# WHERE IS GOD?

## By JOHN ASHTON

NAAMAN THE syrian, returning home from Israel cured of his leprosy, took with him at his own request 'two mules' burden of earth', for 'henceforth', he said to Elisha, the prophet through whom his cure had been effected, 'your servant will not offer burnt-offering or sacrifice to any god but Yahweh'.[1] So he forswore his own god, Rimmon, and pledged allegiance to Yahweh. In doing so, he was conscious of a double need: first, to express his devotion and thankfulness by 'burnt-offering' or sacrifice; secondly to be assured that his gesture would be noticed and appreciated. He felt impelled to remind Yahweh of his gratitude; but he also required some guarantee of Yahweh's presence in a land where his name was not known.

It would be an error to think of Naaman's request for a load of earth as a sign of weak faith. The prophet will have understood and sympathized with this instinctive association of Israel's God and Israel's soil. After all, included in Yahweh's early covenant with Abraham was a promise of land, and behind Abraham's own purchase of 'the field of Machpela east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan', lay an urgent desire to establish a presence on Canaanite soil, so as to be sure that the promise would one day be fulfilled.[2]

There is no reason to be astonished at this instinctive localization of a spiritual reality, crude as Naaman's request may seem. Any cult requires some guarantee of effective communication with the deity, and how can one communicate with an absent God? Elijah's jibe to the priests of Baal was both cruel and pertinent: 'Cry aloud, for he is a god; perhaps he is day-dreaming, or he has gone to relieve himself; he may be away on a journey, or possibly he is asleep and needs arousing'.[3] And rave and gash themselves as they might, 'there was no voice; no one answered; no one heeded'.[4]

The writer does not shrink from the logical implications of his story. There is only one way, he suggests, for a god to make his

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[1]  2 Kg 5, 17.  [2]  Gen 23, 19; cf 25, 10.  [3]  1 Kg 18, 27.
[4]  1 Kg 18, 29.

presence known: he must *reply*. And if he is to reply he must first of all *listen*. Wherever, in the history of religion, men have thought of their god or gods in personal terms, it has been the task of the cult to establish contact with them. The oracular shrines of ancient Greece, the ziggurats of Mesopotamia (which provided the model for the tower of Babel [= Babylon]), the great temples of Aztecs and Incas, the mohammedan Koran, the christian sacraments are just a few examples out of many. It is true that some primitive religions blessed with a very pure belief in a supreme deity make no attempt whatever to express this belief in human terms, confining themselves, in their cult, to communicating with the inferior spirits. No idol, no temple, no priest brings them into contact with the transcendent god, whom they think of as 'heavenly' but not as existing in heaven. They have no physical object, place or person to mediate the most fundamental religious relationship of all, sensing no doubt that it is too delicate and too profound to be subjected to the coarsening and distorting effects of cult-worship.

What is represented instead is man's *experience* of God; and a mountain or a tall isolated tree, or even the middle pole of the tent (the axis of the universe) may signify the elevated and central position occupied by God in the world of men. He is both *in* the world and *above* it, immanent (and centrally so) and transcendent. There is a risk that mountain or tree may become the object of cult, but in the pure form of these religions this does not happen. In any case, immanence and transcendence are both well conveyed in the famous aphorism, said originally to refer to God, but applied by Pascal to the universe: '*un cercle dont le centre est partout et la circonférence nulle part*' (a circle of which the centre is everywhere and the circumference nowhere). Sophisticated as it sounds (and it is sophisticated enough to have caught the fancy of that most sophisticated of writers, José-Luis Borges), this dictum, resisting as it does the feverish attempts of the imagination to represent it pictorially, comes close to expressing the primitive experience. If God were not above the world he would not be God; if he were not in the world he would not be known.

*The phenomenology of presence*

But what does it mean to say that God is *in* the world? This question brings us to the problem of defining or realizing the notion of presence, one of those elusive concepts which are readily intelligible only as long as one refrains from probing into them too deeply.

As always, the best starting-point is human experience, experience of presence, of absence, and even, paradoxically, of presence-in absence or absence-in-presence.

