CREATOR OF ALL THINGS

By JOHN ASHTON

FROM *Enuma Elish* to *My Fair Lady* creation myths have held men in thrall. The mood, clearly, changes: at first sight there is little in common between the brutal cosmogony of the babylonian epic and the slightly anodyne modern version of an ancient dream. Yet the central arguments of the two myths – the origins of the world and of mankind, the nature of creative love – awaken echoes in our hearts, and these harmonize in the bible. As God first organizes the stately procession of the universe and then leans down to breathe life into the being he has moulded from the dust, the germs of truth that are embedded in man's most cherished myths come to fruition in the revealed word of God. Nevertheless, the principal theme of Israel's creation-faith sounds history, not myth. It is in and out of the story of the creation of a people that the other elements of this faith are woven, supporting and extending, as it were, the central melody, and deriving from it that quality of faith, first lived and then professed, which singles out the religion of Israel from that of her many neighbours in the near east. The creation of the natural universe prepares the way for the election of Israel; the modelling of the first man reflects the patient fashioning of God's people. Of the three areas of God's creative activity, the cosmic, the personal and the social, it is the social that is primary, at any rate in the Old Testament. The secondary elements, the personal and the cosmic, the individual and the universal, the interior and the exterior, take their colour from the concrete experience of the people of God.[1]

In each of these areas God's creative power is manifested under three aspects, which I call creation, uncreation and new creation. The natural universe, the individual human being and the people of God are all the object of his creative care, suffer his destructive wrath and receive the blessing of a new creation.

[1] This furnishes a key to the 'music' of many a psalm: the theme of God's universal sovereignty is like a powerful bass, grounding and establishing the main melodic line – his tender care for his people; whilst occasionally the quieter notes of his particular individual providence help to found an even more intricate harmony: e.g. Ps 19, 136, 147, 89. It is to such psalms as these that we must look for the roots of Jesus' faith in the loving providence of the Father.

CREATION

Creation, for the hebrew mind, means establishing order out of confusion and chaos. This said, one must avoid exaggerating the differences between the hebrew cosmos/chaos and the western being/nothingness. The confusion and disorder out of which God drew the universe as we know it, fixed, reliable, permanent, was not pictured as a sort of pre-existent matter. Before God said, 'let there be light', there was darkness; but darkness did not, in the proper sense, exist: it is a symbol for non-being. Light and darkness, day and night are separated out much more radically than the sun and the moon, which were not created until the fourth 'day'. Where light is not distinguished from darkness there is only nothingness.

Similarly, the creation of the firmament, which separates the waters above from the waters below, was an essential first step towards establishing the earth, the middle storey of a three-tiered universe. In earlier myths, the waters of the deep possess a sinister power never fully subdued; but although relics of these myths persist in hebrew poetry, the priestly author of Genesis resolutely sets his face against anything which might detract from the sovereign authority of God. The ocean, the waters of primordial chaos, did not and could not subsist independently of his voice.

The third symbol of non-being, the desert, makes its first appearance in the second chapter of Genesis. It is the natural symbol of chaos for both farmer and city-dweller: ruin and desolation, barrenness and aridity, are commonly represented as a wilderness. In the bible, the desert is also a privileged place for meeting God; but in the context of creation it is the land of chaos, *tohu* or *tohu wabohu*, where there is nothing but confusion, lawlessness and barren wastes.

The natural universe

'Thus says the Lord, your redeemer, who formed you from the womb: I am the Lord who made all things who alone stretched out the heavens; when I spread out the earth, who was with me?'[1]

Presupposed, and assumed into the speaker's title and credentials, is the creation of the chosen people. The speaker is Yahweh: the object of his message is not to say that he created Israel (this is known and accepted by his audience), but rather to assert his universal dominion over the whole universe. Ultimately, faith in

[1] Isai 44, 24.

