

# A GREAT AND TERRIBLE GOD

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**A**S WITH MAN'S GOVERNMENTS so with his gods: he gets the kinds he deserves because he makes them in his own image. This can be harmless enough. In the naive imagery of Genesis God walks in the garden to take the evening air, but even the highly sophisticated and very orthodox Ezekiel saw his God in the form of a man.<sup>1</sup> After all, the human mind stubbornly refuses to work without the aid of images and it could do far worse than accompany its intuition of the divine image with the image of a gentle gardener or a majestic king.

This is precisely the problem. The human mind *has* done worse. The evil is not so much certain forms of idolatry, the representation of the gods in animal forms, for instance; though this could be dangerous.<sup>2</sup> However, these forms could symbolize a value, courage, prudence, fidelity and so on, as they do in our familiar fables. The real evil comes when men fashion their gods completely in their own image. They tend not so much to idolize as to magnify. They attribute all human qualities to their gods, licentiousness, cruelty, cunning, cowardice, as well as the more admirable aspects of human nature, and they attribute all these to the gods in heroic proportions. The sexual appetite of Zeus is insatiable, and the cruelty of the plague gods of ancient Syria and Babylonia or of the major gods of Mexico and so on seems limitless. Once the gods have been fashioned in the image of the worst in man, the results are predictable. Men will be like god and so these gods become models of behaviour. The wild and aberrant sexuality of the fertility cults and the incredible cruelty of certain sacrificial practices are eloquent testimony to what happens when man imagines his gods, too, like himself, and then lives according to these fantasies.

This is the background we must keep in mind if we are to appreciate what the divinely guided education of the chosen people recorded in scripture accomplished. The fearsome and angry God

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<sup>1</sup> Ezek 1, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Wis 13, 14.

of the bible may sometimes seem to us far too human, but actually he is a God who has been made unlike man to a remarkable degree. This represents an advance in man's knowledge of God which was indispensable. To allow for belief in one God alone, for example, it was necessary for men to realize that the divine, unlike man, needed no family, no clan nor wife nor children. To allow belief in a god who could be fair and just, it was necessary to realize that the divine, unlike man, was 'no respecter of persons'.<sup>1</sup> The process could not stop here either. It could not merely deny certain human needs and frailties in God. Man must learn that God is not made in the image of man at all. He is the 'totally other', at once the centre of our being and yet utterly beyond us. It was necessary that the process go on until centuries of purifying the concept of God yielded the god of the philosopher: good, unmoved and unmovable, yet managing the cosmos.

Still, the flight into the empyrean of the philosophers, even though it continue the scriptural process, has its dangers. Paschal's complaint that this god of the philosophers is not the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob keeps its point. Even Aristotle thought about his ultimate Unmoved Mover, but he worshipped the mythical Apollo who could at least be felt as some kind of person to whom a man could relate. Thus one danger in the process of purifying the idea of God from too human a character: a remote God meaningless on anything but an abstract intellectual level.

There is another danger: the ostrich complex. One avoids hard but bracing truths about the divine, whatever their source. The oh-so-loving and gentle god of much 'personalist' philosophy-theology is as unreal and as unbiblical as the other gods of the philosophers. No man really has known God without fearing him from the depths of his being. In all human experience of the divine it fascinates and draws and at the same time frightens and repels. It is the object of awe in the true sense of that word. The reverse side of the divine love displayed on the cross is that demand for total dedication that made the cross inevitable.

This is true even when we prescind from revelation. Any refusal to look at the disagreeable side of things leaves us with an unrealistic view of them. In our case the tension of love and fear in every encounter with the divine is a real experience, and it is as new and as old as man himself. It is certainly not confined to

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<sup>1</sup> Deut 10, 17.

biblical revelation. The poet Blake felt it, however he may have interpreted the experience he symbolizes under the figures of the tiger and the lamb:

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

When the stars threw down their spears  
And water'd heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the lamb make thee?

We and all creation may well be moved to tears by some of the aspects of God's work. It does include the fearsome with the tender.

