

THE FLIGHT FROM GOD

A Biblical Meditation

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THE subject of the Bible as a whole is the unique divine drama of the creation, fall, redemption and restoration of man, and in this drama God himself plays the central role as author, actor and producer. The drama is a real one, no mere puppet show manipulated by the author, and this means that all those engaged in it have the freedom to tamper with the author's intentions in the interests of their own vanity and pride. They can seek to be masters of the plot rather than servants of it. But this drama is such that no actor in it can ultimately frustrate the author's intentions. They can, for example, ignore the part which he is playing in his own works, but they cannot ultimately suppress it. Even when the play seems to be getting hopelessly out of hand, the author-producer has the will and the power to engage the most unruly sub-plot for his main design, which remains always evident in each new situation. For this is a living drama in which all men are assigned parts, and even those who refuse to play or deny their assignments are used by the author to bring the drama to its fruition.

It is in some such way that the Hebrews regarded history, and their language, not really equipped to handle logical or philosophical speculation, was admirably suited for poetic drama, with its concrete realistic images never far removed from the actual and the visible. The divine activity in history throws up in the course of its interpretation its own characteristic images, and these become part of the revelation. These images can never be adequately translated, nor, we may perhaps add, can they be 'demythologised', but are inseparable from the drama itself, only to be understood when they are acted upon in a man's consent to play his proper part in the play.

As an example of what is meant by this, let us take some of the Biblical images which cluster round the themes of sin and redemption. Here, characteristically, there is no great speculation about the origin of sin, nor any precise analysis of the nature of redemption, such as would be found in a Greek writer on the same

themes. Instead the meaning of sin and redemption is indicated in certain concrete images, to which the writers return again and again as irreducible constants in the vocabulary of the drama which is human history, these images becoming themselves part of the biblical history.

Sin, for the men of the Old Testament, is essentially a wandering off the right way set before them by the Lord in Torah. This is no casual innocuous straying from the right course, but a deliberate attempt to escape from it, to seek to assert that the only right way is the one which a man is engaged in pursuing for himself. Hence one characteristic Old Testament image round which the Hebrew consciousness of sin gathers is the *Flight from God*.

In Genesis 3 there is the contrast between the freedom and self-consciousness of man when he is at peace with God, his fellowmen and the world, and the inhibiting self-consciousness of man when he seeks to flee from the Presence:

And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the cool of the day: and the man and his wife hid themselves from the face of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.—Genesis 3, 8-10 (R.V.)

That man is a fallen creature, a sinner, means, then, that he seeks to flee from the presence of God, to hide himself, believing that such a flight is an ultimate possibility. Man's flight from God is on. Cain's sin, all sin, means that a man becomes a fugitive and a wanderer in the earth, not at home in the drama in which he must participate:

Behold thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the ground, and from thy face shall I be hid, and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer in the earth. . . . And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord.—Genesis 4, 14, 16 (R.V.)

Mankind, as the momentum of the flight from God increases, disperses in a scattered and disunited stampede, but seeks, from time to time, the seeming security and unity of city life, because here the flight is so efficiently organized as to seem permanent and the only reality:

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city, and a tower, whose tops may reach unto heaven, and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the

Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of men builded, and the Lord said, Behold they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is what they begin to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore was the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them upon the face of all the earth.—Genesis 11, 4-9 (R.V.).

The unity of man is not to be built up from below, Babel fashion, but received from above, because the unity of men with one another issues from their union with God, the possibility of which turns on Redemption from the flight. In fact, in the Old Testament, the judgment of God falls on all man-made attempts to construct a unity whilst still maintaining the flight, and on all attempts of man to do his own ingathering as if the harvest were his. The judgment of God falls because man's attempt to by-pass the way of God to unity can only result in the exercise of tyrannical force exulting in its own accomplishments:

Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the King of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks. For he hath said, By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom: for I am prudent: and I have removed the bounds of the peoples, and have robbed their treasures, and I have brought down as a valiant man them that sit on thrones: and my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the peoples, and as one gathereth eggs that are forsaken, have I gathered all the earth.—Isaiah 10, 12-14 (R.V.).

Man in the impetus and hysteria of the flight assumes that he is now his own best guide; it is from men who have paused or turned round ('repented') in the flight that the cry comes:

O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.—Jeremiah 10, 23 (R.V.).

A man's goings are of the Lord;

How then can man understand his way?—Proverbs 20, 24 (R.V.).

A man's heart deviseth his way;

But the Lord directeth his steps.—Proverbs 16, 9 (R.V.).

As the flight proceeds man finds it necessary to unburden himself of the things which hinder the running, and the chief of these is truth, a consideration of which makes a man pause and become less certain about the slogans posted up along the way of the flight:

Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; desolation and destruction are in their paths. The way of peace they know not; there is no judgment in their goings: they have made them crooked paths; whosoever goeth therein doth not know peace. . . . And judgment is turned away backward, and righteousness standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and uprightness cannot enter.—Isaiah 59, 7-8, 14 (R.V.).

