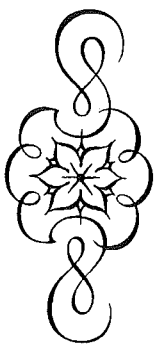


moment, been addressing to God; what infantile placations I was really offering, what claims I have really made, even what absurd adjustments or compromises I was, half-consciously, proposing. There is a Pagan, savage heart in me somewhere. For unfortunately the folly and idiot-cunning of Paganism seem to have far more power of surviving than its innocent or even beautiful elements. It is easy, once you have power, to silence the pipes, still the dances, disfigure the statues, and forget the stories; but not easy to kill the savage, the greedy, frightened creature now cringing, now blustering, in one's soul—the creature to whom God may well say, “thou thoughtest I am even such a one as thyself” (50, 21).

But all this, as I have said, will be illuminating to only a few of my readers. To the others, such a comedy of errors, so circuitous a journey to reach the obvious, will furnish occasion for charitable laughter.

X *Second Meanings*



I must now

turn to something far more difficult.

Hitherto we have been trying to read the Psalms as we suppose—or I suppose—their poets meant them to be read. But this of course is not the way in which they have chiefly been used by Christians. They have been believed to contain a second or hidden meaning, an “allegorical” sense, concerned with the central truths of Christianity, with the Incarnation, the Passion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and with the Redemption of man. All the Old Testament has been treated in the same way. The full significance of what the writers are saying is, on this view, apparent only in the light of events which happened after they were dead.

Such a doctrine, not without reason, arouses deep distrust in a modern mind. Because, as we know, almost anything can be read into any book if you are determined enough. This will be especially impressed on anyone who has written fantastic fiction. He will find reviewers, both favourable and hostile, reading into his stories all manner of allegorical meanings which he never intended. (Some of the allegories thus imposed on my own books have been so ingenious and interesting that I often wish I had thought of them myself.)

Apparently it is impossible for the wit of man to devise a narrative in which the wit of some other man cannot, and with some plausibility, find a hidden sense.

The field for self-deception, once we accept such methods of interpretation, is therefore obviously very wide. Yet in spite of this I think it impossible—for a reason I will give later—to abandon the method wholly when we are dealing, as Christians, with the Bible. We have, therefore, a steep hill before us. I will not attempt the cliffs. I must take a roundabout route which will look at first as if it could never lead us to the top at all.

I begin far away from Scripture and even from Christianity, with instances of something said or written which takes on a new significance in the light of later events.

One of the Roman historians tells us about a fire in a provincial town which was thought to have originated in the public baths. What gave some colour to the suspicion of deliberate incendiarism was the fact that, earlier that day, a gentleman had complained that the water in the hot bath was only lukewarm and had received from an attendant the reply, *it will soon be hot enough*. Now of course if there really had been a plot, and the slave was in it, and fool enough to risk discovery by this veiled threat, then the story would not concern us. But let us suppose the fire was an accident (i.e. was intended by nobody). In that case the slave would have said something truer, or more importantly true, than he himself supposed. Clearly, there need be nothing here but chance coincidence. The slave's reply is

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fully explained by the customer's complaint; it is just what any bath attendant would say. The deeper significance which his words turned out to have during the next few hours was, as we should say, accidental.

Now let us take a somewhat tougher instance. (The non-classical reader needs to know that to a Roman the "age" or "reign" of Saturn meant the lost age of innocence and peace. That is, it roughly corresponded to the Garden of Eden before the Fall; though it was never, except among the Stoics, of anything like comparable importance.) Virgil, writing not very long before the birth of Christ, begins a poem thus: "The great procession of the ages begins anew. Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns, and the new child is sent down from high heaven." It goes on to describe the paradisaal age which this nativity will usher in. And of course throughout the Middle Ages it was taken that some dim prophetic knowledge of the birth of Christ had reached Virgil, probably through the Sibylline Books. He ranked as a Pagan prophet. Modern scholars would, I suppose, laugh at the idea. They might differ as to what noble or imperial couple were being thus extravagantly complimented by a court poet on the birth of a son; but the resemblance to the birth of Christ would be regarded, once more, as an accident. To say the least of it, however, this is a much more striking accident than the slave's words to the man in the baths. If this is luck, it is extraordinary luck. If one were a fanatical opponent of

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Christianity one would be tempted to say, in an unguarded moment, that it was diabolically lucky.

I now turn to two examples which I think to be on a different level. In them, as in those we have been considering, someone says what is truer and more important than he knows; but it does not seem to me that he could have done so by chance. I hasten to add that the alternative to chance which I have in mind is not "prophecy" in the sense of clear prevision, miraculously bestowed. Nor of course have I the slightest intention of using the examples I shall cite as evidences for the truth of Christianity. Evidences are not here our subject. We are merely considering how we should regard those second meanings which things said or written sometimes take on in the light of fuller knowledge than their author possessed. And I am suggesting that different instances demand that we should regard them in different ways. Sometimes we may regard this overtone as the result of simple coincidence, however striking. But there are other cases in which the later truth (which the speaker did not know) is intimately related to the truth he did know; so that, in hitting out something like it, he was in touch with that very same reality in which the fuller truth is rooted. Reading his words in the light of that fuller truth and hearing it in them as an overtone or second meaning, we are not foisting on them something alien to his mind, an arbitrary addition. We are prolonging his meaning in a direction congenial to it. The basic reality behind

his words and behind the full truth is one and the same.

The status I claim for such things, then, is neither that of coincidence on the one hand nor that of supernatural prevision on the other. I will try to illustrate it by three imaginable cases. i. A holy person, explicitly claiming to prophesy by the Spirit, tells us that there is in the universe such and such a creature. Later we learn (which God forbid) to travel in space and distribute upon new worlds the vomit of our own corruption; and, sure enough, on the remote planet of some remote star, we find that very creature. This would be prophecy in the strictest sense. This would be evidence for the prophet's miraculous gift and strong presumptive evidence for the truth of anything else he had said. ii. A wholly unscientific writer of fantasies invents a creature for purely artistic reasons. Later on, we find a creature recognisably like it. This would be just the writer's luck. A man who knows nothing about racing may once in his life back a winner. iii. A great biologist, illustrating the relation between animal organisms and their environment, invents for this purpose a hypothetical animal adapted to a hypothetical environment. Later, we find a creature very like it (of course in an environment very like the one he had supposed). This resemblance is not in the least accidental. Insight and knowledge, not luck, led to his invention. The real nature of life explains both why there is such a creature in the universe and also why there was such a creature in his lectures. If, while we re-read

the lectures, we think of the reality, we are not bringing arbitrary fancies of our own to bear on the text. This second meaning is congenial to it. The examples I have in mind correspond to this third case; except of course that something more sensitive and personal than scientific knowledge is involved—what the writer or speaker was, not only what he knew.

