

IMAGINATION AND REVELATION

The Face of Christ in the Old Testament

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IN THIS article I have been asked to write something about the relationship of the ‘types and figures’ of the Old Testament to the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is an implication of the *literary* art of the gospels, of the Liturgy and of christian literature generally, that Christ is the fulfilment of the Old Testament’s signs and shadows; and this implication is reflected in the *visual* art of painting, sculpture, glass, manuscript, illumination and the rest, as we find those in the monuments of the Church’s past. How can we come to a deeper appreciation of what this relationship involves? To do so will be to understand God’s revelation in the Old Testament more fully, for Christ illuminates retrospectively the ‘wonderful works of God’ recorded and celebrated in the Jewish Scriptures. It will also be to understand Christ himself more fully, as St Luke reports in his story of the meeting of the risen Lord with two disciples on the road to Emmaus: ‘going back to Moses and the whole line of the prophets, he began to interpret the words used of himself by all the scriptures’ (Lk 24,27). The effort, then, is supremely worthwhile, for it leads to a pearl beyond price.

I propose to pursue this goal in the company of one of the greatest theological minds and hearts of our time, Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose multi-volume study *Herrlichkeit* (‘Glory’), an account of the christian perception of God’s self-revelation, may well prove the most enduring contribution of our century to catholic thought. *Herrlichkeit* deals with our theme in a small section of the first volume, and much more extensively throughout the third.¹ For the general reader this work has two evident disadvantages: its length, and the fact that it has not yet found an english translator. And so I shall approach von Balthasar’s view of how Christ fulfils the Old Testament by means of some briefer theological *opuscula* already englished. In any case, nearly all his strictly theological essays (with the exception of the lengthy *Mysterium Paschale*,² an account of the

'dramatics' rather than the 'aesthetics' of God's revelation in the crucified and risen Christ) are summaries of and footnotes to *Herrlichkeit*.

In the essay, 'Why I am still a Christian', von Balthasar points out that as Christians we are committed to what has been called 'the scandal of particularity'. We hold that a *universal* significance (the 'meaning of existence' we might say; or again we might speak of 'the key to history', or 'the destiny of the cosmos') is decanted in *particular* events. These events are, to all intents and purposes, limited, concrete happenings, like any other one might care to mention in history. This has always been a scandal to reason, as is clear from St Paul's remarks to the Corinthian Christians, and from his speech on the Areopagus as reported in Acts (17,16ff). And yet our unbelieving friend could surely agree that, in von Balthasar's words, 'the historical event may be a significant concentration of the whole'.³ There is something irreducibly singular about the life of Jesus (including in this his death and the resurrection appearances) which at least raises our hopes that here we might have found something inexhaustibly significant for our grasp of all history, all reality. Von Balthasar looks at three kinds of unique moment that history throws up. First, there is the example of a work of art. 'Who would dare to offer a proof that Shakespeare's emergence was inevitable?'⁴ Secondly, there is the moment of death, whose utter loneliness makes the prescient individual acutely aware of his own personal uniqueness. Thirdly, and finally, there is the phenomenon of genuine love between persons. It is in this last context that von Balthasar touches on the life of ancient Israel and what it has to teach us.

He suggests that love as *total* dedication to another is only really possible if the lover sees in the other something of 'the quality of the Absolute'. The french philosopher Gabriel Marcel, sometimes called the father of christian Existentialism, had already said something much like this. But von Balthasar gives it a special twist. He calls this kind of total loving a 'wager' which only makes sense in the last analysis if we can relate it to a similarly all-embracing 'venture' on the part of the Absolute. In other words, we can risk everything on a love for someone else in whom God shines through, if we have reason to think that God himself takes this love business and risk business *au sérieux*, that he is the kind of God who would risk everything in communicating himself to us. But that, von Balthasar goes on, is precisely what the Old Testament teaches. It speaks of

