

CHAPTER 12

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

(Exod. 34)

At the Sea of Reeds Israel had sung, "I will sing to Jehovah, for he has triumphed gloriously", and at Sinai its elders had cheerfully and sincerely said, "All that Jehovah has spoken we will do". Yet when God did speak "the people were afraid and trembled; and they stood afar off". In spite of that, or if we apply the principle of Paul's words in Rom. 1:21-23, just because of that, they picture Jehovah as a deity who would stand or sit enthroned on a golden bull,¹ and so be more comfortable to deal with. In other words, though they had experienced the grace, power and salvation of God, they did not really know him.

On a much higher plane the same was true of Moses. At the burning bush he had recognized beyond doubt that the God of his fathers was speaking to him, but he clearly doubted that God could or would accomplish his purposes through him. He returned to Egypt under God's compulsion, but twice we find him expressing doubt about God's actions (Exod. 5:22, 23; 6:30). Then, as suggested by Exod. 14:15, there was renewed doubt by the Sea of Reeds. We rightly admire his offer to die for the people after the sin of the golden bull (Exod. 32:31, 32), but, it is clear that he soon

¹ Cf. W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, pp. 229f. It should be clear from Exod. 32:5 that we are dealing with a debased worship of Jehovah, not with that of another god. The Hebrew 'egel', normally translated calf, means a young bull in its full strength.

realized that it was easier to die for the people of God than to live as their leader.

God interpreted Moses' request that he might see God's glory (Exod. 33:18) by saying, "You cannot see my Face" (Exod. 33:20). The Hebrew for glory (*kabod*) really means "weight". The Semitic concept was that a man's glory is that which gives him weight and reality, his character, his inner man, and this is expressed above all in his face. In other words Moses was acknowledging that he needed to know God in a new way, if he was to accomplish the task to which he had been called. God's statement that Moses could see his back but not his face – in fact the sequel gives no suggestion of such a vision – suggests that the character of God, his glory, can be grasped only in limited measure by man. The fullest revelation that can be granted to man is "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). The mystic's dream that he can penetrate further has no basis in Scripture.

The validity of this interpretation is supported by the revelation's being apparently entirely a verbal one (Exod. 33:19; 34:5, 6), though we must not minimize the awefulness of the theophany. But though Moses prostrated himself in awe, there is no suggestion of his being overwhelmed as in the case of some other theophanies.

The Old Testament is not given to quoting previous revelations, except indirectly, but the bulk of this passage is met with five times elsewhere as well as a number of reminiscences of it. It is worth noting also that this passage plays a major part in the Synagogue services as well.

The revelation began with a two-fold repetition of the name Jehovah (*Yahweh, Yahweh*), the name that had already been pronounced at the bush and explained by the formula, "I will be that I will be" (Exod. 3:14). Nothing that would follow or would be revealed would deny that which was past, and nothing in the future would exhaust God's revelation of himself until his glory was seen in the face of Jesus Christ. It is the failure to grasp this principle that makes

many Christians feel that the Old Testament has little or no meaning for them; they even suggest that they have in measure outgrown the New Testament revelation of the Christ.

The revelation went on: "A God merciful and gracious" (*'el rahum ve-ḥanun*). The use here of *El* rather than *Elohim* may simply suggest that we have an ancient liturgical formula, but it is more likely that we should look back to the basic meaning – A Strong One who is merciful and gracious, unlike the strength of earth's great ones, which is used above all to oppress. But there is more than that here; *rahum* is from the same root as *rehem*, the mother's womb. God is not merely the great Creator, but he loves all that he has made with a deep understanding of its weakness and need. "Compassionate" (NEB, TEV) is probably a preferable rendering, though we might consider "tenderness" (JB). In addition, this compassionate love is not a response to any merits of his creation, but simply to their need. Though, immediately after, God stressed the reality of his wrath, he placed his love in the first place. Any presentation of the Gospel which reverses this order distorts it.

"Slow to anger but plenteous in covenant love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*'emet*)". Scripture makes it abundantly clear what the things are that awaken God's anger. In general terms it is the suppression of truth (Rom. 1:18). This finds its supreme evil in causing "one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble" (Mk. 9:42); in other words the deliberate effort to destroy that which is good. "Slow to anger": man is swift to judge and indeed to punish, where he possesses the power. With God, however, it would seem that he holds his hand until it becomes completely clear that there is no hope of reformation. In the Old Testament this is made plain in connection both with the Northern Kingdom (2 Kings 17:7–18) and with Judah (2 Kings 21:10–15; 23:26, 27). In the New this is one of the dominating concepts of *Revelation*.

