AN EVERLASTING LOVE

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Love – the love of God for man, of man for God, of man for man – is both the dominant pathos and the central moral factor in the New Testament. There is no New Testament book in which love is not mentioned; and the kind of love which is called christian is so much a novelty that it was necessary to infuse new meaning into a Greek word which is rare in profane literature in order to express the revolutionary love revealed in the gospel. But the New Testament book in which it is said that God himself is love[1] is by common critical consent among the most recent writings of the New Testament; and it is not merely fanciful to think that this insight came after a generation or two of reflection on the surpassing love of God for man which was revealed in Christ Jesus. God's love has become such a commonplace in christian life, worship and literature that we forget how difficult it is to enter the mystery of love. Love, when we speak of God's love, is as much an anthropomorphism as God's wrath or God's eyes; and it is possibly the boldest of all the biblical images in which God is described in human traits.

Biblical scholarship has very nearly demolished the venerable falsehood that the Old Testament is the law of fear and the New Testament the law of love. When Jesus uttered words like, 'Fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell',[2] he was not proclaiming a dispensation of love unmixed with fear. Those who are apprehensive when the disciples seem to contradict the master will not be pleased when they compare the above text with: 'There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love'.[3] Jesus obviously was addressing those who had not achieved perfect love; and one may ask at what point perfect love can be expected. Nevertheless, John does present an ideal of perfect love which rises entirely above the level of fear; and this is uniquely a New Testament idea.

The venerable falsehood quoted above was a sincere effort to

[1] 1 Jn 4, 8.
[2] Lk 12, 5.
[3] 1 Jn 4, 18–19. All translations of biblical texts are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

propose a truth which must never become obscure: the novelty of the revelation of the gospel. To maintain this truth and at the same time to maintain the continuity of Old Testament and New Testament can easily place the interpreter in a paradoxical position. The gospel had to be proclaimed in some language; and by language we mean not merely the linguistic symbols but language in the larger sense as a medium of communication identified with a distinct historical and cultural group. The gospel was first proclaimed in the language of judaism; in what sense is the christian mystery of God's love both a development of the Old Testament and a departure from the Old Testament?

No serious student of the Old Testament can think that Yahweh the God of Israel is derived from the common beliefs of the ancient near east. At every point of comparison he appears totally dissimilar to the gods of the ancient world. At the same time, Israel was a member of the cultural community of the ancient Near East. The way in which Israel spoke of Yahweh was determined not only by Yahweh's revelation of himself but also by the cultural heritage which Israel shared. Its manner of thinking and speaking of the deity was not as unique and incomparable as the deity of whom Israel thought and spoke. Not infrequently one sees the prophets and sages of Israel struggling to express the mystery of Yahweh in concepts and language which they knew were inadequate for their purpose. At other times the Israelites were content to borrow language and images from their neighbours and apply them to Yahweh where there was no open contradiction between these borrowed images and the God who was portrayed through them. For example, Yahweh, like a number of gods, is presented as the lord of the storm who makes the clouds his chariot and brandishes the thunderbolt as the weapon of his wrath.

In the ancient religious literature which we possess and which could have been known to Israel there is no genuine idea of God's love. Such generalizations as this are too broad and they are misleading; but this one does not distort reality. I am not concerned here with the conventional language of hymns and psalms, and even these do not have God's love as a theme. I speak rather of the concept of divine persons which we can synthesize from the literature of Mesopotamia, Canaan and Egypt; and love is not an attribute of these persons. They are conceived as benevolent, at times even as friendly. They are conceived as capable of good deeds and of showing favour. But ultimately they are incapable of love, and the reason for

this is rooted in the reality of which the gods of the ancient Near East were a personification. This reality is nature; and the gods were no more capable of love than nature is capable. When the Israelites formed an idea of God's love, they did not and could not have formed it on anything they learned from their neighbours. That the idea does not certainly appear in the earliest period of Israelite history should cause no surprise.

Yahweh does appear in characters which resemble the characters of the gods of Israel's neighbours; and some of these deserve our attention. The three characters which are most relevant to the idea we are considering are the characters of king, lord and father. These three overlap. The king is the absolute and supreme head of the political society. The lord is the owner of a household, which includes the members of the household: wife or wives, children, slaves. The father figure is not conceived in terms of the modern father of a family; and this qualification should be remembered when the fatherhood of Yahweh is mentioned in the bible. The idea does not always imply paternal love, although in the Old Testament this idea is frequently implied. The idea of paternal authority is also implied, and in the religion of Israel's neighbours this is the dominant idea when the gods are addressed as father. The king is called both lord and father of his people; and the three figures merge into an image of benevolent despotic power. Not love but condescension is the determining attribute. I believe it is not unimportant to emphasize these features of ancient Near Eastern belief in order that we may perceive more clearly the theological pattern from which Israelite belief broke.

