Beati Immaculati in Via

L. JOHNSTON

Legalism is for many people one of the more difficult aspects of religion. We cannot help feeling, with some unease, how close it comes to the spirit of the scribes and Pharisees, the very antithesis of New Testament religion, the service of the heart, the freedom of the sons of God. As a subject of prayer, then, it will be even more difficult to assimilate. An 'Ode to the *Codex Juris Canonici*' would surely be limited in its appeal, and as a hymn would not be an obvious success. Yet it is precisely this sort of prayer which the psalter presents to us in psalm 1, for example, or 118, or the second half of psalm 18.

The acrostic form used by many of these psalms does not lessen our difficulty. Psalm 118 is in fact a *tour de force* in this style: it is composed of twenty-two stanzas of eight lines each, in which each line begins with the same letter of the alphabet so that the twenty-two stanzas go through the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Such a form, one might well think, does not make for great poetry; it is a rigid straight-jacket strangling any lyrical impulse or indeed any proper development of thought. And we may be tempted to think that this form is the reflection of the subject matter—uninspired, formalised, the apotheosis of the legal spirit.

But this form gives us the clue to the origin of this type of psalm, and with that, to the understanding and appreciation of it. This form of literature is the product of the exile in Babylon. The exile was the greatest crisis in Israel's long and often chequered history. They had lived in the faith that Yahweh was the only God, and that they were his covenant people; but the exile seemed to show that this faith had been only an empty dream. For if Yahweh were supreme, how had the gentiles conquered? Of, if they were really his people, why had he allowed this disaster to fall on them? And in this crisis, what was there to sustain their faith? There was no temple now, no sacrifice or ritual or the joy of the great feast days. 'How lovely are thy dwellings, Lord! My heart sinks with love of thy house . . . '—but now the temple was only a ruin in a distant land: 'God has destroyed his house, has made feasts and sabbaths forgotten things in Sion, has cast off in his anger priest and king' (Lam. 2. 6).

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What was left to sustain their faith? The word of God. This disaster was in fact a purification of their faith, stripping away all those things which in days gone by had led them astray—the temple, which they had begun to regard as a real house of God, guarantee of their city's impregnability; or sacrifices, which they had regarded as a gift which would close God's eyes to their deeds. Now there was nothing left but the simple word of God; the faith that he *had* spoken to them, that he had shown himself to them, that he had shown himself as one and all-powerful, and that he had made a covenant with them.

The word of God was enshrined in their national traditions, some of them now in writing, some still in oral form. All of these were now carefully collected, written, copied and edited. Moreover, the people had to be taught these traditions; they had to be stirred up, through them, to new life and hope from the apathy and despair of defeat. Above all, they had to be brought to a vigorous assertion of their uniqueness, their national identity, lest they should be swamped in the nondescript mass of slaves who peopled Babylon in those days. Their national customs therefore became of supreme importance—circumcision, the sabbath, the laws of cleanliness. On these, now, on such very concrete, visible observances, their faith rested, now that there were no sacrifices or feast days or ceremonies to give body to their religion.

The men who were responsible for this work were called the 'scribes'—not just copyists, but men who devoted their lives to the word of God and to teaching it to others. They are almost completely anonymous; men like Moses, David or Isaiah live on in history; their words and works compose the matter of scripture. But the scribes are humble, self-effacing figures whose function is to be servants of the word. There is not much in them to rouse deep emotion or passionate enthusiasm; compared with the splendour of priest or king, or the burning oratory of the prophets, they are somewhat pathetic figures, armed with quill and scrolls and dry didactic manner. But for that very reason they are deserving of our admiration and respect. Faithfully and zealously they conserve every jot and tittle of the word of God, and let this light shine to the people in the darkness of exile. And their humble heroism had its effect. Through them, the faith of Israel lived on.

The didactic psalms, especially those concerning the law, are the work of such men. Their form betrays their origins. It is the teacher who begins with a summons to 'Listen carefully, pay attention' (Pss. 77, 48). The acrostic is a mnemonic device, the sort of thing which is familiar to all good pedagogues.