Plato in his *Republic* is arguing that righteousness is often praised for the rewards it brings—honour, popularity, and the like—but that to see it in its true nature we must separate it from all these, strip it naked. He asks us therefore to imagine a perfectly righteous man treated by all around him as a monster of wickedness. We must picture him, still perfect, while he is bound, scourged, and finally impaled (the Persian equivalent of crucifixion). At this passage a Christian reader starts and rubs his eyes. What is happening? Yet another of these lucky coincidences? But presently he sees that there is something here which cannot be called luck at all.

Virgil, in the poem I have quoted, may have been, and the slave in the baths almost certainly was, "talking about something else", some matter other than that of which their words were most importantly true. Plato is talking, and knows he is talking, about the fate of goodness in a wicked and misunderstanding world. But that is not something simply other than the Passion of Christ. It is the very same thing of which that Passion is the supreme illustration. If Plato was in some measure moved to write of it by the recent death—we may

almost say the martyrdom—of his master Socrates then that again is not something simply other than the Passion of Christ. The imperfect, yet very venerable, goodness of Socrates led to the easy death of the hemlock, and the perfect goodness of Christ led to the death of the cross, not by chance but for the same reason; because goodness is what it is, and because the fallen world is what it is. If Plato, starting from one example and from his insight into the nature of goodness and the nature of the world, was led on to see the possibility of a perfect example, and thus to depict something extremely like the Passion of Christ, this happened not because he was lucky but because he was wise. If a man who knew only England and had observed that, the higher a mountain was, the longer it retained the snow in early spring, were led on to suppose a mountain so high that it retained the snow all the year round, the similarity between his imagined mountain and the real Alps would not be merely a lucky accident. He might not know that there were any such mountains in reality; just as Plato probably did not know that the ideally perfect instance of crucified goodness which he had depicted would ever become actual and historical. But if that man ever saw the Alps he would not say "What a curious coincidence". He would be more likely to say "There! What did I tell you?"

And what are we to say of those gods in various Pagan mythologies who are killed and rise again and who thereby renew or transform the life of their worshippers or of nature? The odd thing is that

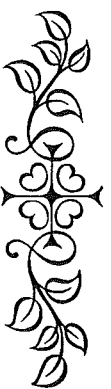
here those anthropologists who are most hostile to our faith would agree with many Christians in saying "The resemblance is not accidental". Of course the two parties would say this for different reasons. The anthropologists would mean: "All these superstitions have a common source in the mind and experience, especially the agricultural experience, of early man. Your myth of Christ is like the myth of Balder because it has the same origin. The likeness is a family likeness." The Christians would fall into two schools of thought. The early Fathers (or some of them), who believed that Paganism was nothing but the direct work of the Devil, would say: "The Devil has from the beginning tried to mislead humanity with lies. As all accomplished liars do, he makes his lies as like the truth as he can; provided they lead man astray on the main issue, the more closely they imitate truth the more effective they will be. That is why we call him God's Ape; he is always imitating God. The resemblance of Adonis to Christ is therefore not at all accidental; it is the resemblance we expect to find between a counterfeit and the real thing, between a parody and the original, between imitation pearls and pearls." Other Christians who think, as I do, that in mythology divine and diabolical and human elements (the desire for a good story), all play a part, would say: "It is not accidental. In the sequence of night and day, in the annual death and rebirth of the crops, in the myths which these processes gave rise to, in the strong, if half-articulate, feeling (embodied in many Pagan

'Mysteries') that man himself must undergo some sort of death if he would truly live, there is already a likeness permitted by God to that truth on which all depends. The resemblance between these myths and the Christian truth is no more accidental than the resemblance between the sun and the sun's reflection in a pond, or that between a historical fact and the somewhat garbled version of it which lives in popular report, or between the trees and hills of the real world and the trees and hills in our dreams." Thus all three views alike would regard the "Pagan Christs" and the true Christ as things really related and would find the resemblance significant.

In other words, when we examine things said which take on, in the light of later knowledge, a meaning they could not have had for those who said them, they turn out to be of different sorts. To be sure, of whatever sort they may be, we can often profitably read them with that second meaning in mind. If I think (as I cannot help thinking) about the birth of Christ while I read that poem of Virgil's, or even if I make it a regular part of my Christmas reading, this may be quite a sensible and edifying thing to do. But the resemblance which makes such a reading possible may after all be a mere coincidence (though I am not sure that it is). I may be reading into Virgil what is wholly irrelevant to all he was, and did, and intended; irrelevant as the sinister meaning which the bathman's word in the Roman story acquired from later events may have been to anything that slave was or meant.

But when I meditate on the Passion while reading Plato's picture of the Righteous One, or on the Resurrection while reading about Adonis or Balder, the case is altered. There is a real connection between what Plato and the myth-makers most deeply were and meant and what I believe to be the truth. I know that connection and they do not. But it is really there. It is not an arbitrary fancy of my own thrust upon the old words. One can, without any absurdity, imagine Plato or the myth-makers if they learned the truth, saying, "I see . . . so that was what I was really talking about. Of course. That is what my words really meant, and I never knew it." The bath attendant if innocent, on hearing the second meaning given to his words, would no doubt have said, "So help me, I never meant no such thing. Never come into my head. I hadn't a clue." What Virgil would have said, if he had learned the truth, I have no idea. (Or may we more charitably speak, not of what Plato and Virgil and the myth-makers "would have said" but of what they said? For we can pray with good hope that they now know and have long since welcomed the truth; "many shall come from the east and the west and sit down in the kingdom.")

