THE HAND OF THE LORD HAS TOUCHED ME

Job, Qoheleth, and the Wisdom of Solomon

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IN EVERY generation the assertion is confidently made that belief in God is dead; thinking thoughts of an afterlife is childish fantasizing, a crutch for the inadequate; retaining such a delusion demands intellectual contortions unworthy of educated grown-ups, and so on. And in each generation, belief in God obstinately refuses to lie down and submit to the burial that has been ordained for it. Highly intelligent and sophisticated adults, even those of a reflective disposition, continue to believe the fairy-tale because they can do no other; continue to affirm that things are not merely what they seem, that the universe is ultimately friendly, and carry on making the apparently preposterous claim that the death that lies at the end of every human life cannot be the end of the story, if God is whom they know him to be. For if God *is* whom they know him to be, then the fact of death simply fails to make sense. The reflective believers I have in mind are to be found particularly in Judaism, and in this article I shall be observing three jewish authors (the ancestors of those profoundly religious rabbis in the concentration-camp who once put God on trial and found him guilty), as they make their way painfully, carrying our burden, towards the view that if we are to be faithful both to our experience of a living and loving God and of the world, then this life, whose termination leaves so many questions unresolved, cannot be the whole story. There must be another life, an 'after-life', where the tensions are resolved, and the sense of the presence of a loving God is reconciled with the grim facts of ordinary living. We do scant justice to the revolutionary nature of this hard-won insight when phrases like 'after-life' trip easily and unreflectively off the tongue. Life after death is *not* obvious, and the chosen people of God loyally lived out their faith for centuries without believing that anything more could be expected after death than a shadowy, disembodied existence in the uncharted region called Sheol.

First, however, it is important to underline the ambiguity of the experience of God that gave rise to this astonishing theological advance, for that ambiguity is at the heart of the matter. It can be well expressed in terms of the title of this article, 'The hand of the Lord has touched me'. In one sense, this is obviously a positive, or at worst neutral, statement of a sense of the presence of God. Again and again, in the Old Testament, 'the hand of God' is simply a code-word for the impossibility of denying the existence of God. For some authors, however, that is only the beginning of the problem; for them the hand of God is not always experienced as protective or commissioning. The quotation which acts as the title of this article is from the Book of Job (19,21), and in the context it is a cry for help from his unhelpful friends, and the hebrew word used here for 'to touch' also means 'to afflict'. Here, therefore, the all-pervasive presence of God is experienced destructively and as a trial, not as that which protects and feeds.

Here lies the ambiguity: 'Thy hand has touched me' can mean 'I have (warm and loving) experience of you' or it can mean 'you have destroyed me'. I hope to show in the course of this article that the ambiguity is a fruitful one, that the shriek of pain uttered by loyal souls is a great, if concealed, act of devotion to God, which makes possible giant theological strides. The reason for describing it as an act of devotion is that to a soul in agony the bland piety of the unreflective is an offensive blasphemy; for such a one it is no service to God or man to gloss over the apparent dissonance between what ought to be and what is. People of this sort find in themselves the courage to face the problems, to worry away at the question until either they find a solution, or, more courageous yet, reveal its insolubility.

The wisdom literature

In Israel it was the questing, restless attitudes of mind engendered by the wisdom tradition that wrestled with these difficulties. The material is perhaps too familiar for us to be able to grasp how revolutionary each stage was, and how Wisdom carried, and carries, within it the abiding seeds of intellectual and hence theological revolution. The mood of the sapiential literature is ideally suited for exploring ambiguities and making explicit hidden tensions before attempting to resolve them, and this has something to do with the origins of this vigorous and influential movement.

