

YOU ARE PRECIOUS IN MY SIGHT

By DENNIS HAMM

NOT LONG ago, in a Georgia kitchen, I was privileged to hear an ancient black woman sing out her life story like a psalm. The times were hard but the Lord had been present and leading all the way. She had a refrain for underscoring moments when the divine support was especially evident: 'There's always a ram in the bush'. The words came not as a learned allusion to Genesis 22, 13, but simply as the most obvious way to celebrate her experience of the providence of God.

When the early Christians looked for language in which to celebrate the consummate providential acts of God in Jesus Christ, now risen and present to the community and active in its mission, they did the same thing. They drew on the images of the Jewish scriptures and spoke of their experience of God in his Messiah as a continuation of the ancient story of the Lord caring for his people. But the old songs were now sung in a new key. What was happening in Jesus was not simply more of the same but a fulfilment which made the things of old look like mere promise.

The purpose of this essay will be, first, to survey some of the primary Old Testament images of God caring, and then to show how some of these themes are used in the New Testament to illuminate the mystery of Christ in his Church. One remarkable example will suffice: Luke's portrait in Acts 4, 23-31, of the community responding in prayer to persecution, a passage containing an astonishingly rich convergence of Old Testament themes of divine Providence.

Some Old Testament images of the God who cares

What we first meet in the printed Bible, the quilt of ancient materials which comprise the prologue (the first to the eleventh chapter), to Genesis offers some vivid images of a caring God. In the priestly account, God creates by bringing order out of chaos with a commanding word. And once begun, the creative activity of the Lord is seen as a continuous and successful holding action

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against the power of chaos (see Pss 89, 10; 104, 5-9, 27-30; Job 38, 8-11). This notion is demonstrated in the story of the flood, when the waters of chaos are allowed, for a spell, to have their way (7, 11; 8, 2). But, finally, the promise to Noah is a promise of permanent check on chaos (8, 22). One chaotic element within creation is, however, allowed from time to time to run its course – the perversity of humankind. Human rebellion and divine response is presented through the rhythm of four episodes. When Adam and Eve, formed by the Lord's hands and enlivened by his breath, try to be like gods, he disciplines them, but not before playing the tailor 'who made leather garments with which he clothed them' (3, 21). When Cain kills Abel, and the earth cries out for vengeance, the Lord provides the murderer with a protective mark (4, 15). When human arrogance reaches the extreme symbolized by the old story of the mingling of the daughters of men with the sons of God (6, 1-6), the Lord washes the slate clean, but not without providing for the survival of every kind of life. Finally, after the rebellion of Babel is punished with the scattering of the nations who wished to make a name for themselves, the narrative which follows has the Lord promise to Abram that he would make Abram's name great, and that all the peoples of the earth would find blessing in his seed (12, 2ff). Each of the four primal sins is met with the care of a God who chastizes only to provide for a new beginning. The rest of the patriarchal story is the adventure of the Lord protecting that promise to Abram (see especially Gen 22; 45, 8; 50, 20).

If there is one model from human life which dominates the symbols of divine providence, it must be covenant. This form of social arrangement is ready-made for the purpose. Consider the elements. An overlord (or stronger tribe or nation) makes an agreement with a lesser party. In return for faithful service, the sovereign party will protect the vassal party. The agreement is cast in a conventional format involving (1) the identification of the overlord, (2) an historical prologue reciting past deeds by which the sovereign has favoured the lesser party, (3) stipulations itemizing the obligations of the vassal party, (4) provision for public promulgation, (5) calling the gods to witness, and (6) sanctions by way of blessings and curses. This model from secular history illuminates and, perhaps, forms the background for the biblical expression of the covenant of Sinai. Even the format finds echoes in Joshua 24 and the whole book of Deuteronomy. But more important than the format are the dynamics of the relationship. The symbol of the

suzerainty-covenant becomes an eminently appropriate way for the people of Israel to express their experience of a provident God. For Yahweh is indeed the more powerful party. Israel's very existence as a people derives from his initiative. The whole meaning and order of Israel's life is so rooted in the Lord's benevolence that even the minutiae of property, marriage and cultic law can be understood as stipulations in the treaty. That is, their obligations to one another are, ultimately, obligations to the Lord. And Israel's chief motive for fidelity in these laws is gratitude for the past deeds of the divine Sovereign. The 'gospel' of the identity and past deeds of the overlord precedes and motivates the legal stipulations. The dynamics of the relationship are caught in the opening words of the covenant of Sinai:

Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob: Tell the Israelites: you have seen for yourselves how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself. Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all the people, though all the earth is mine (Exod 19, 3-5).

