

The Shadow of the Curse: a "key" to Old Testament Theology

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Prolegomena

The attempt to do Old Testament theology has often involved a search for some "centre", in terms of which all the material of the Old Testament can be understood. The ideas of covenant, blessing, salvation — to name but a few — are examples of such. The quest for a centre, however, has been plagued by the feeling that no proposed controlling concept seems to relate to all the material in the desired way. I want to suggest in what follows that the failure thus outlined derives from a reluctance to take seriously the curse upon creation which follows the first act of human disobedience (Gen. 3). In a sense, therefore, the curse itself becomes a kind of key to Old Testament theology. The claim made for it, however, is not so much that it represents the central substance of the Old Testament (which would be absurd) but rather that an understanding of it is a necessary pre-condition of understanding the relationship between the main protagonists in the story (God and man), and of the human condition as portrayed in the Bible.

It is further implied in our treatment that the story of creation, disobedience, curse, judgement (flood), scattering (Babel) and election (Abraham) stands necessarily and as a unity in its place of priority in the Bible. (This may seem obvious, but the point has been seriously weakened by the belief that the order and theology of the material is a late phenomenon in Israel, with the implication, intended or not, that it bears a fortuitous relationship — if any at all — to other parts of the Old Testament.)

An Ambiguity in the Human Situation

The story in Gen. 1-11 can be described in almost infinite detail, or quickly told. In this brief account we are concerned only to notice that the consequences of man's disobedience are that the creation assumes a condition which is at the same time "good" and "bad".¹

Yet we are not dealing with a swing from unadulterated good/hope to unadulterated evil/despair. The death promised for disobedience in 2.17 turns out not to mean the instant destruction of humanity.

The creation, at first, is "good". Gen. 1, telling the story of creation, shows how at each new stage God found his handiwork to be unflawed (1.4 etc.). Clearly, too, it is his purpose that it should be *such* a creation that man — himself a part of it — should enjoy. From this flows the language of blessing (v. 28). At creation man enjoys a relationship with God and with his fellow-creatures that is unclouded (2.15ff., and cf. the defection from this position produced by the disobedience, 3.8); he is worthy, as God's vice-regent (one meaning of the "image", v. 26) to govern the creation, using its resources so that it manifests its "goodness" (1.28ff.). In both his relationships and his responsibilities, therefore, his experience of existence is unequivocally blessed.

All this changes with the disobedience (ch. 3). No longer a garden, but thorns and thistles; no longer harmonious

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relationships, but those which are characterised by suspicion, fear, self-interest; no longer responsibility as a dimension of blessedness, but hard labour.

In part, therefore, even the election of Israel — while it exhibits the goodness of God — derives its character from the curse.

The condition now exists in which murder (ch. 4), lust (6.1-4) and all manner of wickedness (6.5) will be perfectly at home. The picture in Genesis 3, therefore, is bleak with hard irony.

Yet we are not dealing with a swing from unadulterated good/hope to unadulterated evil/despair. The death promised for disobedience in 2.17 turns out not to mean the instant destruction of humanity. The first couple's guilty sense of nakedness is met by an act of God (3.21) which at once reflects their new sinful condition and makes their further life together possible. Similarly the sentence of death, applied in the mortality of each new generation (ch. 5), stands side by side with the development of culture mandated in ch. 1 (4.17-22). And the horribly ominous fragmentation of humanity (11.1-9) is at the same time (ch. 10) a response to the creation-command to "fill the earth" (1.28).

Even the judgement that comes in the shape of the flood as a response to sin's perversion of human nature (6.5-7) appears never to have been intended as a final destruction of humanity (6.8). The *re-creation* (9.1-17) which follows the *uncreation* of the flood (implied in the resurgence of the chaos waters, cf. 1.2) resumes every aspect of the creation in ch. 1. The essential differences are that man is now carnivorous 9.3 (implying a new relationship with the animals), and that there is no renewed pronouncement

1. For a full and excellent account of the meaning of Gen. 1-11 along substantially similar lines to that presented here, though without the further implications which we shall outline, see D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, Sheffield, JSOT, 1979.

that the world-order is entirely "good". Noah plants his vineyard — but the background to this successful exercise of his role as a subduer of the earth remains the accursed labour, cf. 3.17.