Thus, long before we come to the Psalms or the Bible, there are good reasons for not throwing away all second meanings as rubbish. Keble said of the Pagan poets, "Thoughts beyond their thoughts to those high bards were given." But let us now turn to Scripture itself.



If even pagan

utterances can carry a second meaning, not quite accidentally but because, in the sense I have suggested, they have a sort of right to it, we shall expect the Scriptures to do this more momentarily and more often. We have two grounds for doing so if we are Christians.

i. For us these writings are "holy", or "inspired", or, as St. Paul says, "the Oracles of God". But this has been understood in more than one way, and I must try to explain how I understand it, at least so far as the Old Testament is concerned. I have been suspected of being what is called a Fundamentalist. That is because I never regard any narrative as unhistorical simply on the ground that it includes the miraculous. Some people find the miraculous so hard to believe that they cannot imagine any reason for my acceptance of it other than a prior belief that every sentence of the Old Testament has historical or scientific truth. But this I do not hold, any more than St. Jerome did when he said that Moses described Creation "after the manner of a popular poet" (as we should say, mythically) or than Calvin did when he doubted whether the story of Job were history or fiction. The real reason why I can accept as historical a story in

which a miracle occurs is that I have never found any philosophical grounds for the universal negative proposition that miracles do not happen. I have to decide on quite other grounds (if I decide at all) whether a given narrative is historical or not. The *Book of Job* appears to me unhistorical because it begins about a man quite unconnected with all history or even legend, with no genealogy, living in a country of which the Bible elsewhere has hardly anything to say; because, in fact, the author quite obviously writes as a story-teller not as a chronicler.

I have therefore no difficulty in accepting, say, the view of those scholars who tell us that the account of Creation in *Genesis* is derived from earlier Semitic stories which were Pagan and mythical. We must of course be quite clear what "derived from" means. Stories do not reproduce their species like mice. They are told by men. Each re-teller either repeats exactly what his predecessor had told him or else changes it. He may change it unknowingly or deliberately. If he changes it deliberately, his invention, his sense of form, his ethics, his ideas of what is fit, or edifying, or merely interesting, all come in. If unknowingly, then his unconscious (which is so largely responsible for our forgettings) has been at work. Thus at every step in what is called—a little misleadingly—the "evolution" of a story, a man, all he is and all his attitudes, are involved. And no good work is done anywhere without aid from the Father of Lights. When a series of such re-tellings turns a creation story which at first had almost no religious or metaphysical

significance into a story which achieves the idea of true Creation and of a transcendent Creator (as *Genesis* does), then nothing will make me believe that some of the re-tellers, or some one of them, has not been guided by God.

Thus something originally merely natural—the kind of myth that is found among most nations—will have been raised by God above itself, qualified by Him and compelled by Him to serve purposes which of itself it would not have served. Generalising this, I take it that the whole Old Testament consists of the same sort of material as any other literature—chronicle (some of it obviously pretty accurate), poems, moral and political diatribes, romances, and what not; but all taken into the service of God's word. Not all, I suppose, in the same way. There are prophets who write with the clearest awareness that Divine compulsion is upon them. There are chroniclers whose intention may have been merely to record. There are poets like those in the *Song of Songs* who probably never dreamed of any but a secular and natural purpose in what they composed. There is (and it is no less important) the work first of the Jewish and then of the Christian Church in preserving and canonising just these books. There is the work of redactors and editors in modifying them. On all of these I suppose a Divine pressure; of which not by any means all need have been conscious.

The human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naïvety, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing Psalms) wickedness are not removed.

The total result is not "the Word of God" in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God; and we (under grace, with attention to tradition and to interpreters wiser than ourselves, and with the use of such intelligence and learning as we may have) receive that word from it not by using it as an encyclopedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message.

To a human mind this working-up (in a sense imperfectly), this sublimation (incomplete) of human material, seems, no doubt, an untidy and leaky vehicle. We might have expected, we may think we should have preferred, an unrefracted light giving us ultimate truth in systematic form—something we could have tabulated and memorised and relied on like the multiplication table. One can respect, and at moments envy, both the Fundamentalists' view of the Bible and the Roman Catholic's view of the Church. But there is one argument which we should beware of using for either position: God must have done what is best, this is best, therefore God has done this. For we are mortals and do not know what is best for us, and it is dangerous to prescribe what God must have done—especially when we cannot, for the life of us, see that He has after all done it.

We may observe that the teaching of Our Lord Himself, in which there is no imperfection, is not given us in that cut-and-dried, fool-proof, systematic fashion we might have expected or desired. He wrote no book. We have only reported sayings,

most of them uttered in answer to questions, shaped in some degree by their context. And when we have collected them all we cannot reduce them to a system. He preaches but He does not lecture. He uses paradox, proverb, exaggeration, parable, irony; even (I mean no irreverence) the "wisecrack". He utters maxims which, like popular proverbs, if rigorously taken, may seem to contradict one another. His teaching therefore cannot be grasped by the intellect alone, cannot be "got up" as if it were a "subject". If we try to do that with it, we shall find Him the most elusive of teachers. He hardly ever gave a straight answer to a straight question. He will not be, in the way we want, "pinned down". The attempt is (again, I mean no irreverence) like trying to bottle a sunbeam.

Descending lower, we find a somewhat similar difficulty with St. Paul. I cannot be the only reader who has wondered why God, having given him so many gifts, withheld from him (what would to us seem so necessary for the first Christian theologian) that of lucidity and orderly exposition.

Thus on three levels, in appropriate degrees, we meet the same refusal of what we might have thought best for us—in the Word Himself, in the Apostle of the Gentiles, in Scripture as a whole. Since this is what God has done, this, we must conclude, was best. It may be that what we should have liked would have been fatal to us if granted. It may be indispensable that Our Lord's teaching, by that elusiveness (to our systematising intellect), should demand a response from the whole man,

should make it so clear that there is no question of learning a subject but of steeping ourselves in a Personality, acquiring a new outlook and temper, breathing a new atmosphere, suffering Him, in His own way, to rebuild in us the defaced image of Himself. So in St. Paul. Perhaps the sort of works I should wish him to have written would have been useless. The crabbedness, the appearance of inconsequence and even of sophistry, the turbulent mixture of petty detail, personal complaint, practical advice, and lyrical rapture, finally let through what matters more than ideas—a whole Christian life in operation—better say, Christ Himself operating in a man's life. And in the same way, the value of the Old Testament may be dependent on what seems its imperfection. It may repel one use in order that we may be forced to use it in another way—to find the Word in it, not without repeated and leisurely reading nor without discriminations made by our conscience and our critical faculties, to re-live, while we read, the whole Jewish experience of God's gradual and graded self-revelation, to feel the very contentions between the Word and the human material through which it works. For here again, it is our total response that has to be elicited.

