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‘Ye Meant to do me Evil; but God Meant it for Good’

Douglas C Spanner

In this well-known verse (Genesis 50:20, quoted from the *Revised Version* because of its literary exactitude) lies a teasing paradox; expressed simply, how can a single event be attributed equally to two independent agents each intending a different outcome? There is little doubt that many readers (possibly unconsciously) escape the difficulty by rewording the second clause as if it read ‘but God *overruled* it for good’ (leaving the primary initiative to the brothers), for Scripture does sometimes speak in this way, as in Deuteronomy 23:5 where Moses tells Israel that God ‘turned the curse of Balaam into a blessing’. Another related way of escaping the paradox is in effect to split the event into two and to refer the ‘it’ of the second clause not to the sequence initiated by the brothers but only to the final happy outcome – as if Joseph was implying: ‘Don’t blame yourselves. God intended to send me here anyway; you merely anticipated him.’ Still another way sometimes adopted is to regard Joseph’s words as an irenic outburst, generously intended to pacify the guilty fears of his brothers; this avoids the necessity of regarding the whole as propositional revelation at all. But none of these understandings really carries conviction; there are too many strong arguments against them.

Consider for instance such a prophetic oracle as Isaiah 10:5ff. Here God declares that he will send the Assyrian, ‘the rod of His anger’, against his people, to punish them as a profane nation. This presents a similar paradox, for the Assyrian as he carries out the divine intention sets out with quite a different motive; arrogant self-aggrandizement. There is no question of God merely *overruling* him in this, of seizing the opportunity the Assyrian has given him to punish Israel; the fundamental initiative is clearly God’s. Nor is there any question here of anything below the standard of propositional revelation. This biblical instance is only one of many in Scripture. In the opening chapter of Habakkuk, God’s astounding intention is declared to the incredulous prophet; he is actually raising up a bitter and violent nation to do his work! Indeed, such historical judgments as now declared were ‘planned long ago’, ‘from ancient times’; and the agent, having executed the divine purpose, is then himself punished for doing so (Isa 37:26ff for Assyria; 46:1, 8-47:7 for Babylon). The more individually particular cases of Baasha and Jehu are significant too. God announced to Jeroboam (1 Kgs 14:7ff) that he would bring disaster on his

whole house ('every last male' *NIV*) and that he would raise up a king over Israel to do this, apparently very soon (14:14). Baasha, who seized the throne after the brief reign of Jeroboam's son and who probably knew of the oracle, executed it to the letter, and then suffered a like judgment for his own sins – including his sin in *destroying all Jeroboam's male heirs* (1 Kgs 16:1-4,7-12). The case of Jehu is referred to in 2 Kings 10:1-10, 30f, 2 Chronicles 22:7f and Hosea 1:4. These latter instances (reinforced by the similar *particularity* of others like Exodus 9:16 cf Romans 9:17), leave the strong impression that even when the event turns on a single named individual it still falls within the descriptive scope of Isaiah 37:26ff; 46:8ff. God does not have to wait for an opportunity to turn up; he creates one. As von Rad says, history is seen by the Old Testament as *'created by God's word'*. In all the severe judgments and counter-judgments discussed above, a common pattern is discernible; even though they accomplish his purpose the human instruments used by God act with a savagery born out of their own evil motives and quite out of harmony with his and are duly punished for doing so (see also Jer 25:9ff, 15ff; Zech 1:15; Obad 9ff).

We may return finally to the suggestion that Joseph's words were recorded for us not as revealed truth to be believed but as irenic response to be imitated. This is difficult to accept. The awesome revelation to Abraham (Gen 15) of the 400 years affliction tying-in as it does with God's timetable for the Amorites (v 16) and which Abraham would no doubt have passed on; Joseph's early dreams certainly understood later as God-given; the dramatic series of dreams of Pharaoh and his servants leading to Joseph's astonishing rise to power – how could all these things have left him with any conviction other than that God was behind it all, that his hand was in control of events, and that he was working his purposes out? This conclusion seems inescapable; it is certainly the understanding of the psalmist (Ps 105:17). If Genesis 50:20 is not serious propositional revelation, the underlying theology of Israel and the Exodus is profoundly affected.

