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God's Action in the World

A biblical perspective

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In considering the question of how God acts in the world it is somewhat disconcerting to find that the Bible is less explicit about the manner of the divine activity than it is about the fact of it. We have an abundance of assertions that God has acted in a certain event, or that through certain experiences the will of God will be made known, but little in the way of explanation showing how God brings this about. Sometimes it may be by turning the counsel of men into foolishness (cf. 2 Sam. 15:31), whereas in others it may be achieved by the intervention of the angel of the LORD (cf. 2 Kings 19:35). Yet even in the case of this latter event, the majority of commentators have believed that what is described as having happened, the defeat of the Assyrian army, must have some more natural explanation which the Bible simply theologizes by ascribing it to an angel. In reality it is clear that such assertions have themselves arisen by a relatively complex process of tradition formation which has come to view a particular event in a particular way.

If we take the Bible as a whole we do not find that there is any one mode of the activity of God. Sometimes there are clear indications that it was thought to be effected in a hidden way, in and through the actions and plans of men [1]. At other times it is described as taking place more directly through a theophany, or the appearance of an angel [2], whilst at others, specific human leaders are presented as endowed with a special power from God. Even more disconcerting is the fact that a later age may sometimes describe the method of the divine action quite differently from that in which a former age has described it. This is most notable in the case of the census of Israel held in David's time, which the historian of 2 Sam. 24:1 ascribes directly to God, but which the later writer of 1 Chron. 21:1 ascribes to the work of Satan [3]. If we were simply looking in the Bible for statements about how God is active in the world we could readily find support for a great variety of views, which would stand at a nearer or further distance from what we should regard as theologically acceptable today. Nor is this multiplicity of expressions made any easier by the recognition that behind such concepts as angels and theophanies there lies a long tradition-history so that they have become firmly stereotyped and conventionalized formulae for affirmations of divine activity [4]. This means that it is more or less pointless for us to try to define what exactly happened for a particular account of a theophany to have been written. It is rather that a set of images and ideas were current which enabled what we might, in a neutral fashion, call 'a manifestation of the holy' to receive an interpretation in a particular direction. Similarly statements that God 'spoke' or 'stretched out his hand' have largely

become metaphors for a sense of the divine activity which was not more narrowly defined.

Certainly we can see some measure of movement and development in particular directions, but these are seldom so clear-cut as to enable us to say that certain conceptions of the divine activity were dropped by later ages. It is notable, for example, that the activity of angels is more markedly present in the earlier, rather then the later, history-writing of the Old Testament. Yet we then find a marked resurgence of interest in the activities of angels in the inter-testamental period and in the New Testament, where we might have supposed that the tendency would have been in the other direction, towards a greater emphasis upon God's action in and through men. On the other hand there are quite unmistakeable signs that the more mechanistic notions of God's activity, through the sacred lot in the cult, came to be regarded as of less importance. What we may attempt to do is to group together particular areas of life in which the divine activity is described in the Bible, and to see the particular characteristics that pertain to each of these. These are the divine action in man, in man's world, and finally the divine action in nature. Obviously this is only an arrangement of convenience, since each directly overlaps with the other two, so that there is a necessary extent to which each area of the divine action must be recognized to presuppose the work of God through other means and in other areas of life. This particularly applies to the contrast to which a particular school of biblical theology came to attach great importance – the contrast between the divine activity in history and in nature.

1 The Divine Action in Man

When we come to consider how God is conceived to act within man we are immediately faced with the remarkable and distinctive vocabulary by which the Bible describes the nature, physiology and psychology of man.[5] Essentially this is a dualistic notion upon which a third concept – that of spirit – has come to occupy a significant place. Yet even this dualism is not like that of later Gnostic and Mandaean movements in which a sharp division was felt between the material and physical aspects of the body and the psychological and spiritual ones. For Old Testament thought man is made up of flesh (Hebrew *basar*) into which a divine principle of life has been poured (or 'breathed') so that he became a living being (Gen. 2:7). The word to describe this 'living being' is 'soul' or 'life principle' (Hebrew *nephesh*), which is not so much a part of man's being as an aspect of the way in which it functions when it is 'alive'. It is, therefore, a very extended use of the term to speak of a 'dead *nephesh*' (cf. Lev. 21:11). The fact that this 'soul', or '*nephesh*', was closely identified with the blood (Lev. 17:11, 14) both reflects a simple recognition of the importance of the blood for the life of man and animals, and the lack in the Old Testament of any sharp distinction between the physical and psychological aspects of the body's

