

# THE PRAYER OF THE CREATURE

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**I**N THE BIBLE, the prayer of man as creature is a prayer full of confidence and security. In the ancient world obsessed by primitive fears, this fact is so surprising that it is more worthwhile for us to try to understand the reasons for this attitude than simply to enter spontaneously into it. It is, however, a difficult task, since creation is a truth which is given only at a late stage of revelation, a truth derived from several centuries of life lived under the covenant and of spiritual reflection on the dialogue with God.

No religious thought reaches true maturity so long as it has not yet formulated its 'vision of the world'. Until the limits of the real world are attained, religious thought has not exploited all the consequences of its personal contact with the ground of all being and of all personality, which is God. So much so that the range and coherence of the vision of the world is the final criterion of the quality and genuineness of adult religious thinking, just as the inter-personal relation between God and man is its initial criterion.

The man of the bible verifies this law. Begun in a personal religious experience which is firmly rooted in history, in the history of Abraham, continued in the patriarchs and fully developed in the experience of the Sinai community, the religious thought of the people of God is centred on the covenant. The first formulations are expressed in language borrowed from international law towards the end of the second millennium,<sup>1</sup> and in the protocol the demands of Yahweh are based on the duty of gratitude for previous blessings. This simple fact led them to turn memory into a theological faculty, and to go back ceaselessly over the past to discern there the evidence of God's loving-kindness. Deeper reflection gradually brought the people of God to discover the limits of the classical 'formula of alliance',<sup>2</sup> and to remove the impression, sometimes given by the Sinai covenant, that man could attain by his own efforts happiness and the favour of God, by placing it in the context

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Jos 24; Exod 19-20; Deut 27.

<sup>2</sup> Deut 10, 12-11, 17; 30, 1-10.

of the covenant with Abraham,<sup>1</sup> where there was no longer any doubt possible about the gratuitousness of salvation. A dialectical contrast was thus set up, which lasted until the New Testament, between the aspect of divine favour in the encounter with God and the claims which faithfulness could make on divine favour: that is between Abraham and Moses.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the biblical authors, who in the last analysis are theologians who work under inspiration on certain facts that they try to make sense of and to communicate, have to anchor their thought in human experience. Some of them base themselves in the first place on a feature of north mesopotamian international law about 1,200 B.C., the 'formula of the alliance', which stresses the responsibility of the two parties: such are the elohist and Deuteronomy; others, in the first part of the second millenium, sought a formula in which the alliance would be expressed almost exclusively in terms of divine favour: such are the yahvist and the priestly tradition. These two theological insights are not contradictory but complementary. In the covenant with Abraham, God himself undertakes certain obligations and commits himself, through his personal friendship, to the full realization of the human person;<sup>3</sup> this commitment, guaranteed by a divine oath, means that this type of covenant is of necessity unbreakable and eternal.<sup>4</sup> In the Sinai covenant, on the other hand, the obligation falls first of all on the human partner, who pronounces blessings and curses on himself.<sup>5</sup>

In reality, the two theological formulations are both indispensable to any mature religious thought; all is grace, and at the same time all is a personal and free commitment. A one-sided stress on gratuitousness (and therefore with the covenant with Abraham) would gradually tend towards a magical way of thinking; a one-sided stress on responsible personal commitment would lead infallibly to pelagianism. In fact, many christians become pelagians when they think that the new covenant is better and eternal because we are stronger and more faithful than were our fathers in the faith; whereas in reality what makes the new covenant eternal and unbreakable is the fact that it is made between the Father and his

<sup>1</sup> Gen 15; 17; Exod 2, 24; 6, 5-8; Lev 26, 42.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Rom 4, 1-25 and Mt 5, 17-19; Mk 10, 17-22.

<sup>3</sup> Gen 15; 17, cf also Gen 9; Ps 89 etc.

<sup>4</sup> Gen 17, 7; 13, 19; Lk 1, 55, 72-73.

<sup>5</sup> Deut 27, 11-26; and in Gal 3, 10 we see the inevitable consequence of this view.

incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, faith, which alone saves, is not really a faith unless it is a personal commitment which reveals itself in living, in meeting to the full the moral demands of fraternal charity: unless, that is, it embraces the divine plan in its entirety.<sup>2</sup> What we called earlier the dialectical tension between the covenant with Abraham and the Sinai covenant appears therefore as something which is absolutely necessary if we are to understand the relation of friendship between God and man.

