

# THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

## II

### THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

ONE feature common to SS. Matthew, Mark and Luke is that in all three the Ministry of Christ begins with the Baptism in the Jordan, and for all three equally the central point in this event is the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus. Their agreement continues also regarding the first movement of the Spirit which is, according to St Mark's very striking expression, 'to drive Jesus into the desert', where he is to meet the Devil and conquer his temptations. The historians of the last century for whom the Gospels were merely a mine of information for the biography of Jesus, have passed over this episode as a *bizarrie* of no consequence. From the literary point of view alone this is a great mistake. In its place at the beginning of the Gospel, just as the account of the temptation of man is found at the beginning of Genesis, there can be no doubt whatever that it is noted with the intention of bringing out the parallel. It is presenting the Gospel story as a re-enactment of the Adamic story, which is to say the story of man.

In this respect Milton had a truer vision than many modern exegetes when he enclosed his Biblical Epic between the two events of Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. The parallel is connected with the idea of the Second Adam to which (especially in St Paul) exegesis has given too little attention. It seems indeed that we should also relate it to that of the Son of Man, designating Jesus. However that may be, the theme of a comparison between Adam and Christ in the scene of the Temptation, with Satan in the background (as instigator of pride and greed) was certainly a familiar theme in the early catechesis. We find it underlying the second chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians. Most critics, moreover, agree in seeing in this chapter not merely the Apostle's own speculation but reference to a hymn known to the Philippians and perhaps even a quotation from the actual text of this hymn.

But to come back to the Synoptic Gospels, the full significance of their account of the Temptation is to be found not only in its initial position but also in its relation to the Baptism, and especially to the descent of the Spirit. One gets the impression that it is for that special purpose that the Spirit has come down upon Jesus—

in order to make him confront the Devil. This impression is confirmed by the 'ensemble' of the accounts that follow. There is no need to underline the place given to the expulsion of demons by the Synoptics; it is evident that for them this, together with healing, is the typical work of Jesus. It is useless to say that they are simply presenting certain cases of healing in this way; the inverse would be truer—it is rather the expulsion of the Devil that is presented, in certain cases, in the form of healing. That extraordinary diabolic manifestations should have accompanied the appearance of Jesus in this world, and that he should have brought them to nothing, are for them no accessory detail, but their basic idea. We need only re-read the terms in which they express the vocation of the Twelve to share in his work to see the importance that they attribute to exorcism in the activity of Jesus. St Mark writes: 'And he appointed twelve that they should be with him, and that he might send them to preach and cast out devils' (3, 14). And on the eve of his betrayal, when he is warned that Herod is seeking his life, he himself says in St Luke: 'Go tell that fox: "Behold I cast out devils and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day comes my own consummation"' (13, 32). But in his teaching, as the Synoptics re-trace it for us, one great discourse is particularly significant; St Matthew and St Luke recount it in almost the same words (Mt. 12, 22-32; Lk. 11, 14-23). The Jews are saying that it is by the power of Beelzebub, their prince, that he casts out the devils; this accusation has already been made (cf. Mark 3, 23). Jesus protests vehemently. Three points emerge: the affirmation that he casts out the devils by the Spirit of God, the parable of the strong man bound and despoiled by the stronger, and finally the declaration about the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit which has roused so much futile comment.

The first affirmation confirms our thesis: the special task of the Holy Spirit, accomplished in this world by Christ, is to drive out the Evil Spirit. It also throws a great deal of light on the central idea of the Synoptic Gospels, I mean the Kingdom of God. Jesus in fact affirms that what is truly to be seen in his work is the destruction of the reign of Satan. 'Know', he says, 'that in this the reign of God has come to you.' This brings us back to the great theme of the two orders which we have seen underlying all Pauline thought. The reign of God which comes in the person of the Son of Man is essentially a reign that drives out that of Satan, established in this world through the weakness of the old Adam. It is exactly what the parable of the strong man tells us. The strong man was secure in his citadel, but when a stronger comes, he seizes his

arms and, having despoiled him, drives him out and takes his place. In this context, and applied to Christ's work, the parable is clear.

In this light we may be in a better position to understand the gravity of the sin against the Holy Spirit; we see at once that this sin consists in refusing to recognise the triumph of the Holy Spirit over the Evil Spirit in the works that the Son is accomplishing among us. From the moment of this refusal the issue is blocked; the Kingdom of God has come to us in vain if we have not understood its meaning. We have not seized the occasion that was offered to us to escape from bondage and from enmity and henceforward we are sealed in it. The culpable blindness which refuses to see in Christ one spirit driving out another is thus presented to us as the one unforgivable sin. Nothing throws more light on the idea which the Synoptics held as to the mission of Jesus and the state of things on which it supervened.<sup>1</sup>