God's utterly free (some would say rash) choice of Israel, the elective covenant love which seized on this nation, the Jews, and no other. In a study of biblical theology, von Balthasar makes it clear that for him the great individuals of Israel — the patriarchs, Moses, the prophets, the Davidic kings and the rest — can only be understood in relation to the whole community of the people of God, and, reciprocally, this community can only be understood in relation to them. 'Every aspect of this covenant with the community rests on the relationship of God to certain specially chosen individuals . . . these individuals who tower above the rest only hold their office and status with reference to the community which they both serve and represent'.⁵ The modern exegete would think particularly here of the stress on God's covenant love for Israel in the Book of Deuteronomy, and indeed everywhere in the Old Testament where the men of the Deuteronomistic School have set their mark. The 'consequence' of this election and covenant von Balthasar finds, with the New Testament, in the mission and ministry of Jesus. Here one might consider St Matthew's Gospel in particular, with its stress on the way Jesus enacts the response originally asked of Israel: for instance in the story of the temptation in the wilderness, living over again — and this time getting right — the testings the children of Israel went through on their desert wanderings. Human love redeems a person from his or her anonymity; the 'glory of loving choice by God' redeems Israel from being lost among the crowd of nations that have been and gone in world history, and raises her to the unique status of the corporate person chosen by God. Von Balthasar hints that the relationship thus begun between God and Israel (in which elect individuals play such a notable part) could become perfect friendship, 'if only it allows itself to be purified into transfigurations beyond itself'.

Von Balthasar goes on to locate this 'transfiguration' of the Old Testament and its personalities in the risen body of our Lord:

The shock of the fact of Easter released the locked-up treasures of the Old Testament. All the unfulfilled and arresting images and titles — Messiah, mediator, the sin-bearing Servant of God, the prophet, the priest and all his sacrificial victims, the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, the justice, the wisdom and the glory of God dwelling on earth, the Word of God, and so on — all of these at last converge by moving in upon the transcending subject who is the risen Jesus. Not until they come to rest in that which supersedes them all do they find true meaning.³

The glory of God's loving choice of Israel at last found its perfect response: in the perfect obedience of Jesus who, as the Philippians hymn puts it, 'was obedient unto death, even death on a cross' (Phil 2,8). Jesus died, therefore, not into nothingness, nor into the dream-life of the disembodied soul, but into the wonder of the resurrection. And in disclosing that wonder in the radiance of his risen body on the first easter morning, he showed the unbelievable richness, the power and the glory, which had been on offer throughout Israel's history. All the terms which had been used to hint at that richness, all the 'types and shadows' now re-gather, clustering around the figure of the risen Christ in whom they receive their 'true meaning': that is, in whom their final implications are at last spelled out, their true colours displayed.

Christ must be the fulfiller, the fulness, of all partial disclosures of God wherever these have been made; for in the 'eschatological moment' of the 'Christ-event' the world finds its 'ultimate essence' in its self-transcendence towards God through the Son. Conversely, God manifests himself in this same Christ as 'the meaning of all becoming' and 'the one who realizes its whole creative potential'.⁷ All reality, including that of Israel, 'converges on this centre'. As von Balthasar says elsewhere, only the God-Man can be the 'norm of history', for only he can be both 'the manifestation of God and the divine-human pattern of true humanity in God's eyes'.⁸ I think here of Fr Geoffrey Preston's meditations, *God's Way to be Man*, where the title, itself a leitmotif of the book, implies that Christ was both God's way of living a human life, and also the model of human life in general as God wants it to be.⁹ But within these universal structures fulfilled by Christ, there remains the special place, and paradox, and tragedy, of the Jews. Von Balthasar has been deeply concerned with christian-jewish relations, as his sympathetic study of Martin Buber indicates. For him the tragedy of Judaism lies in its missing the main chance, in Jesus, to resolve the primal paradox of jewish existence: the fact that the Jews are one nation among many, yet through their election are called to have redemptive significance for all the nations that are or will be. This paradox, von Balthasar says, is sometimes only endured by the Jews transferring Israel's apocalyptic restlessness to the world. He is thinking here of certain secular philosophies master-minded by writers of jewish origin, and particularly of Karl Marx. Von Balthasar's concern with modern Jewry reflects the fact that ancient Israel was not just one of the many partial disclosures of the divine that Christ fulfilled, but the central and crucial one. 'In

obeying the Father he fulfils not only the will but also the promises and prophecies of the Father . . . the Father's will, which is the content of his existence, does not present itself to him independently of the historic form it has already assumed'.¹⁰ The Hebrew Scriptures contain in some sense a 'definite pattern . . . for his earthly life', consisting in the presentation of certain key 'spiritual situations'.¹¹