The origins of the literature are slightly obscure. There are

parallels in the cultures of both Babylon and Egypt, sufficiently numerous and exact to allow us to regard the phenomenon within Israel as part of a wider international movement; a good many scholars are inclined to link the fictitious ascription to Solomon of much of the wisdom material (Proverbs, the Song of Songs, Qoheleth, the Wisdom of Solomon) and the courtly setting of much of it, with the fact that Solomon had an egyptian wife (1 Kgs 3,1), and that the parallel material in Egypt clearly belongs in courtly circles; and they conclude that it was the bright new monarchy in its deceptive dawn under David and his son which introduced wisdom into Israel in order to meet the requirements of the new political dispensation. This is quite likely, but we need to bear two further points in mind as a qualification on this judgment. Firstly, much of the biblical and apocryphal wisdom material, notably of course in the Book of Proverbs, is couched in the riddling, proverbial mode, for which the hebrew word *masal* is the only proper term, which seems to carry the traces of an ancient folk-wisdom, not the urbane sophistication of royal courts.

Secondly, all israelite literature carries the mark that above all sets Israel apart: its relationship to the Lord its God. Israelite wisdom literature is not merely a set of instructions on 'How to win friends and influence people', but a sustained attempt to link the valuable insights of the international intellectual movement of the Yahwism that Israel and israelite thinkers could never forget.

There is no getting away from it, however, that the world of Wisdom is very different indeed from that of the classical prophets or the edited collection of documents we call the Pentateuch, or the historical writings of the Old Testament, or most of the psalms. The wisdom writers have no interest at all (Jesus ben Sira is a late exception) in priesthood or cult; nor is morality presented as the prophets present it, as part of what God demands of the people to whom he is bound in covenant. Morality is seen instead as the recipe for happiness and prosperity; nor is such a position to be loftily dismissed as ethically repellent: the question 'why be moral?' is always with us and the answer given by the mainstream religious writers, 'because it works', is not a bad one, and has at least the merit of being based in experience. Experience, however, is a continuing affair, and any conclusions gleaned from it must then be checked against subsequent experience and so refined and modified. That is the way individual humans and mankind at large grow in understanding; it means, of course, that one can never rest content

in the optimistic assumption that one has solved the mystery of life. This has the further consequence that Wisdom, as opposed to the Law, is permanently disposed towards revolution and new advance, for it is always testing its own conclusions. In particular it was disposed to test the 'equation' arrived at by earlier writers in the tradition, that virtue plus hard work equals happiness. When the writers whom we are considering in this article considered this equation, they found it wanting and so came to the revolutionary theological insight of which we have already spoken; and if it seems that we are taking an unconscionable time in getting there, that is because if we do not see Job, Qoheleth, and the Wisdom of Solomon in their tradition we shall not see them at all.

What the wisdom writers sought to do was to observe a pattern, and so control the facts; they are part of the great enterprise of the human intellect, which is to find out, at every level, and with no 'No Entry' signs, what's what. The human intellect finds offensive, and therefore worth investigating, anything that seems arbitrary or unpatterned. Anything at all can come under the critical microscope if it seems not to make sense; and of course, for believers in a God who is both loving and omnipotent, the problem that above all seems not to make sense, is that of innocent suffering: if God loves us, how can he possibly let happen the terrible things that clearly do happen? We cannot pretend that there is no evil in the world, and believers cannot convince themselves that there is no God, or that there is one and he is either not loving or rather ineffective; so there is a problem, and we do not serve God or man by evading it. What the believer has to do is find the pattern; and if we are dealing with an omnipotent God then even one counter-example is enough to break the pattern, and demand another explanation.

The Book of Job

In this angry and majestic work the counter-example is made as extreme as possible, by setting up the drama in such a way that the hero is known from the start as unquestionably virtuous. Chapters 3-42,6 are written in poetry of a curiously uneven sort which, nevertheless, at times attains impressive sublimity. The whole work, however, is framed by a prose diptych (chs 1-2 and 42,7-16), which carries the appearance of an old folk-tale, incomplete as it stands, describing the noble suffering and ultimate reward of a totally just man who seemed at the start of the story to instantiate the truth of the sapiential equation of virtue and prosperity. As we read this part

