WONDER AND WORSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

By DENNIS J. McCARTHY

AMONG THE games people can play is the one which contrasts the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New. For openers, one can compare the command of Deuteronomy[1] to show no mercy to the non-jew with the parable of the good samaritan, or the ruthless treatment of foreign wives in Ezra 10 with the New Testament story of the woman taken in adultery. But then one can counter by quoting Deuteronomy again when it demands protection for the helpless stranger and the escaped slave[2] against St Paul's indifference to the slave's plight and the fearsome saying, 'He who is not with me is against me', which leaves the hapless outsider to go to ruin by himself. Again, we can accept the stand-off: the God described in the Old Testament demanding the death of the heathen and yet showing a love far beyond that of any father or mother; while the God of the New Testament strikes down Ananias and Sapphira without mercy and yet sends his Son to save the world. With a little effort one can carry on the game for hours.

Still, it remains a game, for what does it prove? Nothing, really, at least in the way it has actually been played through most of history. If you wish to select your references, you can claim that the blood-thirsty God of the Old Testament has nothing to do with the Father of the New. If you do, you will be attaching yourself to an ancient family, for this was the doctrine of one of the first heretics, Marcion. Nor will you simply be turning to a dead past. The idea is still alive in one form or another; for instance, when Bultmann sees the Old Testament as a mere record of failure, a dark and essentially godless background against which the New Testament shines by contrast. I suppose that, if you chose to settle on a different set of references, you might decide that the reverse was the case, and that the New Testament has fallen away from the heights achieved by Old Testament doctrine. The real point is that to be selective in this arbitrary way allows one to prove anything he wishes, especially

[1] Dt 7, 2.

[2] Dt 24, 17–18; 23, 15–16.

in so miscellaneous a collection of literature as the bible. It has been pointed out that the english puritan revolution produced a wider and a wilder diversity of revolutionary parties than did the later american, french, or russian revolutions. No doubt this was true partly because revolutionary theory and practice had not yet been perfected, but more important was the fact that the King James version offered more scope to the fantasy than did the writings of the enlightenment or of Karl Marx.

However, splendid and bizarre as many of these fantasies may be, their fascination is ultimately impoverishing because they mean that the word of God, with all its apparent diversity and confusion, must be trimmed to meet the modest compass of our fantasies or sentiments. If we refuse to accept this arbitrary limitation, as we must, a set of contrasting references, such as that with which we began, surely show one thing at least: the New Testament shares the view of God found in the Old, though its emphases may be different. He is a loving father, but he is much else besides. Philosophy may teach that God is a simple entity, but this is not the rather abstract being of philosophy; it is the God of revelation in all his complexity. If he is a father, he is also a judge, executioner as well as saviour, warrior as well as prince of peace. But how can he be all this at once, and how are we to react to such complexity?

One approach is a kind of concordism. It is possible to see the various aspects of God's activity in which he reveals himself as reflections of a unity. For instance, he wished to save Israel from Egypt because the people were his children in some special sense.[3] Moreover, in doing this he was dealing out a deserved punishment to the egyptians for their brutal treatment of the helpless foreigners among them, and all the ancient world acknowledged at least in theory the rights of the helpless stranger. Thus we can say that God is revealed as a guardian of justice and father of his people, and, if he carries out these roles in the guise of a mighty warrior, this is appropriate enough when he has to defend his people and exercise justice against a people in arms. In this way we can see the texts not as isolated units but as part of a larger context, so that they do indeed tell of a God of justice and love, one who had even sought to convert Egypt before judging the country. If we stop at this point, we have a kind of an answer, a reasonable enough explanation of the way God appears in the Old Testament. However, I doubt if

[3] Exod 4, 22.

such a facile rationalism does real justice to what the bible has to say.

For one thing, this view depends in part on taking the texts just as they stand in the account of the exodus. They have been worked together into a coherent story in which the more formidable and more primitive elements are modified by their context. Such a reading of the story as it stands is perfectly legitimate, since it concerns itself with the actual present form of revelation. However, this story is a later construct of more ancient fragments, and careful comparative study may show how the construct has modified the force of more primitive elements. Still, I think it obvious that this is not the effect on the ordinary reader. He is struck with the horror of the plagues, the destruction of the first-born of Egypt, and the triumphalism of the poem to the divine warrior.[4] If this is so for us now, think of the effect on the ordinary israelite who did not read the texts so that he could reflect and compare. He heard them, and he heard them usually in the dramatic context of the liturgy where, surely, the most terrifying and most striking elements of the story would stand out.

