ISRAEL,
MY FIRST-BORN SON

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THE NEW TESTAMENT is the environment of the christian, and in the New Testament Father is practically the proper name of God. Hence there has always been a certain amount of uneasiness in the face of the Old Testament's reticence in using the name. Yahweh is seldom called Father, and Israel is seldom called his son. The terms and the ideas are not, of course, unknown to the Old Testament. A text like Exodus 4, 22 is categorical: 'Then you are to say to Pharaoh, Thus says Yahweh: Israel is my firstborn son; so I said to you, let my son go, that he may serve me, but you refused . . . accordingly, I am going to slay your firstborn son'.[1] The motive for this vigorous affirmation is revealing. Obviously the object is to explain how it was fitting that the firstborn of Egypt die. It is, in technical language, an etiology. The first thing to notice is that the claim to be the son of God needed a special motivation to bring it to expression. It did not itself spring readily to the israelites' lips. Only its connection with another essential factor in the story brought it into the open. Since this claim is a commonplace in the culture of the Near East from which Israel drew its modes of thought, its imagery, its language, we may conclude that this avoidance of the phrase was deliberate. Doubtless it was dictated by the danger of the crude polytheistic concepts connected with it among the gentiles. Thus, when the monarchy made Yahweh say of the king, 'You are my son',[2] it borrowed this formula straight from the paganism of Egypt where the Pharaoh was thought to be the son of the supreme god Re in the most literal sense, conceived by sexual relations between the god and the queen. Little wonder that Israel feared the idea of divine sonship and even, in

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[1] Note that this text uses the singular, speaking of the community of Israel collectively as God's son. Others (e.g. Deut 14, 1; Isai 30, 1, 9) use the plural, speaking of the individual israelite. However, the individual was son of God precisely because he was a member of the chosen people; therefore it is not necessary to distinguish the two sets of texts for the purposes of our argument. What is true of the one is true of the other.
[2] Ps 2, 7; also cf 2 Sam 7, 14.

certain quarters at least, the monarchy itself; it could be a paganizing institution.

Nonetheless Israel was ready to call itself son in a context of immense richness: namely, in an essential association with the exodus, the central fact of its revealed religion. We cannot understand the phrase, 'my firstborn son' here as an accidental epithet, a poetic exaggeration, precisely because it has an etiological function, an important explanatory role, within this great story. It is integral to the account of the exodus, the saving event *par excellence*, which revealed Yahweh's will to save his people.[1]

The whole Old Testament is marked by this event, all salvation history centres around it: so much so that the phrase 'Yahweh the God who brought you out of Egypt', became the very name, the identification of the God of the Old Testament. Moreover, when Israel was confronted by the crisis which cost it its independence, its social structures, its public cult and religious life, prophets like Jeremiah and the second Isaiah could turn only to the exodus for the imagery and the ideas to express the promise of restoration. The return of the exiled jews and the re-establishment of their state and religion were to be a new and more marvellous exodus – that paradigm of all salvation.

It is noteworthy that the affirmation of Israel's divine sonship reappears most often precisely in this context. The return is another miracle of Yahweh's saving grace, and it is a miracle granted his children. Before the event Hosea promises a return motivated by Yahweh's fatherly love.[2] Jeremiah sees the return as a restoration of the father-son relationship between Yahweh and Israel, a true and lasting relationship parallel to the new covenant which he also promises.[3] The whole of third-Isaiah,[4] is preoccupied with the return in which Yahweh acts according to the classic terms attached to the original exodus as saviour and redeemer[5] of his children.[6] And

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[1] There are certain problems here which cannot be ignored entirely. 1. Is the connection between Israel, God's firstborn son and the plague on the firstborn of Egypt essential in the sense of being the actual historical motivation for the event? Certainly not. The connection is literary, made by the writer or rather the tradition from which he drew. But it is the literary whole which is God's word; so that what matters is the integration of the text into the literary unit and so into its theology. 2. Was the passover and the attendant rite of the firstborn really the original occasion for the exodus and its preliminary plagues? Once again the connection is literary and theological and that suffices.