### III

#### ST JOHN

Let us now turn to the Fourth Gospel. In general the Joannine writings deserve quite as full a consideration as we have given to St Paul, but as our space is limited we will confine our attention to two points. After the Pauline writings the Joannine, with their calm contemplation of the great conceptual images—Light, Life, Truth, Glory—seem at first sight infinitely peaceful; but a closer examination of these ideas, which develop more lyrically than dialectically, reveals a background of conflict quite as sharp as that of St Paul's. More precisely, the first of the images I have just recalled, Light, is called up by an insistent challenge from Darkness; indeed, the whole development of the Fourth Gospel can be seen as a drama, not merely human but cosmic, in which the Light has come to defy the Darkness. At the end of the story it will overcome it, but only at the price of mortal combat. Light belongs to God and to Christ; 'I am the Light of the world', exclaims Jesus in the Gospel, 'He who follows me will not walk in darkness' (8, 12). Remember that he is speaking in the porch of the Temple on the last days of the Feast of Tabernacles, when they set up great candelabra illuminating all the Holy City. In the same sense, the First Epistle says: 'And here is the declaration that we have heard from him, that we declare to you; that God is Light, and in him there is no darkness at all' (1 Jn. 1, 5).

Yet the darkness exists and fills the world. The Prologue to the

<sup>1</sup> In the parable of the Cockle in Mat. 13, 24-30, we have another expression of this idea of the opposing kingdoms of God and Satan.

Gospel defines all the life and work of Christ in the one phrase, 'The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not received it' (1, 5). Even this translation suggests (more than the actual words seem to express) a positive hostility in the darkness, yet this translation following the Latin of the Vulgate seems to be something of a softening down; according to Origen (certainly supported by the sense of *catalambano* in the other passage where St John uses it also in reference to the darkness—12, 35), we should rather translate, 'and the darkness could not overcome it', that is to say, 'smother' it. In the other passage I have referred to the opposition is equally marked; 'I am come into the world as Light, that whosoever believes in me may not remain in darkness' (12, 46). The meaning of the expression 'remain in darkness' is brought out by a phrase in the first Epistle, 'he who hates his brother remains in darkness, he walks in darkness, and knows not where he goes, because the darkness has blinded his eyes' (1 Jn. 2, 9). Notice again the aggressive note in these last words. This hostility, recurrent everywhere, is explicit in an important message in the Gospel; 'The judgment (*he krisis*) is that the Light has come into the world and men have loved the darkness more than the Light, for their works were evil. Whoever does evil hates the Light and does not come to the Light, so that his works should not be found out. But he who does the truth comes to the Light that it may be manifest that his works are done in God' (3, 19-21). A last word on this opposition is given us in the first Epistle and we are told there what the issue will be; 'The darkness passes away and the true light already shines' (1 Jn. 2, 8).

Once more, this antithesis Light-Darkness gives at the same time the frame and the ground to St John's whole picture of the life of Christ, more particularly to the clash between Jesus and the Jews which takes place in Chapters 7-10, and the significant healing of the man born blind. Let us recall the words pronounced by Jesus at the height of the crisis;

'If God were your father (as they have been claiming) you would love me, for I am come forth from God; for it is not of myself that I am come but he has sent me. Why do you not understand my language? Because you cannot listen to my word. You come from your father, the Devil, and you will to fulfil the wishes of your father. He has been a murderer from the beginning, and he has not kept himself in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he speaks of lies, it is from his own stock he speaks for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth you do not believe me. Which of you will convict me of sin? If I speak the truth, why will you not believe me? He who

is of God, listens to what God says; that is why you do not listen; because you are not of God.' (8, 42-7).

The contrast brought out here is precisely that of light and darkness although the actual words are not once mentioned. All this text in fact pivots on the idea of truth. The Joannine Truth is simply the reality of God Light, known through love and opposed to the dark delusions of the world (cf. 3, 21). It explains the positive reality given to darkness; it is a covering for the Devil. One sees how crude the dualism might seem; 'You *could not* listen to my word!' Certainly no other New Testament writings give such an impression of an irremediable antagonism.

To draw the full value from this imagery we should compare it with that of the Apocalypse. The importance there of metaphors of light has often been noticed, in particular of the dazzling whiteness (corresponding to the word *lampros*) especially connected with Christ (cf. *Apoc.* 12, 6; 18, 4; 19, 8; 22, 1), but this brightness is always in relief against a particularly stormy background. It does finally prevail in the description of the heavenly Jerusalem in which there shall be no more night, but only at the end of a titanic battle with the Powers of Darkness.

It is certainly not surprising that the Joannine writings should have been compared to the Mazdeean representations in which the entire world is resolved in a struggle between light and darkness. None the less, certain differences are forcibly brought out, and this is what our second point will help us to grasp; it concerns the Joannine conception of the world. This word keeps coming in with astonishing frequency, and, with a few notable exceptions, it is always taken in a bad sense. The exceptions are however remarkable, for example: the familiar text, 'God so loved the world' (3, 16) or the description of Christ as Saviour of the world', in the first Epistle (4, 14).