We may not like this. A world of tension is no easy place, and we suspect that the God whom we know through this world he has made can be no easy person. It is so much easier to emphasize the comfortable aspects. We prefer to dwell on the picture of the wolf (or the tiger) lying down with the lamb.<sup>1</sup> However, as Chesterton points out, this turning of the wolf into a lamb represents rank imperialism on the part of the lamb! We want an indispensable but uncomfortable element of the world as we know it to 'denature' itself for our mental ease. If we insist on this one-sided, comfortable view, we can create for ourselves a thoroughly unreal world. Since our knowledge of God must begin with our knowledge of our own world, such an unrealistic view of the world is an unreal and unnatural basis for an experience of the divine. Can this bring us to the real God?

It is a healthy exercise to try to imagine this relaxed and comfortable world, this world without friction, and the God who goes with it, as long as we know what we are doing. Such an effort of imagination, if it is thorough and consistent, can help us to see what seems superficially to be a land of dreams has aspects of nightmare. In fact, the effort has been made often enough and results are not really encouraging, if one thinks hard about this world and pictures it vividly enough to react to it:

So this is the kingdom of heaven, Father,  
Just as you planned it.

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<sup>1</sup> Isai 11, 6.

Every immortal cliché in place.  
 Lambs frisk. Wheat ripples.  
 Sunbeams dance. *Something is wrong.*  
 The light: flat. The air: sterile.  
 There is nothing to dream.  
 Nowhere to go. Nothing to know.

This is the trouble with the elysian fields. They are incomplete and dull. One may well ask:

And these creatures of your kingdom . . .  
 Are they created in your image, also?  
 You are serenity, but rage  
 As well. *I know.* I have borne it!  
 You are hope, but also regret.  
*I know.* You have regretted me.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to say that heaven, the beatific vision of christian doctrine, is dull or impossible. On the contrary, we must try to understand the thing itself which stands behind the latinized phrase. It is a feeble effort to talk about a vitality so great that it produces a happiness beyond imagining. But this is not what is in question here. What we are concerned with is this world and the God we know in and through it. The problem in obtaining a balanced view of the divine does not lie in God. He remains what he is: the unchanging mystery worthy of love and awe. The problem is in us. How can we bring ourselves to face this mystery? It is uncomfortable, and so we try to think it away; but the results we see as unsatisfying.

If we turn to the bible the problem is the same. We are confronted with a revelation which is not always pleasant and comfortable. It is very tempting to avoid the confrontation, to dismiss as mere figures of speech the 'hard sayings' which picture an angry God, full of violence and indignation. They seem so very much the product of a primitive mentality, sometimes almost ludicrous in their picture of an angry old man breathing fire and smoke. It is much more comforting to dwell on a God full of love and generosity, and nothing else. But this will not do at all. This is not at all the God of the bible. According to the scriptures, above all else he is real, not in the sense of a remote but fundamental 'ground of being',

<sup>1</sup> Lines from the text by Leonard Bernstein for his Symphony No 3, 'Kaddish'.

but someone who is intensely involved in our lives. Yet this someone is divine, and as always with the divine this means attraction *joined with* fear towards the fascinating but fearful mystery. Moses was irresistibly drawn towards the burning bush, but he could only approach in fear, trembling and humbled,<sup>1</sup> for the God he was coming to know was a God of wrath. He was a saviour, but a saviour who aroused fear even at the moment when he finally saves and wins the people's faith: 'Israel saw the mighty blow Yahweh laid on the egyptians and they feared Yahweh and believed in Yahweh'.<sup>2</sup>

The story is much the same when God reveals himself to the whole of his people at Sinai. There was no question of refusing this God, but neither was there question of getting too near him. The people were content to let Moses approach the divine alone.<sup>3</sup> The cause of the fear in this case is presented in simple, even primitive, terms. The people are pictured as being frightened off by thunder and lightning, but of course this is only a means of expression. The basic fear stems from the certitude that no man can come near to God in any circumstances and live.<sup>4</sup> Thus when David was moving the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, the israelite Uzzah accompanied it, and he had the best of intentions when he touched it: to steady it lest it should fall from its cart. But the ark was sacred, the mysterious symbol of God's presence among his people, and Uzzah's was a profane hand; so that he was struck down on the spot. This is doubtless an extreme expression, and an extremely naive one, of the uncanny nature of the divine, and of the awe and even terror which it consequently arouses. Nevertheless it is truer to the human experience of the divine mystery than any attempt at an expression of man's relationship to God (and such attempts are legion) which implies a 'nice' God and a thoroughly comfortable feeling in his presence.