In time, the conditional promise of Sinai is superseded by the unconditional promise to David (2 Sam 7, 14-16).

While the suzerainty treaty remained a vivid vehicle for portraying the relationship of powerful care and mutual commitment between the people and their overlord, the symbol lacks the notes of tender personal love. To symbolize this dimension of divine care, the biblical authors looked to the context of family and clan.

Our christian familiarity with the fatherhood of God as revealed in the sonship of Jesus ought not to soften the boldness of the Old Testament use of human fatherhood as an image of Yahweh. In what may be the earliest use of the image, the poet of the archaic song of Moses, included as ch 32 of Deuteronomy, sings:

Is he not your father who created you? Has he not made and established you? (Deut 32, 6)

The kind of paternal 'creating' and 'making' meant here is not mere physical generation (a trait common, after all, to all the nations), but the fatherhood of adoption which came through redemption from Egypt and the covenant of Sinai. The same figure of rebellious son versus caring parent informs Hosea's cameo of the first centuries of Israel's disobedience (Hos 11, 1-11). In Jeremiah's oracle of the

good news of return, the Lord's motive for leading them home is simply, 'I am a father to Israel' (Jer 31, 9). The composer of the lament of Isaiah (63, 7 - 64, 11) thrice addresses the Lord as father. The one who fathered them in the first exodus is exhorted to father them forth again.

Whatever sexist biases may have prevailed in the patriarchal culture of the East, the biblical tradition recognizes that there are aspects of God's providence that can only be expressed in images of the feminine. Isaiah, perhaps, put it most powerfully:

Can a mother forget her infant,
be without tenderness for the child of her womb?
Even should she forget,
I will never forget you (Isai 49, 15; cf 42, 14; 46, 3; 66, 13).

The author of Proverbs 1, 20ff, apparently playing off an ancient eastern tradition of picturing wisdom as a goddess, personifies the wisdom of the Lord as a woman, offering to all comers nothing less than the gift of her spirit. To accept this gift is 'dwelling in security, in peace, without fear of harm' (Prov 1, 33). When the sage wishes to provide a further picture of the graciousness of the Lord's invitation, lady wisdom is cast in the role of the perfect hostess inviting the simple and the ignorant to her banquet (9, 1-6).

Beginning, apparently, with eighth-century Hosea, the prophetic tradition finds in the marriage bond a strong image for Yahweh's love for his people. Hosea interprets the experience of his own unfortunate marriage with the adulterous Gomer as a parable of the Lord's rocky relationship with Israel. Although the woman has 'slept around' promiscuously, like a harlot, the prophet has remained faithful. Similarly, Israel has 'committed adultery' with Baalism, but the Lord keeps his side of the love-pact. It is a love expressed in patriarchal discipline ('I will hedge in her way with thorns and erect a wall against her', 2, 8), combined with deep tenderness ('I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart', 2, 16), with promise of a new honeymoon in the wilderness, and a new covenant (2, 20ff). Jeremiah picks up the image (Jer 2, 1-3, 5), but it remains for Ezekiel, speaking from the fuller hindsight of the exile, to retell the story of that delicate relationship even more explicitly in terms of covenant (Ezek 16).

The solidarity of hebrew clan life provided yet another important image of God's care, the *go'el* (literally 'redeemer') - the next of kin who is obliged to recover the alienated property of his kinsman

and to buy him back if he should fall into slavery. Because of its connotations of intimacy and personal responsibility, it is one of Isaiah's favourite metaphors for God (e.g., 43, 1; 44, 22ff; 47, 3; 52, 9).

The realm of work provides other images of providence. For example, the Lord cares for his people like a vinedresser for his vineyard. Isaiah sings of how the Lord had cultivated Israel lovingly, but it had produced the wild grapes of injustice (Isai 5, 1-7). Ps 80 specifies the cultivation as a transplantation from Egypt and a weeding of Canaan, notes its decay, and prays, 'take care of this vine and protect what your right hand has planted'. And Yahweh is a shepherd to his people, nurturing, guiding and rescuing with his staff, defending with his rod (Ps 23). During the babylonian exile, when the people were a scattered flock indeed, Ezekiel (drawing, perhaps, upon the oracle of Jeremiah 23) interprets the whole sweep of Israel's past and future in a shepherd parable. The Lord castigates the leaders for having been careless and exploitive shepherds, and promises that he himself will shepherd his people, seeking the lost, healing the sick, and feeding them all (Ezek 34).

