

Diabolical Temptation

the colour of the cover is medium grey

ibis

John Houston

the scots philosopher and mystic

Dedicated to the memory of my friend and mentor

Andrew James Collingwood

Contents

Dedication

Contents

Foreword

Quotation

Chapter		Page
1	Basic Premises	1
2	Religion ; a Sociological Phenomenon	5
3	The Problem of Evil	13
4	Sacrifice & Redemption	22
5	Religion Under Fire	29
6	Divine Providence	37
7	The Quest for Immortality	44
8	Diabolical Temptation	53

About John Houston

Index

Foreword

At this time the Human Race is standing at the crossroads of an epochal threshold. After this life can *never* be the same again.

Great and unwelcome upheaval is presently affecting us. Everywhere there is apprehension about the future. There are many who do not know which way to turn. There is a very real need to see the restoration of balance.

This transition is only one amongst many undergone by our Race as we have evolved towards the Human stage. Strange as it may seem, this incredible journey is not yet over. It is for this reason that we should consider the importance of the *ibis*, a symbol ancient in its significance for us.

In Egypt, Thoth of the ibis beak was the god of literature. Among the Greeks He was referred to as Hermes, whilst the Romans knew Him as Mercury. In Egypt most scribes' palettes were under the protection of Thoth of the ibis beak, the god of letters.

Thoth was originally a shepherd. He was to invent *the lyre*, as well as weights and measures. He was recognised as the protector of merchants and the patron of poets and musicians. He was also seen as the god of dreams, indeed an immortal magician. The earliest records from Egypt go as far as to state that Thoth of the ibis beak was actually the creator of the Earth.

The great importance attributed to Thoth of the ibis beak was in connection with the fact that he was the restorer of harmony and the arbiter of all conflicts. Thoth of the ibis beak is mentioned in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, where it states that He records the divine word on papyrus from the primeval marshes.

A rubric from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, which was found at Khnum, was believed to have been written by Thoth of the ibis beak. Thoth was a lawgiver and the archetype of other lawgivers appearing in other cultures just as he had done in Egypt. This includes the Reforms at Lagash around 3200 BC, or those of Sargon of Akkad in the third millenium BC, or of Hammurabi around 1800 BC, or those of the Biblical Moses, whose name is Egyptian.

Thus in ancient Egypt, the symbol of the ibis was known to all those who sought initiation into the *Greater Mysteries*, especially those who had reached the sixth, or penultimate stage.

We know that at this time, we require a new direction. Yet what we await is a *person* who has been instrumental in guiding us this far. We are actually dependent upon this person to guide us still further.

In previous centuries magicians knew that the ibis was symbolic of the phenomenon of resurrection through cyclic or aeonic return. The ibis symbolised a passageway from the known to the unknown.

It was known that the mask of the ibis was the most difficult and the most dangerous to assume. In so doing one was preparing to cross an abyss. The initial leap involved the acceptance that one's so-called existence, or life as we know it, is actually *non-existence*. Here we recall the words of Orpheus who said that, as far as common parlance was concerned, what we refer to as ' life ' is actually ' death '.

The Human Race is at a crossroads awaiting the appearance of our Ultimate Ancestor ; there will then be a quantum leap in terms of consciousness, marking the end of the Human stage of our evolution.

The Jewish doctrine holds that a man can at any time return to be accepted by God at any time. That is all. The simplicity of this idea is deceptive.

The concept of return has been at the heart of Judaism, and it is for the sake of this idea that Jonah is read aloud on the highest holy day of the year. But the theology of Paul in the New Testament is founded on the implicit denial of this doctrine, and so are the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran and Calvinist Churches.

Paul's elaborate language concerning the impossibility of salvation under the Torah and the necessity of Christ's redemptive death *presupposes* that God cannot simply forgive anyone who returns.

If the doctrine of the return is true, Paul's theology collapses and Christ died in vain. Nor does any need remain for baptism and the sacrament of confession, or for the bread and the wine. Man stands in a strict relationship to God and requires no mediator.

Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Translated by Walter Kaufmann.
Published by T & T Clark, Edinburgh in 1970. Page 37.

1

Basic Premises

In 1977 I matriculated at Glasgow University to fulfil what had been a secret

ambition. I had wanted to study philosophy and systematic theology.

