

Change and the God of the Bible

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Thinking how I should contribute, from the biblical perspective, to this discussion of whether there is change in God, there first came to my mind not biblical passages but two quotations from Anglican religion. First of all, the doleful words of H.F. Lyte in his hymn 'Abide with Me': 'Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou who changest not abide with me.' Secondly, words from the first of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England, which speak of God as 'preserver of all things'.

My reason for mentioning these quotations is not so much because of any inherent theological value they may have but because of the kind of use to which they can be (and have been) put. Lyte's words about God's unchanging character are particularly appealing in a world where change is everywhere apparent. The quest for peace, security and a changelessness in God can satisfy the troubled spirit when there seems to be nothing stable in the world in which one lives. That means, of course, that those institutions which bear witness to the unchanging God must themselves be unchanging, a piece of heaven on earth, a reflection of the eternal. Similarly, the words about God being 'preserver of all things', heard when an Anglican incumbent entered on his ministry, reinforced the people who wanted to believe that the God whom the incumbent had come to proclaim was a God who changed nothing and preserved the status quo. Belief in the changelessness of God can be used to justify support for changelessness in society, a fact which is borne out in the ways in which appeals to theology are being used to justify particular conservative political stances in the contemporary world. Changelessness in heaven means lack of movement in those places in the world below where God is said in particular to be found: the Church becomes the locus of heaven on earth protected by bulwarks of unending changelessness. In contrast, those who espouse change look to the involvement of God in the changing patterns of human history moving towards the *telos*, and would emphasise that, while we see in a glass darkly, change is of necessity an essential part of our theological perception and our understanding of the social reality of which we are a part.

But which way of seeing God is more loyal to the biblical witness?

The God of the covenant

It is impossible to deny that the biblical narrative is full of accounts of God's mind changing in specific circumstances, often as the result of the earnest intercession of the righteous. Thus, in the famous incident before Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham manages to persuade God to a change of mind subject to certain circumstances being fulfilled (which are not, and so in the end the divine intention is carried out with unremitting force). Also, Moses manages to persuade God not to destroy the people of Israel; as the Psalmist puts it, 'Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before God, to turn away God's wrath from destroying them' (Ps. 106. 23)

Of course, we can all think of those passages which suggest the changelessness of God, classically expressed in the Letter to James:

Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (1. 17)

It was important for the biblical writers to stress that their God was not moved by mere caprice, destroying some and setting up others (though some of the arguments employed to stress the sovereignty of God, for example, in Ro. 9 come fairly close to saying precisely that). The God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah was the God of the covenant, a God who could be relied upon. The God of Israel is seen by the biblical writers as one who is committed to a particular people, who exercises responsibility in mercy and judgement but is bound by that relationship. Even at those times when the relationship is most under stress. At the time of the Exile, for example, when it became necessary for a prophet like Ezekiel to stress the divine sovereignty in breaking down and building up the nation, there was still the belief that the God who is worshipped and obeyed is one who is consistent in what is demanded:

God has chosen you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6.8)

That clear requirement to fulfil the obligations which are laid down upon the people which are party to that contractual obligation with the Yahweh implies that their devotion to the statutes of Omri will mean God 'will make of you a desolation.... so you shall be a scorn of the peoples' (Micah 6. 16).

There may be some dispute about precisely what constituted the covenant obligation even when it was laid down in the book of covenant given to Moses; for time and circumstances changed and the understanding of the obligation differed. Sometimes it appeared that their God did want child sacrifice (Gen. 22) and at others God's prophets condemned the people for it (Jer. 7.31). Variation in understanding and interpretation of what was demanded there may have been; corruption of

the understanding of the covenant relationship and a false sense of security regarding its effects on the nation were widespread. But there remained a deep-seated conviction that the God whom Israel served was predictable. This did not make it any easier to cope with the many situations when obedience led not to prosperity but to suffering and defeat, but that experience did not inevitably lead to a questioning of God's righteousness and the reliability of the divine partner to the covenant relationship. Indeed, in the prophets of the immediate pre-exilic period, like Ezekiel, the startling emphasis on the inevitability of judgement and the inflexibility of God's purposes points forward to the deterministic strand evident in the eschatological tradition of the Second Temple period to which we shall turn in a moment.