Because man is body *and* spirit (if this word 'and' may be used without implying either accumulation or separation), the primary experience of presence is both bodily and spiritual. The second thing to note is that ordinarily two or more people are involved; and the third point is that the human experience of presence can be either self-regarding or other-regarding. In other words, it makes sense to ask of a particular event or occasion both 'Were *you* present?' and 'Was *he* present?'

There is a weak sense of presence which corresponds to a weak sense of the word *I*: 'I was there but I was asleep most of the time'. We say of a man who is habitually unaware of what is going on all around him that he is absent-minded, and of someone who is inattentive or unable to concentrate on what is being said to him or enacted before him that his mind is wandering. So sheer physical presence, although enough to justify an affirmative reply to the question 'Were you there?', does not by itself fulfil all the conditions of what one may call the *strong* sense of presence. This appears to be linked with the notion of *attention* or *attentiveness*; one does not speak of presence or absence except in relation to what happens to be going on in the particular spot in question. We never ask, 'Have you ever been present in the Albert Hall?', but we may ask, 'Have you ever been present at a Promenade Concert?' or, significantly, 'Have you ever *attended* a Promenade Concert?' And this is not the same as listening to a Promenade Concert, which one can do quite easily on the wireless. One should note finally that an important part of the concept of 'presence-of-mind' is the power of immediate and effective attention.

So far we have been considering presence in its self-regarding aspect. What of the other-regarding aspect, where the experience of presence is associated primarily with someone else, allowing us to say, for instance, of someone with a powerful personality, that he 'makes his presence felt'? In certain circumstances, particularly in an emotionally-charged situation – fear, love, hate, anger – I can have an exceptionally strong awareness of another person's pres- ence. It can be overpowering, engrossing my attention so com- pletely and exclusively that anything said or done by anybody else at the same time is registered at best feebly and fleetingly, or as furnishing a kind of backcloth against which my encounter with the

other is played out. And ever afterwards, this particular scent or that particular piece of music will evoke the memory of the incident that has meant so much to me. Similarly, there are times when one is scarcely conscious of the presence of other people in the same room, and other times (during a discussion, for instance, in which all are joining in vigorously) when the awareness of their presence is all-pervasive. The modern study of group-dynamics has drawn attention to this awareness and effectively exploited it. It is obvious that there is much more than physical presence involved in such groups, and though a particular individual may not make the same impression, either qualitatively or quantitatively, upon everyone in the group, the heightened awareness of one another makes it necessary to indicate the difference between sheer local presence (all together in the same room) and interpersonal communication (all together in the same group). One way of doing this, which does involve stretching normal language a little, is to distinguish between presence *in* or *at* and presence *to*. My presence to another person would mean more than just physical proximity; it would imply that he must be conscious of and somehow affected by my proximity.

The group experience is particularly important, because the group as such acquires recognizable characteristics which are not reducible to those of its members. Being present to one another, they become aware of something extra, an additional presence that has somehow to be qualified as personal. It is along these lines, I suggest, that we may reach some understanding of those words of Christ: 'where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them'.[5] He has given a name (his own) to the indefinable extra presence which is mysteriously perceptible in a christian gathering, especially when the link between the members of the group is their shared prayer.

A full analysis of the concept of presence would entail an examination of the various ways in which man escapes the physical constraints of his bodily condition and exerts power and authority from a distance. One definition of man is 'a tool-making animal', and although tools have become increasingly more elaborate and sophisticated over the ages, man's ability to project himself beyond the temporal and spatial limits of the here-and-now depends basically upon two faculties: one of these is language, the other the fabrication of tools. In the computer, that most elaborate of tools,

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[5]   Mt 18, 20.

both these skills are brought into play. Television and telephone, cassette and tape-recorder are all means of assuring some kind of presence-in-absence, communication at a distance. But humanly speaking, they can never be more than thin substitutes for physical presence, partly because the communication is brief and inter-mittent, partly because of the knowledge that the other person is somewhere else, partly because one of the most effective means of contact, the sense of touch, is in principle excluded.