The entire Old Testament echoes and re-echoes the themes of the exodus and Sinai and the law. It seems that the modern popular idea of Yahweh the God of Israel is drawn mostly from these recurrent themes. Have not most of us learned to think of the God of Israel primarily as the God of Sinai, the lawgiver who appears in smoke and flame, in thunder and earthquake? This impression has been helped by the producing genius of the late Cecil B. De Mille. Possibly his version of the exodus and the covenant will be seen by more people than any moving picture since *The Great Train Robbery*. Certainly DeMille's version of the story has been seen by millions who have never read the biblical version. It may not be beside the point to notice that DeMille's film, *The Ten Commandments*, falls neatly into a literary category known as midrash.[1] But with or without

[1] An ancient jewish, homiletic commentary on the scriptures making free use of allegory.

midrash, it must be granted that the God of Sinai is not a figure who inspires love. The earliest Israelite narratives describe the reaction of the Israelites themselves as sheer terror.

The recent studies of G. E. Mendenhall and others have made the biblical account of the covenant more intelligible; but they have not removed any of the terror. We can now identify the God of Sinai more precisely as a figure of the overlord who imposes his will on his vassals through a treaty of suzerainty. Obligations are imposed and sanctions are attached in these treaties; but the overlord commits himself to nothing. The promises attached to the covenant of Israel are far more generous and specific than the promises made by the ancient overlord to his vassals. But they are the promises of the overlord – again not a figure who inspires love. It is curious that the ancient treaties contain the stipulation that the vassal is to 'love' his overlord; this stipulation does not appear in the earliest Israelite law. Nothing is lost by its absence. The 'love' imposed in the suzerainty treaties is love in the technical sense of loyalty to the overlord and fidelity to the stipulations of the treaty. When the idea of love between God and man arose in Israel it advanced far beyond this merely legal sense. It is more relevant to our purpose to note that while the vassal is obliged to love the overlord, love is not expressed by the overlord towards the vassal. Such love would be beneath the overlord; and here we have the problem in a nutshell.

These considerations are introduced because they show that God's love did not become known in Israel through a reasoning process. God's love was known only through his revelation of himself as loving. Whether it could have been reached by reasoning is a purely speculative point of interest. Among human beings love is not recognized by deduction but through intuition. The timidity with which this intuition begins has been the theme of countless poets and novelists. That another person feels love for one is an idea which at first seems too daring to be credible. But when genuine love exists, it reveals itself through compelling signs – not only words and deeds, but all the little movements which have a meaning all their own, to borrow a phrase from a somewhat vapid contemporary lyric. The analogy between human and divine love breaks down at several points, of course; one point is the timidity with which human love is so often expressed in its initial stages. We have noticed that God's love is scarcely expressed in the earliest Israelite literature; when it is expressed, it is revealed with overwhelming vigour and fullness.

This first expression came in the prophecy of Hosea (Osee). The

book of Hosea is to be dated in the second half of the eighth century B.C., some hundreds of years after the beginnings of Israel as a people. Hosea addressed Israel in the supreme crisis of its history, the crisis in which Israel ceased to exist as a distinct political society.

Elsewhere I have described the book of Hosea as a book of divine passion. The attribution of emotion to Yahweh is an Old Testament commonplace; nowhere in the Old Testament is emotion attributed to Yahweh with so little restraint as in Hosea. Of all the loves in which the love of Yahweh for Israel could be conceived, Hosea prefers the love of man and woman; and he also conceives it as the love of the father for his children. That this theme is original with him is not certain; but his expression deserves the term original if any literature deserves it. The love of man and woman, like the love of father and children, was not entirely the same in the ancient world as it is in the modern world. Under ancient law the woman was the property of the husband. The image of marriage could be used with no trace of affection. Few men have written of love with the depth of feeling exhibited by Hosea.