of the fairy-story (for there is no pretence that it is anything else) we mutter 'Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise', and as the book ends, it is decidedly with a sense of 'and they all lived happily ever after'. It is in this prose part that Job behaves with the stoical nobility that is proverbially characterized as the patience of Job; but if that were all, if this were merely a splendid chap in the land of Uz who took all that the Satan (some kind of metaphysical official, and not to be confused with the Devil) could throw at him, and was subsequently rewarded several times over, then it would hardly be such an absorbing piece of writing, nor exercise the fascination that it has through the centuries on Jews, Christians and unbelievers. The work's unique appeal (and the parallels from other ancient near eastern cultures only serve to underline how unique it is) comes from its combination of poetry with the prose narrative, or, to look at the distinction from another angle, the juxtaposition of the drama of the situation with the philosophical attempt to grasp the issues involved. This combination can be a recipe for quite excruciating dreariness, as the corpses of many twentieth century plays mutely testify. In the book of Job however, our attention never slackens, because of a third ingredient. This is that the drama and the philosophical disquisition take place 'in a cleft stick'. The story is given discipline and a firm line by the fact that not just any solution is possible. 'The hand of the Lord has touched me', the hero cries, and one route that is barred to him is the simple one of denying that the hand has an owner. His experience of the living God is so powerful and undeniable, that such an option, allegedly the standard one in our age, is not open to him. When we said earlier that the human intellect will not allow 'No Entry' signs, the exception to that is the road of doubting one's own experience. Some experiences are so compelling that we can no more doubt them than question our own existence. Job's experience of God as friend and master (for both of these are present in the book) is such an experience: he cannot doubt it, and that is his problem.

The solution he reaches is less clear, however. All sorts of answers are suggested by scholars. One false trail we need to block off immediately is that of questioning the unity of the book. There is no question, of course, that the work has a very odd shape indeed: a good many aspects of its structure combine to suggest that the work was not composed precisely as it stands; the trouble is, there is no agreement among scholars as to how things looked originally. We simply lack the evidence to go back very far in the tradition-history

of the text; and in any case the book that has attracted so much passionate interest over many centuries is the one printed in our bibles. It is of *this* work, and not of another, that we must ask our questions, if only because the last editor of the work presumably thought it was just fine as it stood.

How *does* it stand? How is the great question approached of how God can be God, and all these things happen? A problem is that there seem to be almost too many solutions; from the available literature we can take our pick from at least five, each of which has something to be said for it and each is questionable. It may be that our author wants us to put some or all of them together, or select one of them, but I am inclined to suppose that the peace Job attains, and there is no question that he does attain it, is not that of having found the answer, but that of having raised the question. Simply to have had the courage to lay the problem before his contemporaries and fellow-Israelites (though his hero may be an edomite sheikh, there is no doubt whom the author worships) is to have achieved much. The peace in which the book ends is not the elimination of discord, but its resolution in counterpoint, if a slightly mangled metaphor may be permitted. The author achieves this effect by running the 'sapiential equation' backwards: it is throughout the work a given, and this is what gives the work its harshness, that Job is innocent and that attempts, such as those of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, to argue from his suffering to his guilt, are foredoomed. It is very important that we and the author are able to do what Job and his comforters cannot, namely stand among the sons of God to listen to the discussion from which it all started. We always have, at least at the back of our minds, the context in which the drama is being played out. The only inadmissible conclusion is one which smacks of the bland and the glib, for that is the enemy of human thinking, and therefore not to the glory of God. So to describe Job, as some do, as a 'Wisdom of rebellion', is to miss the point. Job is doing only what Wisdom always does: to look for the pattern, and if it cannot see the solution, at least to lay bare the problem. In this the author of Job is a good and faithful servant; in this he finds his peace.