If our experience of presence-in-absence comes largely through inventions like the telephone (though one must not neglect the letter, which can still bring people strangely close), the opposite ex-perience, of absence-in-presence, is the ordinary consequence of imperceptiveness and inattention. How often people living in the same house, eating in the same room, sleeping in the same bed, fail to communicate properly. The closest relationship of all, that of marriage, does not automatically ensure mutual sympathy and understanding. 'He just doesn't listen to anything I say', a wife will complain: he is there, but not for her; she is present, but not to him.

So far we have been considering the concepts of presence and absence, and the human experience from which they are derived, from a static point of view. There are briefer but more dynamic experiences which, though different, are closely related to presence and absence: parting and homecoming, the visit and the encounter. All of these except the last imply previous acquaintanceship and usually something more. Parting, even when modified by the hope of reunion, can be intensely painful, homecoming the greatest of all joys. Homecoming means, of course, the end of an absence, just as parting is the start of an absence, and how keenly they are felt will depend in both cases upon the depth and the extent of the earlier relationship. The homecoming can present problems of its own, especially if the absence has been prolonged and the two people concerned have 'drifted apart', if their individual experiences have been widely different and they have formed new friendships and developed new interests independently of one another. To with-stand the pressures created by this sort of situation the bond of affection must be very strong indeed. Otherwise, when they meet again they will feel awkward and estranged: literally like strangers. One function of letters and their modern equivalents (the telephone and the tape) is to guard against estrangement by ensuring that fresh experiences and interests are shared, even if vicariously, so that friends and lovers may keep pace with one another as they grow.

The social significance of the visit, fostering friendships, tightening bonds, is evident enough, and maybe less relevant to our theme than the encounter, the unexpected meeting without prelude or obvious consequence. For at this point it is possible to distinguish two very different models of communication with the deity: one is that of the encounter, of its very nature a *brief* encounter (Jacob wrestling with the angel), the other that of the enduring presence. We may experience God as a permanent reality in our lives, or as a sudden intrusion. His healing power may be felt as gradual or immediate, his call as persistent or occasional.

*Theology of presence and theology of manifestation*

In the Old Testament, to which we now return, both these models play their part. The tradition of the early theophanies, which belong, of course, to the encounter model, gave way, after the establishment of Israel in Canaan, to a corresponding theology of established presence, the *shekinah*, though not without a struggle. One theme in the story of the construction of the temple is the unwillingness of Yahweh to accept a home built for him by others: 'Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling'.[6] The idea of an occasional residence, a temporary stopping-place, bridges the gulf, one might think, between a theology of encounter and a theology of established presence like the one associated with the temple-cult. But it seems unlikely that the tent in the wilderness, as originally conceived, was a dwelling-place in any sense; rather it was a meeting-place; and the priestly writer, who speaks of 'the tent of meeting',[7] was no doubt reviving a very ancient tradition. Von Rad distinguishes between a theology of manifestation, connected with the tent, and a theology of presence, connected with the ark and, later, with the temple, in which the ark was housed.[8]

However this may be, a theology of manifestation or encounter is hard to preserve unsullied because of the human need to *locate* the deity and to organize some kind of cult. The theophanies recorded in Genesis may be basically authentic; but even so, the stories recounting them are associated with a particular spot, obviously a

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[6]   2 Sam 7, 5–6; cf Acts 7, 44–50.      [7]   Exod 27, 21; 28, 43 etc.
[8]   *The Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol 1 (London, 1962), pp 234–41.

cultic centre or shrine. 'The tent of meeting' was not, strictly speaking, a place of worship, but it furnished a solution to a closely related problem. The israelite religion was a *revealed* religion, which required some means of regular communication with its God. Just as the altar is a recognized place of sacrifice, so the tent of meeting was, as its name suggests, a place where oracles were sought at times of crisis when the people needed guidance, and where the word of Yahweh was proclaimed. The altar and the tent of meeting provide a ritual context within which man can speak to God and God to man. But neither pretends to bring God down to earth or lays any exclusive claim to the favour of his presence.

