

with the host everlasting and the spirits of knowledge
and the choir invisible,
to be for ever renewed
with all things that are.

An immense amount has been written about the Scrolls of the Judean Desert; there has been much controversy, and much speculation. By contrast the love and faith of the men of Qumrân (not always appreciated) is for all time and is an inspiration and consolation to us now. When the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews wrote (Hebrews, II, 36-40): '*And others had trial of mockeries and stripes . . . being in want, distressed and afflicted, of whom the world was not worthy; wandering in deserts, in mountains, and in dens and in caves of the earth. And all these, being approved by the testimony of faith, received not the promise; God providing some better thing for us, that they should not be perfected without us*'—was he not thinking of the men of Qumrân, coming at the end of a long and glorious tradition in Israel?



‘LEVIATHAN WHICH YAHWEH MADE TO LAUGH AT’

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WHY does God permit evil? It is a fatal timidity which induces us nowadays to pre-occupy ourselves exclusively with the apologetic aspects of this problem. A significant train of thought in the Bible invites us to see it from a far bolder, and I think from a more sublime, point of view. If we follow this train of thought we shall want not so much to apologize (in any possible sense of the word) for the fact of evil in the world, not so much to ‘reconcile it with God’s goodness’ as to glory in its being there for him to conquer. For it pertains to God’s glory that there should be positive forces of evil in the world, and that they should strive actively against his holy will—and not only that they should strive, but that they should seem for a time to prevail against him. It is glorious that there should

be a chaos-monster, an Assyrian army razing Juda, a cruel oppressor exploiting the widow and orphan, a Satan, an Antichrist. That God should have made all these and permitted them to be evil—that fact in itself is glorious.

This idea reaches its full maturity in the apocalyptic writings, above all in Daniel and the Apocalypse of St John. One after another the chaos-beasts come up from the sea. They symbolize the world powers of the apocalypticist's own time; in Daniel, the succession of empires from the neo-Babylonian to the Seleucids; in St John, the Roman emperors. They are allowed a space of time in which to achieve dominion in the world, to exact worship from its peoples, to blaspheme, to scandalize, to persecute. 'Why does God permit this evil?' cry God's people, the 'saints'. 'Because it is glorious that he should permit it', answer the apocalypticists. To them it has been given to look down on the world of their own time from the viewpoint of God and his angels. They see that the evil which appears so terrible from below is, in the designs of God, foreseen, calculated, allowed for, and controlled. In spite of themselves the powers of evil are made to give glory to God. Unwilling glory goes up to him from hell and its devils. The greater the power of evil in the world, the more the glory of God is made manifest in its ultimate overthrow. 'Above the flame the smoke of praise rises from ocean rim to rim.' The relevance of all this to our own world hardly needs to be emphasized.

It is not my purpose in this short essay to explore the idea of 'Glory through Beings that are Evil' any farther in the apocalyptic writings. It will be even more valuable, perhaps, to try to grasp it at its roots in the older literary genres of the Bible, where it is far less easily recognized. In order therefore to show the pervasive unity of this idea in the Old Testament, I propose to examine certain aspects of it in three widely divergent contexts, namely the Psalms, Isaias, and the second account of creation (Gen. ii, 4-iii). In the Psalms we shall recognize the idea of God's transcendence over evil conveyed through the image of the Divine laughter. In Isaias we shall see God positively exploiting, 'taking occasion of' the power of evil with its blind arrogance to achieve his own dominion. Finally in the second account of creation the futility of sin in its attempts to frustrate God's purpose will provide the third, and the most significant, instance of this

idea. God manifests his omnipotence by his imperviousness to evil and sin.

THE PSALMS

In several passages in the psalms God is represented as laughing at his creatures. For example: 'He that dwells in heaven laughs, the Lord derides them' (i.e. the hostile Gentile nations) (Psalm ii, 4). 'The Lord laughs at him (the impious) for he sees that his day is coming' (Psalm xxxvii, 13). 'But you, Yahweh, laugh at them, deride all the Gentiles' (Psalm 9). 'Leviathan which you made to laugh at' (Psalm civ, 26).

When we take these texts together there can be no mistaking their import. The forces of chaos and evil are represented respectively by the Gentile kings plotting against Yahweh and his Messiah (Psalm ii), by the impious heathens who oppress Israel (Psalm lix), and by Leviathan the water-monster, who personifies the sterile and chaotic ocean (Psalm civ). All of these in their various spheres work actively against Yahweh and strive to overthrow his glorious dominion. The waste ocean threatens constantly to sweep back over the dry land and its creatures, which Yahweh has fashioned and blessed with fruitfulness. The Gentiles are forever plotting to overthrow Israel, Yahweh's portion and people. The 'workers of iniquity' try ceaselessly to destroy the 'righteous ones' in whom Yahweh's dominion is embodied. And Yahweh laughs at them. His derision and contempt is a sign of his power. He is complete master of the situation. *Chaos and evil exist only because he made them and suffers them to be evil.* He permits the forces of evil to contend with him so that in crushing them his glorious power may be manifested. 'For this cause I have made you to stand firm', says Yahweh to Pharaoh through Moses, in order to show you my power, and so that my Name should be uttered throughout the earth' (Exod. ix, 16). The concept of glory is originally derived from the idea of triumph in battle, and in the Old Testament it often still bears this connotation. To 'glorify himself' in this sense, Yahweh raises up adversaries to contend with him and to be conquered. But he laughs at those adversaries because as their Creator he utterly transcends them. Moreover it should be noticed that he does not *achieve* glory by conquering his own creatures; rather he *manifests* to the world the glory he has possessed from all eternity.