One year later, while working in a hostel for alcoholic men, it had become clear to me that the time had come for me to set my thoughts down on paper. It had become increasingly clear to me that I would have to write a series of essays which would constitute a radical re-interpretation of Plato.

That part of my life was characterised by great transition. I had become involved in Christian house-fellowships and was reasonably happy for a while.

In time, however, I was to become disillusioned and decided to leave not only my house-fellowship but the Christian faith as well. This was after a long period of self-examination. I did so because I had reached the conclusion that the Christian era was now basically over and that we, in the western world, were witnessing its tail end.

But I was involved in a search for so it seemed at the time ! Rather than all my so-called spiritual problems evaporating away, they grew worse. Indeed it would be true to say that all my spiritual problems came to a head. I found myself face to face with the question which so many are now asking themselves all over what was once Christendom : *where do we go from here ?*

I didn't want to throw anything which I had formerly believed out of the window just for the sake of it ; therefore I decided to re-interpret what I had previously believed. I felt that what was required was clarification, nothing more.

As such I continued to study both the Old and New Testaments as well as other writings, such as the Baha'i writings, Buddhist scriptures, Hindu scriptures, the Koran, the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and that of Karl Jaspers ; then there was the theology of Rudolf Bultmann. I was open to influence from anything that came my way.

I felt that there was no profit in turning away from the Bible completely. From its pages I was able to gaze upon a confession of faith from the period of around 1000 BC until 100 AD in the ancient world.

1

Here there is an *interpretation* of history with an ancient people, Israel, seeking for freedom from oppression, for a land of their own and to be a holy people with God visible in their midst.

Yet there was more to it than this ! The fulfilment of their deepest desires was

always out of reach, always on the horizon. Life was a pilgrimage and the Torah (the Books of Moses) was an invitation to participation in this pilgrimage.

This journey of faith takes place, as it were, between two poles. At the beginning of the Biblical narratives there is the creation of the heavens and the Earth, which is depicted in the opening chapters of the *Book of Genesis*. At the end of the *Book of Revelation* there is a vision of a new heavens and a new Earth.

This journey of faith was not as straightforward as one would have hoped. At times the journeying was no more than aimless wandering in the wilderness, and the belief that there was a promised land was undermined by frustration and hopelessness. The people of faith had a task on their hands ; not only had they to overcome enemies but they had to contend with their own inability to believe.

Although it would be virtually impossible to give an accurate summary of the Bible in just a few sentences, there are certain things that must be said about it. The Bible is the product of a community of faith which emerged from the cultural background of the ancient near east. As such it is by *no* stretch of the imagination *unique as to contents*, as its approach to the life of faith was not uncommon among other peoples.

What the Bible seeks to do is to speak with authority in an attempt to answer questions related to the most fundamental of life's problems in its own way, in its approach to belief in God, or the gods, with the attempts of the Human Race to assert its authority over the environment with the conviction that God had given to Humanity the leading role in what was a divinely-inspired saga.

As such, the Bible is concerned with what the Human Race has to do to fulfil this role correctly, because life was a bitter struggle against the elements, pestilence, powerful warlike neighbours, as well as other considerations.

I was influenced by most of the philosophical and theological writers whom I encountered, but of them all Rudolf Bultmann was by far the most stimulating. Bultmann had taken the step of attempting to *demythologise* the New Testament. For Bultmann the Bible wasn't historical as such. For him it was *mythological*.

2

Bultmann had felt that previous generations of Biblical scholars had paid insufficient heed to the understanding the Biblical narrators had of their own existences. This was indeed a theological landmark. Much light had been shed on the task of theologians yet unborn ; but here I was to conclude that Rudolf Bultmann had not gone far enough.

In our attempts at understanding what it is that the Bible has to say to us we have paid insufficient heed to the basic premises on which Biblical literalism and Biblical theology are based. It is here that we encounter an unprecedented crisis in belief.

Our present generation, in the western world at least, is like no other prior to us in the entire evolution of our race. This generation is the very first, leaving aside those legends pertaining to Lemuria and Atlantis, which has not had to concentrate all its energies on the struggle to progress or merely survive.

