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THE COUNCIL OF YAHWEH

ONE of the chief perils in the exegesis of ancient writings is that we should take figuratively that which in origin was meant quite realistically. It is easy to forget that the whole outlook of the ancient writer was in important respects very different from our own. He could say and mean something which it would be impossible for us to say and mean in any literal sense, just because of the mass of knowledge, or of half-knowledge, which enters into the modern *Weltanschauung* and sharply separates it from that of the ancient world. To realize this, in its many ramifications, requires laborious patience and constant watchfulness. Even the professed student will often take the short cut of calling the ancient usage a figure of speech. That can be perilous, not only because it can rob us of the deeper historical meaning, but because it opens the way to quite arbitrary uses of the word or words in question.

A good example of this may be seen in the conception of 'the council of Yahweh', of which Jeremiah makes use in his differentiation of the true from the false prophets. He asks:[1]

> Who hath stood in the council (*sodh*) of Yahweh,
> that he should perceive and hear His word?

and he goes on to say of the false prophets:[2]

> But if they had stood in my council (*sodh*)
> then had they caused my people to hear my words.

It is easy to treat such reference to a heavenly council (over which Yahweh presides) as a purely figurative description of the true prophet's source of knowledge, much as we might treat the similar reference of Shakespeare, in which Prince John of Lancaster rebukes the Archbishop of York for the militarism which has forfeited former respect for his office:[3]

> Who hath not heard it spoken
> How deep you were within the books of God?
> To us, the speaker in His parliament;
> To us the imagined voice of God Himself.

But when we examine the larger setting of Jeremiah's words, we see that our exegesis must be much more realistic. For him, as for his contemporaries, the sky above is a solid 'firmament', trodden by the feet of Yahweh and of His heavenly court. It is solid enough to support

[1] Jer. xxiii. 18. [2] ver. 22. [3] *2 Henry IV* (*Part II*), IV. ii.

the temple-palace of Yahweh, wherein He dwells, and to which come His councillors at His call, those 'sons of God' who were once the gods of the nations. Now, brought into subjection to Him, they are His angelic attendants and administrators, His advisory council.[1]

The point to be made in this article is that the council of Yahweh was felt to be just as much a reality as Yahweh Himself. In such a description as that of Psalm lxxxix we cannot separate one from the other:

> The heavens shall praise thy wonders, Yahweh;
> Thy faithfulness also in the assembly (*ḳahal*) of the holy ones.
> For who in the skies can be compared unto Yahweh?
> Who among the sons of the gods is like unto Yahweh?
> A God very terrible in the council (*sodh*) of the holy ones,
> And to be feared above all them that are round about Him.
>
> (verses 5 (6) ff.)

The term *sodh* denotes not only a 'council' (or intimate group) but also the 'counsel' which may come from it, as in Amos iii. 7:

> Surely the Lord Yahweh will do nothing
> Unless He has revealed His *sodh* unto His servants the prophets.

Sometimes it is possible to hesitate which of the two meanings is in view, as in the sarcastic words of Eliphaz to Job (xv. 8):

> Dost thou hearken in the council of God?
> And dost thou monopolize wisdom to thyself?
>
> (so Driver, in the *I.C.C.*)

where Dhorme (ad loc.) renders, less probably:

> Est-ce que tu entends la confidence d'Éloah
> Et accapares-tu la sagesse?

But there is no question as to the reality of the *sodh*, in the sense of (heavenly) 'council', for Jeremiah. The word is the same as that which

[1] Illustrative passages are very numerous, e.g. Mic. i. 3: 'Yahweh cometh forth out of His place, and will come down' (cf. Exod. xxxiv. 5); Ps. xi. 4: 'Yahweh is in His holy temple, Yahweh, His throne is in heaven' (cf. Hab. ii. 20; 2 Sam. xxii. 7 (Ps. xviii. 6 (7)): 'I called unto my God and He heard my voice out of His temple'; Ps. xxix. 1, 2, where we hear the sons of God in heaven praising Him above the noise of the thunderstorm below, which suggests the choir of creation mentioned in Job xxxviii. 7:

> When the morning stars sang together,
> And all the sons of God shouted for joy.

