

knowledge, which is at least partly correct. This thesis differs slightly from the epistle to the Romans which, instead of announcing the *possibility and reality of a formulated knowledge*, simply disengages *the reality of a knowledge obscured through lack of knowledge.*"<sup>24</sup> Such a thesis is by no means incompatible with the outlook of natural theology; indeed it seems to presuppose it.

#### IV

In the light of the above discussion we may now, I suggest, fairly conclude that the contemporary theological critique of natural theology is not unanswerable. This is not to say that theologians must have a natural theology. Such a strong suggestion would demand more argument than space here allows me. Suffice it to say that natural theology remains a challenge to the theologian.

<sup>24</sup>op.cit., pp. 58-9.

## Between Prophet and Philosopher

Douglas Kent Clark

Heu vatum ignare mentes . . .

—Vergil, Aenid, II.63

The God of the Psalmists and the prophets was not in nature, He transcended nature—and transcended, likewise, the realm of mythopoetic thought. It would seem that the Hebrews, no less than the Greeks, broke with the mode of speculation which had prevailed up to their time.

—H. and H. A. Frankfort

“The Emancipation of Thought from Myth”<sup>1</sup>

At least until the advent of counter-cultural occultism, we of the post-medieval West, whether we regard ourselves as heirs of the secular Greeks or of the pious Hebrews, have liked to think that our own speculation has broken completely with mythopoetic thought. As successors to the rationalists and empiricists, many of today's philosophers have attempted to find ultimate knowledge through “scientific” investigation, and, failing, have settled for an under-

<sup>1</sup>H. and H. A. Frankfort, “The Emancipation of Thought from Myth”, *Before Philosophy* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Repr. 1971), p. 237.

standing, not of the Ultimate but of mere phenomena. Nor have we lacked our "prophets" who, in the footsteps of Luther, have eschewed human reason, seeking ultimate knowledge directly from God's mouth. Yet both our prophets and our philosophers have tended, at least until very recently, to shun the whole ambiguous realm of mythopoetic thought and expression. To the philosopher, mythopoetry is imprecise, an unscientific and indirect way of dealing with reality. To the prophet, it is unworthy of the transcendent God who has taken the trouble of bypassing myth by revealing himself directly. So the philosopher looks below, to man's own wits, to find, if not clear and distinct Cartesian ideas then clear and distinct descriptions of phenomena, and the prophet looks above, to God, for his clear and distinct word. These different epistemologies are of real interest, though, since they open out into the area of ethical judgment. To some philosophers, the phenomena can only describe what people in fact do and can indicate no norms of conduct. To our prophets, God has revealed his taboos, to be obeyed whether or not they make any sense.

It could be suggested that the prophets and philosophers of the modern era, convinced of the correctness of their positions, have in fact read them back into their Hebrew and Greek prototypes. Today's biblical and classical studies have unearthed and identified countless mythopoetical elements in the Scriptures (e.g. the Psalms) and the classic philosophical works of Athens. Rudolf Bultmann, the unswerving proponent of God's transcendence, has discerned so many mythopoetic elements in both the Old and New Testaments that he has sounded the clarion call for their demythologization.<sup>2</sup> Students of later Greek philosophy, familiar with Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis* and other neo-Platonic works laden with myth and poetry, now perceive and take seriously similar elements in Plato himself, for example in the *Timaeus*. In the quarter of a century since the Frankforts published their thoughts on myth, biblical and classical studies have been moving in the direction of trying to understand and appreciate the function and place of Mythopoetry in the writings of the Hebrews and Greeks, and by implication, in the understanding of their present heirs. The German and French existentialists have expressed their philosophy largely through literature, if not specifically through poetry, and with many mythological elements, and it could be argued that Auden's *For the Time Being* and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* are among the more powerful works of theology in recent times. These works express their authors' view of reality truly, albeit in a different fashion from that of an Einstein. There is every reason to be glad that, *pace* the Frankforts, the Hebrews, no less than the Greeks, did not so totally break with the mode of speculation which had prevailed up to their

<sup>2</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 1941.

time.

