

# GOD WITH US

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THE CELEBRATED ADVENT phrase, Emmanuel, 'God is with us', comes from only three passages of Isaiah.<sup>1</sup> In the first of these, it is clearly a personal name, and very probably in the second; in the third it is more probably a declaration. The identity of the child who bears the name in the first passage<sup>2</sup> is one of the most discussed problems of Old Testament interpretation, and no certain answer has yet been given. In the context, the name and the phrase are prophetic declarations of the presence of Yahweh as helper and saviour. The declaration is peculiarly poignant, because it is given to a king who clearly places little confidence in Yahweh as saviour. The unbelief of the king does not expel Yahweh nor stand in the way of his saving help. As we shall see, this assurance of the presence of Yahweh is not expressed by all the writers of the Old Testament. One may relate this assurance to two other passages from the same book. In Isaiah 6, the prophet experiences a vision of Yahweh in the temple. The vision is dim, but the identity of the one seen is beyond doubt. Unlike the Emmanuel saying, the words of Yahweh in the vision are threats of judgment. In Isaiah 37, Hezekiah reads to Yahweh in the temple the threatening letter he has received from the king of Assyria and prays for deliverance. In answer he receives an oracle from Isaiah.

These passages illustrate the position which the temple of Jerusalem had in the 'presence theology' of the kingdom of Judah. In a phrase frequently repeated in Deuteronomy, Yahweh had chosen Zion as the place in which he set his name to dwell. The 'name' is often the self or the person. Yahweh dwelt among his people not in a general omnipresence, but in his house, right next to the house of the king whom he had chosen. His presence was cultic and symbolic. This understanding of the temple as the palace of the resident deity did not differ from the theology of the temple which we find in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Canaan. If you wished to invoke the deity, you acted as you did if you wished to invoke the

<sup>1</sup> Isai 7, 14; 8, 8, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Isai 7, 14.

king; you went to his house and presented your petition in the approved manner. The israelites hardly doubted that Yahweh could and did hear petitions anywhere, but they felt that action was more assured if the right channels were used.

How this was received in the kingdom of Israel after the schism of the two kingdoms, the bible does not tell us. It does tell us that Jeroboam instituted sanctuaries at Bethel and Dan. These were royal sanctuaries, as Jerusalem was; Amos was expelled from the royal sanctuary of Bethel.<sup>3</sup> There too Yahweh was symbolically present, and there he received cultic worship and petitions. The israelite monarchy could not have accepted the election of Jerusalem as the dwelling of Yahweh, and possibly the rejection was more total than the books of the Old Testament tell us. The interest of this for our present discussion is that the question of where exactly one should look for God arises very early; and it was still being agitated when the gospel of John was written.<sup>4</sup> To this we shall return.

Both in Jerusalem and in the israelite temples, the symbolism of the presence was more closely defined. In Jerusalem stood what was probably the oldest israelite symbol, the ark. It appears that even in Solomon's time the symbolism of the ark had been complicated. One tradition asserted that Yahweh was present in the documents of the covenant. But the shape of the ark and certain allusions to Yahweh enthroned upon the cherubim<sup>5</sup> indicate a footstool or a platform upon which Yahweh stood – invisibly, for an image was prohibited. Ancient images of deities standing upon the backs of animals have suggested that the calves of Dan and Bethel were also pedestals. We are here only a step removed from the symbolic presence of the image, a symbol which Israel completely rejected. Once the temple was built, the ark remained in the temple. There are allusions to the earlier practice of carrying the ark into battle at the head of the column.<sup>6</sup> It is doubtful that this practice was abandoned because of any 'spiritualization' of the idea of Yahweh which suggested that it was unsuitable for him to lead the armies of Judah; it may have been a simple realism, which did not wish the risk of capture of the ark as the philistines had captured it.<sup>7</sup> This opinion is ventured in spite of the fact that it is a strange idea of Yahweh as helper and saviour which refuses to endanger the symbol of help and salvation.

To speak of the 'glory' of Yahweh as a symbolic presence is to

<sup>3</sup> Amos 7, 12–13.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 4, 20–24.