But although men seek to flee from God, God is, in fact, not only the One from whom they attempt to flee, but the One who pursues after them. Hence the constant biblical summons to repentance, to turn round or back in the flight and face the Divine Pursuer. The flight does not mean that the divine drama has got out of hand; men begin to see that it is part of the main plot:

Whither shall I go from thy spirit?

Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend up into heaven thou art there:

If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there.

If I take the wings of the morning,

And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

Even there shall thy hand lead me,

And thy right hand shall hold me.—Psalm 139, 7-10 (R.V.).

Though they dig into hell, thence shall my hand take them;

and though they climb up to heaven, thence will I bring them

down. And though they hide themselves in the top of Carmel,

I will search and take them out.—Amos 9, 2-3 (R.V.).

God as the Pursuer has the power to go on ahead of the stampede and turn to face it, issuing in the prophets the summons to repent:

Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day, I have sent unto you my servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them: yet they

hearkened not unto me nor inclined their ear, but made their neck stiff: they did worse than their fathers.—Jeremiah 7, 25-26 (R.V.).

God pursues fleeing humanity not merely as vengeful Judge but as merciful Redeemer, and so now the image of God as Pursuer grows out into that of God the Ingatherer of his people:

The Lord thy God . . . will have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the peoples, whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee. If any of thine outcasts be in the uttermost parts of heaven, from thence will the Lord thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee: and the Lord thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers.—Deuteronomy 30, 3-5 (R.V.).

I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and multiply. And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be lacking, saith the Lord.—Jeremiah 23, 3-4 (R.V.).

The ingathering is to be one of the signs of the presence of the messianic times, and in the Book of Isaiah the 'Servant' is to be the means whereby God will gather together his Israel. And so the Flight in Old Testament thought is turned into an Exodus, a guided procession, a matter now, not of fleeing from, but of following after; the Flight is turned through the redeeming action of God into a liberation. There comes in now the perspective of a goal for the journey, a promised land. There is now no longer aimless flight for all, but a triumphal march for those who will follow. 'Sing', then, 'to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously':

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! The voice of thy watchmen! they lift up the voice, together do they sing; for they shall see, eye to eye, when the Lord returneth to Zion. Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the Lord hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem.

The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, ye that bear the vessels of the Lord. For ye shall not go out in haste, neither shall ye go by flight: for the Lord will go before you; and the God of Israel shall be your rearward.—Isaiah 52, 7-12 (R.V.).

In the New Testament the New Exodus is accomplished, once and for all, in our Lord Jesus Christ, who, as Israel's In-gatherer through the act of Redemption, takes Israel back with him along the road to the Father: 'He that is not with me is against me, and he that gathereth not with me scattereth.' The Way of Israel in Exodus to the Promised Land is walked along, in consummate obedience, by the Son of Man, who is himself now the Way, the Truth and the Life, and those who follow him are those of 'The Way'. 'He goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice' (John 10, 4. R.V.) He is himself the Way and the Guide along the Way, and Christians are now able to run with joy the race that is set before them 'along the way which he dedicated for us, a new and living way, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh' (Hebrews 10, 20. R.V.).

There is now full realization that God is not only he from whom men seek to flee, but also, in reality, through his merciful Redemption, he to whom they are in fact fleeing. God is not only pursuing after his fleeing humanity, but allows himself to be trodden down in the stampede (in the Crucifixion of the Son he sends), and yet stands finally in the path of all men. Those who know that they are now part of a guided Exodus press on with confidence and joy; those who think that the flight is still only and ever a flight find themselves running up against that which they believed to be ever behind them. In the beginning God, and in the end God. The judgment theme sets before us the image of God drawing humanity unto himself as the inevitable and inescapable Alpha and Omega:

And he said to me, These are they which come out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God; and they serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall spread his tabernacle over them.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun strike upon them, nor any heat; for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them unto fountains of waters of life: and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.—Apocalypse 7, 14-17 (R.V.)



SERMON FOR OUR LADY'S BIRTHDAY

ST BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

Translated by a Monk of Mt St Bernard's Abbey

MARY, virgin yet a mother. Here on earth we can only hold her memory sacred while heaven rejoices at her presence. And in the same way heaven is the true home of every good which we on earth can only imagine to ourselves, we, who have to be content with a mere foretaste of that bliss which will satisfy every desire. In heaven there is true life, here life only in name. Lord, you endure for ever, your name is not forgotten as generation follows generation to the grave—generations of men, not angels, So if we want to know why a name and a memory is all we have while the reality is present in heaven, we turn to the Gospel where our Lord says: 'This, then, is to be your prayer: Our Father who *art* in heaven, hallowed be thy *name*'. Faith speaks here, reminding us in the very first words that we are the adopted children of God, and that our life on earth is only a pilgrimage. Realizing then, that as long as we are not in heaven we are still on our way to God, we groan in our hearts, waiting to be adopted into the family of God and brought into the presence of the Father. Jeremias, too, says expressly of Christ, 'Christ our Lord goes before us as a mighty spirit, and under his shadow we shall live among heathen folk', for in the bliss of heaven we shall not live under his shadow but in the splendour of his glory: surrounded by the splendour of the saints the Father himself says: 'You are my Son born before the day-star rises'.