Biblical thought on creation, and also on eschatology, developed in this context. Starting with the encounter with Yahweh in the covenant, the religious thinkers of Israel go back until they have reached the beginning, and see history unfolding until the last day. Both these limit-investigations are needed, and they are made in terms of the fundamental category of biblical thought; that of time and of history. Without them, the people of God cannot understand its own meaning and could only fall into two aberrations, both equally harmful to a religious thought: either to consider the divine favour which it enjoys as a special privilege, or else to consider its God as one god among many – the Lord is the God of Israel as Baal is the god of Canaan or Marduk of Babylon.

The first synthesis was made in the time of Solomon, about 940 B.C., by the unknown author whom scholars call the yahvist. To explain the favoured situation of the people of God which is called their election, he goes back to the origins of things<sup>3</sup> and already sets down the basic data: the universe was made by Yahweh, it is not part of God and no other agency set itself in opposition to his action. Man is at the centre of God's plan, and his task is to continue this task of developing the created world. But from the beginning man shattered God's plan; and as a result he has since then been a repentant king; if now he suffers and fails to reach personal fulfilment, this is not because Yahweh wills it, but because the world has been broken by man. In this way, the most glaring scandals of the human condition are integrated; death, suffering, laborious work, the pains of childbirth, the sense of nihilism and disorder in the heart of man.

Alongside this first synthesis, we have only space to consider one prayer, but it is a splendid one – Psalm 29. It is an old canaanite psalm taken up into the yahvist tradition, probably from the time

<sup>1</sup> Mk 14, 24; Lk 22, 20; Gal 3, 13-18; Heb 8, 6-13.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Jn 4, 7-5, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Gen 2-3.

of Solomon. The poet's lyric skill is seen in the way the form and structure of the poem correspond to its content. From the opening verses the storm loses all its primitive terrors which are replaced by religious awe, since the storm is the voice of Yahweh. The storm comes from a distance, is heard first of all above the sea, draws near and passes above us, and then rumbles away over the desert. Then we see the magnificent theological finale, in which all the experience of yahvist prayer of man as creature is summed up: the storm is a mighty force, it is true, but a mastered force, and the eternal peace of Yahweh coexists with its apparent unleashing of chaos. Man can live with the storm in peace.

But the biblical vision of the world only reaches its full development in the final synthesis of the pentateuch, in the priestly tradition, during the exile. Meditation on the creaturely condition had grown more profound during the centuries of life under the kings of Israel, but the experience of exile made it indispensable: the deportation had removed all sociological security and the scandalous power and success of Babylon came as a shock to defenceless faith. This is the time at which deuterio-Isaiah understood creation as the first of the saving acts of Yahweh.<sup>1</sup> In this view, salvation, which is true life and, practically speaking, personal communion with Yahweh, is not a second dimension added to a creation which would have been in fact profane and pagan.

Starting from this truth, the meditation of the authors in the priestly tradition develops an image of the world which for the first time places man in the whole of creation; and this is the true prayer of the creature in the Old Testament. Mythical images drawn from the mesopotamian world provide often enough the literary starting point, but the mythical structure is abandoned and replaced by a historical pattern. Its main lines are as follows:

In the beginning, Yahweh made everything by his word; he was not a part of primitive chaos, he mastered it. He created the universe for man, and for a man who is in the image of God: that is, he represents the royal authority of God in the world.<sup>2</sup> With this assertion, the priestly tradition lays down the basis of an ethic of human dignity.<sup>3</sup> In this world, man is in a state of covenant, of personal relationship with the Creator;<sup>4</sup> as a result, the whole of humanity is one and is personally linked to the Creator.

<sup>1</sup> Isai 40, 27-31; 42, 5; 43, 1; 44, 24-28; 51, 9-13; 54, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Gen 1, 26-27; Ps 8, 5-6; 145, 5-12.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Gen 9, 6; Sir 17, 2-12; Wis 2, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Gen 1, 22, 28, 29; 9, 1, 3, 7; 35, 3, 11, 12.