Now let us compare this with the pagan concept of the conquest of evil and chaos as we find it among Israel's neighbours and forebears. The obvious example (though not the only one) is Marduk's victory over Tiamet in the Babylonian creation epic. Here evidently there is no question of Marduk (the creator-god) having created Tiamet (the personification of chaos), still less of him laughing at her. On the contrary, she exists before him, and he achieves his supremacy as creator-god only by vanquishing her at the end of a long and dangerous fight. Then he 'creates' the cosmos by refashioning the material of Tiamet's body according to his own plan. Here lies the precise difference between the pagan *myth* of creation, and the Hebrew *history* of creation. The pagan concept of creation is radically dualist. Good and evil, the divine and the diabolic confront one another as two positive forces in the world, absolutely and irreconcilably opposed. The Hebrew concept, on the other hand, is monist. Yahweh creates the chaos-force and he transcends and presides over the cosmic conflict constantly being waged between it and the forces of good through which his will is to be accomplished. He is outside the conflict and above it, not immersed in it or dependent on its outcome as Marduk was. The *myth* of the older pagan cosmogony becomes in Hebrew thought the *symbol* of the war between good and evil, light and darkness, cosmos and chaos, through which the creation and continuing growth of the world *under* Yahweh is achieved. Faced with Tiamet, Marduk has to fight for his life. Faced with Leviathan, Yahweh laughs. It is a sign of his absolute transcendence as creator of all things, Leviathan included, out of nothing.

ISAIAS

In the message of Isaias this idea of Yahweh's transcendence receives a fresh development. For Isaias is the first of the prophets to speak clearly and explicitly of Yahweh's presiding plan for his people and for the world. 'Let it draw near, let it arrive, the *plan* of the Holy One of Israel, that we may know it' (Isaias v, 19). 'Yahweh of hosts has sworn: Surely as I have *devised* so shall it be, as I have *planned* so shall it be accomplished' (Isaias xiv, 24). 'His name shall be called *Deviser* of Wonders . . .' (Isaias ix, 5). To this plan of Yahweh is opposed the plan of the nations, the forces of impiety and destruction, and Isaias' thought persistently

returns to and develops from this concept of plan and counter-plan. Here too we find Yahweh laughing at the 'plan' or 'counsel' of the Gentiles opposed to him. 'The plan of Pharaoh's wise counsellors has become stupid. . . Where then are your sages? Only let them tell you, and let them know what Yahweh Sebaoth has planned against Egypt' (Isaias xix, 11b-12. Cf. also the Mockery of the Tyrant, Isaias xiv, 3-21, etc.).

The plan of the powers of evil is in fact the re-establishment of chaos in place of the cosmos which Yahweh has made, and which he is bringing inexorably to its fulfilment. But now Yahweh is not content merely to demonstrate his power by crushing them. He is actually using them and manipulating them to achieve the very object against which they are fighting, the establishment of his own glorious dominion over all the world. The Assyrian is actually 'the rod of his anger', though this is 'not what his (the Assyrian's) heart intends'. (Isaias x, 5 ff.) Yahweh is positively directing the chaos-force here, causing it to sweep back over Israel as he caused the chaos waters to sweep back at the Flood over the world he had created. He uses it to purge away pollution from the land, saving only the 'righteous remnant', just as in primeval times he had saved the 'righteous remnant' of Noah and his family in the ark. Thus the 'remnant theme' which is to be found in the Flood story in its cosmic dimension is repeated in Isaias in its political and social one.

The process by which chaos is allowed to resume its sway over the sinful people and their land is graphically described. The rational order of social and political life is completely inverted. In the old days, when Yahweh's will was done and the land prospered, youth revered age and the base-born respected the noble. But now 'The youth is insolent to the old man, and the commoner to the noble' (Isaias iii, 5). The vilest beasts make their dens in the courts of kings and nobles (Isaias xxxiv, 12 ff.). Yahweh stretches over them the line of waste and the plummet of confusion (Isaias xxxiv, 11), that is to say he sets about letting loose waste and confusion in the land as systematically as a builder measuring a wall; but he never ceases to preside over, control, and limit the progress of the chaos.