The story of Job, however, reflects that perplexity over the antinomy between the tradition and historical reality evident in Psalms 74 and 89. Here the plight of Israel and the impoverished state of the Davidic house cast a shadow over trust in a reliable God. In Ps. 74 the heartfelt questioning about God's purposes is starkly juxtaposed with a reminiscence of God's lordship manifest in days of old:

How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile thy name for ever? Why doest thou hold back thy hand, why dost thou keep thy right hand in thy bosom? Yet God is my king of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth....

Have regard for the covenant; for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence.

The book of Job, with its probing examination of the implications of innocent suffering for theology, prompts readers to explore the reliability of God even more radically: can this be a righteous God, who allows human beings to undergo such torments?

The God of eschatology

The biblical tradition is shot through with the tension between God's justice and mercy. God is merciful and generous and forgives those who repent. But alongside this there is the clear emphasis on the divine righteousness which is not capricious, and as God is the creator of the whole universe that lordship must in due course be revealed when the earth is filled with the glory of the Lord and the divine righteousness is manifested. That righteousness which is expected of God's people and manifest in the prescriptions of the Torah demands a degree of predictability: disobedience and distortion of the ways of God cannot for ever be ignored, and, as the prophets reminded the people, the neglect of the divine righteousness in establishing justice in society would lead to a vindication of the character of the righteous God in judgement. As the political circumstances made the divine promises for the world seemingly

impossible to fulfil, the Jews looked forward to a demonstration of that divine righteousness in the future. Although there continued to be a debate as to whether the fulfilment of the promises depended on the repentance of humanity, there was a strong conviction that the God of the covenant would demonstrate dependability by bringing in the reign of peace and justice, come what may. Such talk about the future in many of the Jewish texts of the intertestamental period demonstrates this determinism with regard to the future; indeed, some actually conceive of the whole sweep of history moving according to the unswerving purposes of God from creation to the millennium. It is that world of thought into which the first Christians were born, and it is evident throughout the New Testament that God's kingdom is going to come whatever the human response may be to its proclamation. That is not, however, to suggest that there is an iron rigidity in the way in which the fulfilment of this hope was conceived. God is still a God of compassion, as these words of Jesus in the eschatological discourse in Mk. 13.20 indicate:

If the Lord had not shortened the days, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days.

The idea of a dependable divinity with whom a relationship would be based on observance of a carefully defined code of conduct manifests itself in the later Second Temple period and in the New Testament also. Early Christianity used the covenant idea as the basis for its own rereading of the tradition—a rereading which was consistent with what had gone before but took account of the distinctive character of the story of Jesus, whose life had itself borne witness to the new understanding of that long-established relationship. Early Christian writers spoke of Jesus and his ministry in terms rooted in the Scriptures. Jesus was Messiah, the descendant of David who fulfilled an earlier, additional covenant promise made by God to the first king of Israel. He was also the bringer of God's reign, a participation in the divine *shalom* promised by the prophets as the goal of history. Such language has a certain degree of determinism about it. God's purposes worked out in history moving towards a consummation when the reign of God is finally manifest on earth presupposes an inevitable movement in pursuit of a fixed goal. Nothing could stand in the way of its fulfilment. Like the seed growing secretly in the earth which eventually grows into a tree, so will God's reign start in a small way and culminate in an evident demonstration of the purposes of God set down before the foundation of the earth (Rev. 13.8, cf. Ro. 8.28f).