This device is certainly artificial, and we should be prepared for a certain lack of logical connexion in such psalms. The sequence of thought is determined primarily by the needs of the form, the need to find a sentence beginning with the appropriate letter of the alphabet. From the point of prayer, then, such psalms should be considered as a series of ejaculations, a collection of more or less independent phrases which either separately or *en bloc* may form the subject of meditation, but not as a connected discourse in which each phrase leads logically to the next.

Nevertheless, even this form does express an idea. Language is one of the most valuable possessions of the human race. Without it, men would remain shut off from each other, each confined within the narrowness and isolation of his own identity; with it, they become members of a society, in communication with each other; and through this communication they become more aware of their own personalities, they grow and expand through the sharing and exchange of thoughts. And after communication by speech, writing extends the scope of communication still further, in space and in time; contact is made possible with minds beyond the immediate environment, and man is made the heir to the ages which have gone before. It is not surprising that writing was sometimes looked on as a sacred art, as in the Egyptian 'hieroglyphics'.

But when God speaks to man the range of communication is infinitely extended, and man is able to make contact with the divine world. The treasury of human wisdom is preserved and handed down in writing; but how much more precious is the writing which conveys to us the message of God. This is what made the scribes men of letters; the laborious task of copying out the word of God was for them a labour of love, and one to be carried out with religious devotion; not a word, not a letter must be missed, because it was all from the mouth of God. Human language itself was ennobled by this privilege of being made the vehicle of divine expression. In performing this service, language is put to its most perfect use. And this is the thought that lies behind the scribe's use of the acrostic, especially in its most extreme form in psalm 118, where every letter is repeated eight times. We speak of knowing a subject 'from A to Z'. What the scribe is saying is this: 'Here is the gamut of wisdom, human and divine; here all the potentialities of language are exhausted'.

But our final judgment on the value of these psalms will not rest on the form, but on the matter. What should our reaction be to this 'law'

which the psalmist hymns so fervently?

The Hebrew word which is usually translated as 'law' is *torah*, which means literally 'instruction'.[1] But these instructions are not confined to the various legal codes contained in the Bible. It is the word used in the Wisdom books, for example, of the instruction given by the sage to his followers. This instruction takes the form of practical advice on right living; but the end of it is the acquisition of wisdom itself—'breath of the divine power, all-pure radiance of the glory of the Almighty, ray of the eternal light, untarnished mirror of the action of God, image of his perfection' (Wis. 7. 25-26). It is used also of the teaching of the prophets, and used precisely in contexts where the prophets are castigating that formalism which is usually taken to be the very essence of the legal spirit: 'Hear the law of our God: What mean to me your innumerable sacrifices? I take no delight in the blood of bulls and goats . . . I hate your new moons and your feasts . . . Your hands are full of blood, wash yourselves, cleanse yourselves, remove your iniquity from my eyes' (Is. 1. 10-16). It is not, therefore, the bondage of the letter, but the service of love: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and strength: let these words which I command thee this day be graven on thy heart . . . ' (Dt. 6. 5-6).

We are already a long way from the narrow and constricting spirit of legalism. But besides meaning in general 'law', the word *torah* is also used in practice to denote what we call the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. And it is reflection on this which finally breaks the bonds which the English word 'law' always seems to threaten. For the Pentateuch does indeed include legal codes: the precise rubrics for sacrifice, the penal rules concerning restitution and damages, scrupulous concern with legal purity, detailed distinction of clean and unclean—all of it lovingly listed in Leviticus at what must appear excessive length. But in addition to this, and much more than all this, the Pentateuch is also the drama of man's first sin and God's promise of redemption; it is the story of the call of Abraham and his following in faith and God's promise to him of a son through whom the world would be blessed; it is the epic of the Exodus, God's first great deed of redemption. All of this, in the Bible's own terminology, is *torah*, the law.