The tent of meeting, as Von Rad points out, was closely bound up with the camp, and could not continue to exist independently. After the settlement of Israel in Canaan there is no further trace of the tent, which is replaced by the ark of the covenant. Not that the ark was suddenly invented to fill a gap left by the disappearance of the tent: it was already in existence in the wilderness period;[9] but unlike the tent it could be adapted quite easily to the new conditions prevailing in the stable society of the davidic kingdom. Technically, the ark was a *vacant* throne, flanked on either side by cherubim, legendary guardians like those which proliferate among the finds of Mesopotamia: animals with human faces. Nevertheless, it was certainly regarded as an effective symbol of the divine presence; Yahweh accompanied the ark everywhere, and when it eventually came to be housed in the temple, Yahweh too was thought to take up residence there.

More important than the story of these changes, however, are the religious differences they disclose. The theology of encounter represented by the tent of meeting, though less exposed to abuse than the theology of presence, evidently failed to satisfy the religious needs of the people, who required the assurance that Yahweh had taken up a permanent abode among them. What we have to consider next is the kind of abuses to which these instinctive needs can give rise. There are basically four of these: object, place, person and institution. The danger in each case is similar. Since the created universe manifests the Creator, it is only natural that men should enlist the aid of creatures, of what is not God, to help them find God. And regarded as channels or media of communication, objects and institutions, places and people can serve a useful purpose. But

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[9]   Num 10, 35.

since God is incomprehensible and elusive, there is a tendency to substitute the tangible for the intangible, the seen for the unseen. God is no longer mediated: he is ousted.

Israel was keenly aware of this danger, especially with regard to the cult-object. The episode of the golden calf was the people's original sin, and the memory of it never left them. The first commandment of the decalogue discloses their besetting temptation to escape from the austerities of a pure faith. And the 'high places' too, although their significance may have been partly misunderstood by the deuteronomistic historian, were undoubtedly exposed to the evils of syncretism. That the complaints of the author of the Book of Kings concerning the incense and sacrifices offered at these local shrines had some justification we know from the denunciations of the prophets. And as we have seen, even the tradition of the abiding presence in the temple caused considerable uneasiness in the circle of the priestly writer.

On the other hand, there is no evidence that the priestly caste ever formally abused their privileged status to the extent of claiming honours due to God alone. This is probably true of the monarchy also (although some scholars would dispute this); yet many purists were nervously aware of the religious tensions involved in acknowledging at the same time both a human and a divine king. No doubt there were occasions when priests or kings acted selfishly and irresponsibly, but the monarchy was short-lived, and by and large tradition sides with the priests.

The danger of allowing the institutions, especially the Law, to obscure the face of God was a real one. It is, as we know, one of the great themes of the New Testament. The memory of God's goodness, instead of acting as a spur to loyalty, resulted in laziness and complacency. The divine plan was studied and confidently interpreted, the divine will identified with a written code. The prophets denounced these errors, and there developed a new, purer tradition of the unsearchableness of God:

> Whence then comes wisdom? And where is the place of understanding? It is hid from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and Death say, 'We have heard a rumour of it with our ears'. God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.[10]

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[10] Job 28, 20–23.

Wisdom, though never formally identified with God, is thought of as somehow divine, and behind the continual insistence that wisdom is nowhere to be found except in heaven lies an intense awareness of God's essential inaccessibility. For wisdom 'is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty'.[11] Even so, the author imagines Solomon determining to take wisdom to live with him[12] and begging God, 'Send her forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of thy glory send her, that she may be with me and toil, and that I may learn what is pleasing to thee'.[13] For 'who has learned thy counsel, unless thou hast given wisdom and sent thy holy Spirit from on high?'[14]

*The name of God*

One way of reading the history of jewish religion in Old Testament times is to see in it the gradual purification of the notion of divine presence. The mainspring of this development is the tension between transcendence and immanence; for the God of Israel is at once incomprehensible and revealed: his home is in heaven and yet he has made himself known on earth. And he has made himself known as a God who saves. The cry of the oppressed people in Egypt was answered by the manifestation of his name, 'I am who am'. The memory of this revelation and of the context in which it was made, as a response to a cry of distress, has remained with the jewish people ever since. For Yahweh is a God who listens and who acts: unlike Baal, who may be asleep or away on a journey, Yahweh is *there*. At times, angry with his people's disloyalty, he 'hides his face', and once, in a terrible prophecy to Hosea, he threatened to withdraw his revelation altogether: 'You are not my people; for you *I am* no more'.[15] Absence-in-presence: the pain of loss. God continues to be present, the circle whose centre is everywhere, but not to Israel. Having seen, they know what blindness means; having touched the truth, they must now grope hopelessly in utter dissociation. And even when the promise was restored ('My heart is changed within me, my remorse kindles already'[16]), the memory of the threat continued to lower.