The truth of the Frankforts' assertion lies in the fact that although neither Judaism nor Hellenism expelled every trace of mythopoetry or even of magic,<sup>3</sup> both tended to look to the transcendent, to Yahweh, known basically through philosophy, in order to comprehend man and his world. But if Yahweh speaks "with directness" and expresses himself clearly (Is, 45:19), his hearers have nevertheless had difficulty understanding him. Indeed, his prophets seemed, even to Luther, to have "a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail out of them or what they are getting at."<sup>4</sup> God's word to man is not so crystal clear as some would like to think; even Israel never relied entirely on *sola prophetia*. And if Protagoras proclaimed man as "the measure of all things", even Plato, in the Myth of the Cave had to resort to a theory of "divine" illumination to explain man's knowledge of the Ideas. An understanding of the Plotinian One could only be reached by mystical contemplation. Those who rely solely on the prophetic, excluding man's own contribution, something the Hebrew prophets never wholly did, risk proclaiming an unreal message which reaches nobody. Those who emphasize only the rational all too often end by proclaiming that all is absurd.

Christians have tended at various times and under diverse conditions to stress either the prophetic or the philosophical. With no disrespect intended towards either, Anselm's ontological argument, when taken apart from his excellent starting point of *fides quarens intellectum*, can seem a bit too philosophical, as Luther's *sola scriptura* appears too prophetic, as an epistemological basis. In truth, the Christian is hard put to adopt either the prophet or the philosopher as his sole guide, even when the two are not viewed as mutually exclusive.

There is a third model for the Christian, one who is neither prophet nor philosopher, or more accurately, both prophet and philosopher. The Wise Man of the Old Testament, whose thought is expressed now in Hebrew and again in Greek, is a *mesotes*, a mean term between the two. With the prophet he shares a profound faith in Yahweh, whom he recognises as absolutely transcendent. With the philosopher he shares a deep interest in man's secular life, so much so that the Reformers regarded some of the sapiential literature as too Greek and too philosophical and hence, rid their Bibles of it. But interestingly enough, the Wise Man is a poet through and through, and in his own way a user of myth. The Proverbs and

<sup>3</sup>Note the traces of magic in Gen. 41:8; Is. 47:10; Dan. 1:4 and 2:27

<sup>4</sup>Martin Luther, *Works*, Weimar ed., vol. xix, p. 350, cited in G. von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (London: 1968), p. 15.

Psalms as well as Sirach and Wisdom are written in verse, and mythological themes abound—Leviathan, Rahab, and in a certain sense, personified Wisdom herself.

The Wise Man, of course, seeks wisdom, but “man does not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living” (Job 28:12), yet some were said to have found it, especially Solomon (who seems later to have lost it) and, at the end, Job himself. The whole book of Proverbs is dedicated to inculcating the traditional wisdom of the people in the young, yet Solomon prays for wisdom as a gift from God (I Kings 3:4). The Wise Man’s great interest in this world, in man and his morals fits squarely into his belief in God. He interprets the world in the light of his faith, and, at least implicitly, his faith in the light of his world. Quite naturally, he stresses the doctrine of creation, which both safeguards God’s transcendence and provides the possibility for any theodicy or philosophical treatment of God. Yet most of his knowledge comes not from abstract speculation but from concrete, even homely experience, his own and his people’s. Through the experiential knowledge of her wise men, Israel “stumbled upon perceptions largely similar to those of other ancient peoples . . . but many elementary experiences appeared quite differently to her, especially because she set them in a quite specific spiritual and religious context of understanding.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, the mythopoetic elements that come out in the wisdom literature, so similar to those of other cultures, are acceptable in the context of Israel’s belief in a transcendent God. In turn these elements are in the service of that belief, helping to explain and express the myriad implications of the one word. For all of his interest in this world and its foibles, the Wise Man is no naive optimist. The wise Job and Qoheleth express a profound understanding of man’s lot “under the sun”. Qoheleth grants God’s existence and transcendence, but struggles with the problem of their implications for man’s life, here and now. The result is deeply ambiguous, yet rings true for many today. In the same breath, he declares that “God has made everything beautiful in its time” and that “he has put darkness into man’s mind so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end”. (Eccl. 3:11)<sup>6</sup> Unlike those who claim a prophetic or philosophical knowledge of the whole of things, the Wise Man knows that he does not understand the “totality of reality” for “the height of heaven, the breadth of earth and wisdom—who can search them out?” (Sir.1:2). Like Solomon, any wise man both calls on the Lord for the gift of wisdom and makes every effort to acquire it through traditional

5G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, tr. J.D. Martin (Chatham: 1972), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Ugaritic studies and the parallel verb from in Job 38:2 suggest that *'olam* here means “darkness, obscurity” rather than “eternity”. as Frederick L. Moriarty of the Gregorian would point out.

learning and his own cogitations. He rarely possesses more than a moral certainty, but on such he can act, and act wisely.

