

# THE NEWNESS OF GOD

By JOHN L. MCKENZIE

*Do you not know? Have you not heard?  
Yahweh is the eternal God, who has created the ends of the earth;  
He does not faint nor grow weary; his mind is inscrutable.  
He strengthens the weary, and to the feeble he gives power.  
Youths faint and grow weary, and young men stumble and fall;  
But those who hope in Yahweh will regain strength; they will sprout  
wings like eagles;  
They will run without weariness; they will walk without tiring.<sup>1</sup>*

THE EDITORS OF this journal suggested the title of this article; and when I began to approach the writing of the article, the topic turned out to be so paradoxical that it was difficult to find an approach. The proper adjective for God, we know, is eternal; it is only when I thought of the topic of newness that I realized that for most of us, if not for all of us, eternal means old. Yet even the superficially trained theologian knows that the definition of eternity is intended to exclude either old or recent; the eternal is simply not measured by time. We are, however, unable to escape our imagination. God was there before anything else, and therefore he is older. The image must be the image of an old gentleman, even if the image is false.

Yet if one attempts to reason his way out of age as a synonym of eternity, he is likely to fall into the trap of static immobility. The eternal now freezes, so to speak, before our eyes; God is saved from age and decay because he does not move or change. The imagination rebels at this because we know no life which is not motion and change; deny motion and change to God, and we cannot think of him as alive. To the imagination eternal death, which is indeed static immobility, is easier to picture than eternal life. Yet this is not the reality of God either; and while this reality always escapes us, we do not wish to cherish a collection of false images.

Does this idea of newness illuminate the idea of eternity? And is it a biblical idea? The word 'new' does not appear in the Old Testa-

---

<sup>1</sup> Isai 40, 28-31 (Anchor Bible).

ment as a qualification of Yahweh himself. As to the meaning of the word, 'new' is not without its ambiguities. It can signify untried or inexperienced, and these are not desirable qualities. Greek had two words by which the ambiguity of the english 'new' is avoided. *Kainos* is the unused and the unspoiled, 'brand new' of popular speech, the pleasant newness which one sees in an object newly purchased and just unwrapped. *Neos* is the untried or the inexperienced, the new teacher or the new upstairs maid. When we think of God as old, it is the age opposed to *neos*, not the age opposed to *kainos* which we have in mind. We think of God as true and tested, but not as worn out.

The newness of God means that he is eternally *kainos*; but in greek *kainos* is more properly applied to objects than to persons; just as the two senses of 'new' mentioned above refer more properly to objects and to persons respectively. Our own language would prefer 'eternally young' to 'eternally new', but here too the ambiguity of words trap us; we do not wish to think of God as the eternal adolescent. Eternally young is more a negative than a positive designation; it denies slowness, feebleness, progressive deterioration, loss of interest and ambition. We recognize that some things like wisdom are associated with age, not with youth. But the young have a new life in the sense that their lives are unused and unspoiled; their potentialities are untouched, it is not yet known what limits they have. Age has done whatever it will accomplish, and it has no hope of doing what it has not already done.

Up to this point we are playing with semantics. I think this is not only excusable but necessary when we talk about God. Since God lies outside direct experience, we can speak of him only by analogy. The history of heresy is a recital of false analogies. All analogies are imperfect, and all apt analogies must be employed, even if it seems impossible to join them into a logical unity. Hence we can attempt to use the idea of newness, in spite of the ambiguities already noticed.

There is another kind of newness, derived rather than primary, which can be described as the ability to do new things. In the order of friendship, for example, an old friend is a more cherished friend than a new friend. But our deepest and strongest friendships are sometimes formed with people whom we never know so well that they become completely predictable. They are unable to reveal the whole depth of their persons simply because the depth is too profound for easy revelation. These are the people who never lose their ability to surprise us; the richness of their personal resources enables them to do and to say things that are new. One can illustrate from

professional entertainers. Many years ago Charles Chaplin was highly esteemed as a comedian and an artist with an extraordinarily rich imagination. Yet one never saw him in a new character; one saw the same character in new situations. One could hardly demand more from a professional actor, yet we do demand more. At the risk of irreverence and of departing from my own professional skill, I remember remarking, when I saw Sir Laurence Olivier's Hamlet, that it was interesting to see Hamlet played by Henry V. It would never occur to me to make the same smart remark about a performance by Sir Alec Guinness.