Now, with the dawning of a new millennium, employment is figuring less and less in our lives and, in time, education will eradicate ignorance, meaning that lives can be lived not in seeking primarily to survive, but in being creative and living lives characterised by fulfilment. It is precisely here that we differ most markedly from all the generations prior to us.

After serious study and meditation I became convinced that it was this ease of survival which differentiates us from the generations of our fathers and mothers. All generations prior to us – and this for our purpose includes the narrators of the New Testament – were, due to their struggle for survival and lack of education, to make an outrageous denial, a mistake which from our vantage-point seems so great but, yet, so understandable.

We, as the Human generation at the very crossroads of possibility, are able to interpret our existences in a way entirely different from previous generations and in a quite specific way.

No prior generation would have seriously considered the possibility of a loving God deliberately putting the Human Race into a situation where Humanity would be left to struggle to survive and gain insight into its condition, with this struggle lasting for many millennia. Why should this be ?

They were of the opinion that *only a Devil* would have permitted us to undergo the suffering we have experienced, and all this in consequence of being in a world such as this one (1).

This is significant for us to date as regards religion, and this pertains specifically to the literalism on which leading theistic faiths are based, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam ; the Bible has as its most basic premise the belief which denies that God created the Human Race as it is in the world as we find it.

This is the basic premise which seals the doom of theology as we have known it. This led to me to ponder a *diabolical temptation*. In the application of this it is hoped that the anthropological stage of theology is now concluded.

Notes

(1)

Without doubt, this is the legacy which Gnosticism has bequeathed to us for, in its most primitive stage the Christian faith, or the cult of Jesus Christ to be more precise, may well have been a Gnostic sect.

There was no one brand of Gnosticism, with centres of Gnosticism in various parts of the known world. In general, they held that God was beyond conception and description because God was supremely perfect and infinite in attributes.

The fact that there was so much evil in the world was ample proof that no God characterised by love and compassion could have created it.

God was totally inaccessible, although there were emanations from God. These were Aeons, who descended in degree down to the level of the Demiurge. This was the Creator of the world as we know it, whom the Gnostics identified as Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament.

They considered the Christ to be an Aeon, having been sent into the world to restore the True Religion. Gnostics believed that salvation was only for a tiny elect group. There were Gnostics who believed that salvation was only available to men.

Is there such a thing as divine providence and, *if there is*, what is it ? In this somewhat brief analysis we shall concern ourselves with the words ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth as found in the New Testament.

As we embark upon this study there are certain points which have to be borne in mind. It is easy to read all sorts of things into the words ascribed to Jesus by the writers of the New Testament narratives.

Our analysis comprises a somewhat panoramic view of the beliefs of Jesus, approaching the study from the angle that Jesus saw everything as being in relation to an imminent end of the world which Jesus seems to have expected, with the coming of the Son of Man in power with the angels of heaven from beyond the clouds. This is why in reference to His ascension in the *Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 1, the risen Christ arises from the Earth and goes to the realms of light which are ' out there '. For Jesus this was the goal of history, the consummation of the ages, with lives to be lived in anticipation of this.

First of all there is a very important question we must ask : how does Jesus' attitude to divine providence hold water today, inasmuch as Human suffering, as well as the wanton destruction of the environment, are probably the two greatest barriers to the acceptance of belief in the existence of an all-powerful, loving and merciful God who is passionately concerned with our welfare ? Such is the same God Jesus proclaimed all those centuries ago.

In this connection the first thing to do is to define providence. One scholar saw belief in divine providence as being the most fundamental part of a religious outlook.

It has been stated that faith in providence is religion itself and, again, that the denial of providence is the denial of all religion.

Providence is not seen as something quasi-philosophical but as,

A confidence that man's personal life is the concern of a wisdom and power higher than his own (1).

The scholar also saw the need to define religion, although he claimed that there

could be false religious experiences, but that is not our present concern. Religion arises from faith as a response to revelation from God and, if authentic, it flows

from the heart of the believer. Faith in providence, in other words, is another aspect of the awareness of God as personal which, as it would most definitely appear, lies at the root of all religious experience. Providence, therefore, is the participation of God in the finite experiences undergone by the Human Race.

