in today's Bible came about by turning our attention to the Old Testament. Formerly it was assumed that Ezra, who lived in

450BC, was the chief editor of this collection of writings. He had been in the Babylonian exile and returned to Jerusalem in 433BC. He brought from there a range of laws, which he introduced to the newly established Jewish state. He knew how to make the people respect the laws, by force if necessary. He was vigorously supported in this by the Jewish-Persian governor Nehemiah. This collection makes up the essential parts of Leviticus and Numbers. Moses cannot be their author, because these books are of a much more recent date, as shown by intensive studies that no unprejudiced person disputes any longer. **But this insight has to fight to this day against prejudice and narrow-mindedness, which deem tradition holy and do not allow our conscience – our inner voice, the source given to us by God – to examine the texts, but demand we force our eyes shut in order not to have to think!**

The reason why these books [the Pentateuch] bear the name of Moses, although he was not their author, is that the basic concept of the writings goes back to him, who obviously played a decisive role among his people. At any rate, all the researchers agree that the Pentateuch, as well as the Book of Joshua, were fused together in so uniform a manner much later – probably during the Babylonian exile – and that Ezra, in particular, had a hand in it. He is the one called the **Scribe**, the first to be given this title. A large part of his collection is made up by the ‘**Priestly Law**’ (*Priesterkodex*). Stories from other books, e.g. the story of the creation, were woven into these. The Book of Deuteronomy, on which the Kings of Judah were required to swear, existed before Ezra and most likely had the priest Hilkiyah and the prophetess Hulda as authors who, in turn, could have been influenced by the prophet Jeremiah, as we can see from the story of King Josiah and the Book of Jeremiah. There was also a smaller book, the Book of the Covenant [*Bundesbuch*], which is part of Exodus (20:22 to 23:33) and presents itself to the alert reader as a unified whole. This part is of earlier origin, from about the middle of the ninth century BC, i.e. even before King Josaphat. This ‘Book of the Covenant’ formed the core to which the other books of the Pentateuch were added one by one. The Laws of Moses were deeply revered – the longer, the more so – and along with them everything else that in time was added to them, not only in a legal, but also in a social context, and simply ascribed to

Moses, as if he, with prescient wisdom, had already known everything, and as if no further spiritual development had taken place after him. In these books, the growing knowledge about the different epochs of the People of Israel's development is simply attributed to their origin: Moses, speaking in the name of God, just as if God had dictated them into his pen.

We see from the words of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus had other ideas about this when he says, "You have heard that the ancients were told ... but I tell you!" [Mat 5:21]. How could he have spoken like this if he had held the opinion that everything written there was God's word, i.e. **holy** – inviolable? **To him, the letter was not holy**, but he recognised the **spiritual treasure** contained in the writings without standing still in slavish admiration of what his predecessors had recognised as the truth. Instead, he continued to work to free it from all the impurities contaminating it, so that the truth could be seen by all, purely and clearly. His thoughts and his knowledge of what was needed were millennia ahead of humanity's spiritual development.

In Genesis we find two rather divergent descriptions of the creation of man, and it would be tantamount to blasphemy to claim that God had dictated this process one day like **this** and another like **that**. This divergence, however, does not faze those who know that any old editor may have helped himself from different sources with whatever he liked or found suitable and forged it into **one** story. That the creation story in Genesis actually feeds on two sources is obvious – especially to those who know Hebrew – from the fact that one account always says Elohim* (Allah) for God, while the other calls him Yahweh (Jehovah), which Luther translates as 'Lord'. We recognise these two sources also in the legends of the Patriarchs and later stories. Both versions, that of the **Elohists**, who have a predilection for Ephraim and probably hail from there, and that of the **Yahwists**, who talk more about Judah, existed side by side from the middle of the 8th to the 6th century BC. Not until then were they combined into a whole and served as a framework for the Book of the Covenant and the Codices of Law as found in the Pentateuch and in the Book of Joshua;

* Purposely plural for reasons of reverence [tr]

in fact there were six books, as is proven by the oft-recurring word *hexateuch*. How wrong it would be to assume one particular time for the origin of these books, whose gradual evolution we can trace through many centuries from Moses until after the Babylonian exile. They were finally put together around 400BC and declared holy soon after to prevent the intrusion of other texts. At first this was valid only for these six books, the Torah, which was held in the highest esteem even then and was considered to be a self-contained whole. There also existed, however, a second collection, the ‘Prophets’ (**Nebi’im**), consisting of the twelve books of the Prophets, as well as Judges and the other chronicles of the Children of Israel. That is why it always is “the Law **and** the Prophets”. In time, both these compendia enjoyed a degree of reverence as if God really had dictated them.

A third group of writings, the *ketubim*, i.e. ‘the Books’, consisted of Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, the Psalms, Job and others. The Scribes, virtually a class of their own, were at loggerheads whether to regard these books as holy or not until 90AD when, at the Synod of Jamnia (Jabneh), the rabbis finally determined which canon was to be adopted. We find this one today, **without the Apocrypha**, in the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament. The Jews living in Egypt were the only ones who had the Apocrypha. Ptolemy Philadelphus who, according to legend, had the holy books of the Jews translated into Greek by seventy men (hence *septuagint*) in the third century BC, determined the canon **including the Apocrypha** (also in Greek). Since Greek was the universal language at that time, the writers of the New Testament took their Bible quotations mostly from the Septuagint. Luther, who considered the Apocrypha useful to read, included them in his Bible, while Calvin rejected them and they are therefore not to be found in *his*.

All this you have to know – and it is by no means unimportant – if we want to understand the Bible properly and not fall prey to skewed interpretations.

The **New Testament** is an anthology of writings that recognises Jesus as the Messiah. Its origin lies between the years 60 and 200AD and it developed in a similar manner as the Old Testament. Just as, in time,

the canon of the Old Testament was determined, i.e. what books should be included, so it was with the New Testament and, just as the quality of holiness and inviolability was increasingly ascribed to the Old, so it was to the New.

The Gospel of **Mark** is the oldest gospel and was written about 35 years after the death of Christ. Before this, there was only an **oral** tradition.* Two of the other evangelists, **Matthew** and **Luke**, used the records of Mark as source material, so we often see the same stories – sometimes word for word – in all three gospels. In addition, Matthew had another source, a book called ‘Collection of the Words of Jesus’. Luke, however, a pupil of the Apostle Paul, expressly states that he used **all** the sources he could find – oral as well as written – as the basis of his gospel. There also were gospels other than those three, e.g. the ‘Gospel of the Hebrews’. The Gospel of **John** was not written until 100AD. Most gospels were written following requests from the newly founded Christian communities, which Paul had established in Greece and in Asia Minor. In addition to the Scriptures of the Old Testament, these Christians wanted books that told of the life and work of Jesus, **the Messiah** (Greek: the Christ), the Anointed One.

When it was not possible for Paul to visit his communities, he wrote letters to them, to be read to the congregations along with the gospels, especially after the voice of this witness was silenced forever when he lost his life in a persecution of Christians, fighting for Christian ideas and Christian faith. His letters became ever more precious to their recipients, who exchanged their scrolls amongst themselves to learn everything their teacher had to tell and impress upon them. With this, however, the letters were not yet accorded the quality of holiness; that was to come later.

In time, a canon of the most important writings that testified to Jesus and his teaching emerged. It included, above all, the **four gospels** we still have today, which quickly asserted themselves as the most authoritative, from which Jesus’ life and purpose were recognised most clearly and which were soon deemed holy. Gradually, they were joined by the **Epistles** of Paul, in particular, but also by those from the

* Brief notes about the ‘words of the Lord’ may have existed

Apostles Peter, James, John and Jude as well as by the **Revelation**. In later times, it could not always be established positively in every case where the letters had originated. Disputes arose as to who the authors were of, say, the two letters of Peter or the second and third epistles of John. Similarly, consensus was not achieved about the authors of the letters of Jude, James and the epistle to the Hebrews.

A first attempt at determining a canon stems from **Marcion**, the famous Gnostic, who recognised only the epistles of Paul and, at best, the gospel of Luke, who had been a pupil of Paul. However, by far the greater part of Christendom at that time was up in arms against this, because they insisted that not only the three other gospels, but also the letters from the rest of the authors be included in it. The canon was not conclusively fixed until the Synod of Hippo in 400AD, which was attended by Church Father St Augustine, but it took another 200 years, until 600AD, before the New Testament had progressed to a point where nothing in its wording was allowed to be changed or to be added to. It was declared **holy** to protect it from **further changes**. It is no wonder that **the various phases of the development of Christianity have left their marks on these writings**; they make sense of many terms that otherwise would be hard to understand. This, **in rough outline**, is the **origin of the Bible**.