Still, does this solve anything? We have been dealing with man's response to God. It is easy enough to understand that man will be attracted to and yet wary of the divine mystery, since this is his reaction to the unknown in general. The bible is simply showing this universal human characteristic at work among the hebrews. The trouble is, it goes much further. It speaks not only of man's reaction to the unknown, it also speaks positively of a God terrible

<sup>1</sup> Exod 3, 2-7.

<sup>2</sup> Exod 14, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Exod 20, 15-18.

<sup>4</sup> Exod 33, 20; 2 Sam 6, 6-7.

in his wrath, a God who can regret that he ever created man, and who can act on that regret. How is this God to be reconciled with the impossible, all-knowing being which is God?

We can get some inkling of an answer from a closer study of certain of the Old Testament texts. For one thing, they will teach us that in the Old Testament this element of awesomeness, of being dangerous, inextricably linked up with the true God is not merely a matter of primitive panic before the mysterious, the irrationally tabu. A major aspect of God which commanded awe was precisely the anger of the divine judge. This was greater when directed towards the people who were closest to him and so knew him best. Naturally enough: sin is sin, but as a personal affront it is far worse when committed by those who have been favoured with a special intimacy with Yahweh. Therefore the judgment called forth by the sin is the more fierce. This is magnificently expressed in the prophecy of Amos.<sup>1</sup> Six enemies of Israel are condemned for their cruel sins, but these stanzas are simply the build-up for the climax:

Because of the three transgressions of Israel,  
 And because of the four, I will not save it;  
 They have sold the innocent for silver,  
 And the needy in exchange for a pair of sandals . . .  
 Garments taken in pledge they spread out  
 Beside every altar,  
 And the wine of those who have been unfairly fined  
 they drink  
 In the houses of their gods . . .  
 Yet I brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
 And led you through the wilderness for forty years,  
 That you might seize the land of the amorites.  
 I also raised up prophets among your sons . . .  
 Is this not the truth, O israelites?  
 Behold I am going to make a groaning among you,  
 As a wagon groans that is loaded with sheaves.  
 The swift shall not flee,  
 And the strong shall not exert his strength.  
 And the warrior shall not save himself.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Amos 1, 3-2, 3; 2, 6-16.

<sup>2</sup> Amos 2, 6-14. In regard to the omission of 2, 4-5, from our consideration of the poem as a whole, note that critics generally agree that this oracle against Judah is not part of the original composition of the prophet.

Just because Yahweh had been closer to this people, loved them more deeply, and helped them more, he expects a more faithful and loving response. He is rightfully angry when that response fails: 'You only have I chosen of all the nations of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities'.<sup>1</sup> Or is this being all too human? Is God suffering from mere pique? Hardly, for he is never petty, as we learn from the divine anger revealed in texts like Deuteronomy<sup>2</sup> and the prophecy of Habakkuk.

The first of these reveals a simple pattern, the complaint of the rejected lover or, better here, parent. The pattern is the same in either case. Yahweh first protests the special attention he has shown to his beloved people. His might sets him above everything, natural forces and superhuman powers, so that he can control the affairs of men and of powers greater than men; and he has used this divine might to the advantage of his chosen people. It is he who has established nations and appointed a protector for each:

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance,  
when he separated the sons of men,  
he fixed the bounds of the peoples  
according to the number of the sons of God.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the other nations have been allotted lesser guides while Yahweh himself had taken his own people in hand, and he has not been niggardly with his charges. He has saved his people and made them rich.<sup>4</sup> And the result? The favoured people grows complacent and careless. It forgets its maker. God has personally chosen this people, but the people in its pride has forgotten him and turns its back on him to seek other gods.<sup>5</sup> This is to reject his love with a vengeance!