Israel's destruction of her enemies, therefore, is not evidence for the "primitiveness" of her conception of God, nor of the "bloodthirstiness" of the God of the Old Testament, but a corollary of one step in the process towards the salvation of all mankind . . .

Ambiguity in the Story of Salvation

The call of Abraham follows hard upon the fragmentation of humanity which occurs at Babel. This event is arguably the climax of the story of primeval man, not only because it is the last thing in that story, but because it has the most permanent devastating effects. (The flood, it may be argued, affected only one generation). In the event at Babel the disunity within humanity, which had manifested itself in the blame-shifting of Adam and Eve and in Cain's murder of Abel, now becomes hardened. No longer "mankind", but nations; no longer a single basis for communication, but "languages"; no longer a concerted pursuit of the task of subduing the earth, but a multiplicity of world-views. The seeds are sown of all of history's belligerence. The world is filled with nations — and nationalism.

Against this background Abraham is chosen, from all men on earth, to be the father of a single nation which shall be the vehicle of God's saving activity (12.1-3).

The story of Abraham is linked quite explicitly with the events related in the rest of the Pentateuch, which tell of the establishment of God's promises to the patriarch in Israel — his people by covenant, and heirs to a land in which they can live out their lives in relationship with him (the burden of Deuteronomy). It is a glorious story of divine humility and commitment, and as such foreshadows the incarnation of the Son in a New Covenant which will reunite mankind.

The story begins, however, in a *disunited* humanity. In part, therefore, even the election of Israel — while it exhibits the goodness of God — derives its character from the curse. Since it is not ideal that there should be "nations", it cannot be "good" — in any ultimate sense — that there should be an elect nation. This is not because the election of one means the non-election of others (which is obvious and superficial and in any case ultimately a misrepresentation, since the election of Israel is to the end that *all* the families of the earth should be blessed, (Gen. 12.3). Rather it is because an elect nation remains one among many which are congenitally at odds, committed to compete with each other, and unable to be, together, mankind-as-created. Even God's intention that Israel be "holy" — a reflection before the eyes of mankind of the character of God — cannot absolve her of her nationhood and therefore of the mark of the curse.

The Curse and "Problems" in the Old Testament

When we have accepted that the curse has left its mark on everything pertaining to the human situation in the Old Testament, including even the mode of its salvation, we have laid a groundwork which prepares us to come to terms with some (perhaps all) of the phenomena in the Old Testament which are usually regarded as problems. The most obvious of these, and that which follows most directly

from the observation that the fragmentation of humanity is a bad thing, is the necessity that is laid upon Israel — by divine command — to drive out, and indeed destroy, the inhabitants of the land which *they* are to possess. (The command is given most comprehensively in Deuteronomy, especially 7.1-5; the "execution" follows in Joshua 1-12. There are other celebrated examples of "holy war" most notably in 1 Sam. 15). It seems to me that we can only come to terms with the horrific implications of a command from God to destroy men, women and children if we see it as a necessary corollary of the setting in train of a plan for salvation in the context of a fragmentation in humanity, viewed as a mark of its vitiation.

This is to say rather more than that God was justified in exterminating the Canaanites because they were sinful. The point is not incompatible with this (which is indeed required by Exod. 17.14-16, 1 Sam. 15.2f.). But it seeks to go a little further, specifically to do justice to the fact that God's *instrument* in the annihilation of nation X is nation Y, which, by the very doctrine of election, is no better than any other nation (Deut. 7.6ff.). The understanding of "holy war" in relation to a nationalism which is a product of the curse provides an explanation of it as an inevitable consequence of the first human disobedience. Israel destroys the Canaanites by divine command indeed, yet also because, as one nation among many, it is part of the curse upon mankind. The Israelite action, though commanded by God, is not "good" in any absolute sense. Similarly the *herem*, or ban, to which the Amalekites are put in 1 Sam. 15, is a category which is only conceivable in terms of a division of reality into holy and profane spheres, itself a product of the alienation of man from God following the disobedience.

Are we to believe that the faith of the Old Testament consisted in believing that life was part good and part bad, that this was so because of a primeval, irrevocable sin and that that was the end of the matter?