"Plenteous in covenant love and faithfulness": the force

of "plenteous" is probably not the extent of God's love and faithfulness, but that they far exceed anything that man expects. It is not likely that covenant love is here referring exclusively to the Sinaitic covenant or even only to formal covenants like those with Noah and Abraham, though the thought of Sinai will be uppermost. Down the ages men and women in the hour of their despair have turned from the deities created by man's imaginings to an unknown power above and beyond them and have been heard. This is what the Puritans called the uncovenanted mercies of God. Where, however, men have come in measure to know God, have trusted and obeyed him, they have always found him more loving and faithful than they had expected. The climax, of course, comes to the Christian, who having come to know God's glory in Jesus Christ, can say, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" (Rom. 8:32).

"Keeping covenant love for thousands (of generations)": this, the rabbinic interpretation, is based on the contrast in Exod. 20:5, 6, cf. p. 110. While punishment may pass on to the fourth generation, there is no such limitation on God's love and faithfulness. It is impossible for us to realize the extent of the blessings we enjoy because of our ancestors' faith. This is not a question of the merits of the fathers that play a great role in rabbinic thinking but of God's faithfulness.

"Bearing crookedness and rebellion and sin": the normal rendering, viz. "forgiving", is technically correct, but it seems to miss the main implication. There are two main terms used in Hebrew with the sense of to forgive or pardon, *salah* and *nasa'*. The former seems to be an exact equivalent of the English and implies the remitting of whatever penalty may be due. The latter, however, means to lift up, to carry; when it is used with the sense of "forgive", it seems to mean more than just the lifting of the penalty but stresses something the modern man is all too willing to forget, viz. forgiveness can very well imply that the one

who forgives must sometimes pay a penalty himself. A boy playing in the garden with his ball may accidentally break the neighbour's window. Just because his father forgives him, i.e. he does not dock his pocket-money to pay for a new pane of glass, he will have to pay for the damage himself. In other words forgiveness very often involves bearing the consequences.

In most cases it is impossible to decide why one or other of these words is used, but in a key passage like this it cannot be accidental that we find the latter. It is true that while *nasa'* is sometimes used of human forgiveness, *salaḥ* is applied only to God's. Since, however, the total number of cases where it is a question of human forgiveness is very small, this could be the result of accident; argument from silence alone is always dangerous. Centuries were to elapse before Isaiah was given the vision of the Servant of Jehovah bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows, on whom was the chastisement that makes us whole (Isa. 53:5). We can hardly affirm that Moses realized the full implication of God's words, but equally he cannot have missed their essential implications.

The broken-hearted sinner may say with David, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight", but neither in his nor in David's case is it true, except in the sense that behind all the wrong and suffering caused to others lies the sin against God. Those who speak so lightly of God's forgiveness are insofar correct that there are no obstacles preventing God's forgiveness of the wrongs done exclusively to him, if indeed such exist, but he has no right to forgive the wrongs done to others and their effects, far more far-reaching than most even begin to realize. To do that he must bear their consequences, so "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). This helps to explain Jesus' insistence on the relationship of forgiving and being forgiven. I have no right to refuse forgiveness, for my Lord has borne the results of the other's sin against me.

Man's sin is summed up in three words, though others are to be found elsewhere: 'avon, pesha', hatta'ah. "Iniquity" is overwhelmingly the rendering in the English versions for 'avon, though this does not apply to JB, which uses a variety of translations, few of which seem to be adequate, especially here, where it gives "faults". Our understanding has been made more difficult by the frequent use in AV, followed in part by RSV, of "iniquity" for 'aven, an entirely different word. In spite of the venerable tradition behind it we must reject it. Few who use the word "iniquity" realize that it means "injustice", which is in fact the meaning of 'aven; 'avon seems to stress man's crookedness, the acts that come from it and the guilt it brings. David regarded it as part of human heritage; "Behold I was brought forth in 'avon" (Psa. 51:5). This was expressed less forcibly by Job. "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" (14:4), cf. 15:14; 25:4. For reasons outside the scope of this study the tendency of the New Testament is to include the three aspects of man's falling short of the glory of God under the term sin. Hence we can easily fail to grasp that in his description of indwelling sin in Rom. 7 Paul is describing the results of man's inborn crookedness, which the rabbis named less forcibly the *yetzer ra'*, the evil impulse or principle in man, only partially counterbalanced by the *yetzer tob*, the good impulse or principle.