II

Literary Forms in the Bible

So far we have seen that the Bible is a useful book to read, but also that certainly not all things in it are of equal value, and we have learnt that the view – generally considered valid up to only a few decades ago – of **verbal** or literal **inspiration** by God is incorrect. Spiritual development is discernible in the Bible, too, rising from a lower level to a higher one and then on to the highest, which is embodied in Jesus. Compared to him, the initial stage must be considered rather childish. The authors of the individual books of the Bible were by no means equal in character or understanding, and were naturally influenced by the spirit of their times, as is evident from their writings. Their modes of expression, too, are the ones current at the time. As with all human beings, the spirit of God spoke to them through their conscience, and they reflected this on a level **commensurate with their knowledge**. These men, driven by the spirit of God, used the language of the times, e.g. “thus spake the Lord”, only to make it very clear to their contemporaries what their task was according to the will of God and how people should behave if blessing, not curse, was to be the consequence of their actions. Enough places in the Bible show us clearly that the authors use and understand the words “the Lord spoke” in this sense. The further we go back, the more **anthropomorphisms**, human traits, are ascribed to God as if he, too, were subject to emotional states like rage and remorse. On such low a level of understanding, God was imaginable only in this childish fashion. No one wishing to remain on that level today is entitled to force those on a higher level of understanding to be satisfied with such a childish concept, which is symptomatic of the **initial**, the **pre-prophetic stage**.

The composition of the Old Testament is extraordinarily diverse as far as literary style is concerned. It includes stories from ancient times that have the character of **legends** – having come down to us over centuries – such as the narratives of the Patriarchs. The story of the creation, which is based on the then level of understanding of the

Oriental world, harks back to Indian and Persian traditions. Apart from the **law compendia** and the **history books**, even **poetry** is represented, as in the Psalms and in the Song of Solomon. The Church forcibly redefines the latter to suit its own ends, because the ‘pious’ cannot imagine that the Israelites even had love-songs. **Teaching books** with didactic content are Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon and others; Job is a **dramatic** book; Ruth, Esther, Judith and others are **novellas**, or works of fiction with a historical background, while the prophetic books are collections of **speeches and lectures**. We thus have an **anthology of Israelite literature** in the Old Testament, **but not dictations by God**. At times, there is disagreement about the authors. Some of them have allowed mistakes to creep in – often grave mistakes – when using other sources or when copying, as can be seen from comparisons of the Bible with the famous Egyptian Septuagint; sometimes the scribe has added his own opinion or changed the text if other words seemed more enlightening to him.

The **rigid Doctrine of Inspiration** does not seem to – or does **not want to** – know anything about this. **Christoph Hoffmann**, the founder of the Temple Society, had freed himself from this inspiration-belief and was now able to judge the Bible’s true worth more accurately from a higher vantage point. Without prejudice, he used everything that serious research had unearthed and took it into consideration for his conclusions about the Bible and would, today more than ever, do so with all the extra researched material now at our disposal. For instance, although he was still under the impression that all the laws attributed to Moses were decreed by **Moses himself**, he now would not hesitate for one moment to acknowledge what research has found during the last thirty or forty years, since it would not change his ideal one iota.

If you ask me today, “how, then, is the Bible still the Word of God?” I reply: **The Bible is not the Word of God in the traditional sense, but I can find words of God in it – enlightenment about the essence and the will of God and about the tasks given to the human race – of a quality and clarity I cannot find in any other book, even though much of what is good and worthy can also be found in books deemed holy in other cultures. The idea that man**

is called to be God-like, or the teaching of ‘the kingdom of God’ is found in such clarity only in the Bible. It is these **ideals** which make the Bible precious to us, not what it says about historical events or nature, for **the picture we have today of the world and of world events is and must be quite different from that of the Bible.**

III

Criticism of the Bible

This brings us to **Bible criticism**, a word that may sound perilous to pious ears, but is not indifferent to us either. To practise **criticism** means to separate the false from the correct, or to determine the facts of a matter as much as possible, not out of malice, of course, but in the honest attempt to find the **truth**, and nothing **but** the truth. The connotation of *talking down* is not contained in the word *criticism* and is not to be feared from serious critics. **Their earnest striving after the truth is most commendable, not only legitimate, but also necessary.** Every commercial undertaking is scrutinised and minutely researched to make sure everything is as it should be. Those who neglect to do this are rightfully called fools, but is it right that people should accept what is offered, without trial, sight unseen, something far more important, namely that which concerns their eternal salvation? “Prove all things” – be it **ever** so holy a book, be it the **Bible!** – “and hold fast that which is good!” [1Thess.5:21]. We must not forget the second part of this sentence. However, the **testing must come first, in order to gain the best, i.e. proper knowledge.** Mind you, those who remain fixated on the doctrine of Verbal Inspiration have their hands tied.

Once the spirit of research had broken the spell, the urge to investigate this book grew ever stronger in order to see whether misunderstandings and mistakes might have crept in. This entailed monumental disputes, the end of which we have not seen to this day.

The view that criticism also questions what the Bible says about the will of God and man’s relationship with God is, of course, incorrect. Also, if a critic thinks that whatever an author has written, even if it is acceptable, would be incorrect just because he might have been someone else or that he had lived at a different time than had been assumed, then this is a wrong conclusion. **For us, it is entirely immaterial when and by whom a truth was expressed, as long as it is recognised as the truth by our conscience.** No one finds anything

wrong with applying the probe of criticism to Babylonian or Greek literature, but Israelite literature should be the exception? For no valid reason? – Only those bereft of logic can draw the conclusion that if certain parts are wrong therefore the whole thing is wrong.

For Hoffmann it was not so important when and by whom a book was written; he was interested in whether it contained truth and whether, and to what extent, it might be a source for learning of God's will. By virtue of his deeply religious nature, he recognised what in the Bible was of lasting value, namely everything that is written about our [mankind's] aim and how to attain it. **His measure** for the recognition of Eternal Truth was **his conscience**. He held the Bible in high regard because it could provide answers to the deepest questions of his innermost yearning. Far from being deterred by any criticism, he **welcomed** every solid result of critical Bible study. He recognised that what the Bible proclaims as the goal of humankind – that man's spirit is to become master over the flesh or, in other words, **that man was called upon to be God-like** – was the **highest goal** possible for humans.

For Hoffmann, Jesus was the ideal man. He rejected any feature that could disfigure or darken this, even if it came from the Bible, as we can see from his *Sendschreiben* [letters sent out to the community]. The power of his spirit allowed him to recognise that some of what was recorded in the Bible about Jesus felt alien and odd and did not match the impression one necessarily would have gained from his words and deeds. Subsequent research by academics confirmed that these additions stem from much more recent times and are influenced by pagan concepts.

Criticising the Bible in the right way is therefore not only justified, but necessary. What has it achieved? Good things? – **Yes, it has proved the perversity of the dogma of 'verbal inspiration'**– a highly commendable achievement, which is of great significance for the progress of Christendom. It has unlocked the Bible, which had often been a book of seven seals to us, and taught us to understand and appreciate it better than before. In addition, we owe to criticism the recognition that religion, too, is subject to development, just as art is,

for instance. This achievement is widely recognised today; even staunch conservatives do not dare object to it.

It is particularly valuable that Bible critique has helped us towards a better understanding of the significance of the **prophets**. Through the presentation of its case, it alerted us to the immense progress in the teaching of these men as compared to the teaching of Moses. These proclaimers of God's Will had recognised that **overrating the external form of divine service with its sacramental acts had become a danger to the true worship of God and was the reason why the actual objective, namely to practise love, justice and mercy, had been pushed aside and made obscure** – as is often the case again in Christianity today [1920s].

We readily admit that criticising the Bible can also be harmful, but only to people who do not wish to investigate and think for themselves. Many also approach the Bible appearing profoundly scientific, and even recognise the odd irregularity or inadequacy in it but, in their ignorance, reject all of it lock, stock and barrel and thus condemn the good with the bad. Such criticism is harmful and is absolutely unjustified, but it is rendered impossible if people listen to the primary source within themselves instead of neglecting it, and observe everything, **including the Bible**, from there. They will then reap its true benefit.