functioning. In the New Testament, as already anticipated and stimulated by the practice of the Septuagint translators, the Hebrew terms for 'body' and 'soul' *(basar and nephesh)* were generally translated by the corresponding Greek words for 'flesh' and 'soul' (Greek *sarx* and *psyche),* although the underlying anthropological conceptions do not correspond with any degree of exactness. As most studies of biblical anthropology point out, the Hebrew concept of the *nephesh* does not properly correspond with the Greek concept of *psyche,* and there is no real counterpart in Hebrew vocabulary for the Greek concept of 'soul'. The most striking effect of this is to be seen in the attitude to, and descriptions of, life after death. The notion of the immortality of the soul does not properly belong in biblical thought until a relatively late period when the influence of Hellenistic ideas had begun to make itself felt (cf. Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9). For this reason the biblical understanding of a personal survival after death is expressed in terms of a resurrection of the body, even though this necessitated a greatly modified and extended notion of what the 'body' really consists of (cf. 1 Cor. 15:35-50).

Yet it is not just in relation to a belief in life after death that the peculiar characteristics of the biblical anthropology begin to manifest themselves. It enters more deeply and pervasively into the whole area of the understanding of the nature of man. All too easily the vocabulary used can lead to a false assumption that God is more directly concerned with, and active in, the psychological side of man's nature, to the neglect, and even disregard, of the more physical side. A very interesting effect of this is to be seen in the English translation of Ps. 23:3, which is very familiar:

> He restores my soul.

In the original Hebrew this certainly means no more than 'he refreshes me', or 'he revives me'. No doubt, as with other images used in the psalm, this had a metaphorical connotation so that a deeper side of the divine activity in the human personality beyond mere physical refreshment is not to be excluded. Nevertheless, it is a consistent consequence of the attempt to interpret the Hebrew word *nephesh* by means of the Greek word *psyche* and the Latin *animus,* that it moves in a very marked direction of psychologizing the manner of the divine action in man. This would almost certainly have been resisted had there not been other trends in biblical anthropology which pointed in a similar direction, so that it is not necessary to suppose that it represents a serious misrepresentation of the biblical language. Nonetheless it is evident from a cursory survey of the terminology by which the Bible describes the nature of man that it regarded the physical, just as much as the psychological, aspects of his being as open to the action of God. Hence for God to control the heart, the kidneys, or the liver, of man are all perfectly appropriate affirmations to describe man's openness to God. It would certainly be wrong to interpret this to mean that the concepts used to describe God at work in and through man were naive, or crude, for they are in large measure

simply reflections of a different linguistic and conceptual environment than that with which we are familiar.

When it comes to evaluating the significance of this particular biblical anthropology, it is very difficult to determine how much is a distinctive Israelite-Jewish way of viewing things, suited to its own religious development, and how much is a part of a much wider ancient, or even primitive, way of interpreting the nature and function of man. We find that a scholar like the eminent Danish semitist, J. Pedersen, could interpret the particular conceptual world of Israelite anthropology as a part of a much wider anthropological and cultural phenomenon.[6] On the other hand any attempt to arrive at what might be called 'the biblical doctrine of man' must necessarily enquire after the more unique and distinctive side of the biblical material. In particular the attempt to make too much of the differences between the Hebraic and the Hellenistic ways of describing man, and consequently of describing God's activity within man, runs the risk of misrepresenting what are, after all, historical and cultural distinctions.

With these cautionary words, it may nonetheless be held as true that the Bible retains a strong consistency in presenting the whole of man's being as open to divine influence and activity. The physical, as well as the pyschological and intellectual, aspects of man are moved and manipulated by the energy of God. It is no surprise therefore to find that the Bible can affirm that man's openness to God can have the most profound physical, as well as psychological, effects:

> But they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
> they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
> they shall run and not be weary,
> they shall walk and not faint. (Isa. 40:31)

However, it is the third of the Hebrew anthropological concepts – that of spirit (Hebrew *ruach;* Greek *pneuma*) – that provides the most significant and widely developed of the terms by which the Bible describes the divine activity in man.[7] Ultimately the New Testament arrives at a most profoundly theological understanding of the nature of God, and consequently of the nature of the relationship which can exist between man and God, by means of the term 'spirit':

> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth. (John 4:24)

What is so important about the concept of 'spirit' in both the Old and New Testaments is that it provides a term of great flexibility, both as to what it regards as that side of Man's nature which is particularly open to influence from God and that which denotes the divine activity in the world. In this regard it is noteworthy that the Bible largely avoids the complex entanglements of the discussion about divine 'substance' which

so beset the development of Christian theology in the Patristic period. The Hebrew word *ruach* – 'spirit' means 'wind', 'breath', or simply 'air, breeze', although it readily lent itself to become a description of the nature of deity:

> The Egyptians are men, and not God;
> and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. (Isa. 31:3)

The well-known difficulty in obtaining a satisfactory English translation of Gen 1:2: 'the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters', shows how difficult it may be to reach any clearly distinguished separation between the idea of 'wind' and that of 'spirit' in a more metaphysical sense. [8] That man needs 'spirit' in order to keep him alive, and that God is ultimately the source of all such *ruach,* is well expressed in the book of Job:

> If he should take back his spirit to himself,
> and gather to himself his breath,
> all flesh would perish together,
> and man would return to dust. (Job 34:14-15)

In this way we can see that the Bible very firmly sees the activity of God in the life of man to embrace his physical, as well as his more decidedly spiritual, characteristics. Yet there is a marked development throughout the Bible in the direction of regarding the spirit in man as that side of his nature which is especially open to influence from God. [9] In consequence of this we find that the special gifts requisite for a king are portrayed as the gifts of the spirit:

> And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
> the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
> the spirit of counsel and might,
> the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. (Isa. 11:2)

It is not such a long step from this view to that of the New Testament which regards the endowment of the Spirit as the special gift of God which has been made available to all Christians through the work of Jesus (Acts 2:1-47). What is perhaps less readily anticipated by the Old Testament is the markedly moral tone which the New Testament presents in its delineation of the fruit of the spirit:

> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, against such there is no law. (Gal. 5:22-3)

This considerable extension of the benefits that are to be enjoyed through the power of the Spirit has certainly come about through the recognition that the entire era that has dawned with Jesus is regarded as the age of the Spirit.

From the overall perspective of a biblical anthropology one of the most far-reaching consequences of the concepts and vocabulary used to describe the divine activity in man is the refusal to associate it with any one side of his nature to the exclusion of others. Although we do find certain biblical statements which suggest that man has a creaturely frailty, or that his intellectual ambitions may set him up in opposition to God, or that his emotions may lead him away from God, and from proper self-control, overall it is rather that man's physical, intellectual and emotional nature are all subject to divine control. This is particularly important in considering what appear to be rather contradictory statements about the status of human wisdom before God. On the one hand we do find sharp condemnations expressed of man's trust in his own intellectual powers:

> Therefore, behold, I will again
> do marvellous things with this people,
> wonderful and marvellous;
> and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
> and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hid. (Isa. 29:14; cf. 1 Cor. 1:19)

We may contrast this with the Proverb:

> The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,
> and whatever you get, get insight. (Prov. 4:7)

There is certainly some variation of emphasis between the understanding of wisdom as a gift given by God to the humble and receptive (cf. 1 Kings 3:3-15) and that which saw in it a goal that man must strive for and achieve by the disciplining of his own efforts (Prov. 4:1-9).[10] In the Isaianic passage that we referred to above it becomes evident from the historical context that the divine rejection of human wisdom concerned a specific issue of political policy of the time. Similarly in Paul's citation of the passage in 1 Corinthians, the context shows that it was applied to a special type of 'knowledge', or 'insight', which a group of Christians in the city had claimed to possess which set them apart from others. There is a certain sense of 'wholeness', or 'totality', about the Hebraic view of man which pervades both the Old and New Testaments, and which has ensured that the divine activity in man is related fully to all the human senses and to the physical, intellectual and moral aspects of human nature. It is, as a consequence, very difficult to assert a narrowly defined area of biblical man's 'spirituality' which could refer to the religious side of his nature. Similarly, although many scholars have found in the Bible traces of a mystical conception of religion, it is very difficult to substantiate this as a particularly prominent feature of biblical piety. Even more notable is the fact that the very concept of 'piety' has been felt to lie so far from the main areas of biblical theology that it is hard to find any significant modern treatment of the subject.