Interpreters commonly associate Hosea's intuition of God's love with his own personal experience related in chapters 1 and 3. These autobiographical allusions are extremely obscure, and there is no agreed interpretation of them in all detail. But the general drift of the passages is clear enough for Hosea's message; and the general drift shows that Hosea loved a wife who was unfaithful. Here our understanding is aided if we recall the attitude of the ancient world towards adultery. In ancient codes of law the normal punishment of the adulterous wife was death. Some codes provided for condonation by the husband; but it was the option of the husband to condone or to demand the full legal penalty. We have no way of knowing what the practice was; but it is unlikely that the severity of the law was out of harmony with public opinion entirely. A more tolerant modern society does not readily sympathize with the loathing which was felt for adultery in the ancient near east. These indications suggest that Hosea's behaviour as he describes it was exceptional. He shows himself as a man so deeply and foolishly in love with his wife that he cannot dismiss her even when she is unfaithful. We can scarcely doubt that Hosea's neighbours and contemporaries would regard him as a very simple and unduly meek fellow. His love is not so much forgiving as tolerant.

This attitude is not described without qualification. Hosea makes it clear that he was torn by conflicting emotions; a point can come where tolerance is no longer possible, where love yields to anger.

This is the kind and condition of love which Hosea attributes to Yahweh: tolerant, almost helpless in the face of unforgivable disloyalty, in tension with a mounting anger as love is rejected. Indeed, once God's love is revealed in terms of human feeling, Hosea could not but represent a conflict of emotions. History showed that tolerant love finally gave way to righteous anger, and Yahweh destroyed Israel. Hosea is not simply the prophet of love any more than the gospel is simply a message of love. God's love, in both Old Testament and New, demands a response; and the decision is supremely critical.

Hosea is the first Israelite on record to idealize the early period of Israelite history as a period of mutual love of Yahweh and Israel. He sees it as the honeymoon, the time of the passionate love of youth. The initiative of love came from Yahweh – a theme which elsewhere is called election. In the ancient world it was fitting that the wealthy husband should shower his wife with gifts; this Yahweh had done. To a modern reader this may sound as if Hosea thought love could be purchased; but Hosea was as well aware that this is false, as was the author of the Song of Songs.[1] Israel had responded to Yahweh's love with full devotion; it is this which makes Israel's infidelity so odious. It also heightens the anger of Yahweh. Hosea expresses the anger of Yahweh with the same flaming passion with which he speaks of love. The terrible threats of chapter 13 equal anything in the prophetic literature in their intensity.

This intense anger is not the result of a sudden impulse. The love of Yahweh is so deep that it inhibits his anger. Hosea does not hesitate to represent Yahweh as vacillating between tolerance and punishment, between love and anger:

> How can I give you up, O Ephraim!
> How can I hand you over, O Israel!
> How can I make you like Admah!
> How can I treat you like Zebolim!
> My heart recoils within me,
> my compassion grows warm and tender.
> I will not execute my fierce anger,
> I will not again destroy Ephraim:
> For I am God and not man,
> the Holy One in your midst,
> and I will not come to destroy.[2]

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[1] Cant 8, 7.

[2] Hos 11, 8–9.

This vacillation disappears in chapter 13:

So I will be to them like a lion,
like a leopard I will lurk beside the way.
I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs,
I will tear open their breast,
and there I will devour them like a lion,
as a wild beast would rend them.
I will destroy you, O Israel;
who can help you? . . .
Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol?
Shall I redeem them from Death?
O Death, where are your plagues?
O Sheol, where is your destruction?
Compassion is hid from my eyes.[1]

When I use the word vacillation to describe this attitude, I simplify to excess. Hosea does not represent the anger of Yahweh as final. It is ultimately love which prevails. In chapter 2 the chastisements of anger are intended to teach Israel that it needs the love of Yahweh to live. The threats of chapter 13 yield to the quiet invitation and promise of chapter 14. Critics have questioned with some probability whether chapter 14 is the work of Hosea himself or of a continuator. Critical questions can be important for interpretation; here we can say that whether the lines come from Hosea or from another, they carry on the genuine thought and feeling of Hosea. How Yahweh's love is to find fulfilment Hosea does not know. It is very probable that he wrote just before or during the collapse of the kingdom of Israel, and a restoration of Israel did not appear on the historical horizon. The book closes with a profession of faith in Yahweh's love, a love which is strong enough to realize itself even when history appears to leave no room for its realization. A love with such a past cannot be a love without a future.

The literary relations between Hosea and Deuteronomy are obscure. The earliest form of Deuteronomy is to be placed in the seventh century, less than a hundred years after Hosea. Deuteronomy reflects in several ways the traditions of Israel rather than of Judah; and Hosea was a man of Israel. It is probably not purely coincidental that Deuteronomy alone of the traditions of law and covenant introduces the theme of Yahweh's love of Israel. Like

[1] Hos 13, 7–9, 14.