God the redeemer of Israel must be grounded in faith in God the creator of the world. At the time this prophecy was uttered, the recent history of the jews had been one of defeat, destruction and exile, played out against the setting of babylonian might and tyranny. The temptation to see their God as struggling ineffectively against the gods of their enemies must have been great indeed. The reassertion of Yahweh's omnipotence may seem a paradoxical outcome: it was possible only because Yahweh had never been regarded simply as a local divinity. He had chosen Israel out of the nations: the doctrine of election implies a belief in the universality of his dominion. But the faith that the jews took back with them from Babylon was tried and purified to a degree it had never been before; and this was the article of faith that was put at the head of the bible, as the cornerstone of their whole creed: 'In the beginning, God created heaven and earth'.

The individual man

In the first chapter of Genesis, the priestly author makes it clear that the creation of man was the outcome of a special resolution: 'let us make man'; he is made in God's image and likeness; the verb *bara'* is reiterated to add solemnity to the narrative. But man fits easily and naturally into the place designated for him at the summit of creation.

In the following chapter, the mood changes with startling abruptness. What was a generic term man (male or female) becomes an individual, Man, with a mind and will of his own. God is no longer said to 'create' him by an absolute and irresistable decree; instead, he 'moulds' Adam from the slime of the earth.

As his hebrew name suggests, Adam's links with the earth are deep-seated and permanent. It was to till the earth that he was made, and this essential function becomes the central image of his moral life also:

> Sow for yourselves justice,
> reap the fruit of steadfast love;
> break up your fallow ground,
> for it is the time to seek the Lord,
> that he may come and rain salvation upon you.[1]

[1] Hos 10, 12.

This is now how the word of God itself remains creative, watering the earth, prospering the thing for which he sends it.[1] Man has free will, he can put a gap between the word of God and its accomplishment. Because, in his dealings with man, God achieves his ends across a dialogue and waits for man's response, the images taken from agriculture (the word of God like seed or rain) and pottery (his careful fashioning of man and of his people) have a power and a significance which the priestly author of Genesis, for all his deep awareness of man's central position in the universe, does not even approach.

The people of God

Job recounts with delighted precision how God formed him in his mother's womb:

> Thy hands fashioned and made me;
> and now thou dost turn about and destroy me.
> Remember that thou hast made me of clay;
> and wilt thou turn me to dust again?
> Didst thou not pour me out like milk
> and curdle me like cheese?
> Thou didst clothe me with skin and flesh,
> and knit me together with bones and sinews.[2]

The same image, though more summarily expressed, was adopted by second Isaiah for conveying the almost maternal tenderness of God's creative love:

> Thus says the Lord who made you,
> who formed you from the womb and will help you.[3]

How the events of Israel's calling and redemption, the salvation-history of the exodus, came to be thought of as a creative act cannot be fully discussed here. Part of the answer is that the formation of a single unified people out of the ill-assorted mob of slaves that fled from Egypt was easily envisaged in terms of the cosmos/chaos polarity, characteristic of the hebrew idea of creation. More important is the fact that Israel was constituted as a people by a covenant with Yahweh. She is either the people of God or nothing, and for her to be the people of God two conditions had to be

---

[1] Cf Isai 55, 10–11.
[2] Job 10, 8–11.
[3] Isai 44, 2; cf 43, 1, 21; 44, 24; 45, 9–11.

fulfilled. First, God's revelation of himself: '. . . and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God, and you will know that I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt'.[1] Secondly, on the basis of this revelation, God's protection had to be offered and accepted by a formal covenant, sealed by a communion-sacrifice. The revelation of the name of Yahweh, and the covenant of Mount Sinai (plus the passage of the Red Sea) are the absolutely essential elements in Israel's awareness of her own creation as a people.

UNCREATION

Hebrew has no word for 'uncreate', just as it has no word for unmake or undo. The structure of the language does not permit negative concepts like these to be expressed with the aid of a simple suffix. Consequently they had to be conveyed indirectly: uncreation means the return of chaos where there was order, of darkness where there was light, of desert where there was fruitful soil, vineyards and fields of grain. God withdraws his sustaining hand, or even uses his creative force to destroy instead of to build, to pluck up instead of to plant. In a terrible phrase of second Isaiah who sums up, as we shall see, a whole prophetic heritage, God asserts that there is nothing, evil or good, which does not come from him: 'I form light and create darkness, I make peace and create evil; I am the Lord who do all these things'.[2] Anything that destroys or excludes this peace is evil. Peace is harmony and evil discord. The separation from God caused by Adam's sin started a chain-reaction of evil that operated in three directions and effected a triple dislocation: man's quiet authority over nature was suddenly lost, his own personal equilibrium destroyed, his relationships with other human beings spoilt by selfishness and mistrust.[3] Instead of checking the evil at its source, God allows the chain-reaction to continue: when he says 'I create evil', he asserts that the uncreation which ensues is not

---

[1] Exod 6, 7.