The ultimate origin of the conception of Yahweh's council is doubtless to be found in Babylonia; we hear of the deliberations of the gods in the story of creation (Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels*, pp. 3 ff.; Gressmann, *Altorientalische Texte*, pp. 109ff.); and of their worship of the presiding god, e.g. Nannar, the Moon god (Rogers, op. cit., pp. 144, 145; Gressmann, op. cit., p. 242). But we may also think of the council of the sheikhs, the *mejlis* of which Doughty writes (*Arabia Deserta*, i. 248 f.) as having influenced the idea.

he uses elsewhere for an earthly and visible gathering. Thus he speaks of 'the assembly of young men together',[1] as one of the groups on which the fury of Yahweh will be poured out, and 'the assembly of them that make merry'[2] from which he separated himself into earthly solitude, because the hand of God was upon him.

The most revealing commentary upon Jeremiah's conception of a heavenly council as the source of true prophecy is the scene in heaven described by the prophet Micaiah ben Imlah as the true explanation of the spate of false (optimistic) prophecy which Ahab and Jehoshaphat have just heard.[3] He tells how he has seen Yahweh enthroned, 'and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right hand and on His left', in the posture of obedient vassals. Yahweh declares His purpose to deceive Ahab and to bring him to his death at Ramoth-Gilead, and asks His council (though the word *sodh* is not here used) for a volunteer to carry it out. After several suggestions have been made, 'the spirit' (possibly of prophetic inspiration) offers himself, and promises to become a lying spirit in the mouth of all Ahab's prophets. This, says Micaiah, is the true explanation of the unanimity of the 400 prophets. The peculiarities of the story are the best guarantee of its early date and genuineness. Micaiah has been admitted to the heavenly council, so far as to overhear and now to describe its proceedings. He gives his report as 'the word of Yahweh'; that must mean that it is offered quite seriously as a description of something which has actually taken place in heaven.

Here we naturally think of the description of the heavenly councils in the Prologue to the Book of Job.[4] This, too, is to be taken seriously, for it offers an explanation of Job's sufferings and so of the poem, to which it is essential. No difference is made whether we derive the Prologue from an ancient tradition (oral or written) or regard it as first composed by the author of Job. In either case he has incorporated and accepted it as the explanation of what follows, and he could hardly have dispensed with something of the kind, revealed to us, but not to Job. In the heavenly councils described Yahweh challenges 'the Adversary' to disprove the disinterestedness of Job's loyalty. When the Adversary's first test fails, the divine challenge is renewed and a further and more severe trial is permitted. Thus there is a vindication of God to more than earthly eyes; Job becomes His martyr-witness before the heavenly council. Many commentators have failed to realize the deep significance of this as an explanation of part of the suffering of innocent men. They have treated the Prologue as a literary device or embellishment, whereas it is the revelation of divine purpose, necessarily

[1] Jer. vi. 11.
[2] Jer. xv. 17.
[3] 1 Kings xxii. 19–22.
[4] i. 6–12, ii. 1–7.

hidden from the sufferer, but sufficient, *when known*, to explain his sufferings.[1]

One of the most interesting but less obvious examples of the council of Yahweh may be found in Isaiah's account of his call (ch. vi). The prophet sees the enthroned Yahweh with the seraphim as His attendants. Their antiphony emphasizes the 'holiness' of Yahweh, which includes His unapproachableness. Isaiah cries out in dismay, for what he has seen is a sentence of death for a man of 'unclean lips'. One of the seraphim cauterizes his lips with a hot stone from the altar, and declares that his iniquity is taken away and his sin expiated.[2] Thereupon Isaiah hears the voice of Yahweh (from behind the smoke-veil) saying in His heavenly council:

Whom shall I send and who will go for us?

which elicits Isaiah's offer of service:

Here am I; send me.