This enables us to see in a rather different light the law which the

[1]The various psalms dealing with the law use many synonyms to express the idea. Most of them are no more than synonyms—precept, command, statute—and seem to be used merely for the sake of variety, not with any real attention to the particular shade of meaning which the terms contain. Others will be referred to in the following pages.

psalms propose for our prayer. It is *torah*, instruction; but it is not primarily instruction about ourselves and our legal obligations; it is about God and his deeds. It is simply, according to one of the synonyms which psalm 118 uses so abundantly, the 'word' of God: God's own revelation of himself. God reveals himself in various ways—through his actions, through the words of the prophets, and also through certain legal prescripts. But this makes it clear how we are to regard these laws; we are to regard them as revelations of God, just as much as the account of the creation and fall, or the story of Abraham, or the account of the Exodus. In all of these God is showing himself to us; and he is showing himself to us also in his commandments. It is in fact simply because they are the expression of God's nature that they are rules for us, the children of God. The revelation of God is at the same time a revelation of man, of what man is called to be. 'The God we serve is holy': and this revelation is merely expressed in another way when it says: 'Be ye also therefore holy'.

'All thy ways are truth' (Ps. 25. 10): the law is the expression of God's ways, his *mores*. It is, in another of psalm 118's synonyms, a 'witness' to God—it tells us, it manifests to us, what sort of a God he is. Just as Israel learned to know God through their experience of him, through, as it were, walking in his presence; so we learn to know him by following his law. These ways are true, as God himself is true. God is true, reliable, because he alone is real; outside of him there is nothing, fantasy, unreality. His law is the expression of that reality; it is not the dictate of arbitrary whim, designed merely to ensure our subjection; it is the counterpart in the moral order of the creation in the physical order; outside of that we are in a world of uncertain speculation and dubious opinion. This alone is our sure guide, the way, the truth and the life.

These are the thoughts we should have in mind when we read the psalms concerning the law. We may take psalm 1 as a typical example of such psalms, and see how these ideas apply there.

PSALM 1

Blessed is the man
Who does not go where sinners point,
Who does not stand in evil's way,
Who does not sit where the wicked laugh;
The man whose delight is the law of the Lord,
Who ponders it day and night.

Such a man is like a tree
Which stands by the bank of a running stream,
Which bears its fruit when the season comes,
And flourishes unwithered.
Not so the wicked;
They are like the chaff which the wind sweeps off.

The wicked, then, will not stand up
When judgment comes; they will have no place
Where the good are gathered.
For the Lord looks on the good man's way,
And the way of the wicked is lost.

This simple didactic poem was probably inserted as a preface to the collected psalms as expressing in basic terms the editor's view of the issues of all religion and all life. It deals with the problem of evil—a problem which naturally concerned the didactic writers since they sought to lay down rules for successful living. The answer is given in a contrast between the life of the good man and that of the sinner, first in principle, then in the figure of the tree, and finally in regard to the judgment.

Blessed is the man: the formula is familiar to didactic literature: 'Blessed is the man who has found wisdom' (Prov. 3. 1); 'Blessed is the man who has pity on the poor' (Prov. 14. 21) . . . For this is the essence of the good life, as it is the object of all men's search, *beatitude*, the *summum bonum*.

The psalmist's answer to the search is a confident statement of fact: it is not a promise for the future only, like Luke's version of the beatitudes: 'Blessed are you who mourn now, for you shall be comforted'; an assurance that although the service of God may involve unhappiness now, we should have courage to follow it because it will bring a rich reward later. It is much more like Matthew's beatitudes: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'; an assertion of what is really true here and now, even if we cannot perceive it as such: an assertion of faith, though reason and experience should blind our minds and weary our spirits. 'What is true happiness? Where does success and contentment lie? *This* is happiness: blessed is the man . . . .'

