

THE GOD OF ALL POWER

By KATHRYN SULLIVAN

WHO is this great king?' asks the psalmist. His answer goes back to the early experiences of the people of God: 'Who but the Lord, mighty and strong, the Lord mighty in battle? It is the Lord of Armies that comes triumphant'.¹ In terms equally vigorous is Yahweh's power asserted in many of the oldest poetic passages of the Bible which show his subjects pondering manifestations of his force and energy in the world around them. They ignore in typical semitic fashion all secondary causes and cry out with deep-felt conviction: How powerful must he be!

This theological thinking was sound but not sophisticated. God's works, they argued logically, must reveal his attributes. With the same directness, the author of a spirited diatribe in the book of Wisdom denounces idolatry as folly and insists that the contemplation of creation can lead men to a knowledge of an omnipotent creator. 'Was it power and power's exercise, that awoke their wonderment? Why then how much greater must he be, who contrived it! Such greatness and beauty even creatures have, reason is well able to contemplate the Source from which these perfections came'.²

Knowledge such as this, based on analogy, always lacks the clear definition possible to more subtle dialectics. This is gain rather than loss. Instead of formulae the Bible gives us facts, living images rather than lifeless ideas. To come into contact with God's power exercised in the history of the Old Testament brings an image-fresh realization which ideas, by definition, have forfeited. 'The image cannot be dispossessed of a primordial freshness, which the idea can never claim. An idea is derivative and tamed . . . We think we can lay hold of image and take it captive, but the docile captive is not the real image but only the idea, which is the image with its character beaten out of it'.³

The scope of the concrete biblical approach to an understanding

¹ Ps 23, 8, 10.

² Wis 13, 4-5.

³ John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body*, (New York 1938) p. 115.

of divine power becomes clearer if we examine the historical instances that created the vocabulary of power, the historical interventions that revealed something of the measure of God's power, the historical connection between the life of Israel and their understanding of the doctrine of creation, the historical experiences that taught them God's power over the hearts of man.

THE BIBLICAL VOCABULARY OF POWER

Nowhere is the value of the concrete better illustrated than in the study of the Old Testament vocabulary of power. Hebrew authors as a general rule use three words to convey the idea of this divine attribute: *kō^āh*, 'oz and *gēburā^h*. The meaning of these words was not painstakingly spelled out in musty lexicographers' studies but was shaped on the shores of the Nile, or on trackless Sinai deserts or on windswept Judean hills. First used to describe situations in which there is question of human strength, these words in the course of time took their rightful place in Israel's spiritual vocabulary. To lose sight of their existential background is to attenuate biblical theology and miss many resonances of God's dialogue with men.

The inter-relations of twelve clans is the classic pattern of the conquest of Israel's own land. When Levi ceased to be a secular clan the bifurcation of Joseph's descendants into Ephraim and Manasseh preserved the original number. But these two groups began at once to complain to Joshua, when he was settling each clan's boundaries, that he had allotted to them only 'a single division of the country'. Joshua's answer contained the word *kō^āh* and was a reminder of their own power and a challenge to exert it. 'So great, so powerful a people as you are must not be content with one lot. Cross over the hill-country and fell the trees, to make yourselves room to dwell in; drive out these Chanaanites, for all their iron chariots, for all their great strength, and you will spread your frontiers further yet'.¹

Besides physical strength, *kō^āh* can mean brute animal force as when the Lord from the midst of the whirlwind asked Job: 'Wouldst thou trust that great strength of [the wild ox] to do thy work for thee, bring in thy harvest and fill thy threshing-floor?'² Or better still it may refer to the energetic action springing from greatness of soul that Caleb showed when he bravely brought back to Moses an

¹ Jos 17, 17-18.

² Job 39, 11-12.

honest report of the land beyond the Jordan. Many years later recalling that moment he said: 'I am as vigorous as I was when I went on that errand; in battle or on the march, the strength of old days is still with me'.¹

When applied to God the word *kō^āh* lost none of its dynamism. Moses cried to Yahweh, in the name of a disheartened people, 'Vindicate thy power'², and the second Isaias reminds them that of this power the stars in all their ordered beauty are a proof. 'Lift up your eyes and look at the heavens; who was it that made them? Who is it that marshals the full muster of their starry host, calling each by its name, not one of them missing from the ranks? Such strength, such vigour, such spirit is his'.³

The second biblical word for power, 'oz, denotes something strong, stable, secure; for example, an unassailable tower,⁴ or an impregnable city,⁵ or a trusty staff.⁶ Applied to Yahweh it recalls the historical interventions that gave his people victory over their foes: 'Thy mercy had delivered Israel; thy mercy should be their guide, thy strong arms should carry them to the holy place where thou dwellest'.⁷ It may also denote the continual exercise of this sovereign power. The psalmist made it the subject of his prayer when he said: 'Praise God in his sanctuary, praise him in his mighty firmament'.⁸