[2] Hos 11.   [3] Jer 31, 9; cf 31, 31–34.   [4] i.e. Isai 56, 1–66, 24.

[5] Note that in hebrew redeemer *go'el* was originally a family concept. The *go'el* was the member of the clan responsible for its integrity and especially its vindication in the face of injury. Later the meaning was generalized, but the word always retained its connection with the family also.   [6] Isai 64, 8, 16.

where the Israel of the exodus is only once called Yahweh's son, the affirmation of the father-son relationship is repeated several times in the context of the return. We have an example of a classic process. Terms and concepts which were true and important, but which might have misled earlier Israel, were no danger to the people tested and purified by their trials, and they could be used and developed freely in all their richness.

There is, then, a considerable complexity in the Old Testament attitude toward the idea of Israel's divine sonship. On the one hand, the idea is seldom stated, especially in the older levels of the Old Testament. On the other hand, it was definitely there, and it was inextricably bound up with the central facts of salvation history. Indeed, his very language forced the israelite to think in terms of sonship when he thought of his relation with God. He knew that Israel had a special relation to Yahweh, and hebrew, like the other semitic tongues, characteristically spoke of a relationship as sonship. A citizen was 'son of the nation',[1] a craftsman was a 'son of the craft',[2] a disciple was 'the son of the sage',[3] and so on. Son was the general term for relationship. Inevitably, the people specially related to Yahweh were his sons. We must take care here lest we fail to catch the full resonance of the term. Because we have in our language specific names for these relationships, citizen, craftsman, disciple and so forth, we might make the mistake of thinking that the hebrew use of son in these cases, and for relation in general, is a transparent metaphor, with no further meaning beyond those of our own specialized terms. Not so: the semitic languages reflect the profound feeling about the nature of society as essentially familial. A little reflection can show us how appropriate this feeling is. For instance, a true citizen is indeed the son of his city (i.e. his place of origin, whatever it be) in a real sense. It gives being to him as an individual; he is the special man that he is in great part because he is from this time and this place. The city begins and fosters his special development. In sum, the city has a function much like that of a parent.

However, Israel's thinking of itself as the son of Yahweh was not conditioned merely by a phenomenon of language, even a phenomenon which reflects a primeval insight into the nature of human relationships. The basic concept of Israel as the covenant people points in the same direction. The people of Israel were organised

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[1] Cf Neh 13, 16.   [2]   Cf Neh 3, 8.   [3]   Prov 2, 1.

on the basis of the covenant: it made them a people. Historical investigation shows that Israel was not really a unified tribal group of clans with a common origin and sharing the same blood. Rather it was a collection of peoples with different backgrounds, desert tribes, groups long settled in Canaan, slaves from Egypt and so on. What gave all these disparate peoples unity was not their family origin but rather their allegiance to Yahweh, their entering into a covenant with him.[1] There is something of a paradox here. Pagan nations could easily think of themselves as a family, the descendants of a common divine ancestor. Israel's severe insistence on the transcendence of Yahweh ruled this out entirely. Israel could not be related to Yahweh by physical generation but only by a free act of the will: an agreement, that is, a covenant. In other words the relationship between Yahweh and Israel was contractual and not a natural sonship. And yet this statement of the case inevitably falsifies it somewhat for our minds. The covenant between Israel and Yahweh did in fact make Israel the family of Yahweh in a very real sense. Oddly enough, a group which had no family unit and which could not ascribe to itself the mythic unity of descendence from a god, which could only be united by a spontaneous act of the will, became by this very act what it was not and could not be before. Now, in the minds of the actors, it could and must be thought of as a kind of family. Once again, if we are to understand this, we must put aside our own habits of thought; we are accustomed to make a clear distinction between a contractual group and the family group, the adopted child and the natural child. Not so ancient Israel: the result of the contract, the covenant, was thought of as a kind of familial relationship.