There is little to wonder at, then, when we find that the majestic and terrible God of battles stood high in the israelite imagination. The very epithet, lord of armies, is one of his oldest names, and the warlike feats of Yahweh were the subjects of much of Israel's oldest liturgical poetry. In actual fact, Israel seems to have formed itself as the people of Yahweh by joining in the wars of Yahweh. It knew God as saviour, but as a saviour given to warlike measures against his (and its) enemies. So he was celebrated in hymns.[5] These pieces undoubtedly formed part of ancient liturgies. They are not quite contemporary with the events, but they are so old that we feel in them some of the first reactions of the people to the God revealed to them in their battles. It is not an entirely attractive picture. He is a warrior who overwhelms his enemies remorselessly. Nor, in the first instance, does he do this to redress the balance of justice. He does it because one side is his and the other not. To this purpose he turns the very stars in their courses and uses the waters of the deep. What chance has the enemy? One's sympathy really does tend toward the underdog, and the feeling gets stronger when someone like Jael is commended for her savage violation of the laws of hospitality by murdering the enemy general who has sought refuge in her tent.

This, then, is God the warrior. Nor does he confine his terrific manifestations to confounding the enemy. His advent to his own

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[4] Exod 15, 1–18.

[5] Exod 15, 1–18; Jg 5.

people is marked by frightening natural phenomena, storms and, perhaps, volcanic effects.[6] It is easy to see here a God of terror and terror alone, for this is the God who is coming to his temple, to give his law, and to receive praise and sacrifice. It would seem that even the liturgy was intent on the awesomeness of God. And yet this is the God of revelation, the God of christian as well as hebrew.

Now, it may sometimes be consoling to think that the God of battles is on your side ready to destroy your enemies with overwhelming might. Still, one must wonder whether so powerful and, yes, so arbitrary an ally is really safe. Abraham Lincoln, speaking in time of war, once pointed out that 'the Almighty has his own purposes', which were not in fact those of either party to the war. He was simply giving voice to universal human experience, experience recorded in the Old Testament as well as in nineteenth century America. Israel might vaunt the intervention of its warrior God, but it had felt his wrath turned on itself as well. The very collection of stories of the judges which contains the triumphant song of Deborah[7] is devoted to the story of the regular alternation of defeat with victory. The very God who brought triumph in battle could and would punish through the same agency of war. This was not a God who could be relied on no matter what. Israel was not his country, right or wrong. It could feel his wrath.

At times this is explained by the fact that Israel's sin has earned punishment. So far this is reasonable enough, but things are not that simple. For one thing, if we look at the laments which are the most common of poem in the psalter, we find that the psalmist often protests his innocence even while complaining that he feels the heavy hand of God. Or, if we want to reduce things to simple crime and punishment, how do we explain the fate of Judah's ideal king, Josiah?[8] He walked in the ways of the Lord and strove mightily to restore religion. Yet the best reward he was offered was an early death, so that he would not have to see the final ruin of his nation. He had to suffer for his fathers' sins. These things hardly point to an indulgent father-God; to our eyes they do not even seem to indicate a just judge. They do emphasize that dealings with the God of armies were not to be taken lightly. This, of course, is part of common religious experience. The divine may be the ultimately attractive; it is also the ultimately frightening. Israel's neighbours, and most of mankind, have solved the problem by emphasizing the

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[6] Ps 29; Exod 19. [7] Jg 5. [8] 2 Kg 22–23.

terrific aspect of the divine, hiding the image of the god and all that had to do with him from profane eyes, and in general working on the sense of awe which the numinous arouses. This was possible partly because they have been able to split up the divine. In polytheism, different divine figures could represent different aspects of the numinous: power, justice, love and the rest. This way, of course, was closed to Israel. In any case, it is not a real solution, for inevitably the gods and goddesses made to personify the easier aspects of divinity take on the aspect of the fearsome. The goddess of love is the source of dissent and destruction, and the god of laughter causes panic. It would seem that, no matter what his starting point, man's ultimate reaction to the divine is largely one of fear. Except, that is, in the bible.