Unprejudiced criticism of the Bible helped Hoffmann not to read his own opinions into it, but to cleanse it from alien ideas and so separate the 'glass from the gold', as he expresses it in his hymn ^{*}. He would not have been able to do this if he had contemplated the Bible in the old way, which demands that 'reason must be held captive by faith' (a misunderstood utterance of Paul, the Apostle). We can learn from Hoffmann's *Bibelforschungen* [Bible research] how much his views on the Bible were at variance with those of theology.

Criticism that recognises God as the Universal Spirit and sees humans as destined to develop to perfection the spirituality budding within them can only be beneficial. **Honest examination and thought,**

* *Trachtet ruft mit ernstem Worte* (Seek ye first of all God's kingdom)

controlled by conscience, is fruitful and is the duty of every person who strives to advance spiritually, especially when called upon to provide enlightenment about spiritual questions to others, for only thorough examination will make us secure enough for nothing to sway us any more. Becoming strong and gaining a firm conviction must be the aim of every person aspiring to inner growth.

IV

Natural History and the Bible

It goes without saying that the Bible's authors' understanding of nature and the visible world were generally that of antiquity: the genesis and continued existence of the world was perceived through the senses. The world seemed to be an edifice of three storeys – Heaven, Earth and the Underworld. Heaven was often called a **canopy** stretched out above the Earth or, as in the Old Testament, a firm **vault** resting on pillars. For Israel, heaven, the top storey, seems to have been a multiple top, for it says in the Bible 'the heavens'. Paul, the Apostle, speaks of 'seventh heaven', suggesting that there may have been several levels. However, heaven is always the **abode of God**, or **God's throne**, on which he sits surrounded by his servants, the **angels**.

They saw the **Earth** as a flat expanse. This is especially obvious with the Greeks, who imagined the Earth surrounded by the oceans and with a place beyond it for the virtuous. Originally, the **underworld** was not identified with the concept of hell, but is mostly referred to as a place of shadows, as Hades, or as a realm of darkness. In the Psalms, it says 'a place where the brooks of Belial are flowing'.

Since the concept of the Ancient Ones rested only on the perception of the senses, the Earth had to appear to them as the **centre of the world**, circled by the sun, the moon and the stars. This **geocentric** world concept must be the key to our understanding of what is written in the Bible about it, as well as of its relationship with God. Consistent with their knowledge of the natural world as seen through the senses, their idea of God was a very restricted one: a powerful Lord riding forth on the clouds – thunder his mighty voice and lightning a weapon in his hand – hurling flashes and sending his messengers, the winds, out into the world. Opinions about the significance of the stars in the sky varied: some thought they were light fixtures that served to illuminate the night, others saw in them animated beings. Shooting stars were seen as servants of God, of whom he needed many to execute his

orders. They assumed that anything that made no sense to them was a direct manifestation of God.

This first level of the knowledge of nature, of course, will no longer do as a basis for civilised humanity, for it is aware – thanks to **Natural Science** – that these concepts are illusions and that the Earth is not the centre of the universe around which everything else revolves. Even though we say ‘the sun and the moon are rising’, we still know that the Earth turns around its own axis and that the blue sky above is neither a canopy nor a vault nor an upper floor, but the unending space of the cosmos where the stars complete their prescribed orbits as suns, not as nightlights. We had to concede that our Earth is not the most important, but one of the smallest, most insignificant of heavenly bodies. Much prejudice needed to be overcome, and the astronomers had to fight hard for the new concept of the world before their view prevailed and became certainty. ‘What is it that turns? Is it the sky or the Earth?’ ‘Is the Earth flat or is it a sphere?’

These were questions that caused many disputes, even bloodshed. It took a long time before the difference between planets and fixed stars was acknowledged. The merits of astronomy, the research of which is by no means completed, are immense. It transformed the small terrestrial God of the Bible into a Universal God of such magnitude before our eyes that we cannot but darkly guess at the power of his spirit, forcing us to recognise it with the utmost admiration and reverence. It is incomprehensible that there still are people who think that the work of the scientists poses a danger for the belief in God. These super-pious pedants [*Buchstabengläubige*, literalists] insist that the sun stood still to shine for Joshua during his struggle for the land of Canaan!

The new world concept given to us by astronomy **naturally** gave rise to a new concept of God. It is no longer God himself, who immediately and personally stands behind every event, but his **laws of cause and effect**. These laws of Natural Science are, as it were, ‘thoughts of God’.

For the faithful who cling to the dogma of Verbal Inspiration, Catholics and Protestants alike, the new world concept became a source of conflict, because the perceptions of old – including those of the Bible – about the universe were no longer supportable. The blue dome disintegrated and could no longer be considered the abode of the departed, just as there was no room for hell in the new picture of the world that knew neither top nor bottom.

How does the Temple Society deal with the new world picture? Naturally, it acknowledges everything that earnest and honest people have discovered through serious research, and is able to reject tradition without getting into conflict with its own religious views. For the problem consists of nothing more than the contrast between today's knowledge of Natural History and that of the Bible. The new knowledge does not touch the **religious aspect** of the Bible, and the new picture of the world does not affect the goal that **Jesus** set before us. What we **can find** in the Bible, despite its mistaken notions about nature and the world **is this**: we can better understand our goal (which we have by no means reached yet) and how to recognise the path leading to it.

Unfortunately, our view has caused many opponents to arise in the camp of the literalists, who call us rationalists and fight us wherever they can and, **by clinging to the demonstrably incorrect, contribute to the stultification of the people**. The goal set by Jesus with the words 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God', which Hoffmann chose as the motto of his life, is considered unattainable by these people, because 'humanity is unable to free itself from its lower instincts'. This, they say, is why the teaching of God's kingdom is and would remain utopian, and therefore one has to rely on the Beyond and needs a **Redeemer**. **They do not see what mighty effects the honest efforts of individual people have already produced, and continue to produce, to this day**. What achievements would be possible if a whole nation made this effort! If, of course, you restrict yourself to **getting ahead in the physical world**, and all you have are **selfish goals**, you are not fit to work on the kingdom of God, which alone is able to inwardly satisfy a human being and make him happy and

produce better conditions on Earth. Our goal is quite consistent with the modern view of nature and the world.

Sometimes I am touched when simple folk are shocked by the new world picture, because they can no longer find a spot in it for their loved ones, even though I cannot understand why, in the immensity of the universe, there should not be even more space available to provide departed spirits with possibilities to exist and to continue learning.

Hell as a 'burning bottomless pit' has no place in the new world picture. It is, at most, a graphic expression of the emotional torture of human beings who realise that, of their own volition, they have taken a path in the opposite direction to the goal. This is also Jesus' view of hell which, in his parables, is at one time described as a place of utter darkness and cold, and at another as a spot of the most searing heat.

Clinging to ideas borrowed from earthly thinking is **not faith**, but **superstition**. It has often caused young people to suffer shipwreck in religion, when the attempt was made to force them to cling to superstition instead of guiding them to believe in the high destiny of the human race, as Jesus, our role model, has shown clearly and unambiguously.

The Perception of God at the pre-Prophetic Stage

I have tried to show how the Bible originated, who its authors were and when they lived, even though I know full well that many consider this to be secondary, even dangerous; but it cannot stop me from saying what I consider to be the truth.

What finally matters are our own findings, but we can expand them if we examine what others before us have recognised as the truth and, **if our inner wisdom agrees with it**, we can add it to our spiritual assets. I now want to explain how we can increase our font of knowledge about God by perusing the Bible, and to what extent the Israelite religion can help us do it. In this context, author and historical time, as well as external circumstances, are unimportant – what matters are the inner content of the individual books and the correctness of their views about God and his will.

First, we shall consider the books of the Old Testament, which occupy different stages of development because of their different eras of origin. For just as today's knowledge about nature and the universe is the result of slow but steady progress, so too is our knowledge of God – like everything else in God's creation – subject to the laws of evolution from lower to higher levels.