It is true that the exact nature of Israel's covenant with Yahweh has been and will be the subject of much diversity of opinion and of much discussion. The classic critical school held that the covenant idea was a later substitution for a primitive idea of blood-relationship to God, an improvement which raised a supposed physical relationship to the nobler level of a union of wills, a moral union. At the opposite pole, there have been those who felt that the covenant idea was too legalistic, a beginning of pharisaical self-righteousness. Others again have found the idea of a covenant as essentially a legal contractual relationship to be both useful, praiseworthy and primitive: there certainly was development of the covenant idea

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[1] Murray, John Courtney, S.J., *The Problem of God* (Yale, 1964), p 11.

within Israel. However, in the true israelite tradition, the covenant relationship always had something of the familial about it. An instance of this is Ahaz calling himself the son of the brutal assyrian king, because of a covenant with Assyria, a purely political affair with an overbearing master.[1] In any case, the original covenant made on Sinai was thought of as constituting a familial relationship between Yahweh and Israel. The proof that the Sinai covenant was familial is simple: the rites by which it was ratified. Blood was shared,[2] a sign which is universally recognized among the more primitive peoples as making strangers one family because symbolically they share one blood. In another version, the representatives of Israel shared a meal with Yahweh,[3] again a recognized sign that they were all members of one family circle. Thus the original Sinai covenant meant a relationship with Yahweh which was somehow familial, and this was never lost sight of throughout the later developments and improvements of the covenant idea, as revelation progressed. The texts of Exodus themselves show this, for they are more than simple records of the past. They represent the liturgy of the feast through which Israel remembered and renewed the Sinai covenant. In the ritual and its accompanying texts the covenant was made present to each succeeding generation, and renewed as a familial covenant.

The very name that Israel used for itself as a nation, *ᶜam* – other people are *goyim* – points to the concept of the people as a family. *Goyim* refers essentially to a social group, a political grouping of men who might well be, and usually were, of disparate origin. *ᶜam*, on the other hand, indicates much more than a mere political and social unity; it is a group conceived of as having somehow a familial relationship. This idea, of course, was further expressed and reinforced in the structure under which Israel expressed itself to itself, namely, the partitioning of the people into the twelve tribes thought of as stemming from a single ancestor.

The basic conception of Israel, then, made it inevitable that the nation think of itself as a family; and the God who had made it a nation, and a family, who had saved and guarded it, fits naturally and necessarily into the position of a father. The Old Testament is again explicit here, though as sparing in its use of the term father for Yahweh as of son for Israel. Nonetheless, Yahweh is a true father because he does what a natural father does. He is father because he

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[1] 2 Kg 16, 7.   [2] Exod 24, 5–8.   [3] Exod 24, 11.

has made the people,[1] and because he nurtures it and guides its development.[2] So much is this true that by comparison the revered ancestors Abraham and Jacob (Israel) do not, according to the prophet, deserve the title of father; it belongs to Yahweh alone.[3]

The definition, if we may use the term, of fatherhood involved or implied by these passages is instructive. It does not dwell on the metaphysical nature of fatherhood. Yahweh is seen to be father of Israel in what he does. He brings Israel into being; he fosters and guides it. This is true fatherhood. So also with sonship; true sonship lies in action according to the father's heart. A true son must be like the father not in static being but in activity. Once again we have a parallel to the covenant situation. In Israel, a covenant resulted not so much in the establishment of a state as in a continuing action, in living according to the wishes of the sovereign who had granted the covenant. The ancient Near East even called the relation between covenant partners love. Indeed, though a book like Deuteronomy, based entirely on covenant ideas, knows of the father-son relationship between Yahweh and Israel, the love with which it is concerned to the point of obsession is a love like that between overlord and vassal.[4] This raises a serious objection against the claim that the covenant relationship was always in some part familial. If this were so, how could Deuteronomy concern itself with both relationships, and yet keep them apart rigorously? The answer is, I believe, that love in Deuteronomy is a love of reverence and loyalty and obedience: this love-relationship of son to father is equally applicable to Israel's relation with Yahweh, a relationship of fidelity, reverence and obedience. This is strikingly verified by the contrast in tone between the picture of Yahweh the Father's relation to his son and that of Israel's relation to him as Father. The first is all tenderness;[5] the other is essentially reverential fear and obedience.[6] Yahweh complains not that his son does not feel tenderly toward him, but rather that his son does not serve him faithfully.