So at certain crucial moments in Israel's history, Yahweh repeated his revelation and reassured his people of his powerful presence. These were notably the times of passage or transition, the

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[11] Wis 7, 25.  [12] Wis 8, 9.  [13] Wis 9, 10.
[14] Wis 9, 17.  [15] Hos 1, 9.  [16] Hos 11, 8.

times when the people were asked to renounce the solace of familiar landmarks, to release their grip on what they knew and to step out into the unknown. (The word for this step was *faith*, the sort of faith which was counted to Abraham as righteousness when, at God's command, he abandoned all guarantee that his hope of posterity would be fulfilled.) The passage might be across a sea or across a desert. It might be the death of a leader or the imminence of a war. And in all cases the message was the same: 'Fear not, I am with you'. The reassurance of presence contained a reminder of the original revelation and thereby of its context. Presence-in-absence: an appeal to the past, a promise for the future, but also a demand for faith, since this God was not an idol: he could neither be seen nor touched, and he could not be said to be there as a thing is there. This, however real, was not a local presence: rather it was a presence of *accompaniment* and its condition was faith.

No doubt the temple was held by some to 'mark the spot' where God had his throne. But we have already seen the resistance to this notion. The Deuteronomist made a different use of the tradition. The temple was where God put his *name*,[17] which not only replaced the cultic image in other religions of the near east but also, like the oracular 'I am with you', served as a constant reminder of the central revelation. 'Save me, O God, by thy name', prays the psalmist;[18] 'The name of the God of Jacob protect you'.[19] Presence, but presence-in-absence: the identification of Yahweh with his name was not complete.

An episode which gathered significance as time went on was the refusal of King Ahaz to take the step of faith demanded of him. Threatened by powerful neighbours, tempted to seek an alliance with Assyria, Ahaz was urged by Isaiah to put his trust in Yahweh and to ask for a sign. In spite of his refusal, a sign was given him, the promise of a child who would be called Emmanuel: God with us. Hosea's third child had been given the terrible name 'not-my-people', a living symbol of rejection. Now, not long afterwards, another infant was to be the bearer of God's promise. The assurance of Yahweh's ready assistance, 'Fear not, I am with you', was for the first time to take human form.

All the various reminders of divine presence, the temple, the law, the priest, were realized in and replaced by the person of Christ. In him we see the Father; in him we find God. Stephen, who stressed

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[17]   Deut 12, 5.11.21 etc.          [18]   Ps 54, 1.          [19]   Ps 20, 1.

the transience of the old figures, was accused of uttering blasphemy against Moses, the temple and the law; but because he saw that the prophet, the place and the institution could not contain God, he turned the accusation against his accusers: 'How stubborn you are, heathen still at heart and deaf to the truth! You continually fight against the holy Spirit'.[20]

God is not mocked. The essence of christian belief is that he revealed himself definitively in his Son, who is with us still, Emmanuel, God with us. He is with us through his Spirit: where the Spirit of the Lord is, there the Lord is also, and we must beware in our turn of the insidious temptation to pin the Spirit down, to confine his presence to something we can control, to identify Christ with the church (= the temple), the *magisterium* (= the law), or the hierarchy (= the priest). Communicating with God, listening to his voice, finding his presence, is at once easier and harder than obeying the pope, the bishop, the religious superior, though all these have their role to play in our search for God. We know that there is no longer any need to restrict our search to heaven, but we still need help: the bible, the teaching of the Church, the sacraments, above all, perhaps, our personal prayer and the example and inspiration of our fellow-christians, the love and affection of those around us. God is in one sense always present: 'In him we live and move and have our being';[21] but we have seen that if he is to be present *to us*, we must listen and attend. Ultimately, we can find him *in us*, but there is once again a condition: 'If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him'.[22]

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[20] Acts 7, 51.  [21] Acts 17, 28.  [22] Jn 14, 23.