The New Testament

The same problem of double agency presents itself also in the New Testament and with even greater urgency. The most striking examples occur in the early chapters of the Acts. In Acts 2:23 Peter boldly declares that Jesus of Nazareth was delivered up 'by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God' (*RV*), 'according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God' (*RSV*), 'by God's set purpose and foreknowledge' (*NIV*), 'by the deliberate will and plan of God' (*REB*), 'by the deliberate intention and foreknowledge of God' (*JB*). This declaration is reinforced

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in Acts 3:18: in these events God had fulfilled what he had foretold by the prophets (eg Ps 118:22f; Isa 53:10). Further, in the great united prayer of Acts 4:24ff, which starts with a celebration of the mighty creatorship of God and his implied sovereignty over history, there is added the particular conviction that in the strange happenings of the Passion the secular and religious authorities had acted together ‘to do whatsoever Thy hand and Thy counsel foreordained to come to pass’ (*RV*); to do ‘what Your power and will decided beforehand should happen’ (*NIV*); ‘to do all the things which under Your hand and by Your decree were foreordained’ (*REB*). In other words (it seems fair to say) Scripture teaches that whatever significant happened in the Passion happened because God had decided it should. But men nevertheless were the agents who brought it about, and in doing so they acted out of the impulse of their own evil wills and so were morally responsible (cf Matt 21:33ff). The problem is sharpened by the *particularity* of the case of Judas. His treacherous act had been foretold hundreds of years before (John 13:18; Ps 41:9). Why did Jesus choose him when he knew the outcome already (John 6:64)? A preliminary answer is, because the Father had bid him (Luke 6:12f; John 8:26; 12:49f; 14:10, 24). Are we to conclude therefore that God chose Judas to *evilly betray* Jesus? At this point surely the reverent mind will think it right to temper any dogmatic conclusions, however long and thoughtfully it has wrestled with the problem. Human understanding has its in-built limitations as the wise man reminds us (Eccles 3:11; 8:17; Ps 139:6; cf Rom 11:33f). Even science has been forced to recognize something similar in its Uncertainty Principle and Chaos Theory. The introduction of the concept of ‘middle knowledge’ (*scientia media*) – which proposes that complete divine foreknowledge is entirely compatible with unconstrained human freewill – is no generally satisfying solution to the problem faced in the present discussion. In illustration of this, many eminent physicists, believing that the Uncertainty Principle means that ultimate particles like the electron have a sort of ‘freewill’, have held that this means that even God cannot predict what will happen when they collide. It was this widespread conviction that led Einstein to make his famous protest, ‘Does God play dice?’ The logical basis of ‘middle knowledge’ therefore remains highly suspect.

Seeking a City to Dwell in

I wish to introduce an idea that may throw a little light on the wider problem. How original it is I do not know; it is certainly not definitive. It may have some suggestive value, though it remains my conviction that there are questions to which we shall never know the full answer this side of glory. It is introduced by means of a simple scenario of suggestive relevance to our post-modern culture.

The two travellers continued doggedly on their journey. They had been on their way for ages – sometimes light-hearted, sometimes despondent, sometimes bored, most often simply stoical; now they were without dominant emotions. Of where they were they had no real idea; of how they came to be there still less; and of where their journey would end practically none at all. All they knew was that they had to keep moving, in the fading hope that somewhere, sometime, they would come to ‘a city to dwell in’. They had just traversed a rather featureless wilderness and were now in a gorge bounded by almost perpendicular rocky walls. Evidently it could channel the winds into a high-speed current, for the configuration of the sparse trees clinging precariously to the vertical ramparts spoke eloquently of a tortured foothold. Suddenly, one of the travellers pointed to some curious marks on one of the cliff faces. ‘Look’ he said, ‘a hand has chiselled something on the rock there. We’re not alone! Maybe it’s a message telling us the way to a city. Let’s see if we can make out what it says.’ ‘No’, said the other after a pause, ‘the wind does strange things in places like this. Those marks are nothing but scratches made by flints torn out and carried along by its force. I’ve seen many examples in my time.’ That settled the matter – for the moment; but the pressure of their circumstances prevented it from foreclosing the issue, and the friends soon fell to arguing out the matter very energetically. Eventually they separated, one to continue the journey alone, the other to spend painful hours trying to see if he could make any sense of the strange ‘runes’.