Against this must be set the fact that the Bible does regard the human agency as the most prominent area of divine activity in the world. The notion that God's action is to be seen in and though the actions of man finds a very prominent place. The very notion of the making of man in God's 'image' (Gen. 1:26-7), which appears originally to have been derived from the notion of a physical 'likeness', has been interpreted by the Priestly author of Genesis 1 to assert the role of man as God's representative on earth.[11]

2. The Divine Action in Man's World

That the world is everywhere 'alive with God' is fully accepted throughout the Bible, so that there is an embarrassing abundance of material to consider in examining how God was thought to be at work in the world. Since we propose to deal separately with what we may call 'the natural order', we may confine ourselves in the present context to some wider issues. The first of these relates to the world of events, and to the discernment of a providential purpose, or purposes, in the movement of human affairs and of society in general. Most frequently this discernment of a divine purpose arises as a consequence of the discovery of some hidden moral goal that is achieved by what has happened. It is then assumed that the intention of God has been achieved, even though the intentions of men at the time may have been of quite another character. The most obvious example of this is to be found in the story of Joseph's treatment at the hands of his brothers. What they do out of human jealousy is nonetheless ultimately found to have been used to further the will of God in saving human life. This, at least, is made into the substance of Joseph's saying to his brothers when they discover that he is after all still alive, 'And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are yet five years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God...' (Gen. 45:5-8). If we take this as a typical illustration of the way in which the Bible comes to claim that a special purpose of God has been realized through a long sequence of events, then it strongly suggests that it is the moral ends achieved through these events that have given rise to this. There is no independent discussion of the question of causation, nor of how God imposes his will upon a multiplicity of human wills, but simply an acceptance of the conclusion that, since the final result is the kind that we might fittingly ascribe to God, then it is his will that has operated throughout. Since the story is typical of a great variety of similar stories in the Bible, we may reflect on one or two of its assumptions. It is certainly noteworthy that it does not resort to special physical, or natural, signs of divine intervention to achieve its purpose. That it might have been easier for God to have alleviated the famine, or provided some

unique, but temporary, supply of food for the distressed, is not considered. Men are the chief actors of the divine drama, and the way in which their plans are drawn together to bring about a much higher divine plan is confidently accepted and assumed to pose no problems about the nature of human freedom. From the perspective of the larger setting in which the story appears, it is significant that an even bigger 'Grand Design' is ultimately seen to have been at work, so that the relatively minor incident of the famine in the land of Canaan is subsumed into this. This is to be the great deliverance from Egypt at the exodus for which the story of the coming of Joseph and his brothers to Egypt is a necessary prelude. There is therefore a whole web of plans at work, which, according to the Bible, make up the larger view of providence.

Certainly it is this simple assumption, that God can impose his will upon a human will for the furtherance of a goal which he alone can see, which lies behind the frequent affirmations in the Bible that God has hardened men's hearts (Exod. 7:3, etc.; Mark 4 10ff.). From our point of view it raises many questions of a philosophical character about the freedom of the individual, but such assertions lie quite freely within the biblical perspective. This judges the providential nature of an event by the goal that is achieved by it, rather than by the means that bring it about, or even the human intentions that motivated its actors.

It is this assumption that the providential nature of an event is to be judged by its ends, rather than its means, which provides prophecy with its most fundamental characteristic in the Old Testament. In this the prophet simply asserts something that God will do:

> the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,
> and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
> and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword. (Amos 7:9)

Exactly the same message can be formulated in a more impersonal way:

> Jeroboam shall die by the sword,
> and Israel must go into exile away from his land. (Amos 7:11)

This kind of assertion raises all kinds of questions about the historical context in which such sayings were given, and whether or not the prophet himself had any fixed idea about who the human agents would be who would kill Jeroboam 'with the sword'. There were clearly several possibilities, and it was certainly an essential part of the prophet's technique to leave such matters open, since prophecy was capable of being fulfilled in more than one way. Civil war, a Syrian attack, or an attack by the Assyrians, were all possibilities which would confirm the prophet's view that it was, in the last resort, 'God' who was doing this.