Yahweh then commissions him directly and answers his question, 'Lord, how long?'

The order of events should be noted, for their right understanding depends on this order. It is only *after* the cleansing of Isaiah's lips that he is able to participate in the council of Yahweh, and to address Yahweh Himself. Yahweh calls upon His council for a decision as to His messenger, and asks for a volunteer (as in Micaiah's vision) who will go 'for us', i.e. for the whole body of councillors. Naturally, the cleansing of the lips (as the local organ employed in delivering the message) equips the prophet for his future task; but its first and immediate result is to enable him to join in the deliberations of the council.

The conception also throws light on the rather puzzling use of the plural number in relation to God in Genesis:

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (i. 26).
Behold, the man is become as one of us (iii. 22).
Let us go down and there confound their language (xi. 7).

[1] See further my brief exposition of the book in *The Cross of Job* (1st ed., 1916; 2nd ed., 1938) and J. Hempel, *Althebräische Literatur* (1934), pp. 175–9, closing with the pregnant words: 'Das aber ist die Ehre des leidenden Menschen, dass er durch seine Bewährung seinen Gott gegen Satans Wort verteidigt. So gewiss Gott grösser ist als der Mensch, so gross, dass er den Menschen jederzeit zerschmettern und zertreten kann: auch ihm hat der Mensch etwas zu geben, sein Märtyrertum, das für Gott Zeugnis ablegt, wie Gott als 'Zeuge' für den unschuldigen Menschen eintritt. Beide gehören zusammen, Gott und sein Knecht, Gottes Ehre und des Knechtes Ehre! In diesem Aneinandergebundensein beider jenseits aller rationalen Vergewisserung hat die israelitische Frömmigkeit einen besonders charakteristischen Ausdruck gefunden.'

[2] ver. 7 (t^{e}khuppar).

Doubtless these plurals go back in form (like the idea of the council) to Accadian polytheism, but as assimilated by the Hebrews they refer to 'the sons of God'[1] with whom Yahweh associates Himself. As for the first of these references a certain likeness of shape (not of substance) seems to be attributed to the wholegroup; after this common pattern man was created.

The eighty-second Psalm is wholly concerned with the council of Yahweh:

> God standeth in the divine assembly (*'ēdhah*)
> He judgeth among the gods. . . .
> I said, Ye are gods,
> And all of you sons of the Most High.
> (But) surely ye shall die like men,
> And fall like one of the princes.

Here the members of the council are blamed for their maladministration of the affairs of men, just as in the apocalypse of Isaiah xxiv–xxvii we read (xxiv. 21) that in the day of judgement:

> Yahweh shall punish the host of the high ones on high,
> And the kings of the earth upon the earth.

This links up with many apocalyptic passages, and in particular with the references in Daniel to ruling angels.[2] These in turn recall the LXX version, probably original, of Deut. xxxii.8, where for 'Israel' we should read 'El', and render:

> He set the bounds of the peoples
> According to the number of the sons of God.

It is not necessary for our purpose to discuss other references to the council, such as the promise to Joshua the high priest,[3] that if obedient he shall have 'a place of access among these that stand by'[4], or to the colloquy of angelic voices with which Deutero-Isaiah begins,[5] or to follow up Sirach's suggestive thought of the relation of Wisdom to the heavenly council:

> She openeth her mouth in the assembly of the Most High,
> And is honoured in the presence of His hosts (xxiv. 2).[6]

But it is useful to consider some of the exegetical gains of our realistic interpretation.

[1] Cf. Gen. vi. 2.

[2] Cf iv. 14 (17), and note 'the decree of the watchers'; vii. 10; x. 13, 'the prince of the kingdom of Persia'; x. 20, 'the prince of Greece'; xii. 1. So in Sirach, xvii. 17.

[3] Zech. iii. 7, and note the references to angels in Zech. i. 10, 11.