Certainly it seems to me that from having had to reach what is really the Voice of God in the cursing Psalms through all the horrible distortions of the human medium, I have gained something I might not have gained from a flawless, ethical exposition. The shadows have indicated (at least to my heart) something more about the light. Nor would I (now)

willingly spare from my Bible something in itself so anti-religious as the nihilism of *Ecclesiastes*. We get there a clear, cold picture of man's life without God. That statement is itself part of God's word. We need to have heard it. Even to have assimilated *Ecclesiastes* and no other book in the Bible would be to have advanced further towards truth than some men do.

But of course these conjectures as to why God does what He does are probably of no more value than my dog's ideas of what I am up to when I sit and read. But though we can only guess the reasons, we can at least observe the consistency, of His ways. We read in *Genesis* (2, 7) that God formed man of the dust and breathed life into him. For all the first writer knew of it, this passage might merely illustrate the survival, even in a truly creational story, of the Pagan inability to conceive true Creation, the savage, pictorial tendency to imagine God making things "out of" something as the potter or the carpenter does. Nevertheless, whether by lucky accident or (as I think) by God's guidance, it embodies a profound principle. For on any view man is in one sense clearly made "out of" something else. He is an animal; but an animal called to be, or raised to be, or (if you like) doomed to be, something more than an animal. On the ordinary biological view (what difficulties I have about evolution are not religious) one of the primates is changed so that he becomes man; but he remains still a primate and an animal. He is taken up into a new life without relinquishing the old. In the same way, all organic

life takes up and uses processes merely chemical. But we can trace the principle higher as well as lower. For we are taught that the Incarnation itself proceeded "not by the conversion of the god-head into flesh, but by taking of (the) manhood into God"; in it human life becomes the vehicle of Divine life. If the Scriptures proceed not by conversion of God's word into a literature but by taking up of a literature to be the vehicle of God's word, this is not anomalous.

Of course, on almost all levels, that method seems to us precarious or, as I have said, leaky. None of these up-gradings is, as we should have wished, self-evident. Because the lower nature, in being taken up and loaded with a new burden and advanced to a new privilege, remains, and is not annihilated, it will always be possible to ignore the up-grading and see nothing but the lower. Thus men can read the life of Our Lord (because it is a human life) as nothing but a human life. Many, perhaps most, modern philosophies read human life merely as an animal life of unusual complexity. The Cartesians read animal life as mechanism. Just in the same way Scripture can be read as merely human literature. No new discovery, no new method, will ever give a final victory to either interpretation. For what is required, on all these levels alike, is not merely knowledge but a certain insight; getting the focus right. Those who can see in each of these instances only the lower will always be plausible. One who contended that a poem was nothing but black marks on white paper would be unanswer-

able if he addressed an audience who couldn't read. Look at it through microscopes, analyse the printer's ink and the paper, study it (in that way) as long as you like; you will never find something over and above all the products of analysis whereof you can say "This is the poem". Those who can read, however, will continue to say the poem exists.

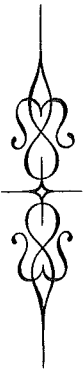
If the Old Testament is a literature thus "taken up", made the vehicle of what is more than human, we can of course set no limit to the weight or multiplicity of meanings which may have been laid upon it. If any writer may say more than he knows and mean more than he meant, then these writers will be especially likely to do so. And not by accident.

ii. The second reason for accepting the Old Testament in this way can be put more simply and is of course far more compulsive. We are committed to it in principle by Our Lord Himself. On that famous journey to Emmaus He found fault with the two disciples for not believing what the prophets had said. They ought to have known from their Bibles that the Anointed One, when He came, would enter his glory through suffering. He then explained, from "Moses" (i.e. the Pentateuch) down, all the places in the Old Testament "concerning Himself" (*Luke 24, 25-27*). He clearly identified Himself with a figure often mentioned in the Scriptures; appropriated to Himself many passages where a modern scholar might see no such reference. In the predictions of His Own Passion which He had

previously made to the disciples. He was obviously doing the same thing. He accepted—indeed He claimed to be—the second meaning of Scripture.

We do not know—or anyway I do not know—what all these passages were. We can be pretty sure about one of them. The Ethiopian eunuch who met Philip (*Acts* 8, 27-38) was reading *Isaiah* 53. He did not know whether in that passage the prophet was talking about himself or about someone else. Philip, in answering his question, “preached unto him Jesus”. The answer, in fact, was “Isaiah is speaking of Jesus”. We need have no doubt that Philip’s authority for this interpretation was Our Lord. (Our ancestors would have thought that Isaiah consciously foresaw the sufferings of Christ as people see the future in the sort of dreams recorded by Mr. Dunne. Modern scholars would say, that on the conscious level, he was referring to Israel itself, the whole nation personified. I do not see that it matters which view we take.) We can, again, be pretty sure, from the words on the cross (*Mark* 15, 34), that Our Lord identified Himself with the sufferer in Psalm 22. Or when He asked (*Mark* 12, 35, 36) how Christ could be both David’s son and David’s lord, He clearly identified Christ, and therefore Himself, with the “my Lord” of Psalm 110—was in fact hunting at the mystery of the Incarnation by pointing out a difficulty which only it could solve. In *Matthew* 4, 6 the words of Psalm 91 11, 12, “He shall give his angels charge over thee . . . that thou hurt not thy foot against a stone,” are applied to Him,

and we may be sure the application was His own since only He could be the source of the temptation-story. In *Mark* 12, 10 He implicitly appropriates to Himself the words of Psalm 118 22 about the stone which the builders rejected. “Thou shalt not leave my soul in hell, neither shalt thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption” (16, 17) is treated as a prophecy of His Resurrection in *Acts* 2, 27, and was doubtless so taken by Himself, since we find it so taken in the earliest Christian tradition—that is, by people likely to be closer both to the spirit and to the letter of His words than any scholarship (I do not say, “any sanctity”) will bring a modern. Yet it is, perhaps, idle to speak here of spirit and letter. There is almost no “letter” in the words of Jesus. Taken by a literalist, He will always prove the most elusive of teachers. Systems cannot keep up with that darting illumination. No net less wide than a man’s whole heart, nor less fine of mesh than love, will hold the sacred Fish.