Religion – the recognition of God and his will, and its effect upon the lives of human beings – has a beginning which, unfortunately, is shrouded in darkness, but which science constantly strives to illuminate. After the first stage, namely **the recognition of supernatural forces or powers and of one or more deities**, had been reached, enlightened people advanced to the second level. It is most important to recognise that this 'growth in knowledge' occurs in the Bible as well, if one does not wish to fall into the fatal error of mistaking an inferior stage of God-knowledge for the last and highest one, which the Churches have forced their followers to commit at times, often by applying most brutal violence (as in the Middle Ages).

This is not possible if the law of evolution is recognised and if reason, guided by conscience, is the arbiter of all cognisance. Since we in the Temple Society consider the teaching of Jesus the greatest treasure of God-perception, we cannot be indifferent to knowing what levels had been reached before Jesus. If it is stated in books, or by renowned theologians, that Jesus introduced an entirely new doctrine, with no connection at all to what had gone before, then this view is **wrong!** Rather than seeing the teaching and life of Jesus as something altogether new, we view it as the highest level of Israelite religious development. Jesus himself entitles us to this view by saying: “I am not come to destroy the Law, or the Prophets, but to fulfil”, that is, to complement, to make complete.

We distinguish **three** stages in the Israelite religion: the **pre-prophetic**, the **prophetic** and **Jesus**, the last and highest stage. It is important to determine what makes up a stage, what is retained or discarded on the next level and what new knowledge is added. It is quite wrong to retain redundant first-level insights which, on the next level, are seen to be imperfect.

We are very well aware that mere theoretical information is no justification for looking down on others or for putting them down, as so often happens. Certainly, correct action presupposes correct understanding, for no task can be properly carried out if it has not been fully understood. If its deepest meaning has not dawned on us, its execution, too, can only be less than perfect. However, if we do not go beyond mere information, then someone with less understanding may be a more worthy person, if he strives to put it into **action**. For this reason, we take care not to speak ill of other religious communities, be they Jews, Muslims, Buddhists or Taoists.

Having tried hard to acquaint myself with today’s accepted research results, I will now begin with the pre-prophetic stage. We have to watch two things: **first**, what does man **call** the higher power, and how does he **imagine** it, for this determines whether his **concept of God** is on a higher or on a lower level. **Second**, how does this understanding affect his life, his behaviour and his worship of God, in short, his

‘**divine service**’, by which I do not mean the superficial services tied to gestures.

The Bible itself testifies that in pre-prophetic times Israel was looking at more than **one** God, as is proven by the fact that they gave him a proper name to distinguish him from other gods. Every nation and every tribe had their own God, in whom they preferred to believe rather than in other gods, in the assumption that his own nation or tribe was especially close to his heart. Research has shown that this was the case with all peoples at that time. Israel named its God Jehovah – or more correctly Yahweh – but refrained from mentioning his name for fear of using it in vain. Later on, ‘Elohim’, and also the ‘heavens’, was used instead.

People rack their brains to this day about what the term ‘Yahweh’ might have meant. Relics were found that indicated this name appeared in very early Babylonian inscriptions. Many interpret the name thus: “I am that I am” or “who I will be”. In any case, the national God of the Israelites had this name Yahweh, which signified the ‘Eternal One’, the ‘All-surviving One’. Moses, to whom Israel owes its life as a nation, used this name to forge together a number of tribes. The bond was strong enough to last for millennia, and it continues to last. He combined tribes, who had been in Egyptian slavery with others, e.g. the Midianites, as shown by the story of Jethro^{*}, from whom Moses accepted much advice in the application of the Law. His wife was a Midianite, too, whose brother Hobab showed Israel the way through the desert and settled down with them in Canaan. In the imagination of these tribes who were welded, as it were, into one people, Yahweh lived in a volcano (pillar of cloud by day, column of fire at night). On the top of fire-spewing Mt Horeb, Moses receives his instructions from Yahweh, who wants to be the God Protector of this new nation, with which he makes a covenant. All things incomprehensible, all the terrors of the desert and of the volcano, as well as of the earthquakes, are seen as direct effects of this deity.

* Moses’ father-in-law (Ex.3:1; 4:18) [tr]

Since this nation does not want to stay in the desert forever and feels drawn to the Promised Land where milk and honey flow, but finds that Canaan is in the possession of other nations, a god of war is now required, a god who takes the lead and fights for his people. So Yahweh becomes a **God of War**. Other nations, too, had their war-gods (e.g. Ares, or Mars). For Israel, however, it is different, because its god of war is also its God of justice and of ethics, who is not indifferent to the moral status of his people; he punishes the disobedient who do not keep his laws, and his wrath descends on them: epidemics and other disasters are some of the consequences.

However, Yahweh, as a Tribal God, also had a **duty of care** for his people so it would want for nothing on its journey to the Promised Land. If he failed to do this, the people would complain, would long for their old gods and would cause their leader Moses many a hard time, as shown by the stories of the Golden Calf, the quail, the manna, or of looking for water, and others.

Many things, however, changed for them after they reached their destination, if only after protracted struggles and by no means in full number, but at least in a position, where they had the upper hand over the inhabitants of Canaan. They were nomads before, now they settled down and became farmers who had to learn a thing or two from the previous inhabitants. This was like a melting pot for the tribes, not only in a physical, but also in a religious sense. Polytheism was still rife amongst the Canaanites. Every larger town with its villages (its 'daughters') formed a mini-state and had its own God Protector to whom groves, hills or wells were dedicated. These Gods were called **Baalim**, or **Lords**, of whom each one had his own name, e.g. Baal Beor and Baal Sebul (Beelzebub). They were the patrons of agriculture and sent the early and the late rains – so important in this country – if they were mercifully disposed. The tribe therefore revered its Protector and offered him the early harvest and the firstborn of the livestock.

The Israelites adopted this kind of divine worship and celebrated the three main festivals of agriculture: **Easter**, the feast of the firstborn,

Pentecost^{*}, the feast of the main harvest, and the feast of **Tabernacles**[†] to give **thanks** for the fruits of the autumn. However, they transferred all of this to Yahweh, their own God, because their faith in him was already strong enough; but, little by little, their perceptions of God mingled with those of the heathens. They took over the ancient cult sites, such as Dan, Bethel, Beersheba, Sichem and others, and turned them into places of worship for Yahweh, but retained the ritual customs of the heathens. This became a danger for the belief in Yahweh, for in the end they would not have cared whether the god responsible for all the fertility was named **Baal** or **Yahweh**, and whether *this* god or *that* was worshipped. The prophets' struggle was always directed against this inclination to "lust after foreign gods" because, all too often, the rules of law and morality were abandoned along with it. It took a long time before the people understood what their leader Moses had wanted to give them. Moses, because of his comparatively mature perception of God, was far ahead of his time.

When we consider the books bearing his name [the Pentateuch], we have to note that in the very first book (Genesis) there are Babylonian influences, e.g. the stories dealing with the Creation of the World, Paradise and the Tower of Babel. But the stories came down to Israel in a purified state, so to speak, because all the petty and base material adhering to the Babylonian sources had been removed. In the first chapter of the Bible – written by the so-called Yahwist – Yahweh is not only the creator of the world, but also the national God of Israel. Logic posed no difficulties to the writers of those days, or else they overcame them easily: the creator of the world would have his seat on a mountain top one day and in the desert the next, or even had to suffer taking his abode on top of the Ark of the Covenant to be carried into battle. At another time, his seat is relocated to heaven. With all this, it has to be emphasised that they did **not** think of God in a spiritual sense, but as a being in human form, hence the saying "Let us make a picture that is a likeness of **us**". Such a being, of course, could not be everywhere at the same time, but needed messengers, the

* Not their names then: Easter is a Germanic name and Pentecost a Greek one [tr]

† Actually a feast to remember the time in the wilderness during the exodus [tr]

angels, who carried out its orders. This is how their God acquired the epithet *Sabaoth* [Lord of hosts].

On this level we see many anthropomorphisms, humanised features, attributed to God, but even though Yahweh is tied to his people and their land, he is nonetheless designated the creator of the world. Monotheism is thus hinted at, but not clearly recognised. If we wish to understand the Yahweh cult of those days correctly, we must not, of course, look at the books written *after* the Babylonian exile like, for instance, Deuteronomy, but those that convey the God-concept at the time. Their worship of God naturally matched this concept; it predominantly consisted of superficial cultic rites. I will only speak about its main features here.