[2] Isai 45, 7. The characteristic *bārā'* is used here not of light and goodness but of darkness and evil. Most readers, even those trained in nice theological distinctions concerning God's permissive will, shy away from a text like this. Even the RSV, a translation rarely marred by bowdlerising tendencies, renders the hebrew word *ra'*, evil, by woe, perhaps in an effort to express the opposition with *shālōm*, which means wholeness, welfare, the state of a man at peace with nature, with himself, with his fellows and with God.

[3] Note the re-appearance under this negative form, of our three areas of creation. The triple uncreation calls for a triple new creation.

something that eludes his control and that he is powerless to stop, but a stage in the divine plan. He himself, and no other, carries through the triple disruption of the original order of creation, destroying and levelling in order to plant. Hidden away in the divine curse, waiting to be born, lies a greater blessing. At the heart of uncreation arises an urgent plea for the new creation. The terrible phrase of second Isaiah just quoted is followed by words familiar to us from the Advent liturgy:

> Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down justice; let the earth open, that salvation may sprout forth, and let it cause justice to spring up also: I, the Lord, have created it.[1]

The natural universe

The first clear example of uncreation is the flood. 'God saw the earth, and behold it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth'.[2] Consequently God resolves (and the consequence is remarkable) to complete the work of corruption: 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh ... behold I will corrupt them with the earth'.[3] The same word is used for the sin and the sanction. No more striking way could be found to express God's determination to allow the cancerous growth of sin to permeate 'all flesh'. Instead of cutting it away, he assists it to spread! This resolve issues in the flood, whereby the proctective firmament is withdrawn and the ocean (the waters below) rejoin the lower sky (the waters above). Man is at the mercy of the deep; by divine command the waters of chaos have resumed control. Nevertheless, God is prevented by his own goodness from blotting out mankind altogether. Even in the floodtide of his anger his mercy shines out in the form of the rainbow, his lavish goodness in the form of the vine that Noah is soon to plant.

But the menace remains. Once man is able to interpose his own wilfulness between the word and its accomplishment, chaos, darkness and the barren wastes of the desert encircle the order and plenty he has received from the bountiful hands of God, threatening continually to encroach upon his peace. The story of the flood is a warning of the wholesale destruction triggered off by sin. One of the great preoccupations of Genesis is to stress that good came

[1] Isai 45, 8. [2] Gen 6, 12. [3] Gen 6, 13.

before evil, innocence before guilt, that history began with a blessing, not a curse. But, this said, the story of the flood also reflects the conviction of the people of Israel that mankind began where Israel finished, with a general cataclysm. Genesis was not composed without an eye on the tragic history of the people of God.

The prophet Amos came in the middle of the eighth century to shake the prosperous northern kingdom out of its complacency. He has a logic all his own, which eschews the soothing conclusions most of his contemporaries drew from their privileged position as the chosen people of Yahweh: 'You only I have known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities'.[1] So the loving Saviour of Israel is seen by Amos as a savage beast: 'Does the lion roar in the forest when he has no prey?'[2] 'The day of Yahweh', for which so many faithful israelites had longed since the days of the holy wars, is darkness not light[3] and the dreadful threat re-echoed so often by Jeremiah is heard for the first time: 'I will set my eyes on them for evil and not for good'.[4] Small wonder that Amos, who of all Israel's writers had perhaps the most profound conviction of Yahweh's creative might, should also have been the first, in a vision of incomparable power, to see that might used to bring darkness, destruction and confusion – in a word, to uncreate: 'the maker of the Pleiades and Orion is turning deep darkness into morning and darkening day into night, calling for the waters of the sea, which he pours out upon the face of the earth'.[5] This amazing vision, repeated in a slightly different form later on in the book,[6] is a long way removed from the songs of thanksgiving and praise we are accustomed to from the psalms.[7] What Amos sees, let us make no mistake about this, is the return of chaos. When darkness is confounded with light and the earth with the sea, the world as we know it has ceased to exist. Amos was prophesying another flood.

