


‘BE HOLY AS I AM HOLY’

By THOMAS WORDEN

NE of the most notorious passages in the Old Testament is that which tells of the fate of Uzzah the son of Abinadab when he touched the ark of God.¹ David had decided to bring the ark ‘which is called by the name of Yahweh Sabaoth Who sits enthroned on the cherubim’ to his newly captured city Jerusalem. So the ark was placed upon a new cart drawn by oxen in the charge of Uzzah and his brother. It was a joyful procession: ‘David and all the house of Israel were making merry before Yahweh with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals’. But disaster overtook them for when the oxen stumbled and it seemed that the ark would fall off the cart, Uzzah stretched out his hand and touched it. ‘Then the anger of Yahweh was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there because he put forth his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God’. David was so terrified by this catastrophe that he abandoned his plan for the time being, and left the ark with Obededom.

We find this story horrifying and repellent, for instinctively our first reaction is one of pity for the unfortunate Uzzah. We see in it God’s excessive punishment of a well-intentioned and devoted man, and therefore do not recognise *our* God in this Yahweh whose anger was aroused by so innocent an action. But our reaction is wrong, inevitable though it would seem to be. Our first reaction should not be one of pity for the unfortunate man, but one of awe at the violation of the holiness of God. That is what is intended here. Whatever historical event may lie behind this aetiological story is wholly unimportant; its intended message is clear, for it is designed to emphasise the sacredness of the ark. The ark was the throne of Yahweh, and therefore it was holy, because Yahweh is holy; and since it was holy, it must not be profaned, even by the touch of an innocent man. Clearly the innocence or guilt of Uzzah is quite irrelevant to the sacred author. Not so to us: to our way of thinking it makes all the difference. Contrary to many of our

¹ 2 Sam 6, 1–11.

contemporaries, we find nothing horrifying or repellent in the picture of God pointing angrily at the wicked and saying: 'Depart from Me you accursed, into everlasting fire', since in this we see the just condemnation of sin by God who in his holiness cannot tolerate the presence of evil.

But it would seem too much for us to conceive of a holiness which makes absolute demands, and is not controlled by moral conditions. We think of holiness in terms of morality, as though it were a state produced by man's living according to the law of God and therefore something dependent upon human actions. We forget that holiness is properly an ontological quality which is the cause rather than the effect of morality, and we are inclined to apply the same moral conditions to the actions of God. Consequently to make this story about Uzzah acceptable we would portray him as a wicked man, who deliberately touched the ark in order to show his contempt of God. By making such a change we would obtain a story to illustrate the truth that God punishes the wicked, though we hardly need another such story since the Old Testament abounds in these. The sacred author knew that this particular truth was already heavily underlined, and here he had another purpose in view. However much we may dislike his method of fulfilling that purpose, we ought not to ignore the truth this story proclaims: Yahweh is supremely holy, and can never be thought of as just one of us. He is different, and however much he has shown himself, as he did in the Old Testament revelation, to be our loving Father, our redeemer and our protector, wholly concerned with our welfare, it is at our peril that we lose sight of the gulf which separates him from us. If we do this, then the Holy God is profaned: he falls into our power, and becomes no more difficult to handle than the despot, who though powerful and rich is as susceptible to cajolery or loyal service or ambition as the rest of us. True, God is less accessible and therefore more mysterious, as were the mighty rulers in their palaces; but once granted that he is really just like us at heart, then all that is necessary is to ring the changes on the human susceptibilities we know so well, and God must yield.

The danger of acting as though this were so is great, for how true it is that God is like to us. When for instance the Israelites sang: 'he found Jacob in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them

on its pinions',¹ the beautiful image rises before us of Yahweh as the most loving and protective person we have ever known. When we read: 'Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine', we see before us the One who makes a bargain with us, and offers us the most enviable position of privilege, if we observe the conditions he lays down: this person is not patronising, for he gives us a chance to play our part. If we read of Yahweh rewarding faithful service or punishing the wicked, we see him to be just. In short, he is like the most loving, the most protective, the most generous, the most unpatronising, the most just man we can possibly imagine. He is like the very best man: there can be no question of the necessity of God's revealing himself to us in human fashion. No man on earth has ever thought or spoken of God without making him to a greater or lesser degree to his own image. God must always appear as more or less one of us. The crucial question is how much more or how much less. It is when we read of the striking down of Uzzah that we are suddenly and shockingly made to realise that it is much less than we are accustomed to think. Yahweh is God and not man: he is different.