The essence of these superficial rites is **sacrifice** and **prayer**, which are the main features of ancient rites in general. These two absolutely belong together; one does not exist without the other. During the earliest times, performing these rites had its roots in the terror and fear which filled weak humanity when, helpless and without protection, people felt at the mercy of supra-terrestrial powers and forces.

Thus we find the attempt to curry favour with God through extensive sacrifices also in the cult of Yahweh. And, as it was realised more and more that individuals complied but little with the law, i.e. they sinned continuously, offerings were introduced to allay **guilt** and thereby pay one's debt to God. The idea that man owed everything to God and that his trespasses could actually only be paid in full with his most valuable asset, his life and his blood, led to the introduction of 'vicarious offerings' [*Stellvertretungsopfer*], the **expiatory** sacrifices [*Sühnopfer*]. The blood was to pacify Yahweh's righteous wrath. We often come across similar ideas in Christianity, albeit in a more refined form, even in modern times.

The sacrifices which, in time, became more and more classified, were meant to support and reinforce prayer. Certain animals were prescribed for the thanks-offerings, different ones for guilt and expiatory sacrifices. **The selection of the right animals was the beginning of the Yahweh cult**, which was then followed by the

ritually correct preparation of the sacrificial animals. Special holy sites were set aside for the sacrificial rites, to be performed by men who understood and mastered all the regulations: **the priests**.

This, however, was not so in the beginning. We read, for instance, that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and even Saul, David and Solomon still offered their own sacrifices, which means these regulations did not yet exist then. It was not until the **rites of sacrifice** needed expert operators that priests, who soon formed a class of their own, were required. At first there were only local priests at the holy sites, which were in fact the same ones that the Israelites had taken over from the Canaanites. After Solomon had built the temple, however, a larger and more differentiated priesthood was required to perform the more complicated service at the temple. Therefore Jerusalem, the capital of the realm, also became the centre of religion, but the other holy sites continued to exist with their own priesthood. Not until 620BC, i.e. almost 400 years after Solomon, was a thorough reform undertaken by King **Josiah**, probably induced by prophetic influence. He closed the holy sites where, in addition to the worship of Yahweh, pagan rituals were often still practised on the hills and in the groves. Many priests lost their office because of these reforms, and they would have become destitute if they had not been accepted into the temple service at Jerusalem. At first, they were on an equal footing with the Jerusalem priests, but were soon pushed into the background and forced to play a subordinate role. Eventually they only found jobs as temple servants, or **Levites**.

The prophets of the first stage, also called Nebi'im, usually gathered in fair numbers at the holy sites, and so were, in fact, a complement to the priesthood. As with monks, their food and clothes were very simple and modest, but they did have wives and children. They were much occupied with religious dancing which, accompanied by monotonous music, was dragged out until the fanatical dancers went into ecstasy or rapture, the way the dervishes practise it to this day. It is an ancient custom. The simple folk at the shrine marvelled at the men thus enraptured and believed that in their unarticulated sounds they heard the voices of gods who had taken up residence in the prophets. They tried to read a divine revelation into the few

intelligible sounds they uttered. Anyone watching such dances and exercises for a long time often became infected, as shown in the story of Saul: “Is Saul also among the prophets?” [Sam 10:11].

Some of these Nebi'im stand out because they are not only worshippers of Yahweh, but concern themselves more with the fortunes of the people and so are **politicians**. It was **Elijah**, in particular, who, alone among the Yahweh prophets, had the courage to stand up to the Baal prophets, while all the others stayed in hiding. Thanks to him, who put his life on the line fighting for Yahweh, a merging of the worship of Yahweh and Baal was averted.

The Nebi'im and the priests took turns speaking as the oracle. Only these two groups had the right and were in a position to proclaim what would happen next and to provide answers for all kinds of questions asked by the public. They were equipped with the ‘Light and the Right’ (the Ephod), a satchel attached to their robes and worn on their chests with a picture of their God if they were pagan, while the Israelites, who were forbidden to make images of their God, displayed twelve stones symbolising the twelve tribes. The lots drawn from this bag gave more or less fitting answers to the questions asked. Apart from the sacrifices, managing and interpreting these oracles was the primary task of the prophets. They also had to inform the people about their obligations to God, as written in Mosaic Law.

Apart from holy *sites*, there were also holy *times*. The priests had adopted the celebration of the **New Moon** from the Babylonians, who were well versed in astronomy. They also celebrated the seventh day of the week, the **Sabbath**, which was originally a day of rest, not a sacred day. From the Canaanites they had taken over the **feasts** that were connected with the **harvest**, e.g. Easter, Pentecost and Tabernacles [see earlier footnote]. At Easter, they combined the feast of Passover with the historical remembrance of the **Exodus from Egypt**. Pentecost, seven weeks after Easter, was called the Festival of the Weeks. However, there were also social festivals: there had to be a **Year of the Sabbath** [Sabbatical] every seven years, during which nothing was to be planted; whatever grew anyway was to belong to the poor. In addition, any Israelite who had fallen into bondage

through poverty or misadventure had to be set free by his brethren in that year. And, after seven times seven years, the **Jubilee Year** was celebrated, in which all land was to be returned to its original owners to prevent some clans falling into poverty, while others indulged in abundance. It appears doubtful, however, whether this generous – and, for a nation’s life, meaningful – law was complied with.

This was the Cult of Yahweh, largely prescribed by the laws which, as mentioned, not only concerned the outward rituals, but contained moral laws as well. We see in the Ten Commandments a valuable treasure of the first stage. These ethical rules establish wonderfully clearly and simply how the right relationship with God should be, and what it takes to make it possible for a nation to live together peacefully and beneficially. The first stage reached this height only towards its end; originally, its divine worship had consisted of only **outward rites of sacrifices and prayer**.

VI

The Perception of God at the Prophetic Stage

The religious development of this period shows up great differences compared to the previous one. While the first level took in more or less the whole nation, the second level was formed by a few particularly enlightened men, who were not only public speakers, but also writers. They did connect with the ethical laws of the first level, but developed them to greater clarity. Thus, something new grew out of the old, as is the case in organic growth. However, the populace at the time of these men took little interest in this development and remained at the level of understanding of the first stage. They were not ready for what these prophetic spirits had envisaged and proclaimed in their speeches and revelations. So the men took to the pen, thus making their knowledge accessible to later generations. They prophesied to their people that they would perish if they did not give up chasing foreign Gods and continued to defy the will of Yahweh. They urgently beseeched them to remain true to their calling as God's Chosen People.

The prophet **Elijah** saved at least the outward worship of Yahweh from becoming submerged in the Cult of Baal. The prophets who succeeded him tried to impress on the people that these superficial rites would not suffice, because Yahweh demanded more of his people.

One of the first of these prophets was **Amos** in 800BC, a strange man, who had nothing in common with the professional prophets, the Nebi'im. He expressly said, "I am not a prophet nor do I want to be one." He does not go into rapture or dispense oracles. The spirit drives him, the cowherd, to the shrine in the north, where he preaches against the depravity of the House of Israel and its king Jeroboam II. This clever and energetic king had succeeded in restoring the Kingdom of Israel to the size it was under King David. Not only power, but also wealth had come to the country under him, so it seemed that Yahweh's blessing was on him. Due to their affluence, however, part of the

people – with the King out in front – became used to a life of debauchery. Splendour and pleasures were out of control, everyone wanted to match or surpass everyone else and all wanted to get rich quick, no matter how. Hedonism knew no bounds, honesty and integrity – even that of public servants – kept declining and the weak were exploited. This exacerbated the social gap between rich and poor, and the latter suffered heavily under the imposed burdens, widows and orphans in particular. **Enter this cowherd.** He leaves his herd in Thekoa and goes to Bethel, where people worship Yahweh by making sacrifices to him. He castigates the perversion of their God-worship in fiery speeches: God would not be pleased; he would be indifferent to their offerings, as well as to the “bawling of their songs”! He shouts at them: “Hate evil, love good and establish justice in the gate!” [Amos 5:15] “This is true worship of God.”

After him, **Hosea** remonstrates possibly even more fiercely. He is followed in Judah by **Isaiah**, at the time of King Hezekiah, and **Jeremiah** who preaches during the reigns of the Kings Josiah, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, and witnesses the decline of Judah in Jerusalem. During the [Babylonian] exile it is, above all, **Ezekiel** and an unknown prophet by the name of **Deutero-Isaiah**, to whom the Book of Isaiah from chapter 40 is ascribed.