Yet we must not make the mistake of thinking of the relationship between us and God as being similar to that which exists between a manufacturer and a manufactured article. Providence is intimately involved with or linked to creation ; indeed it is true to say from the words of Jesus that divine providence is at the very heart of creation.

God operates in such a way as to show that we are to understand the relationship as being between a Father and a Son. Such is the intimacy of the relationship as described by Jesus. It is a relationship which is upheld, governed and determined by God who, at no time, should be envisaged as a mere spectator.

It has generally been the case that, in theological works, the doctrine of creation is followed by an examination of providence. This is due to the fact that God, the creator, is normally deemed to be able to govern such affairs without much difficulty.

By asserting providence one is, in effect, implying a belief in the constant creating and sustaining activity of God. In such a case, then, creation has a goal or destiny which is as yet unattained. Providence, then, is the involvement of God in a progression surely and steadfastly towards a richer and even fuller stage of life.

Karl Barth, one of the leading Christian theologians of the twentieth century, saw creation as the place where the glory of God would one day be made manifest, with the Human Race the guests of honour in the witnessing of such an event. Karl Barth had the belief that,

Creation was the external working of the covenant, and the covenant as the internal working of creation (2).

Creation is the place where providence is experienced, and this gives rise to yet another question : does divine providence appear as part of the natural order of things ? Perhaps we could put it in another way : would it be true to say that,

although divine providence may exist, it can only be recognised through the eyes of faith ? Could it manifest itself as an event which would have absolutely no

significance for someone else ? Let us look at a passage from the New Testament.

Now as Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples.

' Who do men say the Son of Man is ? '

And they said, ' Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets '.

He said to them, ' But who do you say that I am ? '

Simon Peter replied, ' You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God '.

Jesus answered him, ' Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in Heaven '(3).

What gave Peter this insight was not intellectual superiority but divine revelation, in the narrative at least. This providence is, therefore, not a speculative hypothesis founded on a large-scale observation of history, for nature offers no such evidence. These things cannot be made the subject of scientific enquiry for belief in divine providence is founded *existentially*.

This existential or personal basis for belief in providence prevents us from regarding our Human experience as being part of a mere mechanical process ; it is not even a matter of metaphysical speculation, but solely an act of faith.

Let us continue by looking at those Biblical narratives concerning Joseph, the lad with the coat of many colours, to see if we can understand this a little better. Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers who were jealous of him, but later on he was to perceive the hand of God in his enslavement.

I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here ; for God sent me before you to preserve life (4).

Joseph was to realise, therefore, that there had been a divine over-ruling and that

his training for the future had taken place in jail.

How could such a reaction be possible ? How could he have arrived at such a conclusion ? What proof did he have of this ? When he interpreted his existence he had all the proof he needed, and more besides.

For the sceptic, however, this belief which Joseph had in divine providence, particularly when Joseph was a slave and in a position of apparent hopelessness, would have appeared as being ridiculous.

At any rate it was against this background of intense sorrow and, no doubt for a time, hatred perhaps, with plans for escape and then revenge against his brothers, that Joseph recognised providence. The faith which Joseph had, however, did not transport him to another place or another time. What it did was to enable him to see that although there was darkness all around there was, nonetheless, light at the end of the tunnel.

Providence gives us a vision of a greater reality beyond time and sense, as it were. This enables us to understand, although only somewhat partially, that life has a purpose. Providence enables us to understand that the Godhead is concerned with us and there may indeed be a place for us, at the end of a tunnel, perhaps.

Our part must be to discipline ourselves and to find fulfilment through co-operation with others in the overcoming of all obstacles in our way ; bit by bit the promised land, which is the *predestined* Kingdom of God on Earth, is beheld. Our present condition is seen as part of the preparation for the absolute in terms of consciousness, although as regards our development we are still at comparatively early stages.

Jesus Christ saw the providence of God as being inextricably involved with the revelation of God to the Human Race. By means of divine providence we can arrive at a knowledge of God.

Do not labour for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you for on him has God set his seal.

Then they said to him,

What must we do to be doing the works of God ?

Jesus answered them,

This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom God has sent (5).

According to Jesus it was the work of God that people should recognise that it was He, Himself, who was the one sent by God, and to understand thereby that God was bringing covenant promises to fruition. To Jesus, providence was the supply by God to Humanity of a revelation for that particular age, indeed for a generation which Jesus erroneously presumed to be the very last before the end of the world as we know it.