Hosea, Deuteronomy is written in a tone of urgency which reflects the historical crisis created by the Assyrian empire. In such a crisis Israel and Judah could escape annihilation only by a response to Yahweh's love.

In Deuteronomy the theme of election is prominent, and this theme is found in other books also. But Deuteronomy makes election an act motivated by sheer preventing love. This love was first shown to the fathers of Israel.[1] Israel inherits this love not because it deserves it or has earned it by merit; but because it is the object of a gracious choice.

> It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all the peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from Pharaoh, king of Egypt.[2]

It is not surprising that Deuteronomy also emphasizes the duty of Israel to respond to the love of Yahweh. The book imposes on Israel not only single loyalty and obedience, but loyalty and obedience rooted in love. A glance at the texts of the suzerainty treaties shows that the tone of Deuteronomy and the kind of love demanded here are entirely different from the technical 'love' of the vassal given to the overlord. Jesus found in Deuteronomy the line which he said contained the greatest and the first commandment.[3] When he wished to propose the basic attitude of the christian way of life, he found this attitude expressed in the text of the Torah, the work which was regarded in judaism as the one and sufficient means of salvation. Before man's love of God could become an effective reality, man had to learn that God loves him.

Just as the literary relations between Hosea and Deuteronomy are obscure, so are the relations between Deuteronomy and Jeremiah obscure. If we accept 622 B.C. as the date of the promulgation of Deuteronomy, as most critics do, then it is almost impossible to suppose that Jeremiah was unacquainted with Deuteronomy. But he may not have been acquainted with the introductory discourses, from which most of the passages cited are taken. It is also difficult to establish a certain dependence of Jeremiah on Hosea. A community

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[1] Deut 4, 37; 10, 15. [2] Deut 7, 7–8. [3] Deut 6, 5.

of theme is evident beyond all doubt; for Jeremiah is a prophet of Yahweh's love of Israel, and a pathetic prophet.

Jeremiah resumes the theme of Israel as the faithless bride of Yahweh, particularly in the poem of chapter 2. Like Hosea, he idealizes the past of Israel, the youthful devotion and the bridal love.[1] His candour in describing the faithlessness of Israel goes beyond the language of Hosea; his desire to paint the crime in all its ugliness leads him to a frankness which is rather strong for modern and western tastes. His emphasis falls on Yahweh's love as love unrequited. The emotional conflict between love and anger appears again. Jeremiah also was a prophet of crisis, and in the supreme crisis he appeals to the supreme motive. If love is not answered, then anger must fulfil itself.

And Jeremiah did despair of historic Judah. He sees no response to Yahweh's love, and therefore no hope for the people whom he addresses. But despair of Judah is not despair of Yahweh's love. Yahweh's love is more powerful than the malice of Judah, and Yahweh's love will find its fulfilment in a future which is only dimly discerned. This fulfilment is the theme of the great poems of chapters 30–31. Some critics doubt that these poems are the work of Jeremiah himself; but no one can doubt that they carry on his spirit and his feeling.

Jeremiah sees Yahweh's love achieving in the restoration something which it did not achieve in the history of Israel. A love so deep cannot end in divorce.[2] The dreadful punishment of Judah is another exodus into the wilderness like the exodus from Egypt,[3] and Yahweh appears again in the wilderness. He does this because his love is everlasting and his faithfulness continues.[4] Jeremiah sees more clearly than Hosea saw that the punishment, the work of Yahweh's anger, is really the work of Yahweh's love. Unless he punishes he cannot make Israel an object of love, cannot save Israel from its own bad will. Yahweh's love is too strong to be frustrated even by the object of the love.

After the collapse of Judah and the dissipation of historic Israel as a political community, faith in Yahweh's love could not have survived unless it became faith in the redeeming love proclaimed by Jeremiah. The prophet of this faith was the unknown author of Isaiah 40–55, designated as second Isaiah or deutero-Isaiah. This work can be dated by historical allusions in the years 550–545 B.C.

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[1] Jer 2, 2. [2] Jer 3, 1–5. [3] Jer 31, 2–3. [4] Jer 31, 3.

Cyrus of Persia, the conqueror who annexed the Babylonian Empire to his own domains, had already appeared, and the course of his victorious career could be perceived. He was the instrument, the 'servant' through whom Yahweh would restore Israel. The work of Yahweh's redeeming love was approaching completion, and second Isaiah was the spokesman of redeeming love within the little Israelite community which had survived the fall of Judah.