Who does not go . . . To man's unceasing quest for happiness, many answers are given; we are confused by the conflicting voices, we find ourselves swayed this way or that. And as a man stands at the cross-

roads wondering, he may be led astray in varying degrees (*walk, stand, sit*). He sees people who simply give no thought whatever to the hard teaching which is being drummed into his ears from the other side, and yet they seem to do very well out of it; they are not bothered by the taboos and prohibitions and sanctions of religion, they are not apparently troubled by pangs of conscience and remorse: 'They are not in trouble as other men are, they are not stricken like others . . . Therefore the people turn and praise them; they say: These are the wicked, always at ease, they increase in riches. Therefore in vain I have kept my hands clean' (Ps. 72. 5–14). This surely is the answer; this is the way. So a man may follow it, hesitatingly at first and occasionally troubled in conscience. But gradually the doubts fade and he becomes fixed in this way. And in the freedom of this broad road, he can look with contempt on the narrowness of those who are afraid to come to grips with life, held back by petty inhibitions and the cowardice of conscience.

So far, the commonplaces of moralists; and like any other moralist, the psalmist prejudges the issue by the use of pejorative terms, 'sinner, wicked, ungodly'. But the issue is prejudged; that is what revelation means. The sentiments the psalmist has just expressed are empty platitudes until they are given life by real experience; but while we have all had experience of the attraction of a life subject to no law, how can we know where our greatest good lies? How can one know it? Because God has shown us. Revelation is given to us in a historical experience. Israel did not discover God by reason; they found him in the first place in the experience of the exodus. And ' the way' for them was always in the first place not a characteristic manner of action, but a road; the English word 'way' rather obscures this point by signifying equally both 'manner, fashion', and 'path'. For Israel, it was always the road, the road which led from Egypt out into the desert; from slavery to freedom; from life to death. This was the road which God himself first walked, and along it he led his people like a shepherd, guiding them through pitfalls, leading them to pasture. Only in following his way was their safety; stray from this, and a man is lost in the pathless, waterless waste. It was in following this way, God's road, that Israel came to know God—to know his 'love and truth', his mercy and his reliability and reality.

And all this experience of Israel is summed up in the law. Law is not the same as 'orders'; it is not an arbitrary precept. The sense is more like that of a 'law of nature'; and indeed it is a law of nature, of God's

nature and of ours. Its role is to express truth. It is not the edict of a tyrant who exercises his authority by banning whatever we would like to do. If we find the law cramping, that is not the fault of law, but of ourselves, of our own waywardness. The law is a privilege, a grace, a light, the road—the only road—to life.

Such a man is like a tree: This is a very natural figure of speech in a land like Palestine, where the absence of water means a bare and barren waste where only a few withered shrubs survive, and where an oasis or the spring rains mean riches and fertility, with olive trees and vines growing firm-rooted and fruitful.

But it is also a figure with a long history. It was this image of a fruitful oasis which represented to Israel man's original state of happiness with God; and God's promise to repair this loss was expressed in the promise of 'a land flowing with milk and honey'. This fertile land was the image of God's own wisdom flourishing in Israel 'like a cedar of Lebanon, like a palm-tree in Engaddi, like the cyprus of Hermon, like the roses of Jericho, like the olive in the plain, like the plane tree by the waters'. (Eccus. 24. 13-14). And finally Israel itself was like this tree—their deliverance from Egypt reproduced the miracle of growth from a barren land, the beauty and fruitfulness of God's protecting presence. True, the prophets had to utter God's curse on this barren tree: 'My beloved planted a vineyard in a fruitful hill, walled it round and nurtured it lovingly . . . but when he looked for it to bear fruit, it gave only wild grapes' (Is. 5. 1-7). But this was precisely because they had strayed from God's way. In one who follows the law, Israel's destiny can still be fulfilled. Outside of this, there is only fatuity; not only barrenness, not even the stunted half-life of the desert scrub; less even than this—chaff, the useless, insubstantial husks that remain when the corn is removed.