Jesus had a polemic against anxiety. It was that first and foremost we should have a correct relationship with our heavenly Father ; in fact, this should be our priority in life.

Jesus, however, makes no attempt to mask that there is a whole lot of suffering going on all around and that, as such, we must face life with resolve, but with the knowledge that life, as we experience it, is not an end in itself.

To Jesus, authentic belief in God is also the gift of God and it leads us along a path which takes us to the very goal of creation ; here we need to recall that pre-occupation with creation is just as damaging as having to suffer hardships which, to Jesus, were the birth-pangs of a new age.

In *The Gospel according to Matthew*, chapter 24, we have from Jesus a warning about an impending tribulation which would herald the end of the ages. For those of the community of faith there would be no supernatural protection or deliverance from this, indeed many of the early Christians would die in that tribulation.

Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in the house ; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle. But alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days. Pray that your flight may not be in winter, or on the sabbath.

Perhaps one might be excused for asking what all this has to do with divine providence. Could not a new age have been ushered in more humanely ? Other considerations exist : why did the world not end at the time of the tribulation which Jesus predicted ? : is it not correct to say that the predictions made by Jesus, the apocalyptic prophet, were soon found to be false ? Why His prophecies about an imminent end of the world did not come to pass have been an embarrassment to

We take heed of the fact, though, that not all the teachings of Jesus were apocalyptic. To understand the message from Jesus we must strip away all time-conditioned elements. If truth always corresponds to the facts then we should look at the message from Jesus, not from an apocalyptic standpoint, but from the standpoint that life is to continue and, if there is to be a golden age, then the foundations for such may indeed be laid by some other less dramatic method.

At the very heart of the Gospel we see the message from Jesus to all Humanity to seek the eternal, as well as the temporal, but with the eternal always having pre-eminence.

The same approach is the answer to the mundane problems of life. From the words of Jesus, the providence of God is experienced as an assurance of ultimate deliverance from spiritual ignorance, as opposed to supernatural protection from any shortage of provisions or the presence of danger.

Jesus saw divine providence as a pointer to the eternal purpose of God which, according to the Jewish traditions from which Jesus emerged, involved the resurrection of the dead, by means of which all the injustices in life can and will be rectified. We are all aware, are we not, that entrance into life can seem to be so haphazard ? One can be born into a wealthy, caring and educated family, as well as being in sound health, physically attractive and intelligent.

For another, however, the opposite may be true in every case. We can detect the blessing of God in the first instance, but what of the second ? This is why it is understandable that our present existences should be viewed as a preparation for a future life where all the wrongs and unfairness will be rectified.

It appears that the Jesus of the New Testament saw Himself as the embodiment of divine providence. Here we see certain aspects woven closely together. Providence empowers us to recognise and understand the proclamation of the prophet. This is an encounter with the living God and not merely the adoption of a particular life-style.

This leads to an understanding of one's life and its significance. It equips us for a quite fundamental transition referred to as being ' born again ' ; this is the awakening of those divine powers within us which constitute the next stage in the process of our evolution.

The world of the Jesus of the New Testament is now utterly removed from us, yet there is still belief in divine providence. It still manifests itself as the proclamation

of the prophet to those who seek to understand the divine mind through the message of the prophet.

This proclamation of the prophet can be likened to a light which shines on the path which the Human Race is both predestined and predisposed to walk. It permits the Human Race to understand itself and Human destiny in a clearer way, thereby empowering Humanity to overcome the trials and tribulations in the long obstacle course of life.

Notes

(1)

H.H. Farmer, *The World and God*. Published by Nisbet & Company in 1935. Page 92.

(2)

Colin Brown, *Karl Barth & the Christian Message*. Published by Tyndale Press in 1967. Page 89.

(3)

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 16. 1.

(4)

The Book of Genesis, chapter 45. 4 – 5.

(5)

The Gospel according to John, chapter 16. 27f

The Quest for Immortality

I

When we read the pages of the Bible, whether the Old or New Testaments, is there a message which the Bible consistently imparts ? When we take into consideration the various strands of thought which come from the various stages in the development of the faith of Israel, is there an outlook which remains unaltered ?