In a certain

sense Our Lord's interpretation of the Psalms was common ground between Himself and His opponents. The question we mentioned a moment ago, how David can call Christ "my Lord" (*Mark* 12, 35-37), would lose its point unless it were addressed to those who took it for granted that the "my Lord" referred to in Psalm 110 was the Messiah, the regal and anointed deliverer who would subject the world to Israel. This method was accepted by all. The "scriptures" all had a "spiritual" or second sense. Even a gentile "God-fearer"¹ like the Ethiopian eunuch (*Acts* 8, 27-38) knew that the sacred books of Israel could not be understood without a guide, trained in the Judaic tradition, who could open the hidden meanings. Probably all instructed Jews in the first century saw references to the Messiah in most of those passages where Our Lord saw them; what was controversial was His identification of the Messianic King with another Old Testament figure and of both with Himself.

Two figures meet us in the Psalms, that of the sufferer and that of the conquering and liberating

¹ The "god-fearers" (*sebomanoi* or *methistes*) were a recognised class of Gentiles who worshipped Jahveh without submitting to circumcision and the other ceremonial obligations of the Law. Cf. Psalm 118 (2, Jewish laity; 3 Jewish priests; 4 God-fearers) and Acts 10, 2.

king. In 13, 28, 55 or 102, we have the Sufferer; in 2 or 72, the King. The Sufferer was, I think, by this time generally identified with (and may sometimes have originally been intended as) the whole nation, Israel itself—they would have said "himself". The King was the successor of David, the coming Messiah. Our Lord identified Himself with both these characters.

In principle, then, the allegorical way of reading the Psalms can claim the highest possible authority. But of course this does not mean that all the countless applications of it are fruitful, legitimate, or even rational. What we see when we think we are looking into the depths of Scripture may sometimes be only the reflection of our own silly faces. Many allegorical interpretations which were once popular seem to me, as perhaps to most moderns, to be strained, arbitrary and ridiculous. I think we may be sure that some of them really are; we ought to be much less sure that we know which. What seems strained—a mere triumph of perverse ingenuity—to one age, seems plain and obvious to another, so that our ancestors would often wonder how we could possibly miss what we wonder how they could have been silly-clever enough to find. And between different ages there is no impartial judge on earth, for no one stands outside the historical process; and of course no one is so completely enslaved to it as those who take our own age to be, not one more period, but a final and permanent platform from which we can see all other ages objectively. Interpretations which were already established

in the New Testament of course have a special claim on our attention. We find in our Prayer Books that Psalm 110¹ is one of those appointed for Christmas Day. We may at first be surprised by this. There is nothing in it about peace and goodwill, nothing remotely suggestive of the stable at Bethlehem. It seems to have been originally either a coronation ode for a new king, promising conquest and empire, or a poem addressed to some king on the eve of a war, promising victory. It is full of threats. The "rod" of the king's power is to go forth from Jerusalem, foreign kings are to be wounded, battle fields to be covered with carnage, skulls cracked. The note is not "Peace and goodwill" but "Beware. He's coming". Two things attach it to Christ with an authority far beyond that of the Prayer Book. The first of course (already mentioned) is that He Himself did so; He is the "lord" whom "David" calls "my Lord". The second is the reference to Melchizedek (4). The identification of this very mysterious person as a symbol or prophecy of Christ is made in *Hebrews* 7. The exact form of the comment there made on *Genesis* 14 is of course alien to our minds, but I think the essentials can all be retained in our own idiom. We should certainly not argue from the failure of *Genesis* to give Melchizedek any genealogy or even parents that he has neither beginning nor end (if it comes to that, Job has no genealogy either); but we should be vividly aware that his unrelated, unaccounted for, appearance sets him

¹ See Appendix I, page 148.

strangely apart from the texture of the surrounding narrative. He comes from nowhere, blesses in the name of the "most high God, possessor of heaven and earth", and utterly disappears. This gives him the effect of belonging, if not to *the* Other World, at any rate to *another* world; other than the story of Abraham in general. He assumes without question, as the writer of *Hebrews* saw, a superiority over Abraham which Abraham accepts. He is an august, a "numinous" figure. What the teller, or last re-teller, of *Genesis* would have said if we asked him why he brought this episode in or where he had got it from, I do not know. I think, as I have explained, that a pressure from God lay upon these tellings and re-tellings. And one effect which the episode of Melchizedek was to have is quite clear. In puts in, with unforgettable impressiveness, the idea of a priesthood, not Pagan but a priesthood to the one God, far earlier than the Jewish priesthood which descends from Aaron, independent of the call to Abraham, somehow superior to Abraham's vocation. And this older, pre-Judaic, priesthood is united with royalty; Melchizedek is a priest-king. In some communities priest-kings were normal, but not in Israel. It is thus simply a fact that Melchizedek resembles (in his peculiar way he is the only Old Testament character who resembles) Christ Himself. For He, like Melchizedek claims to be Priest, though not of the priestly tribe, and also King. Melchizedek really does point to Him; and so of course does the hero of Psalm 110 who is a king but also has the same sort of priesthood.