One more passage, in some ways the most startling of all, will serve to clinch the argument. It is another vision, recorded this time by Jeremiah, where the uncreation is described in even more detail, systematically reversing the pattern of the first page of Genesis, even to the use of the expression *tohu wabohu*, signifying

---

[1] Amos 3, 2. [2] Amos 3, 13. [3] Amos 5, 18.
[4] Amos 9, 4. [5] Amos 5, 8. [6] Amos 9, 6.
[7] Which is why the common name for these passages, doxologies, is a misnomer. In spite of the succession of participles, which gives them a certain stylistic similarity to a psalm of praise, the mood and tone is completely different.

utter emptiness and formlessness, and found in this form only here and in Genesis.[1]

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and lo, there was no man,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the Lord, before his fierce anger.[2]

The individual man

The resolution of the natural universe into the confusion from which it was drawn is at once the consequence and the symbol of inner corruption. The story of the fall projects Israel's sure belief that her own unfaithfulness is simply the paradigm case of the larger sinfulness of mankind that splinters the harmonious pattern of creation. One deliberate sin and the glory of God, which had covered Adam and Eve like a garment, disappeared, to leave them feeling naked and ashamed. Their nakedness and their shame, symptoms of an opposition within themselves and towards one another, were the first fruits of sin.

The natural end of such disorder is death, the withdrawal of the breath of life bestowed upon Adam.[3] Total obliteration is, in fact, the end prophesised for the king of Tyre, in Ezekiel's use of the traditional Eden theme.[4] But there is a subtler and more insidious sanction too, the hardening of the heart, whereby the corruption of sin penetrates to the core of man's being and destroys that attitude of submission to the divine will which is the very essence of creatureliness.

'Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you', says Jeremiah. 'This is your evil, and it is bitter; it has reached your very heart'.[5] The evil is twofold, the interior sin and the exterior sanction, which fuse together in a terrible image of divine wrath: 'Your wickedness will chasten you, and your apostasy reprove you',[6] 'for I will pour out their wickedness upon them'.[7] Hosea we have

---

[1] Gen 1, 2. [2] Jer 4, 23–26. [3] Gen 2, 7; cf Ps 104, 29 ff; Job 34, 14.
[4] Ezek 28, 11–19. [5] Jer 4, 18. [6] Jer 2, 19. [7] Jer 14, 16.

seen, urged Israel to sow justice and reap the fruit of steadfast love, 'for it is the time to seek the Lord that he may come and rain salvation upon you'.[1] But when, instead, Israel ploughs iniquity and reaps injustice, God rains down, not salvation, but their own wickedness.

With the corruption of the heart, then, uncreation has penetrated into the innermost recesses of man's being, and Ezekiel sees that there is only one solution:

> Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God; so turn and live.[2]

Riddled with corruption, the old heart is dead or dying and the new one will be made a special object of God's recreative power.

The people of God

'And the Lord said, Call his name Not-my-people, for you are not my people and for you I am no more'.[3] Each of Hosea's three children was given a name more terrible than the last. Not-my-people is the third: the name means total rejection. We have already seen how Israel was constituted as a nation by her allegiance to Yahweh: she was a people only in so far as she was the people of Yahweh. Both of the elements in the initial act of creation, the covenant itself and the revelation of the name of Yahweh on which the covenant depended, are made null and void. Yahweh, who had already withdrawn his mercy (Hosea's daughter had been given the startlingly harsh name of 'Not pitied'), now allows the people he loved to disintegrate into the chaotic state from which he had drawn them.