The ark was different too; that is why Uzzah died when he touched it. It looked like any other box, but it was different because it was 'called by the name of Yahweh Sabaoth' It was different because it was associated with the One Who is different. For that very reason the ark had brought the god Dagan crashing down in pieces. For the same reason the men of Ashdod had been struck with terror and had cried out: 'The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us'.² In their turn the people of Ekron had exclaimed in terror: 'They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to slay us and our people'.³ When the ark arrived at Bethshemesh some dared to look inside it and Yahweh slew them. They had thought that it was just an ordinary box, but it was different because Yahweh was different, and the onlookers cried out: 'Who is able to stand before Yahweh, this holy God?'⁴ Yahweh is the holy God, that is the different, the separated, the unique and mysterious God. Consequently the ark was holy, different from all other wooden boxes; the altar was holy, the sanctuary was holy, the priests, the sacrifices, the incense, the vestments: all these things were in greater or lesser degree different

¹ Deut 32, 10-11.

² 1 Sam 5, 7.

³ 1 Sam 5, 10.

⁴ 1 Sam 6, 20.

from ordinary things, though they looked and felt and tasted and smelled the same. They were holy things because to a greater or lesser degree they were connected with Yahweh the Holy One. And because they were set apart and regarded as different they proclaimed each in its own way the truth so easily forgotten: Yahweh is holy. Each of these holy things was surrounded by mystery; each in its own measure aroused awe; but for no other reason than that Yahweh is mysterious and awesome. Each of these holy things must be approached in a different way from its ordinary counterpart, simply because Yahweh must be approached in a different way from even the most powerful and just and good among men. These holy things were in so many ways the same as their ordinary counterparts. So too Yahweh is in so many ways like men, for how otherwise could we know him? But to forget that holy things are not ordinary things will lead to the disaster of forgetting that God is not man.

In particular Israel itself was holy: 'You are a people holy to Yahweh your God'.¹ This small group of Semites was on the surface no different from its neighbours: they depended on the same land for their existence; the same climate, the same language and the same customs governed their lives. It was as difficult for them to make a living as it was for the Canaanites among whom they lived. They had the same problems, and Canaanite solutions to these problems seemed their solution also. Yet though Israel seemed ordinary she was in reality different, because she was consecrated to Yahweh. She was ontologically holy and must therefore live holily: her mode of life must be different from that of her neighbours; she must be holy in the moral sense because she was holy in the religious sense, as was Yahweh her God. She would remain holy only by remembering that she had been made holy, by the holiness of Yahweh.

But the Israelites were constantly in danger of forgetting the holiness of Yahweh, and so they needed many holy things to remind them of it. It is easy to smile superciliously at the ark or the sacrifices or the priests, and to speak with condescension of Israel as a primitive people with all her primitive taboos. It is easy to point the finger of scorn at the dietary laws of Leviticus and ask what the eating of animals which chew the cud but do not part the hoof can possibly have to do with religion; or again, to damn

¹ Deut 7, 6.

with faint praise the elaborate laws of ritual purity by deciding that some of them were sound hygiene. But such an attitude is very shallow. Let it pass that the term primitive is extremely ambiguous; it is in any case unintelligent to confuse the means with the end. The means which God has chosen to inculcate the truth that He is holy have varied according to time and place. They have been means adapted to the knowledge and the temperament of the people for whom they were designed; and in saying this one is also saying that they have been means already associated to some extent with that people's previous idea of holiness and consequently with previous, unrevealed religion. The discovery of the ark in Egyptian religion or of animal sacrifices in Canaanite cult, or of altars, priests, vestments and incense the world over, may be of some interest, but theologically it is no more significant than to find that people ate bread and drank wine at the religious banquets of Qumran. The number of holy things and the manner of treating them may well vary tremendously, not least according to the degree of civilisation which has been reached. We ourselves know how this has happened in minor ways within our own lifetime. It may well be a matter of indifference for instance, whether the priest 'purifies' his fingers after touching the holy Eucharist or not; whether he keeps the consecrated water in a shining font of silver or in a shabby bowl; whether he carries the holy oil in his trouser pocket or held solemnly before his breast. But one thing is certain: there is no man so intelligent and so civilised that he can completely dispense with the help afforded by holy things. One man needs more help than another, but whoever he is, and at whatever time he lives, he is always in danger of forgetting that God is holy.