If we wish to speak about the newness of God in biblical terms, I think we shall speak of him as supremely and eternally able to surprise us. He is never exhausted, never becomes predicatable, never tedious. He remains always the same, and always open to deeper knowledge. Even before we begin any discussion in detail, one can see in the numerous and confusing, even contradictory images of God which circulate in the popular mind, that God is subtle, whatever else is said about him; and it is dangerous to patronize him by talking as if one had gone to school with him. He has as many disguises as Pimpernel, and it seems that each man chooses the disguise which suits his own needs best. Will the real God please stand up? This is equivalently the question which many israelite poets and prophets asked in the course of the Old Testament.

The prophet quoted at the beginning of this article is closer to the idea of the newness of God than any other biblical writer, and we shall learn if we consider his response to an entirely new situation. The verses are quoted from Second Isaiah, the name given by critics to the anonymous prophet whose words are preserved in Isaiah 40-55. This prophet spoke in the years 550-545 B.C.; this date can be established with some assurance from the contents of the chapters. He lived with the judahite community in Babylon, a community established by the deportation of large numbers of judahites after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. To understand the novelty of what he said it is necessary to understand the situation in which he spoke.

The history of the ancient near east from the ninth century to the middle of the sixth century B.C. is mainly the history of the assyrian empire and the more short-lived babylonian empire. In the growth of these empires a large number of smaller nations were crushed. Some of their names are known from the Bible, such as the moabites, ammonites, edomites, the city-states of Damascus, Hamath, and Arvad; others are known from assyrian and babylonian records.

Israel and Judah had been as effectively crushed as any of these peoples; at the time when Second Isaiah spoke there was no more reason to expect an israelite-judahite resurgence than there was to expect a resurgence of the moabites or the ammonites. These people as such had ceased to exist, and they have not arisen since. The world of large states does not have room for small states, whatever be their antiquity and their traditions. We have seen the disappearance of small states in our life time; who knows whether they will rise again? The historian has to say that the probabilities are against them, whatever his sympathies may be. Another prophet, Ezekiel, compared the ruins of his people to a valley of bones.<sup>1</sup> Can these bones live? In the vision of Ezekiel they can live when the spirit of the Lord blows upon them, as the spirit was blown into the nostrils of the first man in his creation. But Ezekiel's vision was a vision for a remote future. Second Isaiah declared a reality which was near; there would again be an Israel in its land.

It should not be hard for us to understand that this declaration was simply incredible. People of the ancient world were not unaware of the realities of politics. Furthermore, the remnant of Judah, if they remembered their own prophets, knew that Israel and Judah had perished because they were unfaithful to their God. They did not apply this principle to peoples like the moabites and ammonites, of course; but the fact that Israel and Judah had passed under judgment was scarcely a fact which would brighten the future prospects of Israel. It was one thing to declare that somewhere in the future God would remember his people, and another to say that he would remember them within a few years, and that his agent of salvation had already appeared. Prophecy becomes more risky the more precise it becomes.

Even if the incredibility of the declaration were not antecedently clear, the words of the prophet himself would make it clear. Several of the sayings of the Second Isaiah explicitly presuppose that his listeners doubt what he tells them. Such an incredible message needed more than ordinary support, and the prophet appeals for support to the theme which is our topic, the newness of Yahweh. In israelite belief and tradition Yahweh was recognized as the creator of the world and as the creator of his people Israel. Surely a God who is capable of such wonders is capable of restoring Israel as he wishes; and it is a question of his will, not his power.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ezek 37.