THE SECOND ACCOUNT OF CREATION (Genesis ii, 4-iii)

The same systematic inversion of the natural order originally

established by Yahweh is to be found in the second account of creation. The formal structure of this story is highly significant and has not, perhaps, been sufficiently adverted to. It falls into two symmetrical halves (ii, 4-25, iii). In the first half the hierarchy among the creatures established by Yahweh's plan is very clearly defined. Man is to be subject to God and under him to have authority over all things; woman is to be subject to man; beasts are to be lowest of all. In the second half of the story we see this order systematically inverted and reduced to chaos, and it is, I think, deliberately told in such a way as to make the symmetry of this inversion stand out. Woman hearkens to beast; man hearkens to woman; man turns from Yahweh. The highest creature bows down to the lowest. In this inversion of the natural God-given order lies the essence of sin. The whole anti-idolatry polemic in Hebrew literature turns on this concept of the confusion and shame involved in 'exchanging the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things' (Romans i, 23). This is the dimension of Adam's sin. The story of his fall is the story not only of the first sin, but of the prototype of all sins. Nowadays, it may be suggested, too much time and attention is devoted (the neglect of real exegesis) to the intriguing problem of what the exact nature of that sin was, to probing behind the symbol of the fruit and the serpent. Plausible and ingenious suggestions have not been wanting, but the reason the biblical author has left this point vague is simply *that from his point of view it is not important that we should know*. It is a side issue. What he does want to inculcate is that this is the sin of sins, the sin which contains within itself the elements of sin as such. The world order is reduced to chaos when man, the chief of all creatures, chooses to listen to the suggestion of a creature lower than himself, rather than to the command of the God who made him. It is the essence of sensuality for man to place himself on the level of a beast, and the essence of pride for him to seek equality with God. Adam does both these things at once.

Here then is a further projection of the work of the powers of evil. Sin produces waste and void, utter barren disorder, in the personal and social sphere. Still Yahweh transcends and dominates the situation. Still the element of ironic derision can be discerned in his anger, though less obviously now. 'See, Adam is become as

one of us to know good and evil' (Genesis iii, 22). In the first half of the story we see what Adam sought: knowledge which would make him like God. In the second half we see what he found: knowledge indeed, for his 'eyes were opened', but knowledge of his own nakedness, his baseness. The irony of the situation is fully deliberate. The effect of the sin is the symmetrical antithesis of what the sinner intended. Exactly the same ironic device is employed in the Mockery of the Tyrant (Isaias xiv, 3-21). First we are shown the sinner's intention to 'become as God'. 'You said in your heart, I will *climb* the heavens, I will raise up my throne above the stars of God. I will dwell . . . *in the remote places* of the north' (i.e. in the abode of God himself) (vv. 13-14). Then we see the effect of his sin which is the exact antithesis of what he intended. 'How you have been *brought down* to the underworld, to the *remote places* of the pit' (v. 15). The deliberate repetition of 'remote places', and the contrast between 'climb' or 'go up' in the first part, and 'be brought down' in the second, serve to point this antithesis. Inevitably it becomes somewhat blunted in translation. In this ironic antithesis the biblical author has another satirical device at his command for conveying Yahweh's derision of evil and its attempts at usurping his dominion.

In this connection Adam's nakedness is a further significant feature. Numerous passages in the Old Testament illustrate the Hebrew attitude to physical nakedness. It is diametrically opposed to that of the Greeks (a fact which becomes particularly clear in the early history of the Maccabees). The exposure of the private parts of the human body was regarded with horror. It involved *bosheth*, which we usually translate quite inadequately as 'shame', but which means in reality utter confusion and the loss of elemental human dignity. A Semite would do almost anything to avoid this loss of his fundamental 'honour'. Hence the care which Noah's sons took not to see the nakedness of their father. (Genesis ix, 20 ff.). Semitic peoples were accustomed to punish their enemies by publicly exposing their nudity and mocking it. In several passages in the prophets Yahweh is represented as deriding his enemies, the 'evil-doers' in the same way. 'Yahweh will lay bare their secret parts' (Isaias iii, 17). 'And I will lift up your skirts upon your face, and expose your nudity to the Gentiles and your shame to the kingdoms' (Nahum iii, 5. cf. also Ezech.

xvi, 37, etc.). It is in the light of these and similar passages that the significance of Adam's nakedness can be appreciated. He who strove to be Godlike in defiance of God finds himself bereft of human dignity, base, contemptible, ridiculous, and disgusting. The waste and void which he has introduced into the cosmic order by his sin turns inward and invades his own soul, filling him with the realization of his own *bosheth*. His sin, instead of frustrating Yahweh's designs, has branded him with its own shameful futility.

CONCLUSION

In this age and generation, which God has given to us, his Christian men, to love and to look after, the working of the chaos powers is evident enough. But we are not allowed to be dismayed. It is unworthy of a Christian, to whom God has disclosed his deep love, to be afraid of evil—to fail to see that it is actually and positively the occasion of God's glory. Serenely transcendent, the God who redeemed us presides over, controls, and 'takes occasion of' every possible form of the evil which exists in our own times. For a Christian, to rejoice is a command, though iniquity is multiplied, though we hear of wars and rumours of wars, though the powers of the heavens are shaken, though the Abomination of Desolation stands in the Holy Place, though we are hated of all nations for the sake of the Name, Christ. Confronted with this sort of world, we do not apologize. Apologetics may be very necessary for removing errors concerning the problem of evil—apologetics, but never apologies. For 'He that bears witness to these things says "Indeed I come quickly"'. Amen.

'Come, Lord Jesus!'