While we cannot read trinitarian theology back into the Old Testament, the spirit of God in the hebrew bible is more than simply just another metaphor for Yahweh. Especially among the writing prophets, 'pneumatology' becomes one of the primary symbols for describing the provident presence of the Lord. Through his spirit, he inspires prophets, raises up charismatic judges, empowers anointed kings. It is, however, in the visions of things to come that the spirit-language becomes most compelling. Ezekiel (36, 23-31) presents a vision of restoration by a God who cares enough to wash, give a new heart, and even bestow his own spirit. Ezekiel 37 presents two images of restoration: dry bones are rebuilt and revived; and this is interpreted by a similar image, resurrection from graves. Both scenes refer not to literal resurrection but to the restoration of the people to their homeland. Again it is the spirit of God himself that is given and a covenant relationship which is renewed. In the oracle of Isaiah 44, 1-5, the people are addressed in terms of prophetic call and renewal. As in Ezekiel, the land will be revived by water and the people by the outpouring of God's own spirit. In Isaiah 42, 1ff, the Lord who gives spirit to all (v 5) puts his own spirit upon his servant for a mission of bringing justice to the nations. After the return, the servant is said to be anointed for the prophetic activity of proclamation, healing, comforting - the

completion of the Lord's restoration of his people (Isaiah 61, 1-3). Finally, there is the remarkable development in the psalm of entreaty in Isaiah (63, 1-3). The return has occurred, but the temple is in ruins and the people far from revived. The post-exilic author of this plea evokes the Lord's past deeds of Exodus (63, 8-14) to 'motivate' a similar visitation now, so that the new exodus of the exilic prophets will occur in all its fulness. The pneumatology of this prayer is astonishingly close to the New Testament doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Three times, the spirit of God is mentioned as the agent of liberation from Egypt. In a recent discussion of this passage, George Montague has argued convincingly that 69,9 alludes to Exodus 33 (God himself, not an angel, led the exodus) and that in this context the Lord's holy spirit means nothing less than his personal, active presence.¹ (Ps 139,7 evokes this equation on the personal level). Implicitly, then, the request is for the Lord to exercise his provident power by exerting his guiding presence in a fully new exodus, again through his Holy Spirit.

Finally, two more providential themes deserve mention before we move on to our New Testament example: the connection between creation and care, and the link between redemptive care and mission.

Creation and redemption are metaphors for the same experience of God's care in Isaiah (43, 1). The failure and revival of nature mirror the fracture and renewal of covenant in Hosea (2, 1-11, 23ff). For Jeremiah, the certainty of the Lord's fulfilment of the new, unconditional (davidic) covenant is rooted in the certainty of created order (Jer 31, 37; cf 33, 20ff). The logic of Job (10, 8-12) is that the one who creates must sustain, and the one who has sustained so lovingly will surely continue. In Ps 147, the psalmist can celebrate both God's on-going ordering of creation and his interventions in history. The promise of a new exodus out of the babylonian exile is rooted in the power of the creator (Isai 51, 14-16).

The oracles of Isaiah 40-55 proclaim not only a providential redemption from Babylon but speak as well of a mission for Israel which looks beyond itself to the nations. The mission is ascribed most explicitly to the enigmatic Servant of Yahweh (42, 1ff; 49, 1ff; 50, 4-11; 52, 13-53, 12). But all Israel itself is also called servant (41, 8-9; 42, 18ff; 44, 1) and given a mission to witness (43, 10-12; 43, 21; 48, 20). The whole sweep of Second Isaiah

¹ *The Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (New York, 1976), pp 54-58.

presents a vision of a provident God – acting with the compassion of mother, father, next of kin – redeeming his people from exile in a creative new exodus by means of a chosen leadership whose lot and whose further mission they will share. However this may have been understood in the sixth century B.C., it provided the perfect model for understanding how God would work a new exodus through his Servant Jesus, and call a new Israel to share in that same mission.

In summary, then, the biblical treatment of providence has little in common with the Stoics' interest in predestination and foreknowledge. Rather, the sacred authors stress the caring relationship the Lord established with his people through his covenants. How that delicate relationship is lived out – in tender initiative, discipline, forgiveness and renewal on the Lord's part, and in survival, rebellion, and repentance on the people's part – this story is spelled out in images derived from the intimate commitments of family and clan life. Throughout, the primary exemplar of divine care remains the self-revelation and deliverance of the exodus. Even as creator, the Lord is seen to be most creative in the ways he freed, formed and sustained his people during the exodus events. And when prophets spoke their oracles and visions about the future caring intervention of God, no dream could outstrip the hope of a people revived through a new exodus, and a covenant renewed and nurtured by nothing less than the Spirit of God.