For a Jewish convert to Christianity this was extremely important and removed a difficulty. He might be brought to see how Christ was the successor of David; it would be impossible to say that He was, in a similar sense, the successor of Aaron. The idea of His priesthood therefore involved the recognition of a priesthood independent of and superior to Aaron's. Melchizedek was there to give this conception the sanction of the Scriptures. For us gentle Christians it is rather the other way round. We are more likely to start from the priestly, sacrificial, and intercessory character of Christ and under-stress that of king and conqueror. Psalm 110, with three other Christmas Psalms, corrects this. In 45 we have again the almost threatening tone: "Gird thee with thy sword upon thy thigh, O thou most mighty . . . thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things . . . thy arrows are very sharp" (4-6). In 89 we have the promises to David (who would certainly mean all, or any, of David's successors, just as "Jacob" can mean all his descendants). Foes are to fall before him (24). "David" will call God "Father", and God says "I will make him my first-born" (27, 28), that is "I will make him an eldest son", make him my heir, give him the whole world. In 132 we have "David" again; "As for his enemies, I shall clothe them with shame, but upon himself shall his crown flourish" (19). All this emphasises an aspect of the Nativity to which our later sentiment about Christmas (excellent in itself) does less than justice. For those who first read these Psalms as poems about the

birth of Christ, that birth primarily meant something very militant; the hero, the "judge" or champion or giant-killer, who was to fight and beat death, hell and the devils, had at last arrived, and the evidence suggests that Our Lord also thought of Himself in those terms. (Milton's poem on the *Nativity* well recaptures this side of Christmas.)

The assignment of Psalm 68¹ to Whitsunday has some obvious reasons, even at a first reading. Verse 8, "The earth shook and the heavens dropped at the presence of God, even as Sinai also was moved," was, no doubt, for the original writer a reference to the miracles mentioned in *Exodus*, and thus foreshadows that very different descent of God which came with the tongues of fire. Verse 11 is a beautiful instance of the way in which the old texts, almost inevitably charge themselves with the new weight of meaning. The Prayer Book version gives it as "The Lord gave the word, great was the company of the preachers". The "word" would be the order for battle and its "preachers" (in rather a grim sense) the triumphant Jewish warriors. But that translation appears to be wrong. The verse really means that there were many to spread "word" (i.e. the news) of the victory. This will suit Pentecost quite as well. But I think the real New Testament authority for assigning this Psalm to Whitsunday appears in verse 18 (in the Prayer Book, "Thou art gone up on high, thou hast led captivity captive, and received gifts for men"). According to the scholars the Hebrew text here

¹ See Appendix I, page 143.

means that God, with the armies of Israel as his agents, had taken huge masses of prisoners and received "gifts" (booty or tribute) from men. St. Paul, however (*Ephesians* 4, 8) quotes a different reading: "When He ascended up on high He led captivity captive and gave gifts to men." This must be the passage which first associated the Psalm with the coming of the Holy Ghost, for St. Paul is there speaking of the gifts of the Spirit (4-7) and stressing the fact that they come after the Ascension. After ascending, as a result of ascending, Christ gives these gifts to men, or receives these gifts (notice how the Prayer Book version will now do well enough) from His Father "for men", for the use of men, in order to transmit them to men. And this relation between the Ascension and the coming of the Spirit is of course in full accordance with Our Lord's own words, "It is expedient for you that I go away, for if I go not away the Comforter will not come unto you" (*John* 16, 7); as if the one were somehow impossible without the other, as if the Ascension, the withdrawal from the space-time in which our present senses operate, of the incarnate God, were the necessary condition of God's presence in another mode. There is a mystery here that I will not even attempt to sound.

That Psalm has led us through some complications; those in which Christ appears as the sufferer are very much easier. And it is here too that the second meaning is most inevitable. If Christ "tasted death for all men", became the archetypal sufferer, then the expressions of all who ever suf-

fered in the world are, from the very nature of things, related to His. Here (to speak in ludicrously human terms) we feel that it needed no Divine guidance to give the old texts their second meaning but would rather have needed a special miracle to keep it out. In Psalm 22, the terrible poem which Christ quoted in His final torture, it is not "they pierced my hands and my feet" (17), striking through this anticipation must always be, that really matters most. It is the union of total privation with total adherence to God, to a God who makes no response, simply because of what God is: "and thou continuest holy" (3). All the sufferings of the righteous speak here; but in 40, 15, all the sufferings of the guilty too—"my sins have taken such hold upon me that I am not able to look up." But this too is for us the voice of Christ, for we have been taught that He who was without sin became sin for our sakes, plumbed the depth of that worst suffering which comes to evil men who at last know their own evil. Notice how this, in the original or literal sense, is hardly consistent with verses 8, 9, and what counterpoint of truth this apparent contradiction takes on once the speaker is understood to be Christ.

But to say more of these suffering Psalms would be to labour the obvious. What I, at any rate, took longer to see was the full richness of that Christmas Psalm we have already mentioned, Psalm 45,¹ which shows us so many aspects of the Nativity we could never get from the carols or even (easily) from the

¹ See Appendix I, page 141.

gospels. This in its original intention was obviously a laureate ode on a royal wedding. (We are nowadays surprised to find that such an official bit of work, made "to order" by a court poet for a special occasion, should be good poetry. But in ages when the arts had their full health no one would have understood our surprise. All the great poets, painters, and musicians of old could produce great work "to order". One who could not would have seemed as great a humbug as a captain who could navigate or a farmer who could farm only when the fit took him.) And simply as a marriage ode—what the Greeks call an *Epithalamium*—it is magnificent. But it is far more valuable for the light it throws on the Incarnation.

Few things once seemed to me more frigid and far-fetched than those interpretations, whether of this Psalm or of the *Song of Songs*, which identify the Bridegroom with Christ and the bride with the Church. Indeed, as we read the frank erotic poetry of the latter and contrast it with the edifying headlines in our Bibles, it is easy to be moved to a smile, even a cynically knowing smile, as if the pious interpreters were feigning an absurd innocence. I should still find it very hard to believe that anything like the "spiritual" sense was remotely intended by the original writers. But no one now (I fancy) who accepts that spiritual or second sense is denying, or saying anything against, the very plain sense which the writers did intend. The Psalm remains a rich, festive Epithalamium, the *Song* remains fine, sometimes exquisite, love poetry, and this is not in

the least obliterated by the burden of the new meaning. (Man is still one of the primates; a poem is still black marks on white paper.) And later I began to see that the new meaning is not arbitrary and springs from depths I had not suspected. First, the language of nearly all great mystics, not even in a common tradition, some of them Pagan, some Islamic, most Christian, confronts us with evidence that the image of marriage, of sexual union, is not only profoundly natural but almost inevitable as a means of expressing the desired union between God and man. The very word "union" has already entailed some such idea. Secondly, the god as bridegroom, his "holy marriage" with the goddess, is a recurrent theme and a recurrent ritual in many forms of Paganism—Paganism not at what we should call its purest or most enlightened, but perhaps at its most religious, at its most serious and convinced. And if, as I believe, Christ, in transcending and thus abrogating, also fulfils, both Paganism and Judaism, then we may expect that He fulfils this side of it too. This, as well as all else, is to be "summed up" in Him. Thirdly, the idea appears, in a slightly different form, within Judaism. For the mystics God is the Bridegroom of the individual soul. For the Pagans, the god is the bridegroom of the mother-goddess, the earth, but his union with her also makes fertile the whole tribe and its livestock, so that in a sense he is their bridegroom too. The Judaic conception is in some ways closer to the Pagan than to that of the mystics, for in it the Bride of God is the whole nation, Israel.