This active sonship might well be called an imitation of God, if we were to express it according to our own ideas; but we must note that this is not said explicitly in the Old Testament. The idea that men should be like God is not unknown in Israel. For instance, the demand: 'Be ye holy, for I, Yahweh, your God, am holy'

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[1] Isai 64, 7.   [2] Deut 1, 31; 8, 5.   [3] Isai 63, 16.
[4] Deut 8, 5; 14, 1. Cf Moran, William, S.J., 'The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963), p 77–87.
[5] Deut 1, 31; Isai 63, 16; Hos 11.   [6] E.g. Deut 14, 1; Isai 1, 2; Mal 1, 6.

occurs to explain and motivate laws;[1] but nowhere are we expressly told that Israel the son must be like the divine Father. And this is natural enough. Within a family the father is inevitably a model, and his children learn more from living with him than from his explicit instructions. However, we do not expect the father to call explicitly for imitation; it is a normal, natural fact of family living and so does not need explicit mention. We assume that the child will be like the father, and we do not need to articulate this assumption. Neither did the Old Testament, though clearly it did make this assumption. The very ancient poem in Deuteronomy reads: 'There is no corruption in him. His children have the blemish, a generation twisted and perverse'.[2] The blame implied can only apply if Israel should have been like its father and had failed to be so.

Again, the israelites are called 'sons of the living God',[3] a phrase which in its primitive meaning referred to the fact that man is like the living God because he has the mysterious power to give life through procreation.[4] He is like God in this action. However, this is no automatic likeness, no brute quality shared by man and animal alike. It can be godlike only when used properly. It must be integrated into a life given to God as a whole. Hosea, the prophet who has called Israel the son of the living God, is most acutely aware of the dangers to which this godlike power left a man a prey. He could refuse to attribute this power to God, claim it as his own and completely disrupt the order of things. More, any sin, any rejection of God, cut men off from the source of life.[5] Thus true sonship is not a state of possession, but a power. It is essentially involved with the use of man's power, with an activity which conforms to the divine Father's manner of doing things.

This is made clear in more general terms in the most common context in which Israel is addressed as Yahweh's son. The point is that the son is to act like a son. Because he is son he must be loyal, he must live up to the family standards.[6] Nor is the action of true sonship confined to accepting general standards; the fact that Yahweh is the father to Israel, his son, is a motive for specific action.[7]

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[1] Lev 19, 2; 20, 7, 26.   [2] Deut 32, 5.   [3] Hos 2, 10.
[4] Cp Gen 1, 27–28 with 5, 1–3.   [5] Cf Hos 2, 7–15; 6, 2.   [6] Cf Isai 64, 8.
[7] 'You are the sons of the Lord your God; you shall not cut yourselves or make any baldness on your foreheads for the dead'. Deut 14, 1. This law against shaving the head seems odd, particularly in connection with its solemn introduction; it is, however, very significant. The practice was a pagan funeral rite and so was tantamount to turning away from Yahweh to another god.