For *pesha'* we find in the AV "transgression" eighty-four times in contrast to three other renderings, occurring together only nine times. This is an adequate rendering for those who think of its meaning, but "rebellion" seems better, for the word does not imply the accidental but only the deliberate infringement of the guide lines and regulations laid down by lawful authority, be it God's or that of an earthly ruler. Man's longing for freedom varies with his upbringing. There are societies in which the young are brain-washed at an early stage into accepting the traditional existing standards of authority; there are others where the severity of the penalties for the rebel have the same effect. In

both these types of society the religious sanctions are at least as strong as the social ones. In contrast, other forms of society extol the ideal of freedom, though in practice even the anarchist finds himself forced to set some limits which may not be passed. Whatever type of society a person finds himself in, history shows his willingness to revolt against its rules, whether they claim to be human or religious, or whether, as in orthodox Judaism, the two have amalgamated.

Periodically, we find that some catastrophe has been caused by someone's failure to follow the rules, on the road or rail, on the seas, in mines or factories. It matters little whether the failure was due to carelessness or was deliberate; the damage done was inevitable and irremediable. But for every case where the disastrous results of rebellion or carelessness become known, there must be hundreds and thousands which will be revealed only on the day of judgment. In very deed, unless God bears it, we are lost, if justice sits enthroned.

It should be noted that Scripture nowhere suggests that God uses his almighty power to counter the principles he has built into his creation and so save men from the results of their actions. It is clear that he may do so in the face of ignorance and accident, but it is doubtful whether he ever does so, where man has deliberately flouted his will. When God's Man bore our sins on the cross, there was no attempt to minimize the burden that had to be borne by him.

hatta'ah, found only twice, is apparently only an extended form of *hatt'at*. The basic meaning behind *hatt'at* and *het'* is "missing the mark". There seems to be no difference at all between these two forms, except that the former is used 135 times for the sin offering as against 155 times with the force of "sin", its guilt or its punishment. The shorter form is found only 34 times, but never for the sin offering. Both words are rarely used of our failings towards men, but in every case where they are, they are those who have a claim on our obedience. In other words

the standard or mark we fail to reach is one fixed by due authority, divine or human. This shows that John Wesley was mistaken when he suggested that sin involved only positive action, for the failure could and often does come from inaction. It rules out, however, the suggestion that failure to conform to normal human expectations need necessarily be sinful, and Paul makes it clear that we cannot speak of sin, where the standard is unknown or has not been given (Rom. 5:13).

Though God bears and forgives, yet he "will by no means clear the guilty", i.e. he will not leave him unpunished, cf. Exod. 20:7. The probable meaning is that given by rabbinic tradition, viz. pardon for the penitent, punishment of the impenitent. At the same time the interpretation hardly does justice to the force of the Hebrew. Forgiveness or punishment, yes, but crookedness, rebellion and sin are not removed by either, something that is all too often forgotten. We are facing the mystery of the cross, which could not be made clear until the eternal purpose of God was made a reality in time.

NEB links the clause closely with the following, as does TEV much more freely, and renders "and not sweeping the guilty clean away; but one who punishes sons and grandsons . . ." This in itself is an attractive rendering, but it is questionable whether the Hebrew will really bear the meaning. It is also rendered the more doubtful, because it ignores the obvious parallel with Exod. 20:7. Knox is, as so often, very free, but there is much to be said for his rendering, "None can claim innocence in his own right". Ultimately the man that stands in judgment will not be able to appeal to ignorance, to the example of others, or to virtually intolerable circumstances. In the last analysis man's only hope is in the atonement wrought by God himself, however man's finite mind may seek to explain it. Fortunately it is not our understanding of it that makes it effective.

There is no need to deal here with the coming of judgment on the children and children's children to the third and

fourth generation, for it was explained in the last chapter in connection with the Fourth Commandment, cf. p. 109 f. Here it is sufficient to stress that because no one lives to himself and no one dies to himself, our failure and rebellion cannot be confined in their results to ourselves, yet God is so merciful, that even here a limitation is placed on the evil we have wrought.

There was only one possible response to this revelation: "Moses made haste, bowed to the ground and prostrated himself" (NEB) – the usual rendering, "worshipped", is misleading for the modern reader. He acknowledged the people's crookedness and failure. He did not mention the rebellion of the golden bull. That had been forgiven, and there was no necessary reason why it, or something similar should be repeated, but the inbred crookedness made certain that failure would continue. In spite of that, but just because of the character of Jehovah, which had just been revealed, he prayed God the King (*Adonai*) to go in the midst of them and take them as his *naḥalah* (inheritance or possession). The traditional English versions prefer the former rendering, but it carries the wrong connotation for the modern reader. That which one had acquired by inheritance was in the thought of the time inalienable in a way that what one obtained for oneself by skill and hard work was not. So, in a context like this, the word bears the sense of inalienable possession, a thought which elsewhere is expressed by Israel's being called Jehovah's first-born or wife. Nothing will ultimately separate Jehovah from his people.