Before I indicate the purpose of this little allegory there are some simple points I wish to make. Clearly, the obvious way to settle the question at issue would be to see if the ‘runes’ could be deciphered. However, there is certainly no *logical calculus* or *algorithm* by the painstaking use of which such a thing can be infallibly done. Analogy with known languages and much guesswork must of necessity be largely used; but even if in the end the task proved not entirely fruitless, it would almost certainly yield not just one, but several possible meanings consistent with the whole. At best some sort of preferred provisional ‘dictionary’ or code linking the postulated writing with the translator’s own language might result (always providing that the sceptical friend was not right). Now suppose we modify the set-up in two stages. First, suppose the ‘writing’ to become *cursive*; and second, imagine the whole to be scanned by a video camera and projected. The result will be to convert the *spatial* ‘inscription’ into a *time*-sequence, of events flowing one into another and forming a sort of little tale. There is no reason to believe that the conclusions previously reached will not still apply. If this ‘tale’ (we might regard it as a fragment of recorded history) can mean anything at all, it may mean several different things depending on which provisional ‘dictionary’ the reader opted for;

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that is, within limits, on his mind-set. Apply this conclusion to a fragment of real history and suppose the one handling it happened to be also an actor in it. It would suggest that there might be more than one *valid* way for an outsider to understand what had been going on; it would all depend on what 'dictionary' in his view had been linking action with intention. Apply this to the case of Joseph. There is the *logical possibility* surely of understanding that while God was the sovereign (and beneficent) ordainer of the given historical events, the human agents who acted them out had done so either as his fellow workers, or as driven by their own evil 'free-willed' motives (willing freely to use a different 'dictionary'). Both 'You meant evil', but 'God meant good' would in the latter case be true simultaneously. By way of further illustration, consider the case of Judas. It is surely possible, again as a mental exercise, to see Judas (so far as imaginary *outward observation* allowed) in deep sorrow acting in obedience to a divine command to lead the enemies into Gethsemane and doing so in a spirit similar to Abraham's journeying with Isaac to Moriah. The outcome of his action could have been the same as it was historically, the crucifixion, but this time with Judas as God's fellow worker. But Judas' 'freedom' meant he could choose to act *this same part* with a different meaning, and he did. In this second imaginary reconstruction God foreordained his act; Judas free-willed his motive. We can surely look at Genesis 50:20 in this sort of way.

Such considerations as these may go a *small* way towards helping the reader cope with the paradox we have been discussing, but it would be a foolish thing to imagine that they end the matter. One obvious objection to the present suggestion is that it seems to imply that an unseen motive can exist *without being reflected outwardly and visibly*. For instance, suppose God had ordained the betrayal by Judas (as imaginatively just described) down to the last physical detail, would it not have included a sorrowful countenance? And if Judas had instead chosen a vicious motive would not his face have set itself otherwise? In other words, could the contribution of Judas have been the motive *only*, nothing more? There is a slight problem here; perhaps it may be alleviated by suggesting that the mind-body relationship does not involve necessarily a fixed one-to-one correspondence (as usually postulated) between a state-of-mind and a state-of-brain. However, what is involved is not only the mind-body problem (and there are eminent thinkers who consider even this to be essentially beyond human comprehension) but also the *much more mysterious one* of the relation of the creature to the Creator who holds it in being.

Postscript

This article has touched on one facet of the perennial problem of the

relationship between the active, providential will of God and the will of the creature – or to be more explicit, the free-will of the latter. The ‘freedom of the will’ is not the simple clear-cut concept it is often assumed to be, though it often seems to be regarded as self-explanatory and few writers trouble to define explicitly enough what they mean by it. One view (which the writer holds) is that of Bishop Handley Moule who wrote: ‘Grace doesn’t *force* the will; it *decides* it’; all the subject is conscious of is the blessed result. But there is another view, that grace has to wait for that free-will’s prior complaisance before it can proceed. The controversy tends to drag on; what everyone must be fully persuaded of in his own mind is the sovereignty of God on the one hand (Isa 40, Rom 9), and the responsibility of man on the other (Deut 30:19f; Rom 14:10ff). And with this we must conclude. The wise man will remember that there are inevitably times when as finite and fallible beings we must exclaim with the psalmist: ‘Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it’, and be content.

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