This is worked out in one of the most moving and graphic chapters of the whole Old Testament (*Ezekiel* 16). Finally, this is transferred in the Apocalypse from the old Israel to the new, and the Bride becomes the Church, "the whole blessed company of faithful people". It is this which has, like the unworthy bride in *Ezekiel*, been rescued, washed, clothed, and married by God—a marriage like King Cophetua's. Thus the allegory which at first seemed so arbitrary—the ingenuity of some prudish commentator who was determined to force flat edifications upon the most unpromising texts—turned out, when you seriously tugged at it, to have roots in the whole history of religion, to be loaded with poetry, to yield insights. To reject it because it does not immediately appeal to our own age is to be provincial, to have the self-complacent blindness of the stay-at-home.

Read in this sense, the Psalm restores Christmas to its proper complexity. The birth of Christ is the arrival of the great warrior and the great king. Also of the Lover, the Bridegroom, whose beauty surpasses that of man. But not only the Bridegroom as the lover, the desired; the Bridegroom also as he who makes fruitful, the father of children still to be begotten and born. (Certainly the image of a Child in a manger by no means suggests to us a king, grant-killer, bridegroom, and father. But it would not suggest the eternal Word either—if we didn't know. All alike are aspects of the same central paradox.) Then the poet turns to the Bride, with the exhortation, "forget also thine own people and

thy father's house" (*11*). This of course has a plain, and to us painful, sense while we read the Psalm as the poet probably intended it. One thinks of home-sickness, of a girl (probably a mere child) secretly crying in a strange *harem*, of all the miseries which may underlie any dynastic marriage, especially an Oriental one. The poet (who of course knew all about this—he probably had a daughter of his own) consoles her: "Never mind, you have lost your parents but you will presently have children instead, and children who will be great men." But all this has also its poignant relevance when the Bride is the Church. A vocation is a terrible thing. To be called out of nature into the supernatural life is at first (or perhaps not quite at first—the wrench of the parting may be felt later) a costly honour. Even to be called from one natural level to another is loss as well as gain. Man has difficulties and sorrows which the other primates escape. But to be called up higher still costs still more. "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house", said God to Abraham (*Genesis* 12, *1*). It is a terrible command; turn your back on all you know. The consolation (if it will at that moment console) is very like that which the Psalmist offers to the bride: "I will make of thee a great nation." This "turn your back" is of course terribly repeated, one may say aggravated, by Our Lord—"he that hateth not father and mother and his own life." He speaks, as so often in the proverbial, paradoxical manner; hatred (in cold prose) is not enjoined; only the resolute, the

apparently ruthless, rejection of natural claims when, and if, the terrible choice comes to that point. (Even so, this text is, I take it, profitable only to those who read it with horror. The man who finds it easy enough to hate his father, the woman whose life is a long struggle not to hate her mother, had probably best keep clear of it.) The consolation of the Bride, in this allegory, consists, not (where the mystics would put it) in the embraces of the Spouse, but in her fruitfulness. If she does not bear fruit, is not the mother of saints and sanctity, it may be supposed that the marriage was an illusion—for "a god's embraces never are in vain".

The choice of Psalm 8¹ for Ascension Day again depends on an interpretation found in the New Testament. In its literal sense this short, exquisite lyric is simplicity itself—an expression of wonder at man and man's place in Nature (there is a chorus in Sophocles not unlike it) and therefore at God who appointed it. God is wonderful both as champion or "judge" and as Creator. When one looks up at the sky, and all the stars which are His work, it seems strange that He should be concerned at all with such things as man. Yet in fact, though He has made us inferior to the celestial beings, He has, down here on earth, given us extraordinary honour—made us lords of all the other creatures. But to the writer of *Hebrews* (2, 6-9) this suggested something which we, of ourselves, would never have thought of. The Psalmist said "Thou has put all things in subjection under his

¹ See Appendix I, page 139.

(man's) feet" (6). The Christian writer observes that, in the actual state of the universe, this is not strictly true. (Man is often killed, and still more often defeated, by beasts, poisonous vegetables, weather, earthquakes, etc. It would seem to us merely perverse and capricious thus to take a poetic expression as if it were intended for a scientific universal. We can get nearest to the point of view if we imagine the commentator arguing not (as I think he actually does) "Since this is not true of the present, and since all the scriptures must be true, the statement must really refer to the future", but rather, "This is of course true in the poetic—and therefore, to a logician, the loose—sense which the poet intended; but how if it were far truer than he knew?" This will lead us, by a route that is easier for our habits of mind, to what he thinks the real meaning—or I should say the "over-meaning", the new weight laid upon the poet's words. Christ has ascended into Heaven. And in due time all things, quite strictly all, will be subjected to Him. It is He who having been made (for a while) "lower than the angels", will become the conqueror and ruler of all things, including death and (death's patron) the devil.

To most of us this will seem a wire-drawn allegory. But it is the very same which St. Paul obviously has in mind in 1 *Corinthians* 15, 20-28. This, with the passage in *Hebrews*, makes it pretty certain that the interpretation was established in the earliest Christian tradition. It may even descend from Our Lord. There was, after all, no

description of Himself which He delighted in more than the "Son of Man"; and of course, just as "daughter of Babylon" means Babylon, so "Son of Man" means Man, the Man, the archetypal Man, in whose suffering, resurrection, and victories all men (unless they refuse) can share.