And now this loving God must change. He must judge this people. However, this is no impersonal courtroom scene. The word 'jealousy' cannot be avoided,<sup>6</sup> for even as judge, this God is primarily one whose love has been rejected. Indeed, immediately before the judgment on Israel we find the strongest affirmation of divine love in the whole passage. In Deuteronomy Yahweh is 'the rock that bore thee . . . the God who was in labour with thee'.<sup>7</sup> The imagery is surprisingly strong and highly emotional. The verb here

<sup>1</sup> Amos 3, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Deut 32, 1-43.

<sup>3</sup> Deut 32, 8, reading with the greek and Qumran texts 'sons of God' in place of the 'sons of Israel' in the hebrew text.

<sup>4</sup> Deut 32, 9-14.

<sup>5</sup> Deut 32, 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> Deut 32, 16, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Deut 32, 18.

translated 'was in labour' means literally 'to writhe in the pangs of childbirth'. Such imagery belongs with Hosea<sup>1</sup> and Isaiah;<sup>2</sup> the strongest expressions of God's tender love for his people, the child which he loves so much because it has cost him so much.

This, however, does not obviate the need for judgment. On the contrary, the sentence is fearful: the total destruction of the nation. This may again sound too human, as though it were the blind emotional reaction of outraged love rather than the objective decision of a judge. But it is exactly here that hope lies. This judge cannot simply forget the case when he has rendered his decision. Because he loves, judgment is not the end. It is made only to educate and bring the people back to where their true good lies:

For Yahweh will vindicate his people  
and have compassion on his servants,  
when he sees that their power is gone . . .  
'See now that I, even I, am he,  
and there is no God beside me . . .'<sup>3</sup>

This educational purpose is even clearer in the prophecy of Habakkuk. This book is short but complex and difficult of interpretation. Still, a certain sequence and a learning process seems indicated. The book opens with a prophetic complaint: Yahweh has allowed the assyrian to oppress his people. Then comes the promise that the chaldeans will come and destroy the oppressor.<sup>4</sup> But then the complaint against oppression resumes, presumably this time against the new overlords, the chaldeans, who have turned out to be as bad as their predecessors.

This renewed complaint receives a novel answer. The prophet is commissioned to write out for all to see and learn: the righteous shall achieve the good life because of his fidelity.<sup>5</sup> This is the religious heart of a message couched in the platitudes of ancient wisdom literature. One cannot expect salvation from imperial politics. It lies rather within one's self, in a man's personal fidelity

<sup>1</sup> Hos 11.

<sup>2</sup> Isai 49, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Deut 32, 36-39.

<sup>4</sup> There is nothing like agreement on the interpretation or the literary unity of Habakkuk. As opposed to the interpretation followed here, in which the chaldeans are first the instrument of justice (cf 1, 8) against Assyria and then become oppressors themselves, it has often been argued that the enemy is always the chaldeans, or the assyrians, or even the greeks, while the psalm in chapter three is often held to be an independent composition. Even if this were the case, which is by no means certain, in the present book it performs a definite function in answering the problems raised earlier, and so must be taken as an integral part of the inspired book.

<sup>5</sup> Hab 2, 4.

to the God of Israel. This is part of the basic demand of Deuteronomy,<sup>1</sup> but here it is more clearly a personal responsibility.

But this is not yet the end. Habakkuk goes on with yet another series of comments on oppression. This time they are not complaints but warnings of woes to come upon the oppressor. Nevertheless, this indicates that the problem remains even after the revelation about the just man,<sup>2</sup> for the just man suffers as much as the rest of the people from the oppressions which affect the whole community.<sup>3</sup> Thus the way is finally open for the full answer: having learned that neither political power nor personal effort at fidelity can achieve final salvation, one must acknowledge that only Yahweh saves:

I will rejoice in Yahweh,  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.  
Yahweh, the Lord, is my strength:  
he makes my feet like the feet of a stag,  
he makes me walk on my holy places.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately we must learn to rely on God alone. Given man as he is, not as he might be, but as he is with his pettiness, his selfishness, his weakness, it appears that this reliance could be learned only through this educative process described in scripture. Only this sequence of punishment and repentance could teach man where his true good lies and so make him ready for the greater gifts God has to offer.