It is surely obvious that this account of how Christ fulfils the pattern, and the several sub-patterns, of Old Testament revelation is of a kind we can only call *imaginative*. The connections and correspondences and relationships which von Balthasar sees between the obedience of the patriarchs, the prophets and the royal mediators of Israel, and the obedience of the only Son, do not force themselves upon us from the pages of Scripture. From the point of view of minute scholarship, or of theological reason austere conceived, they could only be regarded as excessive and unjustified. But are these the only legitimate angles of vision in theology, or in religion at large? We are beginning to re-discover the way the disciplined imagination is a faculty for getting at truth in God's relations with man. For some time now there has been an interest among catholic theologians in the striking fact that so much of scripture is *narrative*, is communicated by the art of story-telling; and there are the first tell-tale signs of a concern with the visual presentation of the divine in salvation-history, through faces, gestures, signs, forms of life: in a word, through images. Here von Balthasar's own *Herrlichkeit* is foundational, and I have tried to make a modest contribution of my own in a study called *The Art of God Incarnate*.¹² Such accounts of the narrative and visual resources of christian revelation could never replace the more systematic and philosophical kind of theology in which the Church of the West has excelled since the Middle Ages, but they are vital foundations on which this more argumentative kind of theology must build.

To return now to the topic of imagination and its legitimacy. Mrs Mary Warnock, in her recent study, points out that at one pole imagination is just a necessary tool for organizing all our ordinary workaday perceptions of the world. It enables us 'to recognize things in the world as familiar, to take for granted features of the world which we need to take for granted and rely on, if we are to go about our ordinary business'. At the other pole imagination is wider-ranging, 'creative' as we say. By its means we 'see the world as significant of something unfamiliar', and treat the objects of

perception as 'symbolizing and suggesting things other than themselves'.¹³ The christian imagination sees the 'types and shadows' of the Old Testament as doing precisely that — symbolizing and suggesting things other than themselves, namely the person and work of Jesus Christ. The 'typological' exegesis of the Fathers and the medievals, the stained glass and sculpture of the Gothic cathedrals, both of these are splendid examples of this perfectly proper use of imagination at work on the Bible.

In this perspective, then, how shall we look upon the various mediatorial figures of the ancient covenant? As so many sketches for the perfect image, Christ. In these sketches we can see roughed out certain features of the Christ, of his perfect reciprocity with God's will which made of his obedient and faithful love the perfect mirror of the Father.

First, the *patriarchs*. The contribution of the patriarchs lies in the personal nature of their obedience in faith. God, *Elohim*, can now be defined purely and simply in terms of his relationship to these semi-nomadic sheikhs who were our fathers in faith: the 'Shield of Abraham', the 'Holy One of Israel' (that is, Jacob) the 'God of your fathers, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'. The imagination at once connects this with Christ's self-definition in terms of the Father in St John's Gospel, his life of pure obedience and dependence which the Synoptic Gospels also imply.

Secondly, the *prophets*, with Moses at their head. As a fine study by a jewish writer suggests, the clue to the prophets lies in their sharing a sensibility with God:¹⁴ their feeling of their own heart-beats and in the marrow of their bones, the divine love, the divine wrath, the divine mercy, as the case may be. The passionate quality of the prophetic oracles, and the way they see Israel as brought to a halt before God himself when they speak, are ample evidence for this. Once again, we can hardly fail to think of our Lord's intimate attunement to his Father in this connection, the total sharing of life from which he expressed the Father's own forgiveness and joy in the terms of his own gospel, his good news.

Thirdly, the figure of *David* and the Davidic kings, on whose line the messianic hope depended, and who crop up so frequently in the Psalter as an image of 'He who cometh', the expected divine mediator. The covenant with the House of David is seen by Scripture as the divinely appointed means by which the wider covenant with Moses on Sinai, and the still wider covenant with Abraham, is to be fulfilled. The king, by the faithful stewardship of

his government as God's viceroy, bears the prime responsibility for their fulfilment of the covenant, and brings to them the blessings of that covenant from God himself. Here we may think of the apostolic preaching in the book of the Acts: 'God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ' (Acts 2,36), by exalting him to his right hand. It is Jesus, the Son of David, who takes prime responsibility for the salvation of Israel and the world, and who is confirmed in his mediatory kingship at the Resurrection.