It is therefore not a great extension of the essential theological assumptions that lie behind this view and which were related to the peculiar situation in which the prophet was placed, to find that God could

use the Assyrians as a stick with which to beat his people (Isa. 10:5). Later, in an even grander perspective of God's action in human affairs, a prophet could regard the Persian ruler Cyrus as an instrument for the achieving of his purpose (Isa. 44:28). There does appear to be a fairly consistent pattern in such biblical assertions. In the first place as has been said, it is the ends that are achieved, rather than the means by which they are reached, which holds the author's centre of attention. That the same end might be brought about by more than one person, or through a variety of ways, would seem to have been a matter of relative indifference to him. At the same time, this view of providence tends to resort hardly at all to 'acts of God' in the sense of natural catastrophes, or even unexpected natural difficulties, which might serve to bring about a particular result (but cf. Judg. 5:20-1). it is highly unusual for us to have any direct pronouncement about how God will bring about a particular result, as in the case of God's intention of thwarting Sennacherib's plan to take Jerusalem:

> Behold I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumour and return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land. (2 Kings 19:7)

There can be little doubt in fact that this particular 'prophecy' is used to interpret an event that had already taken place by the time the author wrote. However, the fact that there are prophecies foretelling drought or famine (cf. Amos 4:6-11) indicates that the Bible in general does not make any sharp distinction between God's action through the natural order and his action through men. The widely canvassed claim that the Bible stresses God's action through history, rather than in nature, cannot therefore be generally endorsed. [12] Nature and history are not two separate 'orders' so far as the Bible is concerned, but are regarded as closely interwoven. It is very much an open question therefore whether the picture of God ordering the destruction of a sanctuary in Amos 9:1 (at Bethel?) may have been regarded as fulfilled by the earthquake mentioned in the superscription of Amos 1:1, or by the destruction of the shrine at Bethel by Josiah (2 Kings 23:15-20), or both in turn. Nevertheless it is true that the great preponderance of assertions in the Bible regarding the providential activity of God in human affairs assumes that the divine interference is effected through God's ability to influence the decisions of men, if need be even by misleading them (cf. 1 Kings 22:20-3).

It is certainly a consequence of the fact that the Bible does not make a sharp distinction between what we call the social and the natural orders of life that such extensive discussion has arisen in regard to many psalms. When the psalmists complain of distress, misfortune and the action of enemies it is usually very difficult to distinguish precisely the nature of the situation which has occasioned the lament to God. Is it

illness, the work of robbers and brigands, the slanderous accusations by neighbours of having committed some crime, or simply economic ruination? All these views have at times been canvassed, along with the counter-claim that in reality the misfortunes are not those of an individual at all but those of the nation as a whole which is personified. Yet even when the whole nation is clearly in view there is a significant breadth of outlook which embraces famine and natural catastrophes, as well as military misfortune, under the same general perspective. It is the character of event as misfortune, rather than the way in which it is thought to have come about, which establishes the basic reason for the appeal to God. The belief that God is concerned with it is established by the fact that it affects man's moral existence, and consequently his ability to enjoy to the full the order which God has established for him. To this extent, so far as the Bible is concerned, our ability to distinguish between true and false conceptions of the divine activity – in other words our ability to tell signal from noise – is less interested in the cause of a situation or event than in the moral effect that it has upon man and upon society.

We may content ourselves with two further observations regarding the biblical perspective regarding God's action in human affairs. The first of these concerns the recognition of what we may call a divine support and basis for the social and political order in which man lives. There are undoubtedly some interesting indications of this, perhaps most notably in the affirmations of the divine election of kings and the divine *charisma* with which they are endowed (cf. 2 Sam. 7:1-17; 1 Kings 3:3-15). The most obvious effect of this factor upon the way in which biblical history has been written is to be seen in the strong sense of a divine commitment to the Davidic dynasty and its right to rule Israel. It is out of this sense of divine commitment to one particular family that the main features of the messianic hope have risen. Yet this sense of a divine commitment to a socio-political order never reached the limits which we find in ancient Egypt, for example. Much of the interest of biblical prophecy and history-writing lies in its awareness that God can ordain the overthrow of the existing social and political order and begin afresh through new men who can establish a new society (cf. 1 Kings 19:1-18), yet whose successors may, in turn, need to be overthrown (cf. Hos. 1:4-5). The biblical sense that the governing authorities derive their power from God and administer it on his behalf, therefore (Rom. 13:1-7) has to be set within certain limits, if we are to take into consideration the whole range of biblical assertions on the subject.