This may sound strange, for are not the words God and holiness inseparably connected? Certainly they are, in the world of notional propositions, and this was true of the propositions which the Israelites inherited as their stock of religious language. The ark of the covenant was by no means the first cult object given the epithet holy, any more than Yahweh was the first god to be called holy. The Israelites were well acquainted with the custom of their Canaanite neighbours to declare certain places and things holy, namely separated, 'out of bounds' and different. It was not the word holy in itself which distinguished the Israelites' God from other gods. The latter were holy according to the claims of their devotees, for if they had not been so, they would not have been gods. Yahweh's holiness is not simply that quality which makes him

different from men, but more precisely, different from all other gods, and therefore different in a unique sense. He is holy not because his worshippers say so, but because he truly is so.

The gods of the Canaanites were holy because they exercised powers beyond those of the most powerful men, and by so doing held in their hands the fate not simply of this individual or that, but of the whole nation – king equally with slave. No man could master the cycle of nature, assuring rain for instance in due season, or the life-giving heat of the sun or the mysterious fertility of animals and plants. Interruptions in this cycle, such as drought or storm or locust or blight, were clear warnings that nature was not an impersonal and automatic process to be taken wholly for granted. Yet on the other hand such interruptions were unusual and temporary, and the cycle was righted before the nation was destroyed. It seemed clear enough, on the analogy of human relationships, that such interruptions were due to certain idiosyncrasies, while the eventual restoration of the normal made clear that strict limits were put to such wilfulness. The powers of nature were the activity of gods; the irregularities of nature were due to the complex relationships among the gods; and the preservation of regularity was the work of the head of the gods. The gods of the Canaanite pantheon were all holy because they were all mysteriously separated from mortal men. But no single one of them was uniquely holy, for no single one of them was wholly different from the rest, nor wholly independent of them. No single one of them could for long resist the will of the father of the gods: eventually he must yield and perform his allotted task. On the other hand the father of the gods was wholly dependent upon the divine sons and daughters he ruled, for they alone put his plans into execution. This mythopoeic explanation of observable phenomena had much to commend it, and it is a mistake to regard the myths as nothing but childish stories. But the myths are in the end no more than an elaborate and often subtle explanation of the universe, with all its mysterious powers. The universe was the supreme god, and Baal, Moth, Shemesh and the rest were its slaves.

But Yahweh is different; 'Hearken to me O Jacob, and Israel whom I called! I am He, I am the first, and I am the last. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand forth together'.¹

¹ Isai 48, 12-13.

He is fundamentally and uniquely holy; he is transcendent and the only God. However much he was described in mythological terms, and this was unavoidable, he was fundamentally outside the religious pattern of the world in which the Israelites lived, for he was not the inescapable conclusion of a process of observation. The Israelites did not choose him; he chose Israel: 'Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for His Own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth'.¹ This was the fundamental revelation. It was by a free and arbitrary act: 'I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau'.² He intervened in the course of history on their behalf and delivered them from the power of Pharaoh: 'When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son'.³ Here lies the explanation of the holiness of Yahweh: he is uniquely different because he is not the result of Israel's coming into existence. This people did not adopt Yahweh as their own particular solution to the problems of life; Yahweh adopted them when they were still too young to know him, and this was a thing unheard of: 'Has any god attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that Yahweh your god did for you in Egypt before your eyes?'⁴