To a people who held warriors in high esteem, the third word for power is a militant word and highly respected: *g^ēburāh*. It speaks of valour and victory. Saul and Jonathan, we are told, were more powerful than lions.⁹ During one of the many desert struggles, Moses went to the mountain top to ask God for victory. Stretching out his hands he prayed. If he raised his arms, the Israelites were more powerful than the Amalecites, but if he lowered his arms the enemy was able to prevail: 'Whenever Moses lifted up his hands, Israel had the better of it; only when he rested for a little did the victory go to Amalec'.¹⁰

In this context it is easy to see the importance of the tribute paid to Yahweh: 'Like a giant the Lord shall go out to battle . . . he will show himself a hero against his enemies'.¹¹ In troubled times a man could turn confidently to so mighty a God: 'Lord, by the virtue of thy name deliver me, let thy sovereign power grant me redress'.¹²

Many forces made themselves felt during the centuries when

¹ Jos 14, 11.

² Num 14, 17.

³ Isai 40, 26.

⁴ Jg 9, 51.

⁵ Isai 26, 1.

⁶ Jer 48, 17.

⁷ Exod 15, 13.

⁸ Ps 150, 1.

⁹ 2 Sam 1, 23.

¹⁰ Exod 17, 11.

¹¹ Isai 42, 13.

¹² Ps 53, 3.

these words for divine power were being formed. Let us limit ourselves to three. They are not mutually exclusive. To concentrate on one is to see it in relation to the other two. The Israelites experienced God's power first in their history. Then they reasoned that the Lord of history was also the Lord of creation. Lastly they realized that nowhere is his power more clearly manifest than in the human heart.

THE POWER OF THE LORD OF HISTORY

The power of Yahweh was an experience for Israel before it was a doctrine, an intervention before it became an attribute. Israel's neighbours in the fertile crescent were religious-minded men. Their nature-gods and local deities attest this. The multiplication of their heavenly protectors points to the longings of their own heart as well as to the limitations of the gods they fashioned for themselves. The chosen people were not immune to the influence of this environment which the prophets tried to counteract. Yet time after time they succumbed to the idolatry.

Ezekiel understood their strength and weakness as a people when he reminded them of the semitic and non-semitic blood that flowed in their veins. 'In origin and birth you spring from yonder soil of Chanaan, an Amorrhite it was begot thee, a Hethite bore thee'.¹ He also reminded them of God's special election. It was the divine intervention, not any inherent greatness, that made them unlike their neighbours. This fact was a fundamental tenet of their faith. They were never allowed to forget that they owed all to God's powerful help. They treasured the words in which he described how he made them his. They had been poor and friendless. 'Then I passed by . . . I bathed you . . . I anointed you . . . I clothed you . . . I shod you . . . I adorned you . . . I nourished you . . . All the world heard the fame of your loveliness, I made you so fair . . . utterly fair'.²

One of the earliest Israelite confessions of faith begins like the christian creed with an affirmation of belief in an omnipotent God. Instead of the christian 'I believe in God the Father almighty', the Israelite made an equivalent act of faith in concrete explicit terms, recalling the redemptive acts of a personal God who intervened with all his power on behalf of his fathers.

¹ Ezek 16, 3.

² Cf Ezek 6, 6-14.

And thus shalt thou address thyself to the priest who bears office at the time: I make acknowledgement this day before the Lord thy God, that the land he promised to us in our fathers' days is now my home. Thereupon the priest will take the basket from thy hand, and set it down before the altar of the Lord thy God. In that divine presence, thou wilt continue thy protestation: My fathers were wanderers, hunted to and fro in Syria, when they made their way into Egypt and began to dwell there, only a handful of them; but they grew to be a great people, hardy and numerous. Whereupon the Egyptians treated us ill and persecuted us, and the burden we must bear was insupportable; so we cried out to the Lord God of our fathers, and he listened to our plea, and took pity on our affliction, the toil and oppression we suffered; rescued us from Egypt by force, with his arm high uplifted to strike great terror, and perform great wonders and portents, and brought us here, where he has given us a land that is all milk and honey. That is why I am offering first-fruits, now, out of the land which the Lord has given me. So leave them there, in the presence of the Lord thy God, and when thou hast paid worship to this Lord and God of thine, go home to feast on all the good things he has given thee, with all thy household, with Levite and wanderer that are thy neighbours.¹

If the exodus remained in Israel's sight as the most perfect manifestation of God's power, it was not merely because it was the first but also because it was the pattern of further interventions. Seven centuries later once more the Israelites found themselves captive. The land of their exile was Babylon. Then God raised up another prophet to prepare them for their liberation.