What is the belief which cements together the various layers of Biblical thought, which is found in all the books, and which determined why the canon of scripture is as it is?

There is an answer to these questions, and it is that the Human Race has an inbuilt or innate desire to become immortal (1). This is due to the fact that Humanity has an existential awareness of having the potential to experience immortality. This existential awareness is actually founded on predisposition, for we are predisposed.

It is significant in no small way, this existential awareness of having the potential for immortality. What is noteworthy for orthodox theology today is that when we look at the various traditions from the ancient world, passed down to us as mythology, such as the myth of Adam and Eve, we see that the purpose of these tales is to inform us, in picture form, how it was that this potential for immortality was lost. A God-given potential had apparently been forfeited because of the wilful disobedience of Adam, meaning that we should become subject to death because finiteness was the unfortunate outcome.

As we consider this question relating to immortality, we must remember that the Biblical narrators appear to have compiled their narratives from the standpoint of a contrived position. The misunderstanding which led to such a contrived position was due to their inability, in producing a popular religion for the masses, to accept that a loving God would have deliberately put the Human Race into a world such as this one, where Humanity would have to struggle to progress and survive for many millennia.

These narrators, in order to preserve and maintain their belief in the benevolence

unite people in a manner to which they could relate, compiled their narratives from the specific perspective that the Human Race lived in circumstances which had been brought about because of some sort of catastrophe. The conclusion was that we had brought disaster upon ourselves because of rebellion against the will of God (2).

In the narratives we had become the culprits, with the harshness of existence brought about because we had stepped out of line with God. We had been living under a curse, not only forcing us to struggle to survive but we had to come to terms with the fact that our potential for Immortality had been forfeited ; thus in the *Genesis* narratives we see Adam, who represents Humanity in this mythological saga, unable to approach the *Tree of Life* and hence experience immortality.

The *Tree of Life* is by far the most important symbol in the Biblical narratives. The whole of Biblical theology is concerned with being able to approach the *Tree of Life* afresh. All other themes are subordinate to this one because we know that, from our perspective, and from the perspective of the Biblical narrators, the most important thing is immortality.

Whether there will be a messiah or not, or whether He will establish the Kingdom of God on Earth, these things, important though they may be, are not an end in themselves, but act as landmarks in the evolution of consciousness, which will result in the Human Race being able to sample the fruit of the *Tree of Life* and, thereby, become immortal.

According to the myth of Adam and Eve, in the earliest of days the Human Race enjoyed a state of innocence, that is, until the supposed disobedience which resulted in *The Fall* ; thereafter the fruits of the *Tree of Life* were withheld. The former coveted position was now no longer available. The way to the *Tree of Life* was guarded by the Cherubim lest Humanity should partake of the fruit and become immortal in a sinful condition.

In the past it was concluded that there could be no immortality in surroundings which were characterised by suffering, hardship and the awareness of being spiritually lost. In such conditions who would want to be immortal ?

Somehow or other the belief that one day we would be able to approach afresh the *Tree of Life* always seemed to be able to persist. In the *Book of Revelation*

there is a vision of the end of the world and the Tree of Life is there for all to see.

Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

Also on either side of the river the *Tree of Life* with its twelve kinds of fruit (3)

So we see that the ancients felt that the harsh conditions and historical circumstances of their temporal lives were the result of disobedience to God, inasmuch as Adam had been offered a choice and behaved foolishly. The condition of the Human Race was symbolised by and depicted as a refusal of the *Tree of Life* with the unfortunate acceptance of the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*. Here a further clarification is necessary.

For the ancients the good was not just an idea ; the good was what had good effect ; as a result, in this context, ' good ' and ' evil ' should be understood more as what is ' beneficial ' and what is ' salutary ' on the one hand and ' detrimental ' and ' damaging ' on the other. So the serpent holds out less the prospect of an extension to the capacity for knowledge than the independence that enables man to decide for himself what will help him or hinder him.

This is something completely new in that as a result man leaves the protection of divine providence. God has provided what was good for man and had given him complete security. But now man will go beyond this and decide for himself. The question in mind is probably whether the coveted autonomy might be the greatest burden of man's life (4).