This sentence of damnation – for that is what it amounts to – is underlined by the words that follow: 'for you I am no more'.[4] The constitution of Israel depended upon her knowledge of Yahweh, who revealed himself in the act of Israel's creation. Now even this is denied: 'for you I am no more'. The assurance of Yahweh's intimate presence, his rock-like solidity, his fidelity, his life-giving force, has

---

[1] Hos 10, 12. [2] Ezek 18, 31–32. [3] Hos 1, 9.

[4] This reading, supported by most hebrew MSS as well as by the Septuagint, is almost certainly correct. I owe this observation, as well as most of what is of value in this article, to my teacher, Fr Jacques Guillet.

been withdrawn. His constant reply to prayers of supplication and distress: 'Fear not, I am with you', will be heard no more. Prayers will be left unanswered, for the world, Israel's world, is from now on empty of God. The stubborn idolatry of the israelites has borne sinister fruit: they have appealed to Baal: to Baal they shall go, and from him they will hear no voice and no answer, nothing but the emptiness at which Elijah mocked: 'he is musing or busy or away on a journey or asleep'.[1]

None of the terrible denunciations of the later prophets were to exceed the bleak finality of this single verse of Hosea. The desolation of the land, the dispersal of the people, the destruction of the temple, these are relatively light punishments. They are external sufferings, attached no doubt to the original sentence, but not fully explaining it. For the real penalty of idolatry is death, and when death has struck at the heart of a tree, sooner or later its leaves and branches will wither and die.

NEW CREATION

In the promise of a new creation, strands which have up to now been considered apart are woven together in a pattern of striking novelty. (Particularly important is the new role attributed to the Spirit, the gift of God to his people and the agent of a general renewal). At the centre of the revelation stands the new covenant: 'I will be their God and they shall be my people' – the same promise as that made long ago to Moses but repeated under different conditions and with a new emphasis. Balancing and supporting this central theme are two others: the inward and the outward. With the theme of 'the new heart', the work of creation is explicitly associated for the first time with the depths of man's being, the root and core of the human person. At the same time, by the renewal of the natural universe, a harmony of limitless extent and duration is restored, which, however, is no longer simply the guarantee of God's new covenant with his people, but its consequence and exterior manifestation (just as the new heart is its interior manifestation).

Never before had the vision of God's universal sovereignty and might been so complete and so compact. Ranging over the whole of the natural universe, piercing deep into the heart of man, establishing a new covenant with his people, God reveals – and the

[1] I Kg 18, 27.

revelation is also new – the power, nature and function of his Spirit. Only the Spirit of God could have an influence at once so wide, so intimate and so enduring: 'When thou sendest forth thy Spirit they are created; and thou dost renew the face of the earth'.[1]

The prophecy of the new covenant is fulfilled in the Church, the new Israel, the new people of God. As 'the sacrament or effective sign of intimate union with God and of unity for the whole human race',[2] the Church is the first recipient of the spiritual renewal brought about by Christ. The sanctity of the individual, his new creation in the Spirit, is in a sense secondary, the interior effect and manifestation of his allegiance to Christ in his Church; and similarly the renewal of creation, of which the sacramental symbol is the mystical body, is the exterior effect and manifestation of the new covenant. The public and social is logically prior both to the interior, private recreation and to the exterior cosmic recreation. This said, we must be careful not to exaggerate the importance of the social element at the expense of the personal relationship of the individual with Christ. In the new covenant each individual fulfils, at least partially, the Old Testament figure of the people of God, just as Christ himself did. In the prophets of the new covenant there is a greater awareness of the individual than there had been before, and it would be a retrograde step to sacrifice the personal elements in, say the liturgy of the sacraments, so as to make of them simply expressions of corporate worship.

The natural universe

In Jeremiah, the cosmos remains in a sense outside the new creation, as a witness, an external guarantee.[3] Second Isaiah, on the other hand, for whom the original exodus was itself a sort of creation, readily pictures the imminent return from Babylon as a divine act affecting the whole of the natural universe.[4] But this is not all. Following in the same tradition, but enriching and deepening it, another poet gives a new content to the vision of renewal. 'The sun shall be no more your light by day . . . but the Lord will be your everlasting light'.[5]

The divinization of the cosmos? At any rate the first glimmerings of the idea. Just as the nation of Israel is the work of God's hands, 'the shoot of his planting', so the created luminaries are to be transfigured by an interior light that is the light of God himself.