Many students of the Old Testament have said that the idea of creation does not appear in the Old Testament with clarity before the writings of Second Isaiah. This opinion is no longer held widely, both because the text does not support it and because it seems unlikely that the prophet would have proposed an entirely new belief as a motive for believing in an incredible prediction. It is true that the idea of creation is not proposed by any earlier writer as a motive of faith. The full significance of this plea of Second Isaiah is missed unless his imagery is taken seriously. The abstract theological idea of creation, to speak quite candidly, is exciting to no one. Second Isaiah and other biblical poets view creation as a personal achievement of the creative deity, who sits throned on the dome of the earth, spreads out the heavens like a veil, and summons the stars by name.<sup>1</sup> The creation poem of Job 38-39 is both more naive and more explicit in its presentation of the wonderful and the unexpected in creation. In this poem God appears almost like a playful giant who is prodigal and insouciant in the use of his power, tossing off wonders as if they were nothing. Only a God rich in power and in imagination could produce such paradoxical fauna as the wild ox, the wild ass, the ostrich, and the war horse. Man cannot capture most of these wonders, much less understand them; they are beasts of whom mere man could never even think, let alone produce. Most biblical critics believe that a lesser poet, equally impressed by the wonder of creation but not as gifted as his model, added the description of the hippopotamus (Behemoth) and the crocodile (Leviathan), feeling that these two zoological marvels should not be left out of the recital.

This may seem to be a strange basis for an appeal to the babylonian community to stop saying that God has forgotten it;<sup>2</sup> yet this is the appeal the prophet uses. God has proved his capacity to perform the wonderful, the unexpected, the paradoxical, the incredible; as we have noticed, it is not his power but his will that is in question. Why should God wish to restore Israel? It had its history of election, of covenant, of saving acts, and of judgment; to all appearances its history had ended in rejection. There was nothing in this remnant which would furnish a basis for its restoration. Exactly, the prophet answers; the restoration will happen for another and even more incredible reason. It is not only the power of God but also his purposes which are too wonderful for analysis. His

<sup>1</sup> Isai 40, 22-26.

<sup>2</sup> Isai 40, 27.

ways are as far above the ways of men as the heavens are above the earth.<sup>1</sup> One can no more understand why God will restore Israel than one can understand why he created Israel in the first place; and this is the second theme of newness—the creation of Israel. Second Isaiah presents the restoration as a greater wonder than Israel's creation.

Of all the wonders of God the exodus of Israel from Egypt is the wonder more often and most enthusiastically mentioned in the Old Testament. In some passages, such as Isaiah 51, 9–11, the exodus is described as a re-enactment of the wonder of creation. In all probability the traditions of the exodus were celebrated in festivals and hymns in Israel before creation was so celebrated. This was the great saving act of God because it had produced the people. And it was accomplished against all hope and expectation. The traditions in the final form in which we have them tell of the number of times in which Israel hovered on the brink of extinction, to be saved at the final moment by the intervention of God. These traditions gave no basis for doubt of God's power and will to save Israel. To the contemporaries of Second Isaiah they failed, apparently, to convince that the will to save Israel endured.

A devout believer, whether in the ancient world or in our own, will never admit that history presents obstacles which God is unable to overcome. But the realism of even the devout believer will admit that God, adjusting himself to the realities, so to speak, does not choose to overcome certain obstacles. They could hear Second Isaiah say that the nations are a drop from a bucket<sup>2</sup> and that the peoples of the earth look to God like locusts<sup>3</sup>. To them the imperial power of Babylon looked much larger than a drop from a bucket or a locust, and simply stating the theoretical difference did not tell them how God intended to deal with this very massive power which had conquered them and now governed them. Second Isaiah, as realistic as his audience, announced that the nation and the ruler which would overthrow Babylon had already appeared on the horizon of history, and he identified the ruler as Cyrus of Persia. If we remember that Persia had barely emerged from complete obscurity, we shall recognize that this announcement scarcely rendered the prophet's words more credible. God would do the unexpected through unexpected means.

We come finally to the entirely unexpected, the supreme paradox,

<sup>1</sup> Isai 55, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Isai 40, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Isai 40, 22.

the core of the mystery of the unpredictable God: the declaration of the prophet that God chooses to restore Israel in spite of the absence of any perceptible reason for doing this. Second Isaiah asks and answers a question which is not asked in earlier israelite writings. Why was there an Israel? In the literature up to this time Israel either serenely expresses its confidence in the God who has chosen it or hears its prophets' harsh reproaches for infidelity to God. No israelite really asks for any purpose in the creation of Israel, no more than any israelite asked for a purpose in the creation of the world. Both the world and Israel were basic realities which one did not question but rather took for granted. The prophets had done their best to persuade the israelites that it is dangerous to take God for granted; they had failed in their persuasion, and so the survivors sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept over Zion. Amos had made an ultimately inexplicable remark that because God had chosen Israel he would punish them.<sup>1</sup> But why had God chosen Israel? Why had he performed the wonders of the exodus? Israelite literature up to this point did not even reach the explanation which a babylonian myth of creation gave for the creation of man: man was created to maintain the cultic worship of the gods. The israelites simply did not know the basis of their relation with God; many of them seemed to think that God existed for them.