They all emphasised that Yahweh was a God of law and morality, who took no joy from the odour of burnt offerings or from celebrating feasts, if law and justice were not observed at the same time.

Compared to the first level, we can see progress in the God-perception of these prophets at various points. Moses had elevated Yahweh to a national God, but the question whether other nations had *other* gods remained unresolved. *Now* the prophets realised that there was **in fact only one God for the whole world**. Scientifically speaking, they took the step from **henotheism** to **monotheism**, but it did not yet occur to them that God was Spirit.

Their second insight was that God was not interested in being worshipped in outward rituals if egotism also played a part.

Third, they realised that God was to be sought behind all human fortunes. They tried with great zeal to make their people understand that even great kingdoms like Egypt and Babylon were only tools in the hand of God, whom to serve was the foremost duty of a people.

The awareness of being ahead of other nations in the knowledge of God gave them the belief that Israel was **chosen** by God but, along with it, had inherited the **obligation** to convey to the others the recognition of the **One** God and his will. Israel was not God's spoilt brat, but the **firstborn**, with **obligations** to the rest of God's children. If it did not fulfil its task of being a beacon to other nations, it would be overtaken by disaster. This, however, would not make God abandon his intention to save humanity, but he would awaken a prophet who, like Moses, would lead his people out of the desert to the Promised Land. With such or similar pictures that sometimes establish a link to the Golden Era of David, the prophets promise the coming of the **Messiah**, the one **Anointed with the Spirit of God**.^{*} A new era would dawn with this Messiah. **In his kingdom, law and justice – and therefore peace – would rule, and all the blessings of men behaving thus would come to pass. The kingdom of God on Earth would then come.**

However, the prophets' sermons were not heeded by their contemporaries, let alone understood. The prophets continuously had to fight against the people's inclination to worship foreign gods. Jeremiah still laments, "according to the numbers of your cities are your gods, O Judah!" [Jer 2:28].

The prophets demanded a kind of Yahweh-worship different from mere outward ritual, as we can see from many passages of the prophetic books. They judged this kind of worship harshly, even contemptuously, a worship in which egotism was splendidly ensconced alongside it. We see clearly how seriously they took the actual compliance with the new teaching, which was not meant to be a **theory**, but **hands-on practical work**.

* In Israel, high priests and kings were anointed with holy oil, hence 'anointed by the spirit of God'

Amos writes [5:21, 24]: Hear the word of the Lord: “I despise your feast days and I will not smell your solemn assemblies!” “Let justice roll on like a mighty stream!”

Hosea [6:6]: “I desired **mercy**, not sacrifice, and **knowledge** of God more than burnt offerings!”

Isaiah [1:11, 17]: “What good is the multitude of your sacrifices to me? says the Lord: I have had enough of burnt offerings, and I delight not in the blood of the bullocks!” “**Learn to do right, seek justice, relieve the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.**”

Micah [6:6]: “With what shall I come before the Lord? With burnt offerings and calves a year old?” No, “he has shown you what he requires of you: **To keep his word, to love mercy and to walk humbly before your God.**”

Jeremiah [7:4]: “Trust not in lying words when they say this is the temple of the Lord, but **change your ways and act justly towards each other!**”

These statements show clearly what the prophets meant by ‘doing right’: to ‘**become master over one’s selfish desires**’. This was the right divine service, for which they promised the most brilliant reward in a happy future; but they threaten terrible punishment for those who act in defiance of divine will. Since the prophets ran into resistance always and everywhere, they did not cease to predict a gloomy future. “The judgment of the Lord shall descend on you”, was very often the theme of their talk, which is why the theologians and the scribes frequently called them ‘prophets of doom’. All they achieved was a slightly cleaner, less pagan cult. The iron snake, *nehustan*, which Moses once had installed, and to which smoke-offerings were still made, was not removed from the temple until the reign of Hezekiah, probably influenced by Isaiah. Josiah introduced a more thorough reform. His code of law contained not only cultic regulations, but also social ones.

Due to the decline of Samaria and the Northern Kingdom, the prophecies fell on slightly more fertile soil in Judah, at least they achieved that the priests were sworn in on this State Law. From that time onwards, ‘worship in the hills’ was no longer allowed; Jerusalem was the only place where offerings were permitted. This brought the entire ‘offering service’ under the control of the priests. However, the inner renewal that the prophets had desired and preached was not achieved, and so the wrath of God – seventy years of banishment [the exile] – was not long in coming. Not until the course of history had proved the prophets right, and the people suffered the consequences of their wrongdoing in their own lives, did they realise the significance of these men. *Now* the scriptures of the prophets were held in high regard and were taken along into exile as a valuable treasure, from which the people gleaned comfort and learned lessons during their dark times in captivity. The inner change of heart, however, still did not come. They might well have said: “Our fathers have erred in following the *Baalim*; that is why they were punished; we want to avoid that!” And they actually meant it, they *wanted* to satisfy Yahweh. Yahweh, none but Yahweh, was now worshipped. They anxiously avoided all the animals designated unclean by the law, kept the peace of the Sabbath more strictly than ever and prayed, fasted and sacrificed more than the law required. The super-pious even observed all of the ‘adjuncts of the elders’ which in the course of time had been attached to the law, minutely prescribing the formal rites of piety down to the last detail. Alas, even so, all that remained were superficial rites of which the heart knew nothing. It seemed, therefore, as if the prophets had lived and preached in vain, as if their teaching had been mere ideals impossible to carry out – until Jesus arrived and embodied this ideal in word and deed in the most convincing way.

VII

Jesus of Nazareth's Perception of God

The prophets form the transitional stage between the first and the third, the highest level, which is represented by only one man, the Saviour or Messiah, promised by the prophets – **Jesus of Nazareth**.

This already says it all: nothing new, or anything like a new revelation, came with Jesus as the Churches maintain; on the contrary, **Jesus is inconceivable without the two preceding stages** (the pre-prophetic and the prophetic). Jesus stands firmly on this foundation and confirms it by repeatedly referring to the Law and the Prophets: “Do not assume that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfil” [Mat 5:17], fill it, in fact, with God's spirit. He removed the weaknesses that the Law had conceded to people whose level of understanding was still childlike: “You have heard that our forefathers were told ... but I tell you this” [Mat 5:21-22]. More could have been expected of the people by this time, but he met with as little understanding by his contemporaries as did the prophets in *their* time. **The ritual worship of God continued to remain more important than worship in spirit and in reality**. The **priests, the scribes and the Pharisees** formed the greatest obstacle to the spread of Jesus' teaching, the very class that was called to lead the people in their knowledge of God. They opposed the new doctrine and its proclaimer, mostly for the sake of material advantage. To Jesus, they are greater enemies of the kingdom of God than the sinners; therefore, he exclaims, “Woe betide you scribes and Pharisees, for you have stolen the key of knowledge! You cannot get in, yet bar others from entering.”

For this reason, their task is **taken away** from them. The new leader sprang from a – by no means influential – tradesman's family, in which respect for God and the Law was the rule, and which knew how to awaken a longing for God and for clearly discerning his will in their spiritually gifted son at an early age, even though they later backed away from his all-too-bold language.

Christoph Hoffmann's spiritual work and his insight saved the Temple Society from having to regard Jesus as 'the second person in the Godhead', as is the case in the Christian Churches. As a human being and as a true son of his people, Jesus has given us a clear picture of how he sees God through the testimonies in the gospels of his words and deeds. Its main features can be summarised in four points:

1. **“God is spirit”**, says Jesus to the Samaritan woman [John 4:24]. This is a perception of far-reaching significance, which removes any humanisation and represents immense progress compared to the First Stage where God is the God of the Covenant who journeys with his people or has his seat in the temple.

2. **“God is one”** [or “God is the one Lord”, Mark 12:29]. In fact, the prophets had already indicated this, but not with such clarity and certainty. This recognition of **one** God for the whole world seems extraordinarily important to Jesus, as we can see from the answer he gives to the question: which is the most important commandment? “Hear me, Israel, the Lord, your God is **One God!**”

Jesus thus advocates **absolute monotheism in contrast to the Churches which use his name**; they **obscure** the concept of the divine by **splitting it into three**. He describes the duty to serve this **one** God and to love him as the highest duty, along with only **one** other: love of neighbour. This commandment, according to Jesus, contains all the laws and teachings of Moses and the prophets. This is perfectly plausible, for where the commandment of **love** is followed, all laws and regulations, which only emerged as protection against human selfishness, **are rendered redundant**.