[1] Ps 104, 30. [2] *Lumen Gentium*, para 1. [3] Jer 31, 35–36.
[4] Isai 43, 18–20; 55, 13. [5] Isai 60, 19–20.

The individual man

The interior renewal affects the heart. In a passage that anticipates by two centuries the exilic prophecies of the new covenant, Yahweh entices his people back and promises to 'speak to her heart';[1] and the great message of comfort and forgiveness that heralds second Isaiah's promise of a new deliverance and a new creation is to be addressed 'to the heart of Jerusalem'.[2] God promises to give his people 'one heart and one way, that they may fear me for ever'[3] and to remove their heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh.[4] But the key-text here, linking inseparably the new heart with the new creation, is the prayer of the *Miserere*.

This psalm has two main sections, each beginning with a direct appeal to God, and a short coda. Without going into a detailed exegesis, we may say that the first half of the psalm is chiefly concerned with God's merciful forgiveness and the total absolution of sin, the second half with a complete spiritual renewal:

> Create in me a clean heart, O God,
> and put a new and right spirit within me;
> Cast me not away from thy presence,
> and take not thy holy Spirit from me.

Nowhere else in the Old Testament is there a more intimate association between the spirit of man and the Holy Spirit of God. The clean heart is one free from sin, yet 'broken and contrite', profoundly aware of a sinful past. With such an attitude of sorrow and repentance, accompanied by an intimate sense of the presence of God, the psalmist at last dares to offer sacrifice, confident that what he is about to do is no meaningless ritual, no empty sham thoroughly displeasing to God, but the external expression of an inner attitude of sorrow, humility and worship. The psalm thus anticipates the inner meaning of the mass, the sacrifice of the new covenant, whose celebration also demands the creation of a clean heart within those who offer it.

Though Christ our Lord and no one else possesses the Spirit by natural right since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, still, the promise had already been made: 'my spirit which is upon you and my words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart out of your mouth . . . from this time forth and for evermore'.[5] To utter the words of God himself and to breathe his Spirit, these are the

[1] Hos 2, 14. [2] Isai 40, 2. [3] Jer 32, 39. [4] Ezek 36, 26.
[5] Isai 59, 21.

precise terms of the new covenant. And the knowledge of Yahweh, an essential element of the old covenant, promised to the whole of Israel through the mouth of Hosea,[1] is now given directly to each and every individual.[2]

The people of God

It should not be necessary to prolong our examination of the numerous texts in which the promise 'I will be their God and they will be my people' is renewed. They are in any case authoritatively summed up in St. John's apocalyptic vision of the new Jerusalem, which rings out a triumphant confirmation of promise.[3] Established once and for all by the sacrifice of Christ, the new covenant has yet to make its full effects felt. The presence of the Spirit guarantees to the people of God an inner power of perpetual renewal: when this penetrates to the heart of every individual and extends outwards so as to transform the whole cosmos, then and not before then will the eschatological vision of St John have been completely realized.

Conclusion

Perhaps enough has been said to justify the pattern followed in this article: creation, uncreation and new creation. It now remains to see its relevance for the life of the ordinary christian. The second aspect, uncreation, may be unfamiliar to some; to ignore it altogether is to fail to do justice to the strong element of negativity in the biblical account of God's dealings with his people. At the beginning of his prophetic career Jeremiah was entrusted with a definite task of destroying and of building.[4]

> Behold I have put my words in your mouth.
> See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms
> to pluck up and to break down,
> to destroy and to overthrow,
> to build and to plant.[5]

No one could accuse Jeremiah of neglecting the first part of his commission: amid the prevailing gloom of the first twenty-five or so chapters, the words of encouragement glimmer far apart. In the story of the potter[6] the prophet recalls the central message given to him and interprets it as an either/or that makes Yahweh's blessing