More often this is put negatively: Yahweh has chosen Israel as his
son, but the son has been rebellious and unfaithful; hence the poig-
nant force of the prophetic reproach to the faithless nation.[1] The
intimate connection between divine sonship and right action appears
most graphically in the story of Eden. 'The state depicted in Genesis
2ff might better be called the state of innocence, in terms of reli-
gion, of life in a pure childlike relationship with God, a life also
reflected in a relationship between man and woman. It is, therefore,
a perfectly natural harmony between them and also perfect harmony
with nature . . . The cleavage in the original harmonious relation-
ship between God, man, and woman (and ultimately the animal
world, too) was caused by reaching out for the fruit of the one
forbidden tree – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, symbol
of a higher divine knowledge. Sin is man's desire of independence,
the desire to shake himself free of the childlike relationship with God,
free of true innocence. And the punishment for this cleavage is the
rupture of the relationship between man and the animal world,
man and woman, man and the earth, and ultimately this punish-
ment is death (symbolized in man's expulsion from the Garden of
Eden with its tree of life). Here God recognizes the fact that har-
mony between himself and man has been broken'.[2]

There is a danger that we see in all this a sort of moralism. God the
Father lays down the law which his children must follow if they are
to remain his children, but the law can seem to be something ex-
trinsic, an arbitrary appendage conditioning the essential relation-
ship. This may in fact have been the interpretation of later, pharisaic
schools; but it is a misreading of the true Old Testament attitude.
The law was a natural and integral factor in the relationship. Just as
the Father is father in terms not of what he is but in terms of what he
does and how he lives, so the son is son precisely in his continuing
action, in his life as son. It may be said that this activity according
to the divine heart constitutes the relationship. Whether it was
phrased as covenant or sonship, the relationship with God was not
a legal or an ontological state; it was a continuous activity, an
activity defined and expressed in the details of the law. One did
not become a son and then accept the father's standards; one was a
son precisely because he lived those standards. The state and the
activity connected with it are indistinguishable.[3]

[1]   Cf Isai 1, 2; 30, 1, 9; Jer 3, 4, 19.
[2]   Vriezen, T. C., *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Oxford, 1962), p 209.
[3]   Cf O'Connell, M., S.J., *Theological Studies* 21 (1960), pp 351–403.

We have argued that the concept of Israel's divine sonship in the Old Testament is often very like the concept of Israel, the covenant partner of Yahweh. Indeed, the two ideas are inseparable: partly because the covenant idea, was a way of making a new family larger than the blood relationship. However, covenant was more than this. It was an affair of free choice and therefore pre-eminently human. It could become a true and a conscious union of minds and hearts. Covenant necessarily expressed itself in actions carried out according to the partner's direction. So also sonship: it was an affair of action according to the wishes of the father's heart. The one idea necessarily and naturally completes the other.

All knowledge of God depends upon analogies drawn from created things. In our Old Testament context we have a variety of likenesses, which, taken together, reveal something of the richness and complexity of the relationship between man and God. Thus the covenant idea helps to avoid the over-emotional and irrational elements which spring from concentration on blood ties (e.g. the vendetta where even accidental death must be avenged). The family concept, on the other hand, warns us against the shallow moralism and harsh legalism associated with the idea of a contract and its legalistic overtones. Both emphasize that a privileged relationship to God is a commitment to action, the action of the true son, the true friend.

Here we draw very close to the modern scene. In discussing the knowledge of God and the refusal to acknowledge him, Fr Murray says: 'I prefer to speak of the godless man rather than of atheism in order to avoid any possible suggestion that the problem is abstract or that it presents an issue only on the level of argument. The suggestion would be entirely false. God is not a proposition but an existence: 'I am He who is'. The knowledge of God is not an affair of an affirmation alone; it is a free engagement in a whole style of life. Similarly, ignorance of God is not simply a want of knowledge or even a denial; it too is a free choice of a mode of being'.[1] As a matter of fact, the knowledge of God itself is another great Old Testament category. Hosea, the prophet who affirms so strongly that Israel is the son of Yahweh, insists equally strongly on the true knowledge of Yahweh: that is, knowledge which continues into action. So it is with covenant, so it is with sonship.

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[1] Murray, John Courtney, S.J., *op. cit.* p. 77.