New Testament eschatology seems to offer a picture of an unchanging God whose plan for the cosmos will be completed whatever humanity may think of it. That has to be said, for rarely does the New Testament give any hint of changes of mind in God about the character

and inevitability of the fulfilment of the divine purposes. Two exceptions are the way in which the fulfilment of the eschatological hope are made dependent on Israel's repentance in Acts 3.19ff. and the indications of the divine forbearance in the fulfilment of the eschatological promise in 2 Peter 3.8ff. When the promise is not fulfilled as expected, rethinking does have to go on (as it appears to have done in 2 Peter 3) and a degree of further explanation has to be offered. Similarly, Paul reverses a traditional Jewish view that all Israel would be saved first and then a privileged number of Gentiles would be allowed to share in the commonwealth of Israel in the last days. He does this by suggesting that there is an *inversion* of the two: first Israel rebels and refuses to accept the gospel; this allows the gospel to go to the gentiles and then all Israel will be saved (Ro. 11.25f). It is worth noting that Paul offers this information as a subsequent revelation of the divine purposes in the form of a mystery (Ro. 11.25), to expound new information about God's purposes which had not been known before. It is that tension between God's attributes of justice and mercy which we have noted before and which exercised many thinkers in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Nowhere is this problem more acutely felt than in the attempt to relate the teaching of Jesus about love of one's enemies and the emulation of a merciful God with the stress on the ultimate sovereignty of God in human affairs and the destruction of those who are opposed to the ways of God. It is not just the Book of Revelation which enunciates this, as such material is found in the tradition of Jesus's sayings also. It is a strand of the tradition which should not lightly be subordinated to the emphases on love and mercy. Surely, the God of the Magnificat who promises to put down the mighty from their seats cannot remain forever indulgent with the unrepentant rich and the powerful? There will come a time when they will be sent empty away.

The incarnate God

Of course, one could argue that what has just been said here is merely that previous perceptions of the divine purposes have been shown to be inadequate, and that the new revelation has corrected them. But that seems to diminish the significance of the tension between God's mercy and righteousness and the theological importance of this tension for understanding the balance between compassion and sovereignty in the divine character. That subtlety is important and is reflected in those passages in which Paul suggests that relationship between the believer and the indwelling spirit and God offers an intimacy of personal relationships which most closely resembles the relationship between child and parent (Ro. 8.15f. and Gal. 4.6). In speaking about the divine/human relationship in such a personal way Paul seems to be

allowing for the possibility of mutual growth and development. There is not the picture here of the relentless subjugation of the will of the child to the parent but of real dialogue and interaction in which change and development is not just a one-sided affair, but what is to be expected in a personal relationship.

To talk in these terms may seem to be extracting too much from Paul's language. But there are other parts of the New Testament which seem to bear out this impression. In the garden of Gethsemane the struggle towards an understanding of the divine will which goes on involves the bearer of God's spirit and the harbinger of God's reign painfully accepting the immediate dashing of that hope and death on a cross instead. Here we have the climax of one of the most perplexing contrasts in the gospel narratives. The one who set out to proclaim the fulfilment of the divine purposes and the imminence of the reign of God finds himself on the eve of Passover not awaiting his coronation as king of the Jews but the death of a rebel against the state, crowned with a crown of thorns. Nowhere is there any suggestion that Jesus abandoned his conviction that God's reign would come, though alongside it is the recognition that he would have to suffer and die. Nowhere is the traumatic acceptance of change in the understanding of the divine purposes more poignantly exemplified. It is part of the power of Albert Schweitzer's treatment of Jesus in his famous book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* that he recognised this tension between the coming reign of God and the imminence of suffering and death, the contrast between hope and bitter reality. He offers us a portrait of a Jesus whose eschatological convictions are such that he feels it is incumbent upon him to go to Jerusalem, to take upon himself the sufferings which must precede the messianic age and thus force God's hand to inaugurate the kingdom. However unpalatable we might find that account (and I have to say that I find it less so than I used to), it does put the issue sharply: can human beings affect the purposes of God by their actions or are they passive recipients of a divine plan laid down before eternity; also, how are we to understand the change in the mind of God which set Jesus on the path of proclaiming and initiating God's reign and then led him inexorably to a Roman gallows?