<sup>5</sup> *E.g.* Ps 80, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Num 10, 33 ff; 1 Sam 4, 3 ff; 2 Sam 11, 11.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Sam 4, 11.

risk ambiguity; the literature tells us nothing of any obviously material and sensible symbol of presence like the ark or the calf. Yet the glory is mentioned as a visible manifestation of Yahweh's presence and protection. This is the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire of the exodus traditions; there is a certain polarization of glory in that it is both light and obscurity, best symbolized by a luminous cloud. The appearance of the cloud at the tabernacle or in the temple signifies that Yahweh is at hand; always present, his presence becomes manifest and terrible.<sup>8</sup> The cloud becomes a protecting canopy over Israel.<sup>9</sup> This luminous cloud of glory passed from the Old Testament into the gospel accounts of the transfiguration. The theme of glory can scarcely be derived from a cultic act or symbol; at least no one has thought of the act or symbol which might be implied. The theme is an expression of the belief that the presence of Yahweh at times is manifested, and the contexts in which the glory is mentioned are contexts of critical moments, in which some assurance of the present help of Yahweh was desperately desired.

Of all the Old Testament writers, Ezekiel made a more vivid use of the theme of the glory than any one else. The luminous cloud becomes a chariot propelled by winged beings. What Ezekiel meant is unfortunately obscured by problems of literary criticism; both the authorship and the date of many passages are disputed. There is no doubt, however, that in Ezekiel 10-11 in the present form of the text the glory of Yahweh departs from Jerusalem. In the present text, this occurs after Ezekiel first sees the glory in Babylonia. If this is the original form of the oracles of Ezekiel, the significance of the departure of the glory is somewhat obscured. Taken by itself, it clearly means that Yahweh leaves the temple and the city which, in the words of Deuteronomy, he had chosen for the dwelling of the name. His departure means that present help and salvation are no longer there; the temple and the city are not only open to judgment, they are no different from any other place in the world. The appearance of the glory in Babylonia does not mean that Yahweh has moved the dwelling of his name to another place; it means rather that there is no place where the name dwells.

The imagery of Ezekiel is related to the sayings of Jeremiah concerning the temple,<sup>10</sup> although Jeremiah does not deal with the theme of presence. He does deal with the same type of assurance in a holy place with which Ezekiel deals. The temple is not so holy

<sup>8</sup> Num 14, 10; 1 Kg 8, 11; Isai 6, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Isai 4, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Jer 7, 1-15.

that Yahweh cannot let it be destroyed; the temple is not so holy that Yahweh cannot depart from it. His presence is conditioned by the response of those among whom he dwells. If they are unworthy of his presence he does not stay. It is evidently implied that if Yahweh remains present his help and salvation are assured. He is not the agent of judgment against his own people; he withdraws in order that agents of judgment may be free to do their work.

The same Ezekiel – the same book, if not the same writer – does not abandon the theme of presence when he speaks of restoration. The restoration of the city and the temple in Ezekiel appears to most writers to be quite contrived.<sup>11</sup> More than that, it does not escape the confines of historic Palestine into a more universal view of the saving will of Yahweh. The focus of the saving act of Yahweh is Jerusalem, which receives a new name, *Yahweh-shammah*, Yahweh is there. The presence which was removed is restored, permanently, in the view of the writer. The permanence does not repose upon any change in the will of Yahweh to remain, which is still conditioned upon the response of these among whom he dwells. The prophet visualizes a change in the moral attitude of those who dwell in the land; they will not again do the things which caused Yahweh to remove his presence. What creates this moral change? About this the prophet is not altogether clear. It seems that he must visualize a time in which men will no longer expel the presence of Yahweh from their midst. The presence to be expected in the future is a different presence from the presence in ark and temple. The difference is not described by the prophet, and it could not be described. Ezekiel no more than any other prophet intended to describe the future salvation as a restoration of that past which had found its fulfilment in judgment. Yet the prophets had only the experience of the past to give them images and language in which to describe the salvation of the future. Ezekiel chose the theme of presence. By contrast, second Isaiah has no temple in his restored Jerusalem. Neither does Jeremiah. It is probably not irrelevant that neither second Isaiah nor Jeremiah see any of the religious or political institutions of pre-exilic Judah emerging in the restoration.