This view also provides us with a means of understanding Deut. 7 as part of a unified theological perspective which in addition embraces those prophetic passages which foresee salvation coming to all mankind, most notably in Isa. 40-66. (Deut. and Isa. 40-66 are widely regarded as representing two thoroughly irreconcilable views of the nations). On the premisses which we have postulated, namely (a) that nationhood and nationalism are functions of the curse upon mankind, and (b) that the fragmented and dissolute state of humanity after the disobedience renders it most suitable to a plan of salvation that God should begin with one nation as the vehicle of that salvation (which the biblical narrative simply assumes to be the case), then it can follow that the nation which will ultimately be a blessing can also from time to time bring upon other nations the effects of the curse. Israel's destruction of her enemies, therefore, is not evidence for the "primitiveness" of her conception of God, nor of the "bloodthirstiness" of the God of the Old Testament, but a corollary of one step in the process towards the salvation of all mankind (namely the acquisition of a land for a people of God) — a corollary which may be called *inevitable*, given the fact that human sin produced the *need* for salvation in the first place. Other "problems" thrown up by the Old Testament may be regarded in a similar way. This is true whether the problems are only in the eyes of the modern reader as opposed to the biblical writer (such as cries for vengeance on enemies Ps. 58.10f., Ps. 137.8f), or whether they are problems recognised by the biblical writer — e.g. the "absence" of God (Job), the prosperity of the wicked,

with its obverse in the suffering of the righteous (Ps. 73, Job), the suffering of humanity in general, i.e. without immediate association with righteousness or wickedness (Job 24), death itself (Ps. 49, Ecclesiastes). (We might add to the list, perhaps in the former category, the givenness of tyranny, especially in Esther, where Esther and Mordecai may be seen as part of the tyrannical system as much as Haman.)

Indeed there is a feeling throughout Isa. 55 that there is a whole dimension of reality which man but dimly apprehends because of the limitations of his powers of perception.

It is impossible to deal in detail with all of these. The reader may apply the central point of our argument and his/her own imagination. We will proceed only in relation to the problem of death, since that was, in Gen. 2.17, another way of referring to the effects of the curse, and since it is in any case the ultimate implication of all other "problems".

Death and Old Testament Hope

It is well known that the fate of men and women beyond death is little addressed in the Old Testament. (See on the subject *Evangel* 2:2, pp 9ff.) Indeed the way in which the inevitability of death was regarded by the average Israelite is not obvious, at least from a superficial reading of the Old Testament. The fact that most of the expressed hopes of the Old Testament are in this-worldly terms can obscure the attitude to death. Clearly, however, Israelites were as conscious of death as any other people. An explanation of its origin and cause stands at the head of their scriptures (Gen. 3). Attitudes to having children (vital as bearers of the father's name after his death) and customs surrounding inheritance are examples of the way in which Israel's life was governed by the universal fact of death. Of course, the fact that hopes of an after-life are not often expressed does not mean that Israelites were normally *content* to die. Death is widely seen as the ultimate disappointment of grand human aspirations (Ps. 49.10-20; Ps. 6.5). Ecclesiastes reflects a feeling (even if it does not ultimately affirm it) that all striving and all values are worthless because of the levelling at death (Eccl. 3.18ff.; 2.20ff.). Sometimes such feelings attain the proportions of bitter protest, as in Job 24. Here, the whole gamut of life's miseries and injustices is rehearsed. Death and misery are part of the same wretchedness (v. 12). The hardness of life is such that the authors of the wisdom-books sometimes depict death as better than life (e.g. Job 3, Eccl. 4.2f., 6.3, 7.1). This, of course, is a rhetoric that relies heavily on irony. As if death could be a blessing! The "straighter" statements of the wisdom-authors show clearly that death is regarded as the ultimate hard thing that life brings (Eccl. 7.15; Job 24.14). Job, in his misery, "curses" the day he was born (Job 3.3, cf. vv. 11, 20). (Again statements such as those in 3.21f. cannot be taken to mean that death is good. At best it can only be better than a wretched life. But in fact Job has, in a sense, *refused* to die, 2.9f., insisting rather on having it out with God.) And so the idea of curse is reintroduced to our discussion. As Israelite men face the rigours of life and the awfulness of death they reflect the primeval "curse" in their own experience.