In the description of the circumstances which the Human Race has had to encounter in life, there is the symbolism of two trees. There is the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* which represented what had come to to be considered as the temporal or historical circumstances of the Human Race. Then there was the *Tree of Life* which, nonetheless, was deemed to hold the key to Human destiny and immortality.

Those of us who are alive at the dawn of a new millennium can view existence in a

manner utterly alien to those narrators from the ancient world ; we can envisage

our lives as part of a global civilisation where poverty and ignorance have been eradicated as far as possible. Yet this future global civilisation is, nonetheless, one and the same as that Kingdom of God prophesied in the sacred literature from the ancient world. We are on the threshold of realising what has been anticipated as possible for the Human Race.

In what way is the Human search for immortality to be seen in the Biblical narratives ? What is the Old Testament if the belief that ' salvation is of the Jews ' is undermined ? And what of the New Testament if Jesus Christ is anything other than ' the way, the truth and the life ' ?

II

Jesus Christ saw himself as the fulfilment of what was proclaimed in former times ; he understood himself as the key to the regaining of immortality for the Human Race.

The narrators of these passages are interpreting their existences, not only for themselves as individuals, but on behalf of their nation, their community of faith, as a chosen people, separated from all the others as instruments of the grace of God.

Every nation and every ethnic group has its own individual characteristics which, when written down, will provide a particular outlook within an historical setting. From this literature, or writings, there will be a scaling-down to get to the kernel of the traditions of the people. This will involve the direction the community is travelling in relation to spiritual goals, that is, how they envisage the unfolding of Human destiny and their role, as a nation, in that unfolding.

This is where the idea of the need for *canon* appears, something which is considered to display the mind of God and which claims to speak with authority for God, as opposed to mere Human beliefs and attitudes. Canon has authority, the word being derived from the Greek, the root implying ' a rod, a straight line, an instrument for measurement '.

Whatever problems the nation may encounter in the fulfilment of their commission as servants of God, the solution will be found in the canon.

The canon develops slowly rather than appearing ' once upon a time '. The need

for canon has its roots in crisis, a national crisis as it was in the case of Israel ; the same thing can be said about the Christian community which had to deal with the crisis of having to create a strategy for facing the future, with all the apostles either dead or dying and the return of Jesus Christ as yet unrealised.

In the canon, history is re-interpreted in such a way as to preserve the hopes and the aspirations of the people until a new day has dawned. Then destiny will be realised, and the nation in question would be vindicated as the servant of the most High God.

In the canon, there are certain tensions which are a reflection of the situation which the nation has experienced in its dealings with other nations. On the other hand, there is a plea for deliverance from temporal problems whilst, on the other hand, there is a corresponding plea for those things pertaining to eternity, as symbolised by the *Tree of Life*. These tensions colour the writings, but they do not exist in any other way than as part of the whole, as though they were like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

In her entire history Israel played a relatively insignificant part in the development of the cultural setting of the ancient near east, from which Israel emerged. The cultural setting of the ancient near east is very much in vogue in the Old Testament.

The future of Israel always seemed to be on a knife-edge. This led to increased tension within Israel, especially since the promise of an inheritance made to Abraham, and then the promise of a Davidic dynasty without end, were yet unfulfilled. They were always on the horizon, always out of reach.

There was a tendency to look to the past for guidance for, in a sense, it was as though Israel had always been in the wilderness, for they were not masters in their own land. They believed that all of that would change when the messiah appeared.

By the time of the Jesus of the New Testament, the traditions of Israel had been greatly influenced by the apocalyptic movement. It was generally held that the world would soon end, indeed, for many there was no doubt about it.

Jesus of Nazareth goes as far as to predict that the end of the world would take place *within one generation* after his death and resurrection (5). Jesus of Nazareth stated that there were many who had heard him preach who would not

experience death, for they would see the Kingdom of God being inaugurated before

their very eyes. This same Jesus would enjoy playing the role of honour.

Even if those predictions had come to pass, and they did not, they would not have been an end in themselves ; thus in the *Book of Revelation* we read,

I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they might have the right to the *Tree of Life*, and that they may enter the city by the gates.