The wicked will not stand in the judgment: This is our faith; a firm faith, resting on the truth of God, of God's own revelation of himself. But it still is faith, not evident experience; it is not free, then, from the attacks of doubt which can beset us when faithfulness to God results only in poverty—not only material poverty, but the much worse poverty of spirit, the blight of our natural growth. But the tree brings forth its fruit only 'in due season'; before that it must be pruned, so that it may bring forth more fruit (Jn. 15. 2). We must be purged, 'tested as gold is tested by fire, so that our faith may be shown worthy of praise and glory and honour' (1 Pet. 1. 7). These sufferings are the birth-pangs through which a new man is brought forth, one who is

moulded to the likeness of God through conformity to the law in which God has revealed himself. And only where this likeness to God exists is there life; outside of God there is nothing. Those in whom God's likeness is not found do not exist. There is the horror of the abyss in these words; not the abyss of a picture-book hell, but simply the abyss of nothingness. God does not need to punish these; though they flourish 'like the green bay tree', there is a cancer at the heart which eats through and leaves—simply nothing.

This, too, suggests an answer to the simple absoluteness of the psalm. Good-evil, sinner-just, black-white; it is rather more absolute and simple than most of us would like; at any given moment, most of us could not be too sure which side we were on. But the simplicity and absoluteness are the expression of God himself, of his holiness, of his absolute separation from all evil. As for us—this psalm is after all a prayer; it is an act of faith and an act of hope and an act of charity; it is the expression of our allegiance to that ideal. And as long as we recognise the ideal, to that extent we are taking sides with God; there is at least this much in us which God can 'know'. The rest, it is the task of our lives and of God's purging to destroy.

The law is God's word; but 'the Word has become flesh'—it is our Lord who is 'the end of the law', the completion and perfection of all that the law meant. The law was God's own revelation of himself, telling us what he was like; and it is in our Lord that we see most perfectly what God is: 'No man has ever seen God; the only-begotten Son, he has revealed him': 'He who sees me sees the Father': 'In him the fulness of the godhead dwells in bodily form'.

The law is the revelation of God's 'way'; it is reliable, as God himself is reliable because he is real, the only real thing in a world of shifting shadows and delusions; following this we come to life. And it is our Lord who is the way, and the truth, and life.

The life which the law gives is God's promise to Israel, and a return to the life of paradise, where the tree of life grew. Israel went astray and was felled like a tree; but from that stump a shoot sprang (Is. 6. 13), the root of Jesse (Is. 11. 1), like a new plant from the arid earth (Is. 53. 2). In him is all that beauty and richness of life that the figure of the tree means: 'I am the vine'. He alone; but we are 'planted with him by baptism' (cf. Rom. 6. 5); we are God's planting (1 Cor. 3. 9); he is the vine, but we are the branches.

Therefore, we do not painfully strive to conform to a law which is extrinsic to us, a constraint imposed from outside. The law is written

in our hearts (cf. Jer. 31. 31). We are one with Christ, the fulness of the law; his Spirit is our Spirit; and by that Spirit we are led (Rom. 8. 15). We do indeed follow the law; but the law is a person, Jesus Christ, our model. The law is simply the expression of the life of Christ in us.

The Trinity and our Society

CLARE DAWSON

To say that the being of God is the basis of human society may seem to anyone who believes in the procession of creatures from the divine mind, conceived by his thought, made actual by his will, a statement of the obvious; indeed any theist would be likely to agree that since the nature of ultimate truth must be the source of all truth and being, whatever theory of creation is held, it is from God that the shape of what concerns human destiny must descend. Any real belief in God affects our ideas about man and human society, but the Christian belief in the Trinity most profoundly tempers the structure of our thought.

The idea of society (as an unspecified notion, not tied down to this society or that, in one age or another), and of man's life in common is closely related to the mystery of divine society. It could hardly be otherwise since the fundamental doctrine of Christianity shows God as knowing and loving, having within his essential unity true interchange and the mutual give-and-take indispensable to the concept of community or society.

If there were no divine society, if God were one not only in the oneness of nature but as a solitary being, human society might exist, since man is a social animal, depending on the first and smallest unit of society for his existence and preservation, on the larger society or group, nation or state for his well-being. But it would be very different. Instead of being the goal towards which we move and which we try to express by successive social patterns it would be something of a makeshift, a utility rather than an end in which human persons are to achieve completion.