Yet man is free, and so he can turn away from Yahweh; and he does so from the first generation. The priestly tradition recognizes this by presenting the account of the first sin according to the old yahvist tradition.<sup>1</sup> The rejection of the friendship of God continues from age to age, and wrecks creation.<sup>2</sup> The story of the tower of Babel admirably expresses this dislocation of the created world.<sup>3</sup> But Yahweh does not accept the breaking up of his creation, which was designed so that he could dwell among men and be their God.<sup>4</sup> Now, therefore, he must enter the world by means of history. But he only wishes to enter the world on the religious level, which is that of personal encounter. Hence the need for contact with one man. This man, Abraham, and then his descendants, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, restore divine friendship on earth and make possible a dialogue with the people.<sup>5</sup> The people of God is established definitively by its liberation at the time of the exodus; the personal experience of the leader, Moses, who makes his own exodus on a smaller scale,<sup>6</sup> is followed by the liberation of the people.<sup>7</sup>

The delivery of the people from Egypt is the presupposition of their encounter with Yahweh at Mount Sinai, where the fundamental alliance with Abraham is completed by a personal human response.<sup>8</sup> And since the experience of sin and of pardon is an indispensable part of the experience of creaturehood, the priestly tradition adds at this point the account of the golden calf.<sup>9</sup> After that the priestly authors had a vast mass of documents concerning worship, which take up the rest of the book of Exodus and practically the whole of Leviticus and of Numbers. The explanation is that creation is fulfilled in liturgy;<sup>10</sup> for this activity brings about the unity of the created world and restores it to the friendship of its Creator.<sup>11</sup> Already the yahvist tradition had reached this understanding of the universe and of the special task of the people of God, which is to gather this unity into unity in Yahweh.<sup>12</sup>

From this vision of the world from the time of the exile, the prayer of created man can now arise. The dominant form it takes is that of the hymn, this astonishing form in which the wretchedness of man is forgotten, and man suddenly springs beyond himself to lose himself in admiration before God. But even here, it is only rarely

<sup>1</sup> Gen 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Cp Gen 1, 31 and 6, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Gen 11.

<sup>4</sup> Exod 29, 43-46.

<sup>5</sup> Gen 12-50.

<sup>6</sup> Exod 1, 1-7, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Exod 7, 8-18, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Exod 19, 1-31, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Exod 32-34.

<sup>10</sup> Cp Gen 2, 1-2 and Exod 40, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Exod 25, 8; 29, 43-46.

<sup>12</sup> Gen 12, 2-3.

that creation is considered for its own sake. In the bible, creation itself is history, and is continued in the history of salvation;<sup>3</sup> elsewhere, the dominion of Yahweh over the whole of creation and especially over all the peoples is based on his creative activity.<sup>1</sup> Especially noteworthy are two fine hymns, the first where admiration for the world is overcome by astonishment at Yahweh's concern for man,<sup>2</sup> the second in which the word of Yahweh in the covenant stands out more clearly than the word which man can read in the open book which is creation.<sup>3</sup> Only very rarely does the prayer of man as a creature take the form of meditation on the fragility of man and the shortness of life.<sup>4</sup> Only one psalm is a hymn to creation for its own sake without any strong link with human history and with salvation;<sup>5</sup> and today we know that this psalm is based on an Egyptian hymn attributed to the pharaoh Amenophis IV Akhnaton!

In the wisdom books there is less concern in general for the creation of the universe and more on the condition of the creature, the creaturehood of man. Qohelet makes this the centre of his work;<sup>6</sup> having gone through the gamut of human experience, the only worthwhile attitude is to turn towards one's Creator, who alone enables one to overcome the vanity of all things. Such is the answer given in the end by Yahweh to Job, who is aware of the scandal of suffering in the world:<sup>7</sup> the certainty that the world was created by Yahweh guarantees the existence of a world order which will lead to the full realization of human beings, in spite of the darkness and pain of this life. Qohelet and Job both speak of creation not so much to humble man but rather to lead him into an attitude of faith and confidence; and this is an important aspect of the Old Testament meditation on man as creature.

The ultimate reason is that all the authors of the Old Testament, the historians and the sages, the psalmists and the prophets, realise that creation has placed them in the hands of a God who defines himself as a God of mercy and of goodness,<sup>8</sup> a God who hears the tears of a child and who has made a gift of the earth to the sons of Adam.<sup>9</sup>

*(Translated by Peter Hebblethwaite, S.J.)*

<sup>1</sup> Ps 135; 136; 147; 148.

<sup>4</sup> Ps 90; 103.

<sup>7</sup> Job 38, 4-39, 30.

<sup>2</sup> Ps 33; 96.

<sup>5</sup> Ps 104.

<sup>8</sup> Exod 34, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ps 8.

<sup>6</sup> Qoh 12, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ps 115, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ps 19.