This whole discussion of the Old Testament's view of the world must be set alongside the well-known celebration and enjoyment of good things from God's hand, which is often described as peace, or *shalom*, meaning a deep feeling of sufficiency and welfare rooted in (this-worldly)

health, wealth, and longevity. It is this *possibility* of *shalom* that underlies the fact that *joy* is one of the Old Testament's most consistent themes. (Cf. e.g. Deut. 12.7, 12; Ezra 6.16, 22; Ps. 97.12, and *passim*.) It is fundamental to Old Testament theology that well-being is the obverse of righteousness. Nevertheless, in the juxtaposition of joy and wretchedness, which the Old Testament forces us to reckon with, and which affects the just as well as the unjust, we have, at the very least, a continuation of the note of ambiguity which we found in Gen. 1-11.

Having said this, can we say no more? Are we to believe that the faith of the Old Testament consisted in believing that life was part good and part bad, that this was so because of a primeval, irrevocable sin and that that was the end of the matter? If so, then the theology of the Old Testament would hardly amount to more than that of the cynical voice in Ecclesiastes. Plainly, however, it does amount to more than that. How is it then, that there can be real joy, and indeed a *doctrine* that joy is a right response to God, alongside an utterly sober awareness — as keen as that of any observer of mass suffering in the 20th century — of the potential for and reality of human misery? The sheer nonsense of this paradox forces us to look again at the nature of hope in the Old Testament.

Two passages in Isaiah will help us. The first is Isa. 55. An underlying theme here is one of human deficiency and longing. The Lord speaks to those who "thirst", v. 1, and those who put out their labour and hard-earned wages for that which does not satisfy, v. 2. In contrast the Lord offers satisfaction ("fatness") v. 2, and "life" (v. 3 — implying thereby that the alternative is death) and goes on to promise a new joy and peace (v. 12). Clearly the pursuit of righteousness and the experience of forgiveness are part of the wholeness which the Lord thus offers (vv. 6f.). But there is more here. First, vv. 8f. justify the implausible offer of fulfilment by reminding the hearer that God's thoughts are as high above men's as the heavens are higher than the earth. On one level this refers to the grace of God, who, because he is holy, is disposed to a reconciliation with those who have offended him, in a way which seems alien to men (cf. Hosea 11.9). On another, however, it speaks of the inability of men, because of the deficiency of their "thoughts", to begin to imagine what it is that God is offering.

The salvation of God embraces *all* the misery of *all* the world. The ultimate effect of the curse — death — is ultimately revoked in a salvation which transforms, through judgement, the whole order of things.

This brings us to vv. 12f. What is significant here is that the promised joy and peace (12a) are in the context of a creation in which the mountains and hills break into singing, the trees clap their hands, and the cypress and myrtle come up instead of the thorn and brier. A whole new world-order is depicted.

It is an order which does not belong to normal human experience. Indeed there is a feeling throughout Isa. 55 that there is a whole dimension of reality which man but dimly apprehends because of the limitations of his powers of perception. A similar thought lies behind God's answer to Job, Job 38-41, which is largely in terms of Job's inability to fathom God's thoughts. The "singing" of creation (in our passage) may indeed be a present reality which is simply lost on men's dulled senses. Yet the burden

of Isa. 55 is that man need not always remain so handicapped. He shall again know joy and peace. And this joy and peace seems to presuppose a new appreciation of the nature of creation and an enjoyment of it as it ought to be.

The essential point of Isa. 55, however, is that the new order is the *old* order (that of Eden) restored. As in the curse of the earth (Gen. 3. 14ff.) thorns and thistles came to threaten and choke the good and beautiful produce that had prevailed hitherto, so now the (symbolically identical) thorns and brier have a term put upon their reign. The cypress and myrtle, epitomising a creation that is once again "good", shall flourish unmolested. The promise of joy in Isa. 55, therefore, is in the context of the promise of a reconstituted creation, freed from the effects of the curse. It is only thus that joy and peace become conceivable in a world characterised by lack, frustration and death.

Man was created for life, and *salvation* can only be that which restores it to him in an unqualified way. If the Old Testament is poor in information about life beyond the grave it is perhaps because that remained to be revealed in nothing less than a Resurrection itself.