To restore their faith in Yahweh's power he spoke of their return from Babylon to their own country as a second exodus. He recalled the glorious moments of their first deliverance: the oppression of slavery, the message of the Lord, the passage through foaming waters, the crushing of hostile chariots and horses, the overthrow of fighting men and chieftains. Then came the Lord's heartening words: 'I mean to perform new wonders: even now they are coming to birth; surely you will understand at last?'²

¹ Deut 26, 3-11.

² Cf. Isai 43, 16-21; 51, 10; 63, 11-13.

This plea for deeper insight could be applied to other details of the first exodus which were to be repeated in new and greater ways: the pure water pouring from the rock,¹ the cloud betokening the divine presence,² the path across the desert,³ the confusion of those who trust in human wisdom,⁴ the mystery of the name revealed to Moses.⁵

But there was still another way in which the power of the Lord was made manifest to the returning exiles. Babylon unlike Egypt was a punishment. Israel's captivity was the result of Israel's sin. Liberation meant forgiveness as well as political freedom: 'Take heart again my people, says your God, take heart again. Speak Jerusalem fair, cry aloud to her that her woes are at an end, her guilt is pardoned'.⁶

The exercise of divine strength in history, as we have seen, is inseparable from God's control of the world and his power over human hearts. But let us speak first of creation before we speak in more detail of the mystery of his intervention in the hearts of men. God's power over time – past, present and future – is revealed throughout the course of Israelite history. God's power over the world – earth, sea and sky – is at the same time made equally clear. The faith of the Israelite was rooted in the great historical, redemptive acts of God who was both Lord of history and Lord of the world.

THE POWER OF THE LORD OF THE WORLD

In the course of centuries the dimensions of divine power were better understood by the people of God. The stable rhythm of the seasons, the recognizable pattern of the year, the alternation of darkness and light were early acknowledged to be under divine control. Noe's pleasing sacrifice drew this assurance from the Lord: 'While the earth stands, seed-time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall keep their course unaltered'.⁷

More dramatic because totally unexpected were the prodigies that indicated the Lord's control over earth, water and sky before and during the exodus. The Sinai theophany confirmed men's awesome belief in the cosmic power of their saving Lord. Thunder, lightning, fire and clouds were signs of his presence when he laid down the terms of the covenant, and those who accepted his law

¹ Isai 48, 21.

² Isai 52, 12.

³ Isai 40, 3.

⁴ Isai 44, 25.

⁵ Isai 45, 5-7.

⁶ Isai 40, 1-2.

⁷ Gen 8, 22.

were so sure of his power that Joshua one day confidently asked him to change the changeless heavens so that the Israelites might win a victory and the Amorrhites might be routed at Galgal. According to the picturesque account which testifies to Israel's belief in Yahweh's power over the forces of nature,

The Lord sent great hail-stones down on the Amorrhites, so that more of them were killed by hail than by the weapons of Israel. Sun and moon stood awe-struck, while the people took vengeance on its enemies. The sun stood in mid-heaven, and for a whole day long did not haste to its setting. Never was so long a day before or since, as that day when the Lord listened to a human prayer and fought openly on the side of Israel.¹

Nor does this seem to be an isolated incident. Debbora bravely battling the wily general, Sisara, could sing with joy and almost casual assurance of the divine help that was directed against the Chanaanities: 'Heaven itself was their adversary, the stars in their ordered courses did battle against Sisara'.² All this was in the early days of the Judges. Then came the Kings. Monarchy lasted in Judaea for five troubled centuries. During these years of political failure and religious infidelity, the historical and cosmic dimensions of divine power became better understood. The stable order of the heavens, so Jeremias taught his people, was the pledge of the unflinching stability of the divine plan. It is in words like this that the prophet shows that the power of God over the course of history is not to be thought apart from the immutable strength of the creator. Just as surely as day follows night, so will the defeat of Israel be followed by Israel's victory.

A message from the Lord, from him, the God of hosts, the same who brightens day with the sun's rays, night with the ordered service of moon and star, who can stir up the sea and set its waves a-roaring; All these laws of mine will fail me, he says, before the line of Israel fails me; a people it must remain until the end of time. You have the Lord's word for it; when you can measure heaven above, he tells you, and search the foundations of earth below, then I will cast away the whole line of Israel, for all its ill deserving.³

¹ Jos 10, 11, 13-14.

² Jg 5, 10.

³ Jer 31, 35-37.

The book of the Consolation of Israel throws more light on the relation between the cosmic and historic manifestations of divine power. A conquered people, captive in Babylon, needed faith to believe that God had not forgotten them. It was at this moment of Israel's greatest humiliation that the prophet spoke to them once again of God's creative power. His message, for all its originality, was not totally new. It was a development of traditional teaching.