Now it is easy to conjure up a host of objections to all this. For one thing, it is all Old Testament and not New Testament. Have we not learned from the latter of the God of love? Of course, but this is not new. The New Testament revelation of divine love flows from the Old Testament's message of loving kindness such as we have seen in Deuteronomy.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, just as in the Old Testament, this love is not something which can accept any slight, any insult, any unfaithfulness from the beloved. In fine, it is not a passionless colourless 'good fellowship'. It is true love and therefore demanding, intensely demanding. Jesus called for a love which demanded dedication even in the face of torture and death without promising anything beyond the special personal relationship with

<sup>1</sup> Deut 32.

<sup>2</sup> Hab 2, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Hab 2, 8, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Hab 3, 18-19. The clause about the feet of the stag means that God makes it possible to take part in the temple worship, to make joyful pilgrimage; even, perhaps, return from exile.

<sup>5</sup> Deut 32.

him, the suffering Messiah, that this dedication would bring. This is surely all that he offers the sons of Zebedee who seek a special place with him.<sup>1</sup> Again, God in the New Testament just as in the Old, and like the divine in all human experience, seems arbitrary in granting his favour. He chooses whom he will choose and rewards whom he wishes to reward.<sup>2</sup> He also punishes harshly those who come near to him profanely, without full sincerity, with the desire to take out a little insurance for themselves while seeming to give themselves to him entirely.<sup>3</sup>

But does this really save the case? Does it not still reflect the ignorant man's fear of the unknown and his personification of his fears? Have we not progressed beyond this? In a sense we have, but at a price. For one thing, as we gain more and more control over our environment, we do not feel the apparently numinous so often. We may still fear lightning, but what we fear is electric voltage, not a mysterious divine aggressor who uses it.

Then, and I think more important, have we not transferred much of the sense of the numinous to man himself? We hope for more and more from ourselves. Man and his works can bring about the conquest of disease and perhaps even death – we hope. He is able to travel to the reaches of space, and these are but hints at the list of accomplishments and the hopes of modern mankind. On the other hand we fear ourselves. We can destroy the world by fire without waiting for the Lord to do it (though who would remain to rebuild the New Jerusalem afterwards is in doubt). Mankind in his world of nature and science is the object of much fascination and terror once reserved for the divine.

Where, then, is the place for God? If we have really understood the message of the bible we would not be asking the question. The whole point there is that God is not remote. He is intensely involved in all natural and all human processes. He demanded of his people a total devotion to himself which must result in social justice: that is, a proper provision for all his children. Even the complaint that his people had deserted him for other gods usually means something quite this-worldly, for the typical desertion was the turning to other gods as sources of agricultural fertility when it was only Yahweh who supplied the needed increase in grain and grape and oil.<sup>4</sup> Total commitment to God was total commitment to a programme for order in society and in nature.

<sup>1</sup> Mk 10, 35-45 and parallels.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 20, 1-16.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 5, 1-11.

<sup>4</sup> Hos 2, 5-8.

This has never been forgotten either. We have always taught the doctrines of divine providence and divine conservation of the universe. But these are very cool media of expression. The Prime Mover is way out there, guiding things from his remote solitude. At least so we tend to feel in response to much teaching about God and his relation to the universe. Perhaps our failure has been a lack of a true realization of the meaning of the axiom that all that is good in man and nature is but a reflection of what is perfect in God. Passionate involvement and true love of one's work in this world are obviously a good thing in man; so they too must be perfect in God. The God of the bible is real, a person, the ultimate and true personality, and therefore transcendent in all good qualities, including passionate devotion to love and justice. For us men, such passionate involvement means constant give and take. It must include frustration and anger, forgiveness and renewed love. How can we understand it in God in any other terms? We cannot, and we must not, be so afraid of the terms that we equivalently deny the involvement, for God is involved. He loves, he demands, he is part of all that we do. If we are to realize this and know him, we must always be drawn by his love and be afraid of his anger. Only thus shall we come to know the transcendentally wrathful and transcendentally loving God of biblical revelation.