We should not be surprised at this lack of self-awareness. Neither nations nor individual persons often reach a consciousness of purposeful existence other than survival. Their existence needs no explanation, any more than the existence of the world. Few even among theologians and philosophers ask seriously the question: since this thing need not be, why is it? In individual persons the consciousness of purposeful existence, when it arises, comes after a period of maturation; and I believe the analogy can be extended to peoples and nations. Neither the existence nor the restoration of Israel could be explained by looking at the historic reality of Israel. If Israel was the people of God's creation and election, only God can explain why Israel existed.

Second Isaiah is the first biblical writer to speak of a mission of Israel, a mission which goes beyond mere national survival and is of interest to others besides the israelites. Briefly and simply, the mission was to reveal their own experience of God to others besides themselves. In Israel's history so far this mission had not been accom-

---

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

plished; indeed, as we have just pointed out, it was not even known. But it was still the purpose which explained Israel's existence, and the purpose which explained its restoration. But Israel could not reveal its experience of Yahweh until that experience had reached maturity; and mature experience had to include the terrible history of the fall of the nation in war. This history was Israel's lesson in the meaning of judgment.

There is no book of the Old Testament which does not at least touch upon the theme of judgment. This does not imply that the theme was always perceived with the same clarity. The prophets like Amos, Hosea and Isaiah disclose in their words that their own contemporaries as a group did not take the possibility of judgment seriously, indeed refused even to recognize that they might be liable to judgment. We have noticed that early Israel seemed to show no awareness of a mission which went beyond national existence. Israel knew its responsibilities to a morality which was implied in its covenant, but viewed these responsibilities as conditions for its continued survival, not as responsibilities with implications for others besides themselves. Early Israel was more aware of God as saviour than of God as judge. Mature understanding of salvation demanded the recognition that genuine and enduring salvation cannot be expected until man is judged. Until man is saved from his own moral obliquity, he is saved from nothing. Until the earnestness of God's moral will is known Israel cannot proclaim him as he is to the nations.

Hence Second Isaiah's message of salvation is not really a message of ultimate 'messianic' salvation. The prophet announces that God has given a new life to his people so that his people can fulfil their mission. They are still under judgment, and they know the terms on which they will be judged. The terms are not merely the observance of the traditional law, but also the proclamation of the reality of God to those who have not heard it. The future of Israel does not lie in the world of politics and war; Second Isaiah does not see a restoration of the monarchy of David, nor an israelite empire. The destiny of Israel is to bear witness.<sup>1</sup> There is no God but the God of Israel, and the world still will not attain its due order and proportion until all men confess him.<sup>2</sup> In this mission the prophet reveals a new dimension of the God of the fathers. Scholars have often discussed the question whether Israel before Second Isaiah was

---

<sup>1</sup> Isai 43, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Isai 45, 14-25.



truly monotheistic in the proper sense of the term. No one doubts the monotheism of Second Isaiah, but it should be understood that it is not so much the monotheism which is novel as the universal implications of the monotheism. Israel, like its God, belongs in a certain sense to the nations to whom its proclamation is due.

I think this summary shows that Second Isaiah is an excellent illustration of the newness of God. He presented to a disheartened and nearly extinct people an entirely new future with possibilities greater and higher than any which had been seen when Israel thought of itself both as the people elect of God and as a nation among nations. The idea of mission communicates to Israel some of the eternity which is proper to God. It opens up an influence of Israel on the world and mankind far in excess of any merely political influence. With these rather obvious facts stated, one must note that the development of postexilic judaism did not follow the programme of Second Isaiah. Far from exhibiting a cosmic mission, postexilic judaism shrank itself into a small exclusive group which was dedicated to the observance of the law and an elaborate system of public worship. In a smaller and not strictly nationalist way, postexilic judaism still thought of its relations with God in terms of group survival.