The complexities of this particular question, concerning the degree to which a divine order may be discerned within any one existing socio-political order, relate to the second observation that we intend to make. This concerns the precise meaning and semantic range of the Hebrew word for 'righteousness' (Hebrew *sedek;* Greek *dikaiosune*) which has profoundly affected a large area of biblical discussion on the question of

a right 'order'. Originally scholarship was inclined to follow the study of E. Kautzsch that the term meant 'conformity to a norm',[13] but increasingly this has given way to the belief that it is primarily a term of relationship.[14] Especially does it concern man's relationship to God, so that in certain contexts it has a decidedly cultic orientation. Without digressing into the more detailed aspects of its semantic history, it is certainly clear that the demand for righteousness entailed a deeper commitment than simply the acceptance of an existing social order, or even of a current process of legal administration. Whatever the reasons for the distinctive character of the biblical development, we find that two narrative stories have greatly served to emphasize the special nature of the divine demand. These are the accounts of David's condemnation by the prophet Nathan, on account of his complicity in the death of Uriah and the taking of Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:1-15) and the condemnation of Ahab for his complicity in the death of Naboth (1 Kings 21:1-29). No human institution stands above the demand for righteousness which God himself imposes. This particular perspective has undoubtedly been a significant factor in the formation of a broad biblical picture of the action of God in human affairs. It has lent to this certain 'ideal' dimension, upholding a concept of 'order' but giving to this order a larger frame of reference than that which could be construed from a static concept of the social and political orders which men found. Seeking 'the Kingdom of God and his righteousness' (cf. Matt. 6:33) thereby comes to be a part of the divine activity on earth which works within the world as it exists, but which does not confine the divine work to any one particular pattern of society, nor to any one political regime.

This view of the work of God in human affairs also sheds some light upon the way in which the broader sweep of biblical portrayals of judgement are to be seen. That God could allow his own nation to be defeated in war, his own sanctuary to be defiled and destroyed by pagans, and finally his own Son to be killed by envious and bigoted men, do not present situations which lie beyond the compass of biblical conceptions of righteousness. God is active in human affairs, in every dimension of their reality, and yet his interests are never wholly absorbed within the human situation. There remains a larger purpose, which men can only seek and strive for (cf. Heb. 12:1-2).[15]

3 The Divine Activity in Nature

The third aspect of the divine activity in the world is one which has caused greatest difficulty for the modern critical mind, since the entire scientific world-view is affected by it. It concerns the divine activity in what we call 'nature' although it has frequently been pointed out that the Old Testament does not possess a word for, or the idea of, 'nature'. H. Wheeler Robinson is undoubtedly correct when he asserts 'The only way to render this idea into Hebrew would be to say simply 'God'.[16] The

consequences of this, so far as the Bible is concerned, are quite marked in the way in which it is assumed that God is very directly in control of what is taking place in the natural order:

> Thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
> and plants for man to cultivate,
> that he may bring forth food from the earth, ...
>
> The young lions roar for their prey,
> seeking their food from God. (Ps. 104:14,21)

It is entirely in line with this sense of directness of the link between the world and God, and the belief that the 'natural order' is not interposed as a kind of 'buffer zone' between man and God, that God creates the world by his word (Ps. 33:6). Hence the celebrated Priestly creation story of Gen. 1:1-2:4a simply describes the creative activity of God as one of speech: 'And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light' (Gen. 1:3, etc.). The use of the analogy of speech to express the intention of God is itself a profoundly revealing expression of the biblical way of thinking. The simplest Hebrew idiom for expressing thought, or ideas, is 'to say in one's heart', which would almost certainly have savoured too much of an idealistic perspective had it been used to affirm God's creative work. Yet the earlier idea of picturing God working with clay to fashion man (Gen. 2:7 J) would no doubt have been felt as too physical a notion by the Priestly author. Hence the analogy of speech appears to capture quite effectively the balance between regarding the world as a projection of the divine mind and regarding it as a physical substance which has to be manipulated and fashioned by a deity to put it into shape.