If we take the Incarnation seriously, we would have to say that the incarnate God cannot but be affected by the consequences of Incarnation, a point made in graphic terms in the apocalyptic symbolism of the book of Revelation. The whole eschatological drama is conditioned by the coming of the slaughtered Lamb to the Throne. This is depicted as affecting God. God's throne is now shared by the Lamb who comes bearing the marks of slaughter and who changes God's relationship with the cosmos through the implementation of the divine purposes as set out in the heavenly scroll. Heaven is not seen as a static

place where nothing changes. Indeed, the Incarnation itself involves the original bearer of the image actually becoming that image and taking the flesh into heaven itself.

There are some passages in the New Testament which suggest that it was possible to affect the divine will by prayer and intercession in a way similar to that we find in the case of Abraham and Moses. Thus, the disciples are told to ask God and expect to receive whatever they ask in the name of Jesus (Jn. 14.13). Here is an example of that theurgic power which is found in invocations of the name of God in support of some miraculous act. Similar themes occur in the parables of Jesus which are meant to illustrate prayer in Luke 11.9ff. To follow the Messiah is to tread the path of a Promethean figure who, in Ernst Bloch's words, takes heaven by storm, and enables humanity to have some purchase on the divine power. Of course, when it becomes impossible to offer a coherent explanation of the ground-rules for such leverage on the divine, a form of theodicy is needed to indicate the reasons for the theological poverty of the views of those who believe that they can change the mind of God, a bizarre and dangerous activity whose pastoral consequences are sometimes catastrophic. One cannot dismiss the important function of petitionary prayers in the New Testament, however much they may seem to be unnecessary and an affront to God, yet it is essential to note that the context in which such prayer is uttered is of the disciple who is already committed to proclaiming the coming of the reign of God and seeking to offer tangible expression of its reality in an order that is passing away. As such, the struggle to articulate what that will is in the midst of the old order and to pray for radical and dramatic change to be effected in circumstances which seem unpromising is part and parcel of that commitment to the Messiah and his way. There are no clear rules here, and the presence of God who is Spirit among those who also seek the signs of that divine reign means a complex dialogue between God's spirit and our spirit as the particular steps needed are worked out (1. Cor. 2.10f). In this complicated and uncertain process the spirit bears witness that we are children of God and that the God who seeks change in his creation is not far removed from us but is in us and with us in our struggles, indeed in the whole of creation as it groans and travails awaiting the liberation which is to come (Ro. 8.15ff.). The Israel of God, whether those who look only to the Hebrew Scriptures or those who seek their inspiration in the writings of the New Testament, look to Jacob, Israel, as their father. It was Jacob who wrestled with God and prevailed (Gen. 32.28):

... and a man wrestled with Jacob until the breaking of the day.... Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' ... he said, 'Your name shall no more be called but Israel, for you

have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.'

To be descendants of Israel means to be those who continue to wrestle with God, not merely with desperate cries of bewilderment about the state of creation but with the determination to wrest the blessings of the new age before the breaking of the day of righteousness. We may well set out determined to show signs of the nearness of God's kingdom but find ourselves taking up our cross and following Jesus up to our Jerusalem when that scope for change finally is closed off to us.

Christian theology has often been tempted to cut the tangled knot. Either it has opted for a God whose changelessness and inflexibility leave little room for that intensity of relationship between God and humanity which is such a feature of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, or it has sought a God who can be at the beck and call of super-charged believers and who seems to be prepared to work miracles for well-heeled faithful who have fallen on hard times in the First World but is to be incapable of moving to the aid of millions who suffer in the Third World. The Bible offers no coherent answer to our problem. What it does seem to assert is that we must not allow our beliefs in the unchanging purposes of God to lead us to suppose that similar changelessness should characterise human attempts to emulate the divine righteousness, whether in our ecclesiastical or our political life. Change in our circumstances is of the essence of our faith in a righteous God who suffers with us and goes before us beckoning us to move towards a promised land when what is unchanging and eternal, a gospel which offers good news to the poor and oppressed, may at last be seen on earth as it is in heaven. Meanwhile the God whose Spirit is poured out on all flesh is involved in that struggle and painful growth whereby a new order is born: 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come' (2 Cor. 5.17).