Qoheleth

If the book of Job is painted in rather sombre tones, Qoheleth, 'The Preacher', seems to work from a palette that is hopelessly black. He has been described as 'profoundly agnostic', and 'a world-weary cynic', but this fails to state the case. As with Job, and as with

all the literature preserved for us by the people of God, it is God who is the only constant point of reference, the unchanging background against which his admittedly somewhat rebellious spirit tries to come to terms with the world as he sees it. As with Job, we shall take the text as it stands to be that which the final redactor intended us to have (it is clearly the only one we have!), and examine it as a whole for its reflections on the problems of life.

Once again, we have to deal with an author who observes life with a shrewd eye, one for whom authoritative statements need to be checked against the facts of experience. As before, the only 'No Entry' signs posted are those marking out roads where the *facts* make it impossible to go. So, as in the case of the Book of Job, one road that our author may not go down is that of denying God's existence. For him that would be a cul-de-sac: that God exists is the still centre in all his reflections and it is precisely this that makes his problem so difficult to solve. So God is clearly regarded as responsible for anything that happens (1,13) even if to the eyes of this observer he does not appear to have made a particularly good job of it (2,24.26), and perhaps the best of his gifts is 'to be happy . . . eat and drink, and take pleasure in all his toil' (3,10-15). What is missing in this work is Job's sense of intimacy with God; for it is only with an old friend that one can be as angry as Job is. Like Job, Qoheleth feels man's powerlessness over against God's all-pervasive omnipotence, but he is far more inclined to shrug his shoulders at it:

> Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful; and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him (Qoh 7,13-14).

The mood of depression is summed up by the second verse: 'Nothingness of nothingness, says Qoheleth'. We have in this book a cosmic cry of 'What's the point of it all?', made more, not less, acute by his inability to throw off the sense of the ubiquity and omnipotence of God; 'the hand of the Lord' has touched him for sure and so overwhelmed is he with the power of it that nothing much seems to matter. Things were much the same yesterday as they will be tomorrow, 'the sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises' (1,4-11). There is even a hint (6,10-11), and this is quite different from Job, that there is not even

any point in thinking it through, except that, the human intellect being what it is, he has no choice. At times, it must be said, it seems rather distressing that so gifted a lyric poet should use his talents in so negative a way (see, for example, 12,16-18), but he could only follow his star.

There is in Qoheleth nothing that resembles a suggestion of life after death; but the grim fact of mortality (3,19-22) is very much a part of his general picture of the pointlessness of life, so in spelling out the impasse in which he found himself he gave definition to the problem; and in that sense he made possible the eventual breakthrough to belief in a life after death where nonsense and pointlessness would find meaning. For without Qoheleth's gloomy bafflement the eventual solution would have been won too cheaply, seemed too easy to think and so insufficiently prized. Qoheleth could only reflect on the meaning of life, and complain at those who refused to do so (4,4-6). Virtue, so far as he could tell, was not rewarded (4,1; 7,15-16; 8,14), so once again the wisdom tradition throws up an author who questions its own presuppositions. Qoheleth cannot find the pattern, so all human thinking rests on a mistake and the only certainty is death, which renders everything else absurd. God's action necessarily therefore seems wholly arbitrary.

But it is still there, this action of God, and so Qoheleth is, like Job, a work written in a cleft stick. There is not much solace or peace in Qoheleth, though there is a certain loftiness born of the triumph of the intellect. The solution of a life *beyond* death in which all nonsense is turned into sense is just beyond Qoheleth's reach, a fact which should teach us, not that Qoheleth's intellect was somehow inadequate, but that the solution is not an easy nor an obvious one.