The hand of God in the exodus of Jesus's people

When the early writers of the christian community want language to celebrate the providential acts of the Father in and through the mystery of Jesus, all the images and themes of the Old Testament are sitting there like an organ waiting for the new song to be played. Sometimes this reworking of the Old Testament material for christian purposes is so rich and masterful that the resonances and implications can be unfolded almost endlessly. One such text, whose theme is nothing less than the whole mystery of the provident Father working through the missions of Jesus and the Church, is Luke's nine-verse portrait of the community at prayer, in Acts 4, 23–31. (Though we shall quote parts of the passage as we take them up, the reader is asked to have the whole text in view.)

We are presented with the picture of an assembled community bursting into the choral creation of a rather involved prayer, including the quotation of the first two verses of the septuagint version of the second psalm, a word-for-word commentary on these

verses, and a petition relating to the community's present experience of persecution. It is apparent from the context that, in the story line he narrates, Luke wants us to understand the prayer as the spontaneous response to Peter and John's report of how the Sanhedrin had just silenced them. Either the author means us to picture a miracle of speech, an entire group improvising a prayer in the same words at the same time; or he is presenting us with a literary composition in a narrative setting. While the first alternative cannot be ruled out entirely (it is Luke who reminds us that 'nothing is impossible with God'), the second alternative is more consistent with the composition of Acts as the consensus of scholarship understands it. This prayer has a function in the narrative here, which is similar to all the other speeches in Acts. It is a biblically-based commentary on the events of the narrative.

The prayer begins by addressing God as 'Sovereign Lord' (*despota*), a word used in the greek bible where God is referred to as the Masterful One, 'maker of heaven and earth and the sea and everything that is in them'. The Old Testament instinct, to cry out for help to God by naming him as the one who made things in the first place, comes to the surface. The words are an exact echo of Ps 146, 5, which provides a 'parade' example of the way in which the Old Testament juxtaposes these two motifs of creation and rescue:

... who by the mouth of our father David, thy servant, didst say by the Holy Spirit. ... (v 25).

The Lord of all is now addressed as revealer, the one who spoke through David the prophet, moved by the Spirit. Acts 2, 30 is witness to the fact that Luke has David in mind. The dense phrasing is typical of the evangelist. God is the ultimate source of the words about to be quoted, though he speaks through instruments. The Holy Spirit as inspirer of prophecy is a favourite Old Testament motif of Luke. The reference to David as 'our father' evokes memory of the davidic covenant (2 Sam 7): to be sons of David is to be heirs of the davidic covenant. That this is Luke's deliberate intention would seem to be borne out by his reference to the resurrection as fulfilment of the promise to David 'that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne' (Acts 2, 30, alluding to Ps 132, 11, and 2 Sam 7, 12ff).

After citing the first two verses of Ps 2, the prayer goes on to interpret the ancient words as having been fulfilled in the events of

the passion of Jesus, detail answering detail. The 'gentiles' are, of course, the roman soldiers. The 'peoples' (in the original context of the psalm, simply a synonym for gentiles again) here refers to the 'peoples of Israel'; the strange plural is used to echo literally the word of the psalm. 'The kings of the earth' are represented by Herod, and 'the rulers' by Pilate. 'The Lord' is, of course, God, and his 'anointed' is Jesus, who, in Luke's language, is said to have been anointed (*Christed* in the greek) with the Holy Spirit at the beginning of his public ministry (see Acts 10, 38 and Lk 4, 18).

... to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place (v 28).

In referring here to the death of Jesus as ordained by God, Luke is simply repeating a theme already established within the whole unit Luke-Acts. The events of the passion fulfil the Lord's plan expressed in scripture (Lk 24, 26. 44). He was delivered up according to the plan of God (Acts 2, 23), who foretold by all the prophets that his Christ would suffer (3, 18). With such talk of plan and predestination, the classical philosophical question, regarding providence, foreknowledge and free will, threatens to raise its head. But Luke's use of the word for plan (*boulē*) shows clearly that he does not intend to say that the divine plan overrules human freedom. There is indeed a kind of divine script, and Paul can refer to this message as announcing the whole *boulē* of God (Acts 20, 27); but people are free either to participate in that plan or to reject it. Gamaliel cautions that the Sanhedrin might be opposing the *boulē* of God (5, 38ff). And, commenting on the mixed response to John's baptism of repentance, Luke asserts that 'the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose (*boulē*) of God for themselves' (Lk 7, 30). Strikingly, Luke is even able to attribute the death of Jesus to the 'hand' of God. That hand is a symbol of God's providence *par excellence*. The concordance to the Old Testament lists scores of examples where the hand of God is a way of referring to his providential care and intervention (e.g. Isai 41, 10; interestingly, the hand of God is equated at times with the Spirit of God: see Ezek 3, 14; 37, 1; Isai 31, 3).