Commentators point out that the author of Revelations 21 has drawn on Ezekiel as his principal source for the vision of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven as a bride adorned for her husband. He has carried on the theme of presence: 'Behold the

<sup>11</sup> Ezek 40-48.

dwelling of God is with men'.<sup>12</sup> But his new Jerusalem has no temple; the symbolic dwelling of the temple is absorbed in the real presence. A symbolic presence can be ended; but the heavenly Jerusalem is the true residence of God.

The author of Revelations is also presenting an apocalyptic vision. The new Jerusalem and the dwelling of God with men are not accomplished in history but in the end of history. In the usual terms, it is a vision of the Church triumphant, not the Church militant. The presence which is assured and which admits no departure of God from his people is not a part of the historical experience of the Church. Like Ezekiel and Jeremiah, the author believes that presence of God cannot be assured as long as man lives in the contingency of history. Like them, he believes that history must end in the enduring presence of God. His own apocalyptic drama removes all the factors which can lead to the expulsion of God from his presence with men. Before the apocalyptic consummation the author of Revelations knows no assured and enduring presence of God.

Nor do other New Testament authors employ the theme of presence to any greater extent. One must set aside Paul's theme of incorporation in Christ, which has no Old Testament antecedents. So also one must set aside John's statements about the Word which became flesh and tented among us; for later in the gospel he presents Jesus as speaking of a departure and a subsequent return. The presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is not a clear New Testament theme, and it is in fact a development of medieval theology rather than of New Testament literature. Matthew echoes the Old Testament in his promise that Jesus will be with the disciples all days until the end of the world;<sup>13</sup> this is the presence of ready help and salvation. If the theme of presence in the New Testament is closely examined, the results may be disturbing.

Let us observe that the New Testament nearly annihilates the category of the sacred. There is no sacred personnel in the New Testament; no community officer is called priest. There is no sacred time, no set festivals. With reference to our topic, there is certainly no sacred place. We have already adverted to the passage in John,<sup>14</sup> which we do not pretend are the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. But the words are altogether in harmony with the general direction of New Testament thought and procedure. The New Testament

<sup>12</sup> Apoc 21, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Mt 28, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Jn 4, 20-24.

church knew no sacred places. Worship could be conducted anywhere. Matthew has a saying,<sup>15</sup> (again not surely the *ipsissima verba*) that Jesus is present where two or three are assembled in his name. This is surely the minimum requirement for a holy place. When Paul speaks of the temple, he knows no temple except the persons of the believers.<sup>16</sup> That temple is holy, and the Spirit dwells in that temple. For the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Christ by his redeeming death has ended the temple and the sacrificial cult.

Perhaps it is more than an accident of history that the 'holy places' where Jesus lived and died were lost from memory between the first and the fourth centuries. Perhaps palestinian christians were not so much uninformed as uninterested. Perhaps they thought that the presence of God should not be sought in one corner of the world rather than another. This is not said by way of finding fault with the pilgrims of the fourth century and of later centuries, who did their best to recover the sacred places, although I know the implications are there. When one recalls the troubles which the holy places have caused christians and others, one wants to see applied to them once and for all the words of Jesus quoted in John about worship in spirit and in truth. Holy places are a type of religious institution found universally; it may be worth attention that holy places, like the other institutions mentioned above, have no roots in the New Testament.

In the little ones, in the disciples; in those who are hungry or thirsty, unclad or homeless, sick and in prison: it is here that the whole biblical theme of the presence of God finds its fulfilment. The whole tradition of pilgrimage should have directed all the expense and personal effort which it demanded to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the shelterless, and liberating those in bondage. There was ambiguity in ancient Israel concerning the places where Yahweh was present, and the israelites could not be blamed for seeking either a symbolic presence or a luminous cloud. But Jesus wished to leave no doubt about where believers should seek his presence. Regretfully he did not seem to say enough; but on this particular topic even he could not create formulae which could not be evaded. But for any officer or member of the Church the ancient anguished question, 'Where can I find God?' has a clear and assured answer. Whatever be our uncertainty, the presence of God is not uncertain.

<sup>15</sup> Mt 18, 20.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Cor 3, 16-17.