The belief that God himself constitutes the binding element within the world undoubtedly allows a considerable measure of freedom in the various pictures of the way in which the natural order works. The various manifestations of what we should call 'nature' can be interpreted quite directly as manifestations of God. Hence the thunderstorm can readily be interpreted in terms of a theophany, with the thunder itself as the divine 'voice' (Ps. 29). That there is order in the universe is fully accepted, and this order can be defined in terms of 'ordinances':

> Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?
> Can you establish their rule on the earth? (Job 38:33)

It is noteworthy that such prominent physical features of the universe as the sun, moon and stars could be regarded as set in their respective positions, not only to give light, but also to bear witness to this divine order (Gen. 1:14). The sense of 'order', described after the analogy of human 'decrees', or 'ordinances', embraces both the working of nature, the passage of time and the seasons of the cult. In fact the cult becomes a part of the whole 'cement' which binds the universe together, so that at

one level the rituals of worship and the processes of agriculture are scarcely distinguishable from each other:

> He that goes forth weeping,
> bearing the seed for sowing,
> shall come home with shouts of joy,
> bringing his sheaves with him. (Ps. 126:6)[17]

That this feature of the natural order could take on a metaphorical significance as an image of divine blessing shows further how a sense of wholeness, and even of totality, was felt to pervade the universe. It is, at bottom, this view of an ordered universe which has allowed the familiar picture to emerge within the Bible that significant changes within the historical, political and moral realms can be described as accompanied by changes in the physical realm:

> The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood,
> before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. (Joel 2:31)

To what extent the language in such pictures can be called either poetic, or mythological, has to be considered very carefully in each case. That there is evident the development of stereotyped themes and traditions denoting the divine activity in terms of theophany, earthquake and even volcanic eruption, is not to be denied. It would certainly be wrong to judge them solely from the point of view of whether we can rationalize, or re-interpret, them in some more modern, or scientific fashion.

The same must broadly be said in respect of the so-called 'nature miracles' of the Bible.[18] A study of the terminology for miracles in the Old Testament in particular, shows that this does not express a sensitivity to a supernatural order which may disrupt, or suspend, the natural order. The very closeness which was felt to relate God to the world rendered any sense of a breach of the laws of nature a false category of understanding. Yet when we look at modern attempts to interpret instances of the sun standing still (Josh. 10:12-3), the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21-2), or the killing of the Assyrian army (2 Kings 19:35), the tendency has been to try to find some more obvious 'natural' explanation for the event described. Seldom, in fact, can this be regarded as a justified way of proceeding, since we do not have in these instances contemporary reports, written by people who simply misinterpreted what was happening. In these, and in many comparable instances of biblical miracles, the reports have passed through a long process of formalizing and interpretation before the form of the stories which we now have has been arrived at. The same must broadly be said in respect of New Testament miracles, although a number of factors here make the overall picture a little different from that in the Old Testament.

It would be foolish not to admit that it is the element of 'miracle' which has attracted most attention to itself as a part of the biblical portrayal of

the divine activity in the world. The very element of strangeness and dissimilarity from an understanding derived from a modern scientific world-view inevitably singles them out as deserving of special attention. Yet they are not, in reality, all that prominent a part of the biblical perspective as a whole, and can seldom be regarded as records of events told for their own sakes. Rather they fall generally in the category of being 'signs' (Heb. *'oth;* Greek *semeion*) or 'wonders' (Heb. *mopheth;* Greek *teras*) through which the majesty and greatness of God, and of his servants, have impressed themselves upon men. Perhaps nowhere is this better shown than in the story of the plagues of Egypt which, according to the tradition, accompanied and even facilitated the escape of the Hebrews from Egypt. That God brought his people out with 'signs and wonders' (Deut. 4:34, etc.) has become a basic part of the Old Testament confession of faith in regard to the event. Yet attempts to reduce the complex literary compilation of the plagues of Egypt to a central core of historical reportage have proved neither convincing in themselves as explanations, nor helpful from a theological perspective as interpretations of the biblical narratives.[19] The proper intention of the biblical narratives must be seen in their theological motivation, which is well brought out by the declaration of purpose which all the plague sequences are to serve:

> And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch forth my hand upon Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them. (Exod. 7:5)

We must work back from this primary theological interest and concern, rather than from a basis of information regarding physical, or natural, phenomena, which we can then seek to reinterpret and explain in some more scientific fashion. Seen in this perspective the overall picture of the divine activity in nature, or the natural order, is of a piece with the wider portrayals of God's actions in the world. Our ability in the modern world, through the pages of the biblical record, to tell signal from noise, to distinguish the central from the peripheral, must be undertaken as a part of a theological interest in the writings. We must become attuned to their theological nature and intention, if we are to find a continued meaning within them, rather than subject them to a kind of scientific 'filter', by which the 'interference' of a pre-scientific world-view can be set aside. In this area the roles of apologetics and hermeneutics can be seen to overlap, and even to merge altogether.