The Book of Wisdom

So far as we know, the privilege of reaching the solution fell to an anonymous alexandrian Jew, whose first language was not Hebrew but Greek, and who therefore belonged at least in part to the intellectual world in which the eclectic ragbag known as Middle Platonism, as well as certain other fairly half-baked philosophical systems, were the fashionable modes of understanding reality. Like Qoheleth, this author made the pretence, which hardly anyone can have believed, that his work was the composition of Solomon. Though the anonymous author is aware that following the God of Israel is problematic, he is calm about an answer to the problem. He

now offers that answer to his struggling, and perhaps vacillating, fellow-Jews of the Diaspora. Job had anguished over the 'equation' that virtue yielded a measurable return in material prosperity; Qoheleth had simply rejected it as vanity; and Jesus ben Sira had, equally simply, reaffirmed it. The author of the Book of Wisdom admits the dilemma, and resolves it by supposing that death is not the end, and offering his co-religionists a world yet to be experienced in which virtue and vice will receive what they deserve. This is a very considerable advance, not only over our other two works, but also with regard to other, roughly contemporary, works such as 2 Maccabees, Daniel, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, where resurrection is reserved exclusively for the virtuous, and vice is punished by a relapse into nothingness.

The Wisdom of Solomon belongs in the great tradition of sapiential literature; like its ancestors, it submits everything to the reflective judgment of experience, including therefore all other sapiential literature. So, for example, Qoheleth is very likely one of the opponents the author has in mind in chapter 2 (compare, for instance, Qoheleth 3,19; 2,16; 3,22, with Wisdom 2,2.4, and 9 respectively). However the sentiments there are commonplace enough, and are equally imaginable on the lips of thinkers influenced by Epicurus in the hellenistic world, so it is perhaps as well not to be too categorical about reconstructing the opponents whom 'Solomon' has in his sight.

The work is not a treatise on life after death for its main function is the praise of wisdom. The community to which it is directed is a beleaguered one, a community under siege by the brilliant achievements and dazzling attractions of hellenistic culture. Unlike Job and Qoheleth, therefore, but like Jesus ben Sira, our author could not afford the luxury of untrammelled theological experimentation, but above all needed to justify jewish Wisdom to his fellow-Jews, to show that it is the adherents of other religions, and people who fail to behave morally, who are the misguided ones. In his situation he cannot afford to leave hanging in the air the large question-mark sketched by the authors of Job and Qoheleth, and perhaps it was this urgent necessity that enabled the theological revolution of which this work is the earliest extant witness, the leap from the grim facts of experience on the one hand, and the ineluctable belief in God on the other, to what is perhaps the only possible solution, belief in an after-life.

This gives 'Solomon' the courage to admit what on the lips of Job

and Qoheleth was a very shocking doctrine, that, quite simply, virtue is *not* always rewarded in this life. We should read the Book of Wisdom, therefore, marvelling at its quiet self-confidence, and the great power of the human spirit to cope with life. For it is clear from the tone of their writings that Job and Qoheleth were lone voices against the blandness of established orthodoxy, and the community of alexandrian Jews has reaped in joy the harvest that earlier thinkers had sowed in anguish. There is in the Wisdom of Solomon an undeniable peace and a solace, but it was not easily come by.

Conclusions

The human understanding of life advances step by step, in dialogue and disagreement with others, restlessly enquiring, testing everything to see whether it rings true. Humanity requires its freedom to do so, and neither God nor man is served by shackling that freedom. It is worth making the point that in this respect things are much harder for the monotheist than for the polytheist (which may perhaps explain the sharpness of 'Solomon's' attack on polytheism), who can always explain the inexplicable in terms of the conflicts of warring deities. The myths of monotheism cannot take that step, because that would be untrue to the monotheist's experience of God, and so both Job and Qoheleth found themselves in an apparent cul-de-sac. It may be true that both of them failed to offer a satisfactory answer to the problem of how we experience the justice and mercy of God in this life, and both of them trail off into silence in the face of the problem; but it is also true that without their courageous and doubtless lonely questioning, the later doctrine of personal survival after death would not have been possible.

We need to raise our hats in silent tribute to those hard-working theologians who went before us in the Wisdom tradition, those hardy and courageous souls who tried to understand human existence, to grasp the pattern, and push back the frontiers of the unpredictable and all this without surrendering the one constant: their faith in God. Again and again in every age, great souls will cry, in peace or in anguish, 'the hand of the Lord has touched me'.