[4] i.e. to the heavenly court, cf. ver. 4.

[5] Isa. xl. 3, 6.

[6] Box and Oesterley, in Charles's *Apocrypha*.

(1) First of all there is the contribution made to our understanding of the prophetic consciousness. No question is more interesting or on the psychological side more important than this—how did the Hebrew prophets become convinced that theirs was indeed the voice of God to men? An essential part of the answer lies in the peculiar psychology of the Hebrews, which cannot here be discussed.[1] But the conception of a council of Yahweh, to which the prophet was in some real sense admitted, according to Jeremiah's explicit statement, usefully reinforces the strictly psychological explanation of inspiration. It offers an intelligible and graphic way of imagining that intercourse between God and man from which the prophetic consciousness springs. It provides a permanent basis of fellowship, so marked in the dialogues of Jeremiah, whilst also giving occasion for the 'high lights' of special moments, as in the call of Isaiah. It introduces the idea of collaboration and of a personal relation more intimate than any external command suggests. In all generations men depend on the adequacy of such thought-forms to express and revive their deepest convictions. In the course of time these thought-forms may be transcended, but not necessarily the reality which for a measure of time they served to express.

(2) By its very realism, such mediation of the fellowship of God with man warns us against reading 'mysticism' into the Old Testament, or extending its idea of the Spirit of God into a doctrine of immanence. Both are foreign to Hebrew ways of thought. The prophetic fellowship with God is the ideal relation which even in the Old Testament is offered to all believers (the most explicit statement of this is in the prophecy of the New Covenant).[2] The repeated experience of the prophet Isaiah in the temple-worship, which he shared with others, culminated in the supreme moment of his call, and stamped itself upon his record of that experience. Our continued use of the Tersanctus is a fitting memorial of it. The ordinary worshipper in the temple was constantly challenged by its psalmody to think of the heavenly choir, and of the angelic *entourage* of Yahweh. He longed 'to see the face of Yahweh', even whilst conscious that only those 'spirits that surround the throne' could 'bear the burning bliss'. Worship depends, for most men, on the texture of its imagination, next to its moral earnestness. Perhaps the best argument for a copious ritual and an elaborate liturgy is that they ultimately enable men to dispense with them. A bare and rationalistic conception of God is apt to fail just here. The God of the Old Testament is certainly not Trinitarian, but He is much more than the God of 'ethical monotheism'[3]. The council of Yahweh opens out

[1] See on this my *Redemption and Revelation*, pp. 138–57, 'The Prophetic Consciousness'.

[2] Jer. xxxi. 31–4; cf. Joel ii. 28, 29 (Heb. text iii. 1, 2).

[3] For the application of 'corporate personality' to the Old Testament con-

into such conceptions as that of Hebrews xii ('the general assembly and church of the firstborn'), or of Rev. iv and v, with the circle of worshippers expanding to the furthest horizon, from the 'four and twenty elders' around the throne. Only the great inheritance left by ancient realism has made much that is known as 'mysticism' possible.

(3) A further aspect of the heavenly council, which is indeed a development of the last-named, is that it provides a cosmic background to the lives of men upon the earth (as in the Prologue to Job). At a time when there was no Israelite belief in any life after death, save the worthless continuance of mere existence in Sheol, there was the more need for some intenser consciousness of this—the only—life of man. It can hardly be questioned (for these thought-forms are not created unless and until they do meet a need) that it did enrich the religious thought of Israel to imagine a whole body of heavenly councillors and administrators under the control of God. At a time when there was a growing emphasis on His transcendence, this idea helped to maintain a living relation to God. Certainly 'the forces of Nature', divorced from contact with God, are no compensation for the loss of the council of Yahweh. The myriad agencies through which God controls our lives may be more personal than we ordinarily suppose. 'Turn but a stone, and start a wing!'

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ception of God, see A. R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* (1942), though his expression of it may be somewhat unguarded.