Our second passage, Isa. 24f., enables us to take this line of argument a little further. Ch. 24 contains one of the bleakest pictures of desolation in the Old Testament. The subject is not just Israel, or any other particular nation, but the whole earth. (The frequent occurrence of the word "earth" in the chapter, and especially the repetition in v. 19f., warn us not to miss this). Indeed we can go further, and say that it is the creation as a whole that is in view. With the juxtaposition of the *heavens* and the earth (v. 4), and the involvement of the *sun* and *moon* in the picture (v. 23) we are inescapably reminded of Gen. 1. The desolation depicted is a judgement upon all the inhabitants of the earth because they have polluted it (v. 5). In this also we have a reminiscence of Genesis (6.5-7). And the judgement is depicted as a *curse* (Isa. 24.6), reminding us again of Gen. 3.17. The "everlasting covenant" in the same verse does not refer to any of the historical covenants made with Israel, but to a relationship between God and all mankind, involving obligations upon the latter, and implied in the very fact of creation. The judgement described, therefore, is universal. It is also total. The earth will be utterly laid waste (v. 3). All joy is at an end (v. 11). The curse — and the prophet does appear to want to connect this curse with that in Gen. 3 — is finally manifested in a terrible judgement that affects the whole earth.

Just as the flood did not mark the end of creation, however, so here there is a salvation that lies beyond the destruction, and is commensurate with it. This is described in 25.6ff., where we have the promise of a rich feast *for all peoples*: the veil that is spread over all nations will be destroyed (v. 7); death — together with all human wretchedness — will be swallowed up for ever (v. 8). The salvation of God embraces *all* the misery of *all* the world. The ultimate effect of the curse — death — is ultimately revoked in a salvation which transforms, through judgement, the whole order of things.

Conclusions

The first main implication of our study is that the Old Testament as a whole does not simply accept death as part

of the natural order, or as compatible, ultimately, with its concept of *shalom*. This remains true even though many Old Testament statements clearly regard living to "a good old age" as a blessing in comparison with dying young — which is, after all, less than regarding mere long life as a *summum bonum*, and perhaps no more than a commonplace. The ambiguity in the natural order and all human experience which we saw to be a strong undercurrent in Gen. 1-11, traceable to the primeval sin and its consequence in the curse, sets the tone for the entire Old Testament. All of life within the present order is tarnished. Not only death, but all suffering derives from the curse, which has left its imprint upon all reality. Salvation can only ultimately be effected in a new order, in which even death is swallowed up. This is the only satisfactory answer, in the end, to the question whether the Old Testament has anything to say about "life after death".

Discussion of the very few texts which clearly speak of life beyond the grave (e.g. Dan. 12.3), and the few others which may do, is an essential part of any comprehensive study of the subject, but does not provide in itself a sufficiently broad perspective on life and death in the Old Testament. That perspective is only gained when it is appreciated that a creation that is "good" is one from which death is absent. Man was created for life, and *salvation* can only be that which restores it to him in an unqualified way. If the Old Testament is poor in information about life beyond the grave it is perhaps because that remained to be revealed in nothing less than a Resurrection itself.

Our study has implications not only for "problems" associated with the theology of the Old Testament, but also for the *unity* of the Old Testament. It is widely held today that the Old Testament contains a number of more or less incompatible "theologies". It is impossible here to illustrate this at length. One example, however, which happens to bring together two areas of concern underlying our study, is the belief that the so-called apocalyptic strain, (of which Isa. 24f., along with Da. 7-12 and other passages, is an example), with its belief in a radically new order of life beyond the grave, represents a rejection of traditional Israelite theology according to which fullness of life was attainable, through righteousness, in the present. We have attempted to show that the themes which are often described as apocalyptic are merely the inescapable conclusion of the premisses contained in Gen. 1-3, which in turn govern all of Old Testament theology. This is not to deny that the discovery of new implications of these premisses was a matter of *progress* as far as the Israelites were concerned, or indeed that new insights may have been gained from new national or personal experiences. Nor is it to deny that there was in fact a *process* in the application of God's intention to save, a process which involved at one stage the displacement — or worse — of nations which happened not to be Israel, in order that, at a later stage, *all* nations might benefit from Israel's election. Indeed such a process *must* be postulated if a unitary view of the Old Testament is to survive. (We saw above that the so-called discrepancy between the views of the nations in Deuteronomy and Isa. 40-66 was often taken as another proof of *disunity* in the Old Testament). What we are saying, however, is that there is a profound unity in the Old Testament, transcending all diversity of authorship and specific origin, and such that the various parts of the whole neither are merely contingent upon things that happen to happen to Israel, nor stand in conflict with each other. In particular the position of Gen. 1-3 at the head of the Old Testament (and the Bible) is no accident, but essential to the understanding of the whole.