From the beginning a special biblical word, *bārā'*, had meant a mighty act, beyond human scope, which God alone could perform. It aptly applied to each of the divine interventions in the history of Israel, from the punitive destruction of Jerusalem and the purifying imprisonment in a strange land back to the first divine historic intervention. The second Isaiah went back even further. He applied *bārā'* to creation, the first manifestation of God's love for all mankind. The act of divine power, which called the world into being, called Israel into being and calls all souls into a special relation of loving obedience with their creator and redeemer. To be seen properly, the divine work of man's sanctification should have this historic and cosmic perspective.

THE SANCTIFYING POWER OF THE LORD

The salvific dimension of divine power is the last to be studied in these pages, but it was not the last to appear in the Bible. Looking back, we can see that it gives meaning to creation and to history. God's control over the macrocosm has for its purpose the good of the microcosm. Time and space are subject to him but not for their own sakes. He directs the course of history and rules the universe in order that man may know and serve him. 'Power in its highest form is power over men'.¹ The author of Psalm 50 begs God to give him a pure heart. That this means a very special kind of transformation is evident from his use of the word *bārā'*, a word, as we have seen, that was employed to describe the creation of the world and the creation of the people of Israel.

Belief in God's power makes possible this *metanoia* or change of heart. At the threshold of Old Testament history stands the heroic figure of Abraham. There was no wavering in his faith, no matter how severely taxed. Paul, recalling his courageous trust declared: 'He showed no hesitation or doubt at God's promise, but drew

¹ Cf. B. J. Lonergan, S. J., *Insight* (London 1958), p. 543.

strength from his faith, confessing God's power, fully convinced that God was able to perform what he had promised.¹

This belief in God's saving power runs like a thread of gold through the psalms: 'Grant me audience, and make haste to rescue me; my hill-fastness, my stronghold of defence, to save me from peril. Thou dost strengthen and defend me; thou, for thy own honour, dost guide and escort me; by thee protected, I shall escape from the snare that lies hidden in my path'.²

The exile in the midst of a pitiless people cries out and the brave man, harassed on every side, learns in the loneliness of battle that he is not weak or alone.

They swarm about me like bees, their fury blazes up like fire among thorns, but see, in the power of the Lord I crush them! I reeled under the blow, and had well-nigh fallen, but still the Lord was there to aid me. Who but the Lord is my protector, my stronghold; who but the Lord has brought me deliverance?³

God gives not only victory over foes but also the peace that comes from forgiveness. Only the all-powerful can be the all-merciful and the all-loving, as the author of the book of Wisdom understood.

Only thou art all-merciful, as befits the Almighty, and dost overlook our human slips, in hope of our repentance. All things thou lovest, nor holdest any of thy creatures in abhorrence; hate and create thou couldst not, nor does aught abide save at thy will, whose summoning word holds them in being. They are thine, and thou sparest them; all things that live thou lovest, thou, the Master of them all.⁴

Not to know God's power to forgive is not to know God. The author of Psalm 102 first recalls God's cosmic power, then his wondrous interventions in history and concludes with words of praise for the Lord's goodness and mercy.

Bless the Lord, my soul, remembering all he has done for thee, how he pardons all thy sins, heals all thy mortal ills, rescues thy life from deadly peril, crowns thee with the blessings of his mercy . . . How pitying and gracious the Lord is, how patient, how rich in mercy! He will not always

¹ Rom 4, 20-21.

² Ps 30, 3-5.

³ Ps 117, 12-14.

⁴ Wis 11, 24-27.

be finding fault, his frown does not last for ever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve, does not exact the penalty of our wrong-doing. High as heaven above the earth towers his mercy for the men that fear him; far as the east is from the west, he clears away our guilt from us'.¹

GOD THE MIGHTY ONE

Four times in the Old Testament Yahweh is addressed as '*el-gibbōr*, the great, the strong, the mighty Lord'.² According to the context this power is liberating and creative. Isaiah used it on a fifth occasion when he was describing the messiah who would come to save all men. It is to this saviour who would intervene in history and create a new people whom Paul recognised as 'Christ, the power of God', the Lord of the world and the Lord of history.³ Isaiah prepared men for his coming with these words:

For our sakes a child is born, to our race a son is given, whose shoulder will bear the sceptre of princely power. What name shall be given him? Peerless among counsellors, the mighty God, Father of the world to come, the Prince of peace. Ever wider shall his dominion spread, endlessly at peace; he will sit on David's kingly throne, to give it lasting foundations of justice and right; so tenderly he loves us, the Lord of hosts.⁴

¹ Ps 102, 3-4, 8-12.

³ I Cor 1, 24.

² Deut 10, 17; Isai 10, 21; Jer 32, 18; Neh 9, 32.

⁴ Isai 9, 6-7.