Yet we have seen that the God of Israel is mysterious and often terrifying. How can he be something more besides? I think that we must turn here to the principle that in the bible God reveals himself in many ways, and each of these ways has its proper human response. This is hardly surprising, since the bible, as form-critical study has revealed, is largely a collection of liturgical texts or of stories centred on liturgical events and liturgical themes. Since the liturgy is the place where *par excellence* man meets God and responds to the meeting, it is not surprising that the bible should contain a very rich and varied set of views of this meeting and these responses. Hence it helps a great deal to see the biblical texts as a whole; that is, as a collection expressing the various moods in which man can approach God. For one thing, this helps to explain the early and continuous emphasis on triumphant hymns to the God of battles. It is so unfashionable these days not to beat one's breast and cry about the shortcomings of the Church that one hesitates to use the word. Still, the fact is there. One aspect under which man can and does meet God is as the Almighty who is with him, and the only sane reaction to that is a feeling of triumph. Neither good works nor fellowship nor what-have-you are the real objects of religion. It exists to bring man and God together, and in those brief moments in which it succeeds it is bringing man to his true fulfilment. If it all makes him just a little dizzy, it is understandable. One should shout this triumph from the housetops, and no true expression of the experience can really be exaggerated. The conventions of early israelite heroic poetry may not be ours, but if we try to look behind the strange outer shell we find them expressing something true. God has found man, and man has something tremendous to shout about.

Still, while exalting the arbitrary might of God may be a proper

and normal expression of triumph at finding him, another mood must always march with this one. The terrific aspects of God will soon enough induce a reaction of fear, and it may well be that this is the emotion which ultimately predominates in the biblical texts. 'Who can look upon God and live?' that is, who can meet him with any hope of safety? The sacred is a burning fire – the presence of God is often symbolized by this devouring element, for example, at Sinai and on Carmel – bound to destroy the profane. Even if this sentiment is strong in the bible, however, it is not unique, and recognition of it should not so foreshorten our vision that we forget all the rest. There are the hymns which call on us to rejoice and praise God because he is the creator of order and the saviour. There are even the lamentations, which can be lugubrious enough, but which are filled with a spirit of trust in the ultimate goodness of God. There are their pendants, the songs of thanksgiving, which express the joy and gratitude of those whose wants have been met and who have been saved. There is the picture of God as the loving parent – it may be father or mother[9] – who should inspire a deep and trusting love. It is impossible to catalogue all the nuances of human reaction to the experience of the divine offered in the bible, but this is enough to show its complexity.

The problem is really one of synthesis. If God can properly be seen under so many aspects calling for such varied human reactions, is there any way that we can bring all this under some kind of unity? Or must the reality of God remain multiple, so much so that there is a constant temptation in practice to separate off the various aspects to an extent which in practice approaches a kind of polytheism? And must the human reaction to all this be so diverse as to seem schizophrenic? Putting things this way, of course, is misleading on at least two counts.

First of all, it assumes that we must take everything together, see all the contrasts at once and feel all the divergent reactions at the same time. We all know that there are times when moods of joy are appropriate, times when penance fits, times for thanksgiving and all the rest. Secondly, the wish to 'see things as a whole' so often means seeing them in only one way. It fails to take into account the fact that we must approach God in many ways, in love, in hope, with gratitude, but also in fear and trembling. The temptation is to seize upon one attitude so as to exclude the others. To exclude even one of the legitimate approaches would be to make us less than human and to reveal less of God. It is the virtue of the Old Testament that,

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[9] Hos 11, 1; Isai 49, 15.

precisely because it is a record of more than a thousand years of a whole nation's experience of the God of revelation and of that nation's response, very little if anything that is needed is slighted.

But if these are false approaches to the problem, this does not mean that there is no problem. On the contrary, while it is true enough to say that almost all attitudes are called for in front of the infinite, it is hardly satisfying to have them laid out before us in a kind of supermarket of the supernatural without any hint at an order among them. More, it is dangerous. Unfailingly, we will tend to discriminate in our choice according to our feelings. Up to a point, this is as it should be, because it allows for the personal without forcing some mechanical order on us; but the personal can so easily turn into the narrow and eccentric. If we pay attention to the Old Testament, this can be avoided since it certainly does not leave us without guidance in the matter.

We may well begin here by returning to the thought of the awe which God inspires. Certainly the Old Testament never forgets that fear is the beginning of piety. But it is only the beginning. The paradox is that it is out of this very fear, this awe, that it draws the answer to the problem. God is mighty beyond comparison, his ways are not our ways, and his power and his strangeness should make his worshippers uneasy – up to a point. That point is the one where man accepts God for what he is, utterly powerful, utterly just, utterly good, and most of all utterly beyond our knowing. The classic expression of this is in the book of Job. This is a work of that special kind called wisdom literature; but it is surely not an accident that this most profound of the wisdom books uses liturgical forms, laments and hymns, to attack the most profound of problems. We cannot know God and his ways; we can and we must trust him. Though the response come out of a whirlwind, it is enough. It is no answer on an intellectual level; it is an existential fact. How can we 'know' that this tremendous, mysterious being is to be trusted? Through the experience of his nearness: even if, as for Job, that experience be terrible and terrifying.