3. **“No one is good except God alone”** [Mark 10:18]. These words of Jesus are confirmed in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke when, upon being addressed as “good master”, he reprimands the speaker by saying “why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone”. This response also tells us that he did not identify with God, even if he does feel **at one** with the Father, namely in that which he has recognised as God's will.

4. “**God is the Father of all**”. There are enough passages in the gospels where Jesus proclaims God as our Father, such as the Lord's Prayer, for one. **He considers all human beings children of God who may approach him, their loving Father, at any time.** What tremendous progress, compared to the grim, vengeful God of the first stage!

Jesus took great care not to put forward abstract doctrines and concepts in the manner of the philosophers; to him, **God was reality**, for he felt him within. He did not need to speculate about God's existence or to produce evidence of God's existence. He had no need to; to him it was self-evident. He felt God within himself as a being full of a father's kindness and love for his creatures, who only wants the best for all human beings. He shows this in wonderful images when he points to the lilies in the field and the birds in the sky: “and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more than they?” [Mat 6]. Tirelessly, he praises **God's love** to strengthen his listeners' **trust in God**: “Do not worry, your heavenly Father knows what you need” he says to the faint-hearted, but not to the indolent, lest they sit and wait for God to care for them. He does not speak against making prudent provision, but against becoming stressed by the worry of everyday life and the struggle to get your daily bread. What might and should concern us is our **sinfulness**.

While Jesus severely rebukes **sin**, he judges leniently the **sinner** who **repents!** Countless statements of his bear testimony to that. According to him, even thinking of what is not allowed is sin, since he knows that, if not immediately banished from the mind, these thoughts will become too strong and cause harm. He warns: “**Watch and pray** that you do not fall into temptation” [Mat 26:41]. He, who knows the human soul so well, knows the weakness of man and how easily he falls, but he does not condemn him **if** he tries to rid himself of his mistakes and “sins no more” [John 5:14].

To a person who groans under the burden of his sins in utter despair, he calls out the infinitely comforting words: “There will be greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people ...” [Luke 15:7]. Many of the parables are in the same spirit, especially that of the **prodigal son**, whom sin has made **humble** and

modest, and who, repentant and contrite, yet fully confident of his father's love, returns home and is not disappointed. In contrast to the forgiving and loving father, the other 'good' or 'sinless' son is self-righteous, hard and envious and behaves lovelessly towards his brother.

There is another important element in Jesus' message of God's fatherly love. It **completely does away with others mediating between man and God, be they priests or saints, for a child goes straight to his father and his father listens to his child.**

God's plan of salvation, already anticipated by the prophets, is very clearly outlined by Jesus who presents it as the only way out of humanity's deplorable state of misery. He demands from individuals as well as from entire nations to be ready and willing to help establish God's kingdom: **Set your mind on God's kingdom and his justice before everything else** [Mat 6:33]. This is the core and the central issue of everything he spoke and taught; for he sees very clearly that all harm caused by the people's violations against the kingdom, such as poverty, hunger, misery, conflict, murder and war would disappear if love dictated the actions of men. Then God's kingdom would be here! That is why he adds "and everything else will come to you", that is, it will come about as the natural consequence of the good. Also in the Lord's Prayer, God's kingdom comes first: "Your kingdom come", in fact by dint of "your will be **done** on Earth as in heaven."

He therefore makes the advent of God's kingdom dependent on **human action**, not on waiting for it, as if this kingdom would one day descend from the sky into the lap of those waiting. No, this goal demands **work**, which is why it matters that the idea of the kingdom of God takes root in every individual and brings about a change of heart. Only then will decrees and laws produce better social conditions. **Individuals must be willing to put the common good before private greed and the spirit of sacrifice before selfishness.**

Jesus, who described this demand as the will of God, made it the basis of his own life and remained true to it in all situations. He did not back off from the worst predicament, **death** itself, when it came to standing

up for his conviction. He proved that he did not regard life as the ‘highest of goods’. He not only **preached** his teaching, but furnished proof that it is possible in life to realise it, thereby rendering humanity the greatest of services.

He did not reject the outer form of divine service, but he sharply condemned abuse of the same; he felt it to be blasphemy, slander against the sacred. “What should be a house of prayer you have made a den of thieves!” [Mat 21:13] he cries, outraged, when he sees the hustling and haggling in the temple. Instead of enlightenment about God and his works to the people, who regarded the temple as the ultimate shrine, and teaching them the will of God, the lowest instincts of the mob were promoted. It was a slap in the face of the real purpose of the temple.

Nor did Jesus judge the offerings as harshly as the prophets did, but he adds a higher purpose, as we can see from the Sermon on the Mount: “If you bring your gift to the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift at the altar. First go and be **reconciled** with your brother; then come and offer your gift” [Mat 5:23-24]. His highest commandment is always the love of God **and neighbour**. The major cause for the Christian Churches’ poor success in improving the conditions of humankind is that they did not place their main emphasis on **this** aspect but on the **belief in dogmas and sacraments**. “By their fruits you shall know them” says Jesus at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, where he clearly shows us what matters to him: beware of the wolves in sheep’s clothing, the false prophets, who indulge in selfishness under the mantle of displayed piety. “Have we not exorcised spirits in your name, prophesied and done many deeds?” they ask, and receive the answer: “Not all who say Lord, Lord shall go to heaven, but those who do the will of my heavenly Father.” There are no ifs and buts about this!

What counts are actions, not rattling off prayers or the belief in shrines and miracles. In his innermost self, man must strive to grasp the **eternal**, which goes beyond earthly things, beyond everyday life and bring it to reality in his life, so that no gap can arise between theory and practice.

Rituals **can** be useful. They are preliminary steps, a kind of visual instruction for minors or a means of education, but never an end in themselves lest they become an obstacle or even a danger. Far from leading the populace out of its ignorance and thereby avoiding the **consequences** of wrong perceptions, the appointed teachers or priests of Christianity sought to maintain the ignorance of the people in order to govern them more easily. They gave them substitutes (dogmas and sacraments) instead of the truth. We can see the consequences of this in Russia [USSR], and also in Germany, in the *Gottlosenbewegung*^{*}, whose followers may well have recognised the lies and the worthlessness of these substitutes, but now throw out everything, including the good that was taught in the name of Christianity, and see all of it as an upper class ploy to stupefy and more easily control the masses. They thus pour out the baby with the bathwater, because they have become suspicious of the proclaimers of Christianity.

Nothing was further from Jesus' mind than to introduce new **sacraments**, such as **Holy Communion**. What he wished to impress on the disciples at his farewell supper was something entirely different: "Do this in memory of me!" [1Cor 11:24-25]. At each meal they were to remember him or rather what he had taught them and for what he now had to pay with his life. Just as wine and bread pervade the body, so, too, was the spiritual food he imparted to them to penetrate their minds. In the vivid language characteristic of him, Jesus likens the bread to his body and the wine to his blood, which would be spilt in order to motivate many to **change their ways** and **follow** him and so attain forgiveness of their sins. Thus, Jesus sacrifices his life for the love of the truth and the love of mankind that has lost its way. This was what the disciples were to remember! To this effect, the early Christians held their communal meals, the 'agapes', which were also to demonstrate the close bonds within the community and with Jesus.

Jesus also viewed **baptism** as only an outward sign of a change of heart. He allowed himself to be baptised to demonstrate that he

* 'Movement of the godless', i.e. atheists, in the 1920s, possibly in connection with communism [tr]

thought the penitential sermon of John the Baptist was extremely important. Jesus then began to preach a change in attitude after the death of this witness to the truth. **Jesus himself did not baptise anybody**. If he had really seen baptism as a means of man's salvation, he certainly would have considered – and would have had to consider – it his first duty to baptise people. It never would have occurred to him to believe God capable of being so unjust as not to acknowledge innocent children as *his* creatures just because they had not been baptised by some person. This puffed-up pomposity is tantamount to telling God what to do! Quite apart from that: how much discord and misery have the sacraments brought upon people, who fight and condemn each other over their divergent views about them and forget the **most important part** of Jesus' message in the process. He himself defends his disciples when they act contrary to such 'holy' maxims, because he deems the latter unimportant in comparison to what is necessary:

'To serve God in daily life'; this is what marks a true human being and a true Christian; not perfunctory rituals, or sacraments, or doctrines about the trinity that to him, as a Jew, must have seemed **blasphemous**. This cannot be emphasised enough because, unfortunately, in Christendom today as with the Jews of yore, superficial practices involving sacrifices and 'means of grace' (*Ruhekissen*, placebos) are shifted into the foreground once more. Yet Jesus says it so clearly and unmistakably: "Hear ye, Israel, the Lord your God is **One God**" (not a triune God).