Fourthly, the *Suffering Servant* of the Book of Isaiah. In this image of the ideal Israel (it is possible that the Servant Songs have some actual Israelite — Jeremiah, a Davidic king — in view, but this is not certain) we glimpse how vicarious suffering can be a means of atonement with the holy God. Here too, as the Liturgy testifies in its generous use of these texts for the passion of Christ, the mind is thrown forward to the perfect loving sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The reader may care to continue the list for himself: adding perhaps the relation of the Jewish priesthood to Jesus as eternal high priest; of the personified wisdom of the sapiential books to Jesus the preacher; of the heroes of the Exodus to the divine hero who in his passover descended into hell.

In all of these cases there can be no question of a 'proof from prophecy', if we are thinking of proof in some knock-down sense of that term. To see the lines of Old Testament revelation converging into a pattern centred on the figure of Jesus requires sensitivity and imagination, control and creativity. Let us take the model of God as an artist. An artist always works with a particular selection of images, called an iconology. Very often these images will come to him out of a tradition where their reference and meaning, their denotation and connotation, is already established: even so, he will use them in his own fashion, and give them an extra sense all his own. At other times, he may be quite inventive in his use of images, although no artist can work without some inheritance of forms, even if they are only the forms of geometrical shapes or of natural objects. But taken altogether, his image-system, his iconology, provides the necessary key to understanding his work. Turning now to revelation, we can see the 'types and shadows' of the Old Testament as the primary images of God's self-communication in history. Some of these images, perhaps, are newly minted (the image, say, of the Suffering Servant). Others are transformations of pre-existing forms in human religion at large (charismatic prophecy, for instance). In their interrelation (because an image scarcely communicates in

isolation), these Old Testament images convey to us the divine meaning which God would have us take from Israel and its experience. In this case we must think of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, as the supreme artwork of God, the canvas on which the divine artist has projected an image at once so complex, so simple and so complete that it sums up and interprets all the preceding images of his work. At the same time, this supreme image needs the earlier images, or its meaning will escape the viewer.

If Christians are to continue reading their Old Testaments (or to start learning how to read them!), a basic perspective of this sort is quite fundamental. There is much to be learnt of the meaning of the Old Testament from the ancient historian and the archaeologist, from the philologist and the student of ancient texts. But to confine our response to the Old Testament revelation to this level is to remain within its own limits, it is to pretend that we are Jews. If, on the other hand, what we are engaged in is a christian reading, then there must be some way of finding the christological bearings of the Old Testament; for it is Christ, and him crucified, who makes the Christian what he is. No one today who is acquainted with at any rate the general lines of modern scholarship on the Bible should feel comfortable about forcing New Testament meanings on to Old Testament realities. But neither should he feel excused from the discipline of using his own christian imagination to trace the lines that connect the figures of the Old Testament to the supreme figure of the New, the synagogue to the Church, the promise to the achievement. Without such imagination, the Liturgy, and the art and literature of Catholicism, must remain to some extent a closed book to us. With it, they become the continuing resonance through history of the single Word spoken by God, the God who is the *auctor*, the Source, of the Old and the New Testament alike.

NOTES

¹ H. U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit: eine theologische Ästhetik*, I (Einsiedeln, 1962), pp 595-603; III (Einsiedeln, 1967), 2.1 *passim*. ² 'Mysterium Paschale: *Theologie der Drei Tagen*'.

³ Cf Balthasar and J. Ratzinger, *Two say why* (London, 1973), p 18. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p 20.

⁵ English translation, *Engagement with God* (London, 1975), pp 31-32.

⁶ *Two say why*, pp 41-42. ⁷ *Ibid.*, p 31.

⁸ English translation, *A Theology of history* (London, 1964), p 18.

⁹ *God's way to be man* (London, 1978). ¹⁰ *A Theology of History*, p 51. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 52.

¹² A. Nichols O.P., *The Art of God incarnate* (London, 1980).

¹³ M. Warnock, *Imagination* (London, 1976), pp 13-71.

¹⁴ A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, 1962).