The prophet is commissioned to speak words of comfort and tenderness to Israel.[1] This is indeed the tone of his discourses. Yahweh reveals himself in his forgiving love. Israel will be re-established as it was once established in the exodus. Kings and nations and the whole course of history cannot prevent the love of Yahweh from accomplishing its purpose.

> Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
> I have called you by name, you are mine.
> When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
> and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
> When you walk through fire you shall not be burned;
> and the flame shall not consume you.
> For I am the Lord your God,
> the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
> I give Egypt as your ransom,
> Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
> Because you are precious in my eyes,
> and honoured, and I love you,
> I give men in exchange for you,
> peoples in exchange for your life.
> Fear not, for I am with you;
> I will bring your offspring from the east,
> and from the west I will gather you;
> I will say to the north, Give up;
> and to the south, Do not withhold;
> bring my sons from afar,
> and my daughters from the end of the earth . . .[2]

The love of Yahweh falls with a peculiar affection on Zion, the city of his temple:

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[1] Isai 40, 1–2. [2] Isai 43, 1–6.

But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me.
Can a woman forget her suckling child,
that she should have no compassion
on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.
Your builders outstrip your destroyers,
and those who laid you waste go forth from you.
Lift up your eyes round about, and see;
they all gather, they come to you.
As I live, says the Lord,
you shall put them all on as an ornament,
you shall bind them on as a bride does.[1]

The possibility of a divorce between Yahweh and his people is eliminated. Yahweh does not bestow his love and then withdraw it; he is not like a man whose love can be alienated.[2] Fidelity is an essential attribute of the love of Yahweh, the very attribute which was lacking in Israel's love.

The biblical books selected for mention here do not exhaust the Old Testament theme of Yahweh's love; but they are its clearest and most passionate expressions. We have not yet arrived at the love disclosed in the gospels; but it is love we meet and not some other sentiment. The reader of the Old Testament notices that Yahweh's love is directed to Israel exclusively, and he misses the breadth of the New Testament. This is a limitation of Old Testament revelation which affects other themes also. For this reason I have drawn attention to the lack of parallels to God's love in the Old Testament. The marvel is not that God's love was known as directed exclusively to Israel; the marvel is that it was known at all.

God's love is described in terms of human love; this means that the Old Testament uses the language of passionate feeling. The images most frequently chosen are derived from family life; Yahweh has the love of a husband for his wife, of a father for his children. It is rare that the love of friendship is mentioned: friendship implies equality and mutual reliance. The images of both father and spouse

[1] Isai 49, 14–18. [2] Isai 50, 1.

are continued and fulfilled in the New Testament. The language is bold and totally unmetaphysical; but it brings forth the reality of God's love as no other language can. The philosophy of Epicurus carried to the limit the metaphysical idea of a cold, remote and uninterested deity. Effectively this philosophy removed any communication between the divine and the human. Judaism in its later phases did not escape the danger of a god who was too distant to be the subject or the object of love. Such a god was not proclaimed by the prophets. The risk of excessive familiarity was preferred to the risk of widening the distance between man and God. The prophets did not wish to preserve God's dignity at the cost of his love.

If God's love in the Old Testament can be summed up in a single idea, it is the idea of a love which overcomes refusal. It is a love of election and a love of forgiveness, a love which creates and which restores. It is a love which is incorruptible. Man cannot destroy the love of God because he cannot merit it; it is not within his control. It cannot be said of the Old Testament as a whole that love is the dominant theme in the Israelite experience of Yahweh, or that love is presented as the motivation of Yahweh's action in history. All that can be said is that some Old Testament writers approach this conception. The everlasting faithful love of Yahweh was in the mind of St. Paul when he met the problem[1] of Israel's last and decisive refusal to accept the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus. What he found in the Old Testament was more than a minimal foreshadowing. When Jesus proclaimed the Father as one who loves, he did not introduce a total stranger.

AN ADDITIONAL NOTE

Some readers will wonder why I have not introduced the Song of Songs into this consideration, and I owe an explanation. The interpretation of the Song which sees it as an allegory of God's love of Israel is very ancient and appears even in pre-christian judaism. Most christian expositions of the Song have treated this theme. Some recent biblical scholars have presented persuasive arguments for the thesis that this is not the literal and primary meaning of the Song. I find these arguments convincing enough to omit the Song from this article. The love of man and woman as a parable of God's

[1] Rom 9–11.

love of Israel is a solid Old Testament theme, whether it is found in the Song of Songs or not.

I have no desire to impose this interpretation on those who are not as well convinced as I. But a treatment of the Song as an allegory of divine love will be written much better by one who believes that the Song is such an allegory; and I prefer to leave this treatment to others.