To love God and to serve him is the most important commandment, and the one that is equivalent to it is **love your neighbour as yourself**. If this commandment is fulfilled, then God's kingdom has come. This is the **key** to all his parables and sayings, just as it is the key that, for Hoffmann, opened up his understanding of the image and nature of Jesus and made him recognise what belonged to this image and what were extraneous additions.

This commandment exists for all people and can be understood by everyone, regardless of their cultural level or nationality, even though individual people have different gifts, as indeed do nations. And just

as the Ancient Greeks can still teach us much about **art**, the Jewish People of old can teach us in matters of **religion**.

Here, too, the saying by the Apostle Paul applies: “Prove all things” – no matter where, when or from whom they originate – “and hold fast that which is good” [1Thess 5:21]; make it your property for your own benefit and advantage as an enrichment of your spiritual treasure, not to kneel before it in admiration, let alone adoration.

Jesus shows absolutely no trace of national arrogance; on the contrary, he tells his compatriots not to pride themselves on being Abraham's children. He was and remained humble and modest from the bottom of his heart, ate with the most despised class, the tax collectors, and attended to the lowliest of people and sinners. His entire life was a **battle for God's justice** until his death, from which he, like anyone else, would have liked to escape, but his trust in God did not waver, even when he was forced to drink from this cup. He is a model in every way, as pure and sublime as no other.

VIII

The Perception of God of the Christian Churches

Jesus has clearly shown the direction in which development should proceed. Unfortunately, however, other things were soon held in higher esteem due to pagan influences, and the goal Jesus had established drifted more and more into oblivion. Doctrines about the Godhead containing one or several gods were the consequence of the **deification of Jesus** and the **humanisation of God**. Disputes and discords arose about questions like “Is Jesus only divine, or is he human as well?” “How do the two Gods – the Father and the Son – harmonise with the one God that Jesus himself and the prophets proclaimed?” “What part, then, is played by the **Holy Ghost**?” “Does it emanate from the Father only, or from the Son as well, or is it a separate entity altogether?” Such speculation obscured the picture and the teaching of Jesus, and drove peace from the communities. To salvage at least a semblance of the unity of God, **Holy Trinity** was invented, but this, too, did not lead to unity among Jesus’ successors. The views of **one part** of the Church (the Eastern one), according to which the Spirit emanates only from the Father, stood against the opinions of the **other**, according to which the Spirit emanates not only from the Father, but also from the Son and even from their deputy, the Pope. This difference of opinion led to a schism in the Christian Church which then split in two, the **Eastern** [Orthodox] and the **Western** [Catholic] **Churches**.

Both Churches continued to place their main emphasis on dogmas and doctrines and attached an unduly high value to rituals, rituals that, together with the sacraments, represented an imitation of the **old Israelite cult** and meant an increasing divergence from the direction of the development indicated by Jesus.

Great men of spirit, Luther in particular, realised this and put their lives on the line to reform the Christian Church and its cultic practices that had partly deteriorated into scandal (sale of indulgences etc.). However, the leaders of the Church opposed his reformatory efforts,

so Luther founded a new Church, the **Protestant Church**. Unfortunately, his successors rested on the laurels of what he had created and built walls around it to stave off every breath of spiritual fresh air. They thought his words were untouchable, and thus they banished from his Church the spiritual freedom that was his gift. Here, too, clinging to the letter had a disastrous effect. Crises were rife everywhere in the Protestant Church, whose leaders met all new knowledge with rejection. This was also the reason why the **Temple Society** came into being.

IX

The Temple Society's Perception of God

If you have attentively followed the foregoing, you know my attitude – and that of the Temple Society, for that matter – towards the Bible and to the Churches that have emerged from it. Nothing particular, therefore, remains to be said about the Temple Society's perception of God. However, for the sake of clarity, I want to summarise it briefly once more:

We believe in one God. – Just as any human achievement, be it material or spiritual, testifies to the ability of its producer or creator and the level of his intelligence and skill, so the universe is evidence of *its* creator and his infinite wisdom, whether we observe it on a large scale like astronomers, or on a small, even minute one, with the eyes of natural scientists. Whether we call this creator God, spirit, elemental will, elemental force, reality or whatever, is of secondary importance.

We believe in a will of God. – We recognise this will in **nature** and in the laws ruling it. We recognise it in the **spiritual** sphere, in the nature of man and the consequences of his actions. To counter-balance to the drives serving the physical, God has endowed man's being with a **yearning** for happiness and inner peace. This feeling is achieved when man does 'good deeds', that is, when he overcomes his egotism. This yearning also acts as a **guardian** who remains quiet for as long as his ward is on the right path, the path willed by God, but becomes restless and creates a feeling of dissatisfaction when man strays from this path and acts contrary to God's will. God has given man the **freedom** to choose his own way, but has also burdened him with the **responsibility** for his choices. Each choice has consequences, beneficial or disastrous, as we can clearly recognise – and learn from – by observing the history of mankind.

We believe that humanity has a duty. – Man is the only living being on this Earth that God has endowed with a spark of his spirit, which

enables him to engage in creative activity and to look at himself objectively. By virtue of this divine spark, he is able to engage in conceptual thought, draw conclusions, and make decisions based on these conclusions, rather than on instinct or conditioning. However, the gift of this divine spark or spiritual capacity places him under an obligation to ensure that it does not wither away or is **selfishly** exploited, but develops in the direction of God's will. Since it is God's will that humans should feel **happy** they, individually and collectively, must work with all their strength at realising such a state of happiness for humanity.

We believe that love of our fellow man and compassion for all of God's creatures **is the best way of loving God** and serving him. We also believe it to be **the only way to reach the goal**, namely a kingdom of happiness and of inner peace, a kingdom which is in harmony with God's will, and which we therefore call 'God's kingdom'. The practical application of this attitude of love can be condensed into two sentences: a **prohibition** for beginners and a **command** for the more advanced. The first says "What you do not want to be done to you, you must not do to others", and the second says "in everything, behave towards others as you would like them to behave towards you".

We hope – we have no certainty – **for a life after death**, a continuation of spiritual development after bodily death, without speculating about the 'how' and the 'where'; we **trust that God's fatherly love** will let his creatures have what is best for them. To us, it is far more important to **make use of the present, of which we are sure, than to reflect on an uncertain future**. If we do our duty here on Earth, we can be certain that **God will do his share** and that "all the rest will come to us as well", as Jesus says.

We believe in God's mercy, as Jesus describes it in the parable of the prodigal son. We believe in **forgiveness of sin**, which is tied to the condition in the Lord's Prayer "as we forgive those who sin against us".

We see Jesus as the ideal human being, whom we try to emulate by using his message as a guideline and his life as a model for all our thoughts and actions.

We wish to provide the foundations for a **truly Christian way of life** by establishing communities modelled on Jesus' way of thinking, whereby “each carries the burden of the other” [Gal 6:2], and each stands up for the other.

Since God has created man in such a way that all his talents – be they physical or spiritual – require **practice** to develop, we must be mindful of creating ways to further man's development by spurring on his often sluggish spirit time and again and alerting him to the goal to be pursued: **becoming perfect in body and mind**.

In the Temple Society, such means are the **religious assemblies**, the **presentation** of newborn children before the community, the **thanksgiving** festival, our **schools**, religious **instruction** for the young, **confirmation**, and all functions suitable for ennobling human beings. Especially the fine arts – also God-given – can contribute, for they have the capacity to enrich people's **minds** and awaken in their hearts a yearning for the **divine**.

However, all these **means must never become ends in themselves**, for then they would fail to serve their true purpose and could easily make us stray from the straight line that leads to God.

Hence, our **foremost** and **highest concern** shall always be the word of Jesus, which Hoffmann chose as his life's motto, and which we, too, shall make our own:

“Set your mind on **God's kingdom** and his **justice before everything else**.”