St. Paul said of the history of the exodus: 'Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come'.<sup>1</sup> Our purpose here is not only the austere erudite purpose of interpretation of a biblical document, but to see how this biblical document is meaningful for us. I believe it is meaningful, because we are really no more aware of the newness of God than the contemporaries of Second Isaiah were. In fact, we feel the weight of the age of the world more heavily than they did. We have not yet sensed collapse as they did, but we seem to live in expectation of collapse. Our own modern prophets are both cheerful and optimistic about man's potential of overcoming his historic illnesses, and deeply pessimistic about man's potential for self-destruction. The community of the exile felt neither of these, but they were a community of people who simply had no future. Second Isaiah gave them a future of hope and promise. Where is the contemporary prophet who can do as much for us?

We have observed that while the believer would never question the power of God, the believer often suspects that God will not over-

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 10, 11.

come certain obstacles. He does not really expect God to do the unexpected; and in our situation nothing but the unexpected seems to offer any promise. If there is to be a future, it must be a new future which no one yet has thought of, a future which is from a practical point of view impossible. We believe our own crisis is entirely new and unprecedented, and we therefore wonder whether God is able to deal with the new and unprecedented. We really doubt his power to rise to the occasion.

Possibly our reading of the Bible contributes to our hopelessness, and there are certain biblical themes which should elicit uncertainty. We read that God destroyed mankind by a flood. We read that he effectively destroyed the people of his election. We believe in an eschatological consummation which will resolve all human problems by bringing history to an end. Where do we stand in the process of history? In such moments of crisis as we live in there have always been those who believed that there was no solution to the problems of man except apocalyptic judgment. More than a few of our contemporaries wonder whether we are not at this moment near the end. It would be stupid to affirm that we are not at this moment; but before we too quickly flee to apocalyptic judgment, let us remember that Second Isaiah had a message of new life to a people which was totally despondent.

If the newness of God is revealed to us in the promise of a new future, may we not find that the revelation echoes the revelation of Second Isaiah? We have observed that both in early Israel and in postexilic Israel the relations of Israel with God were conceived in the framework of group survival. Perhaps we in the Church too have thought of our relations with God in the same terms. What is important to us is that the Church continue to exist, and to many of us it is important that the Church continue to exist just as we know it. That the newness of life may be found in growth is not something which encourages us. How deep is our own consciousness of Mission? The mission of Israel proclaimed by Second Israel was to make the reality of God known to the nations of the world. That mission is still unfulfilled; and on the analogy of Second Isaiah, we may expect God to restore the agent which he has chosen for the mission, not to replace that agent by another. In saying this it is not my intention to belittle the noble work of catholic missionaries, who as a group put the rest of the Church to shame by their dedication. But it is my intention to say that the Church as a body has a small share of their dedication. In particular the Church as a body shows little

dedication to the proclamation of the reality in those parts of the world where most of the Church lives. When we deal with western Europe and the Americas, we show a very practical realism; we do not expect our fellow countrymen to hear the proclamation, and we do not waste time in trying to reach them. Where the Church is most solidly established, it often appears to be chiefly concerned with maintaining the establishment.

Like the Israel addressed by the prophets, we may live in self-centred contentment because we do not believe in the reality of judgment. We do not take the moral will of God seriously. Perhaps we shall have to learn of God's earnestness as Israel learned of it. Yet as one reviews the two thousand years of roman catholicism, one wonders how many times the judgment must fall on the Church before it learns to take God seriously. Certainly the Church has known its share of frivolity and worldliness, and certainly it has known suffering. In spite of this, it still exhibits frivolity and worldliness which are not recognized as such only because their external forms are slightly different. Second Isaiah told Israel that its future did not include imperialism; but the roman catholic Church apparently believes that it lives under a different dispensation.

In conclusion, one is forced to wonder whether most of us do not really think that God is old and tired and no longer able to cope with a situation which grows in complexity daily. This is the supreme anthropomorphism, to measure God's power and will to save by our own. It is also an anthropomorphism to measure his moral earnestness by our own. I said earlier that it is dangerous to patronize God. This subtle form of blasphemy may be the predominant and unrecognized sin of our age.