We have seen that in St Paul, in the pair of enemies to man formed by the flesh and the world, it is the flesh that is most in evidence. For St John the contrary is true; one could even say that for him the flesh takes on too pale a colour to seem an actual enemy any longer (cf. e.g. 3, 6; 6, 53). This change of position explains moreover how it is that the dualism of St John can appear even more decisive than St Paul's while his inner life remains of an unparalleled serenity. The conflict is no longer within man, at any rate in the Christian, but outside him. The world has not known the light although he was present in it and was its author. It is unable to receive the spirit of truth. The peace that Christ gives is not like that of the world. The world hates Christ and the

disciples because they are not 'of the world'. Christ convicts the world of sin. The joy of the world like its peace, is opposed to that given by Christ. Christ has overcome the world. Christ does not pray for the world, he expressly says so. The world has not known God. Finally, Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world. These features are brought out more strongly still in the first Epistle: 'Do not love the world, or what is in the world; if anyone love the world, the love of the Father is not in him'. 'The world passeth with its greed' (1 Jn. 2, 15-17). 'The false prophets come from the world where the spirit of anti-Christ already is, and that is why the world listens to them' (4, 3-5). But 'that which is born of God has overcome the world, and the *nike* which has overcome the world is our faith' (5, 4). And finally the word which says everything; 'the world, whole world is established in evil' (5, 19). In spite of this, we see from the first words of the Prologue that for St John the world is no more evil by nature than is the 'flesh' for St Paul. It is the creation of the Light; equally, the Light is not sent into the world to judge (and 'to condemn' is implied), but to save it, because of the great love that God has for the world to the point of sacrificing his only Son for it (Jn. 3, 16-7). It is not astonishing then that 'Saviour of the world' should be a title for Jesus peculiar to St John. It is clarified when on the even of his Passion, Jesus himself explains, 'Now is the judgment of the world; now the prince of this world is going to be driven out' (12, 31). This phrase is related to that in the first Epistle the subject of which seems to be the Holy Spirit: 'He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world' (1 Jn. 4, 4). With these two texts we are brought back to exactly the same idea as that in the parable of the strong man in the Synoptics.

We need not pursue this inventory of the New Testament any further. All its doctrine of evil, all its solution of the problem of evil, can be summed up in one phrase from the Epistle to the Hebrews which runs like a 'leitmotiv' through all Patristic tradition:

'Since the servants (which is to say men) share in flesh and blood, he (Christ) also has likewise shared in them (It) in order to annihilate through death him who had the power of death, the Devil, and to reconcile those who, through the fear of death, had been held in bondage all their lives.' (Heb. 2, 14.)

To conclude: for the early Christians, the world, or more properly the creation, was in the first instance a spiritual realisation extending far beyond the little circle of purely human spirituality. Or rather this visible world which surrounds us was but the reflection (as it were a lining) of a vast spiritual cosmos. And it was this entire cosmos, created by God in goodness, which had fallen. It

was so through the Fall of the higher, perhaps the highest, of these created spirits upon whom all depended according to the first design of God himself. However, inside this universe the coming of man, the creation of Adam, appeared as a new possibility as the rebirth itself did not succeed. Man, an inferior creature, issuing from matter, allowed himself to be seduced by the superior created spirit upon whom matter itself depended. Still the saving action of God inside his erring creation did not stop short at this first unfruitful attempt. As from enslaved matter he had raised up free man, so from humanity in its turn enslaved, he had raised up the victorious freedom of the Man-God. Thus, in despite of the original Fall and of its successive repercussions, a final recapitulation would reconcile his creation to him again, and at the universal Judgment when the entire world will be ready for the final division, it would eliminate from the cosmos every trace of the disobedience of Lucifer.

This solution of the Problem of Evil seems to me of interest still today. The analogy it suggests with certain contemporary theories are striking, and at a deeper level, I am inclined to see here a whole way of envisaging things which can meet the needs of existential thought as readily as the more 'modern' way repels them.

It is for the theologians to show whether, like the Scribe praised in the Gospel, they know how to bring out from their treasure both the old and the new as the occasion demands.<sup>1</sup>

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## THE CASE FOR EXORCISM

**D**IABOLICAL possession is the devil's hideous parody of the union between Christ and the soul in the spiritual marriage. Whereas the marriage of Christ with the soul is the consummation and seal of a union by grace long adorned with the constant display of acts of heroic virtue, the diabolical counterfeit is achieved usually after the subject's long-continued and progressive indulgence in vice. The comparison is introduced only to indicate the nature of possession. Nor is it exact, for whereas Christ can possess only the souls of the good, it would seem that diabolical

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<sup>1</sup> If the reader wishes to know along what lines I think that such a presentation of the old truth to the modern mind could be attempted, I should venture to refer to my contribution to the volume of collected essays on *Le problème du mal*, edited by Daniel-Rops, published by Plon at the end of 1948.