Now there is an abrupt transition between verses 27-28, referring to the conspiracy against Jesus, and verse 29, referring to the Sanhedrin's threats against the apostolic community. Commentators sometimes call this transition a 'seam', since the 'their' of verse 29 would most logically refer to the enemies of Jesus; and yet, in

order to fit the meaning of this verse, it must refer to the Sanhedrin. The transition is indeed abrupt; but, rather than marking poor editorial suturing, the very abruptness serves to bring out the point all the more strongly – that the situation of the apostolic community parallels that of Jesus. The opponents are more or less the same. And the reader, knowledgeable in the psalms and attentive to the story of Acts up to this point, can fill in what is presupposed in the abrupt transition. The second psalm, after all, from which only the initial verses were quoted, is a royal psalm, proclaiming the universal reign of God's anointed, vindication against his enemies, and, in the final two verses, asserting the total mastery of God himself and the beatitude of those who trust in him. How this has been fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus had already been proclaimed in the earlier speeches of Acts and need not be rehearsed here in chapter 4. The petition for divine help is based on the logic that, just as God vindicated Jesus through the resurrection, he will vindicate the apostolic community; for, as we shall see, its prophetic mission is identical with that of the risen servant Jesus:

And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus (vv 29–30).

This petition is remarkable both for its content and for its wording. First, the cry for help is not simply the expected plea for rescue and vindication against the enemies; we have a request for the two gifts of healing and boldness in preaching, precisely the gifts which had provoked the threatened response to the Sanhedrin. They are praying for more of the same. Secondly, the language in which the petition is framed shows how Luke understands the source and exercise of these gifts. 'Signs and wonders' is a stock phrase of the Old Testament referring to the wonders which God worked in the days of Moses. The image of God's stretching forth his hand also evokes the providential interventions of the exodus. One text that illustrates both motifs, and indeed almost provides a paradigm for our Jerusalem prayer, is in Deuteronomy (26, 7ff):

We cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and he heard our cry and saw our affliction, our toils and our oppression. He brought us out of Egypt with his strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs and wonders.

Luke shows that he intends this phrase 'signs and wonders' to carry overtones of the exodus by using it specifically to refer to that deliverance in Acts 7, 36. That Luke wants the ministry of Jesus to be understood as the new exodus of the end-time is shown by the reference in Peter's speech at Pentecost to 'Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty words and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst' (Acts 2, 22). The implication then of Luke's use of exodus-language to specify God's action through the community, is that the apostles' own mission is the extension of the new exodus, which the Father had begun in Jesus (see too Acts 26, 23). Luke is at pains in his first volume, the Gospel, to underline the continuity between the mission of Jesus to preach and heal, and that of the Church (see Lk 9, 1-6; 9, 11; 10, 8ff). Here, through the medium of the prayer, he elaborates that theme more fully. The community consider themselves God's 'servants', and the signs and wonders they perform are done through the name of his 'servant Jesus'.

Finally, the prayer is answered. The place is shaken, and the word for this shaking is that used in the greek bible for the theophanies, for example, in Ps 113, 7 (Septuagint), where the earth is said to have trembled at the exodus-presence of the Lord. Then all are filled with the Holy Spirit, and speak the word of God with boldness. The rest of the Acts demonstrates how the petition for healing is also answered.

So we find how the Old Testament images and themes mentioned at the beginning are here played in a new key, to celebrate God's providence in the mystery and mission of the risen Lord and his Church. The God who cares enough to create, cares enough to rescue. The God who rescues from political bondage can also liberate from sickness and sin. The promised renewal of covenant, a community revived through the dynamic presence of the Spirit of God, is happening in the community of the risen Christ. What was hinted at in later Isaiah, the close identity between the mission of the servant people with the special servant of the Lord, is here made explicit in the people of Jesus. From now on, the caring providence of God will always involve the Christian in the call to take part in the Spirit-led mission of the risen Lord.