It is this recourse to a living experience which makes it natural that the book of Job use liturgical forms of expression. It was struggling with a problem of experience, the experience of God. Normally, this experience was mediated by the liturgy. Therefore the liturgy furnished the natural means to express it. This is not a matter of deduction; it is simply the fact as brought out in the Old Testament. The book of Deuteronomy had insisted on 'the place

where my name dwells', that is, on the temple as the place where God was to be met. The historical books which follow Deuteronomy in the canon form a unity which builds up to a climax in the construction of the temple, and then offer a view of history dominated by the vicissitudes of the temple and the worship offered in it.

However, we have even more direct testimony. There are the psalms of ascent celebrating the temple. Typically, 'I was glad when they said to me, Let us go up to the house of the Lord'.[10] The very looking towards Jerusalem, with the temple and its worship, was enough to arouse joy. One sang during the journey because in the house of the Lord one would find the Lord. To be sure, sin was not forgotten. One had to qualify to enter into the joys of the liturgy: 'Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart'.[11] In later times, every feast had to include its expiatory sacrifice to put away the sins of priest and people. Nor, if man was sinful, was it forgotten that the Lord was mighty and awesome. The very hymns which were a central part of the liturgy kept these attributes of the God of battles before the eyes of his people. They praised him for his mighty works of creation, the power with which he overcame primeval chaos. His hand held back the sea and raised up the mountain. But in another context we have seen that it was this very power over the impressive forces of nature, the waters of the deep and the mountains, which made him fearsome. Again, the hymns called for praise of the Lord because of the mighty deeds he had accomplished on behalf of his people. This was typically israelite; other peoples praised their gods as lords of nature, while Israel hymned its God as creator *and* lord of history. However, we have seen that these mighty deeds on behalf of the people were mighty deeds of war, and that, while the people might exult at the salvation worked by these deeds, the nearness of so fearsome a warrior was not an unalloyed comfort.

Thus the psalter explains nothing away. It does not really try to explain. It accepts the many aspects of the God of revelation and responds accordingly. But one way or another the nearness of God in the liturgy makes it all acceptable. Not, be it noted, intelligible, but acceptable. Once one had some experience of the Lord, one ceased to question him. That is the message of Job; that is the message of the triumphant songs about the liturgy in the psalter. I find

[10] Ps 122, 1.

[11] Ps 24, 3–4.

it a significant symbol that there was a whole category of psalms which are called songs of Zion.[12] Zion was the special dwelling place of God. It was there that one went to meet him, and in his presence all questions of terror could be forgotten. Zion was the mountain which could not be shaken. It was a symbol of certainty and security precisely because there one could come to know the Lord. So much was this true that the pilgrim who was leaving the holy city could look back on it as a sign which gave him confidence as he set out on his journey homewards.[13] The thing which is interesting in this is that the mountain has become a symbol of security. Remember, in the early poems of Israel, Yahweh tended to appear from the mountains amid fire and smoke, a figure of terror from a place of terror. All this was symbolic language, for the mountains which the early israelite poets knew were like others. They were not volcanoes; they did not pour out fire and brimstone. They were terrible because they were associated with the terrible God of battles. Now the mountains had not changed. Neither had the God associated with them. What had changed was man's experience. God remained mysterious; he could be terrifying, but for the faithful the liturgy offered an experience in which the mystery remained unexplained and the awesomeness stayed untouched; and yet one knew, without being able to spell out the whys and the wherefores, that this God was to be trusted – not in spite of his strangeness and his power but because of it. If at first this seems unsatisfying, perhaps we should ask what kind of answer we are seeking. If it is some sort of proposition *à la* geometry, there is no doubt that this will not do. But if we reflect upon the fact that we are dealing with relations between persons (even if one of the persons, God, is something quite different from any persons as we know them), we may see it differently. No doubt it helps us to know something *about* a person before we are ready to trust him; but the ones we really trust are those we know, even though, often enough, we could not formulate anything but the most banal proposition *about* them. So the Old Testament liturgical texts record personal experiences. They leave us the richness, the ambiguities, and the communication of experience which can be given only in poetry.

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[12] Pss 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 122; 132. It is probable that psalms of this sort originated in pre-israelite Jerusalem and celebrated a kind of magical connection between the local god and the city. However, as in many other things, Israel took over a literary form and changed it. The point was no longer that God was bound to a place, but rather what he had done there and what men could experience there.

[13] Ps 121.