[1] Hos 2, 20. [2] Jer 31, 34. [3] Apoc 21, 1–4. [4] Jer 1, 10.
[5] Jer 1, 10. [6] Jer 18

depend upon Israel's repentance. In the vision of the two baskets of figs[1] he divides up, as it were, the curse and the blessing, applying the curse to those left behind in Palestine, the blessing to the exiles in Babylon. But in the Book of Consolation,[2] the prophecy of the new covenant, the message is taken as a whole, and the positive task – to build and to plant – is seen to come after, even in some mysterious way to emerge out of, the destruction and desolation that have preceded it. The stark either/or that made Yahweh's fidelity conditional upon that of Israel has given way to a before/after wherein repentance is no longer a condition but a promise and a gift. The infidelity of Israel, once a possibility, now a fact, has been punished and forgiven. Not forgotten (that way lies illusion) but forgiven. And sin punished and forgiven constitutes the 'before' of the new creation. The 'after' is the other branch of the alternative, fidelity to God's law, under a new guise. Once a condition, it is now an object of promise, to be inscribed upon the heart as a gift and a grace, guaranteed by the spirit of God himself. The laws written on stone were a reminder and a warning: the law of the spirit, written on the heart, is pure grace.

The pattern of innocence, guilt and pardon characteristic of the bible is illuminated from within by the revelation of Christ. Of few passages in the Old Testament is this more true than of this one from Hosea: 'Come let us return to the Lord, for he has torn, that he may heal us, he has stricken, and he will bind us up; After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him'.[3]

The pattern that is only dimly visible in the Old Testament shines out clearly when worded by the life and teachings of the divine Logos, of him who is in his very person the plan and project of God. In this article we have seen how the essential relationship of creature to creator is structured by a dialectical movement that passes from good to evil and finally to evil overcome by good. But only the New Testament can show us to what lengths God is prepared to go in maintaining this pattern, and what is its ultimate significance. His judgement on the world (both the value he sets upon it and the sentence he pronounces upon it), is exhibited in the crucifixion: this is how far evil is allowed to go, this is the full meaning of uncreation – the death of God.

But the *kenosis* (emptying) promises *pleroma* (fullness), death

---

[1] Jer 24. [2] Jer 31 ff. [3] Hos 6, 1–2.

precedes resurrection and sadness joy. The revelation of the New Testament is that life is born out of the womb of death, that Christ's defeat was really a victory, his shame a glory. Dying, he conquered death and death's attendant satellites, weakness, suffering and old age, to make of them a new constellation, shining with his divine life. They remain, obstinately evil. The christian life is not free from pain, nor is its essential pattern easier than before. Christ came to transfigure our lives, not, curiously, to change them. That is to say the same elements are there, only the configuration is different. If Marx were right and religion were indeed an opium, it would deaden the nerve and kill the pain. But the true christian, like his Master, is exposed to suffering and his sensitivity is heightened, not dulled, by the faith he practises.

What, then, has changed? Simply that the forces of destruction may be turned upon what is bad in us so as to allow the good to emerge. This is the fulfilment of the symbolism of the Red Sea and the meaning of baptism. Through the power of God the primordial waters of chaos were first parted to allow the fleeing israelites to emerge as a people, and then released so as to overwhelm and engulf their pursuers. The desert, haunt of evil monsters, was also a privileged place for meeting Yahweh. Darkness, symbol of gloom and of the power of the evil one, was transfigured by Christ's passion into a source of light. *Nox illuminatio mea!*

Plunged by the christian sacrament into Christ's death and resurrection, we must expect to feel some of its effects in our lives. The uncreation and recreation transmitted to us at baptism is a continuous process. 'Become what you are', says St Paul equivalently in the great chapter on baptism.[1] Allow Christ's death and resurrection to penetrate into your lives so that into your whole experience of dying, your whole experience of the effects of evil, may be transfused the life-giving blood that Christ shed upon the cross. Through the sacrament received in faith passes the creative power of the Spirit, renewing the face of the earth and continuing to transform our lives: 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, the new has come'.[2]

[1] Rom 6. [2] 2 Cor 5, 17.