III

Let us return to this quest for immortality. How do we interpret the Biblical narratives which, as we have seen, are based upon a false premise, which is that Human existence as we experience it was never actually intended by God and that we are, because of disobedience to God, living our lives under a curse whereby a once-cherished potential for immortality has been removed ?

All this talk of God has its source in an innate knowledge of God, experienced existentially as part of the way in which we understand things ; there is an approach from the side of Human existence, but this is essential for we can only truly speak with authority from that perspective, for it is our experience.

This means that, in this context, systematic theology or philosophical theology is the art of *interpreting* the inner experiences, feelings or realisations of the Human Race in the light of being, or God. This demands a definition of the relationship of the finiteness of our experiences with the infinity of God ; thus in the *Book of Genesis* we read :

And the Lord commanded the man saying,
You may eat freely of every tree in the garden ;
But of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil
You may not eat, for in the day
You shall eat of it you shall die.

This is the basis for the supposition that life as we experience it is lived void of any potential for immortality. Yet it is here that we have to disagree. This claim has as its foundation the belief that Humanity was created perfect ' once upon a time ',

but this is not the case.

If the Human Race had appeared on the scene of time with full knowledge of the true extent of our Humanity and our potential then, even if expelled from the Garden of Eden, surely the Human Race would have possessed the expertise to enjoy a relatively and reasonably sophisticated life. For one thing, the age of science would not have taken so long to appear.

The Biblical narrators made a grave error when they were formulating a theological outlook. Their foundation was a totally false premise, which was that the Human Race had been created perfect and went downhill thereafter (6). This does not correspond to the facts because for centuries we have been learning and storing knowledge, none of which was known previously (7).

The *Tree of Life* is an eternal principle of which we are all the roots, bark, branches and fruit. This *Tree of Life* was germinated in the soil and left to grow. The difficulties it has had to overcome to develop roots in the soil are the lessons to be learned from the experience of the cosmos, for the learning of the lessons permits the perfection of form by means of the process of evolution.

The cosmos has provided the *Tree of Life* with the possibility to develop by means of interacting with experiences gained. The cosmos gives rise to the possibility of knowledge gained during the process of history which, according to Biblical literalism, was not intended by the Godhead.

This *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* has a particular role to fulfil for it is the temporality which we experience as characteristic of our present existence here on Earth.

It is the conditioning which makes mistakes possible, for one has to learn from experience and from mistakes, which is the true way to progress (8).

Yet this *Tree of Life* has within itself the ability to recall its divine origin and, because of this, it will bear fruit which will exist forever and its fruit will be for none other than the Godhead.

(1)

Great Books of the Western World. Mortimer J. Adler, Editor in Chief. Book 6. Plato. *The Dialogues of Plato.* Translated by Benjamin Jowett. From *the Symposium.* Page 165.

' Marvel not ', she said, ' if you believe that love is of the immortal, as we have several times acknowledged ; for here again, and on the same principle too, the mortal nature is seeking as far as is possible to be everlasting and immortal : and this can only be attained by generation, because generation always leaves behind a new existence in place of the old.

Marvel not then at the love which all men have of their offspring ; for that universal love and interest is for the sake of immortality.

I am persuaded that all men do all things, and the better they are the more they do them, in the hope of the glorious fame of immortal virtue ; for they desire the immortal '.

(2)

This must surely be an allusion to a great civilisation, such as the legendary Atlantis, which is believed to have existed on the planet millennia ago. Plato mentioned Atlantis in *The Timaeus* as well as in *The Critias*.

(3)

The Book of Revelation, chapter 22. 1.

(4)

Gerhard von Rad, *Commentary on Genesis.* Published by SCM Press in 1972. *The Old Testament Library.* Page 89.

(5)

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 24. Verse 36 is most explicit.

(6)

Read the opening chapters of the *Book of Genesis*.

(7)

As the chapters unfold it will become much clearer to the reader that, according to our philosophical heritage, knowledge comes *as* recollection. Self-discovery comes through recognising reminders. *It is through experiencing our history that we are empowered to remember who we are.*

(8)

Those Extraterrestrials who were referred to by our ancestors as gods, would have created the circumstances which would have enabled the Human Race to become more and more civilised, should they be able to learn certain important lessons.

These higher powers are also depicted as having the ability to assume Human form in order that they might be able to communicate with us in a meaningful way.