Notes

1 The importance of this is particularly stressed by G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol.1 (Eng. tr. D.M.G. Stalker, Edinburgh – London, 1962), pp 314 ff.

2 It is noticeable that the Bible does not possess any completely uniform angelology, so that we are not entitled to presuppose that there was a single theological basis for the conception of angels. Cf. V. Hirth, *Gottes Boten im Alten Testament* (Theologische Arbeiten xxxii, Berlin, 1975). Several factors have contributed to the belief in angels in the biblical tradition: the demoting of divine beings in a more rigid monotheism, the need to form a basis of mediation between man and a transcendent deity, as well as a more popular folk religion, have all played a part in the formation of a more complex belief in angels.

3 What has been said above in note 2 applies in a closely similar fashion in respect of the belief in a personal Devil. The role of Satan as the divine 'Accuser', a popular demonology and a theological tradition of 'the Antichrist' have all assisted in different ways towards the building up a larger picture of the nature of evil and its personalized reality.

4 The attempts by J. Jeremias, *Theophanie. Die Geschichte einer alttestamentlichen Gattung* (WMANT 10) (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1965) and J. K. Kuntz, *The Self-Revelation of God* (Philadelphia, 1967) (esp. pp.47ff.) to piece together a coherent development in the biblical presentation of theophanies achieve only a limited success.

5 A comprehensive view of the Old Testament basis for this is provided by H. W. *Wolff, Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Eng. tr. M. Kohl, London, 1974) cf. the still useful earlier work by H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (3rd ed. Edinburgh, 1926) pp.11ff.

6 Cf. J. Pederson, *Israeli I-II* (London – Copenhagen, 1926) pp.99ff; D. Lys. *Nephesh, Histoire de l'âme dans la révélation d'Israel au sein des religions proche-orientales* (Etudes d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse 50, Paris, 1959).

7 Cf. H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, pp.32ff; D. Lys, *Ruach* Le Souffle dans l'Ancien Testament (Etudes d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse 56, Paris, 1962), H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit* (London, 1928), pp.8ff.

8 Cf. C. Westermann, *Genesis I-II* (BKAT I,1) 2nd ed. Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1976), pp.141ff., esp. pp.149-50.

9 Cf. R. H. Fuller, *The New Testament in Current Study* (London 1963), pp.68ff.

10 Cf. J. C. Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature* (Chicago, 1944) pp.30ff.

11 For the many problems relating to this verse and the history of its interpretation, cf. C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, pp.203-222.

12 Cf. J. Barr, *Old and New Testament* London, 1966), pp.65ff.

13 E. Kautzsch, *Abhandlung über die Derivate des Stammes sdq in alttestamentlichen Sprachgebrauch* (Tübingen, 1881).

14 Cf. J. Pedersen, *Israel I-II*, pp.336ff., and K. Koch in E. Jenni-C.Westermann, *Theologisches Handworterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Vol.2 (Munich, 1976), cols.556ff.

15 For the conception of the divine relationship to human society cf. W. Zimmerli, *The Old Testament and the World* (Eng. tr. J. J. Scullion, London, 1976).

16 H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1946), p.1. But see also J. Rogerson, 'The Old Testament View of Nature: Some Preliminary Questions', *Instruction and Interpretation* (Oudtestamentische Studien XX, Leiden, 1977), pp. 67-84.

17 On the ritual background of the 'weeping' mentioned here, and the mythological world-view which it presupposes, cf. F.F. Hvidberg, *Weeping and Laughter in the Old Testament, A Study of Canaanite-Israelite Religion* (Leiden-Copenhagen, 1962) pp.133ff.

18 Cf. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament*, pp.34ff.

19 Such attempts have been undertaken by Greta Hort, 'The Plagues of Egypt', *ZAW* 69 (1957), pp.84-103; *ZAW* 70 (1958), pp.48-59, and earlier by W. J. Phythian-Adams, *The Call of Israel* (London, 1934).