Yahweh therefore is Israel's Holy One, and there is no other. He alone is the master, and sole cause of all that happens. That so many happenings seemed to contradict one another and yet all came from Yahweh was an enigma which defied solution. That he should for instance send rain to water the earth and yet withhold the warmth of the sun to make it sprout; or that he should make his sun to shine, but so fiercely that the young crops should wither; that he should send his hail at the wrong moment, or his locusts or his blight; that he should do a thousand other things which defied understanding must not lead the Israelites to seek an answer from their neighbours. Faced with such problems, the Canaanites recognised many holy ones, and turned now to one, now to another. But the first command which Yahweh had imposed on his people was: 'You shall have no other gods beside Me',⁵ and he had insisted: 'Whoever sacrifices to any god save Yahweh only, shall be utterly destroyed',⁶ and again 'Make no mention of the names

¹ Deut 7, 6.

⁴ Deut 4, 34.

² Mal 1, 3.

⁵ Exod 20, 3.

³ Hos 11, 1.

⁶ Exod 22, 20.

of other gods, nor let such be heard out of your mouth'.¹ Yahweh would not tolerate the worship of any other god, for he was jealous: he claimed for himself exclusive rights to the recognition of his people. In him and in him alone they must find the solution to all their problems, the answer to all the enigmas of their lives and the source of all their happiness. To go elsewhere was to put a limit to his resources and make him less different from themselves; it was to lose sight of his holiness and arouse his jealousy; 'You shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the peoples who are round about you; for Yahweh your God in the midst of you is a jealous God; lest the anger of Yahweh your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth'.²

Thus Yahweh, unlike any other god of whom Israel had ever heard, is supremely intolerant and refuses to share his glory with any others. His holiness was in practice frequently profaned, as when for example his holy temple was made to house 'all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah and for all the host of heaven'.³ His people Israel did not wholly trust him; they wished to play safe; they thought that their neighbours had something to offer when they faced such difficulties as Yahweh's deafness to their prayers or his inaction during their calamities. They were only playing safe: they did not deny that Yahweh was their God; it was his exclusiveness, his jealousy, the sheer exorbitance of his demands that was at times intolerable. It is not an easy thing to acknowledge that Yahweh is holy, and to hear him say: 'I am Yahweh: that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to graven images'.⁴ It was not easy for the Israelites because Yahweh, precisely by reason of his holiness, was beyond their understanding and beyond their control. It is always difficult for man to acknowledge his dependence: however clever, however inventive, however perspicacious he may be, he must acknowledge that he has not the final explanation of his own existence nor the final control of his destiny. He is often unwilling to make this acknowledgement, though indeed he is not averse to recognising the mysterious powers of the universe, and to bowing before them, whether he call them Baal and Asherah or Nuclear Fission and Big Business. The powers of this universe, however mysterious and complex they may be, follow a regular pattern and hold out to him the promise of eventual understanding and final control. It is altogether another thing to acknowledge

¹ Exod 23, 13.

² Deut 6, 14-15.

³ 2 Kg 23, 4.

⁴ Isai 42, 8.

that the universe itself is dependent upon Yahweh, and that however much he reveals himself to us, he still remains incomprehensible and inaccessible, for he is holy: he is the uniquely Holy One, and everything else is by comparison ordinary and profane.

The Israelites rejoiced in the revelation which Yahweh had made, whereby they knew him to be their loving father, their protector and their saviour: 'For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as Yahweh our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?'¹ He loved them as a father loves his firstborn, as a husband loves his wife. So well did they know him that they could speak of their God in a way no other nation dared. Who else would have ventured, for instance to put into the mouth of their god such words as these: 'Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you'.² But however truly Yahweh was both father and mother to his people Israel, they must never forget that he was also their Holy One. It is a truth that must never be forgotten. Perhaps in our day we do not care to be reminded of it by the story of Uzzah. Possibly we prefer the sight of Christ driving out with a whip those who were profaning God's holy temple, or the memory of Ananias and Sapphira who profaned God's holy church? No matter, so long as we always remember with awe and dread that Yahweh our God is holy.

¹ Deut 4, 7.

² Isai 49, 15.