And it is this, I believe, that most modern Christians need to be reminded of. It seems to me that I seldom meet any strong or exultant sense of the continued, never-to-be-abandoned, Humanity of Christ in glory, in eternity. We stress the Humanity too exclusively at Christmas, and the Deity too exclusively after the Resurrection; almost as if Christ once became a man and then presently reverted to being simply God. We think of the Resurrection and Ascension (rightly) as great acts of God; less often as the triumph of Man. The ancient interpretation of Psalm 8, however arrived at, is a cheering corrective. Nor, on further consideration, is the analogy of humanity's place in the universe (its greatness and littleness, its humble origins and—even on the natural level—amazing destiny) to the humiliation and victories of Christ, really strained and far-fetched. At least it does not seem so to me. As I have already indicated, there seems to me to be something more than analogy between the taking up of animality into man and the taking up of man into God.

But I walk in wonders beyond myself. It is time to conclude with a brief notice of some simpler things.

One is the apparent (and often no doubt real)

self-righteousness of the Psalms: "Thou shalt find no wickedness in me" (17, 3), "I have walked innocently" (26, 1), "Preserve thou my soul, for I am holy" (86, 2). For many people it will not much mend matters if we say, as we probably can with truth, that sometimes the speaker was from the first intended to be Israel, not the individual; and even, within Israel, the faithful remnant. Yet it makes some difference; up to a certain point that remnant was holy and innocent compared with some of the surrounding Pagan cultures. It was often an "innocent sufferer" in the sense that it had not deserved what was inflicted on it, nor deserved it at the hands of those who inflicted it. But of course there was to come a Sufferer who was in fact holy and innocent. Plato's imaginary case was to become actual. All these assertions were to become true in His mouth. And if true, it was necessary they should be made. The lesson that perfect, unretaliating, forgiving innocence can lead as the world is, not to love but to the screaming curses of the mob and to death, is essential. Our Lord therefore becomes the speaker in these passages when a Christian reads them; by right—it would be an obscuring of the real issue if He did not. For He denied all sin of Himself. (That, indeed, is no small argument of His Deity. For He has not often made even on the enemies of Christianity the impression of arrogance; many of them do not seem as shocked as we should expect at His claim to be "meek and lowly of heart". Yet He said such things as, on any hypothesis but one,

would be the arrogance of a paranoiac. It is as if, even where the hypothesis is rejected, some of the reality which implies its truth "got across".)

Of the cursing Psalms I suppose most of us make our own moral allegories—well aware that these are personal and on a quite different level from the high matters I have been trying to handle. We know the proper object of utter hostility—wickedness, especially our own. Thus in 36, "My heart showeth me the wickedness of the ungodly," each can reflect that his own heart is the specimen of that wickedness best known to him. After that, the upward plunge at verse 5 into the mercy high as heaven and the righteousness solid as the mountains takes on even more force and beauty. From this point of view I can use even the horrible passage in 137 about dashing the Babylonian babies against the stones. I know things in the inner world which are like babies; the infantile beginnings of small indulgences, small resentments, which may one day become dipsomania or settled hatred, but which woo us and wheedle us with special pleadings and seem so tiny, so helpless that in resisting them we feel we are being cruel to animals. They begin whimpering to us "I don't ask much, but", or "I had at least hoped", or "you owe yourself some consideration". Against all such pretty infants (the dears have such winning ways) the advice of the Psalm is the best. Knock the little bastards' brains out. And "blessed" he who can, for it's easier said than done.

Sometimes with no prompting from tradition a

second meaning will impose itself upon a reader irresistibly. When the poet of Psalm 84 said (10) "For one day in thy courts is better than a thousand", he doubtless meant that one day there was better than a thousand elsewhere. I find it impossible to exclude while I read this the thought which, so far as I know, the Old Testament never quite reaches. It is there in the New, beautifully introduced not by laying a new weight on old words but more simply by adding to them. In Psalm 90 (4) it had been said that a thousand years were to God like a single yesterday; in 2 Peter 3, 8—not the first place in the world where one would have looked for so metaphysical a theology—we read not only that a thousand years are as one day but also that "one day is as a thousand years". The Psalmist only meant, I think, that God was everlasting, that His life was infinite in time. But the epistle takes us out of the time-series altogether. As nothing outlasts God, so nothing slips away from Him into a past. The later conception (later in Christian thought—Plato had reached it) of the timeless as an eternal present has been achieved. Ever afterwards, for some of us, the "one day" in God's courts which is better than a thousand, must carry a double meaning. The Eternal may meet us in what is, by our present measurements, a day, or (more likely) a minute or a second; but we have touched what is not in any way commensurable with lengths of time, whether long or short. Hence our hope finally to emerge, if not altogether from time (that might not suit our humanity) at any

rate from the tyranny, the unilinear poverty, of time, to ride it not to be ridden by it, and so to cure that always aching wound ("the wound man was born for") which mere succession and mutability inflict on us, almost equally when we are happy and when we are unhappy. For we are so little reconciled to time that we are even astonished at it. "How he's grown!" we exclaim, "How time flies!" as though the universal form of our experience were again and again a novelty. It is as strange as if a fish were repeatedly surprised at the wetness of water. And that would be strange indeed; unless of course the fish were destined to become, one day, a land animal.

APPENDIX I *Selected Psalms*

PSALM

8 *Domine, Dominus noster*

O Lord our Governor, how excellent is thy Name in all the world : thou that hast set thy glory above the heavens!

2. Out of the mouth of very babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength, because of thine enemies : that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.

3. For I will consider thy heavens, even the works of thy fingers : the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained.

4. What is man, that thou art mindful of him : and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

5. Thou madest him lower than the angels : to crown him with glory and worship.

6. Thou makest him to have dominion of the works of thy hands : and thou has put all things in subjection under his feet ;

7. All sheep and oxen : yea, and the beasts of the field.

8. The fowls of the air, and the fishes of the sea : and whatsoever walketh through the paths of the seas.

9. O Lord our Governor : how excellent is thy Name in all the world !

19 *Coeli enarrant*

The heavens declare the glory of God : and the firmament sheweth his handywork

2. One day telleth another : and one night certifieth another.