When the "prophet's lantern had run out" (Auden) and the Greeks in their philosophy seemed to offer only the alternative of a veiled atheism,<sup>7</sup> the Hellenistic Jews relied heavily on the Wise Man. It is not too far-fetched to consider the early Christians, especially the Apostles and even the Fathers, as Wise Men in the later Jewish sense, more so, perhaps, than as prophets or philosophers properly so called. For Christians, Christ is the end of both prophecy and philosophy, their goal, and, in some sense, their conclusion. Christ is the Prophet, and more—he is prophecy himself. He is the Philosopher and, indeed, the very Wisdom of God (I Cor. 1:24). He is, too, the Wise Man *par excellence*, in his humanity, especially as teacher. In fact, his parables and *logia* are definitely in the style of the later Jewish Wise Man. The Sermon on the Mount abounds with proverbial aphorisms, including the beatitudes, which recall the sapiential psalms (e.g. Ps, 1). Paul too, is cast in the same mould as the Wise Men. Granted extraordinary revelations himself (2 Cor. 12: 1 ff.), he did not pose as a prophet, but as a conveyor of the Apostolic Tradition (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3). Still less did he consider himself to be a philosopher, deriving the truth from self-evident principles. He can be called a prophet in that he spoke for God, who had called him and given him the faith that underlies the Apostolic teaching. And he can be called a philosopher in that he could quote the Greeks against themselves (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:33) and could meet them on their own ground and in their own terms at the Areopagus (Acts 17: 16 ff.). But he is better called a Wise Man, who knew that he saw as through a glass darkly, who taught when he had definite teachings from the Lord (1 Cor. 7: 10) and when he did not (1 Cor. 7: 12), and who claimed no clear and distinct knowledge of his own experiences (2 Cor. 12: 2-3), to say nothing of such a knowledge of the sum of things. Rather, he saw all things in the light of the One in whom he believed, and if he saw them darkly, yet he saw truly, and such was sufficient. Fittingly, the writings of Paul the Wise Man are replete with fragments of poems and hymns, many containing elements which Bultmann would regard as mythological.

Another man, a bit closer to our own era, stands out as a Christian wise man. Thomas More, England's greatest humanist, nevertheless died for his faith. In his life he was called a philosopher, in his death a prophet. For his prudent silence, his careful investigation of the ambiguous question before him, and his fervent and sometimes anguished prayer, I would call him a wise man. In him there is no

<sup>7</sup>See P. Merlan, "The Old Academy" in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: 1967), pp. 34 ff. for a discussion of gods in Plato.

sharp distinction, let alone contradiction, between the martyr and the satyr of *Utopia*. He was a man of prayer who sought to serve God with his wits, by his service to the society in which he lived. Robert Bolt captures More, the wise man in *A Man for All Seasons*:

*More:* This country's planted thick with laws from coast to coast—man's laws, not God's —and if you cut them down—and you're just the man to do it—d'you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? (*Quietly*) Yes, I'd give the devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake.

*Roper:* I have long suspected this; this is the golden calf; the law's your god.

*More:* (*Wearily*) Oh, Roper, you're a fool, God's my god. . . (*Rather bitterly*) But I find him rather too (*Very bitterly*) subtle. . . I don't know where he is or what he wants.<sup>8</sup>

This echo from Qoheleth or Sirach is striking because we do not expect a sense of ambiguity in martyrs. But in many cases, and certainly in More's, even a martyr has to struggle through a confusing ambiguous situation to attain any moral certainty as to his course of action. More kept silent for a period of years until, in his mind, the field was won and he knew what course to take. He upheld the law as far as it could be upheld, and then died at its hands.

To be a man for our season, a Christian, whether he leans towards the prophetic (“charismatic”) or towards the philosophical, must in any case be wise. He must know that he both knows and does not. Living, as he does, in an ambiguous world, he must take its ambiguity seriously and shy away from ideologies which try to cut the Gordian knot by a total *Weltanschauung*. The wise man's thought, and even his doctrinal system, may not be at all clear and distinct; some may even call it “mythopoetic”. When he expresses his faith, it may well be couched in a parable, alluding to “dark sayings from of old” (Ps. 78: 2), as befits the kind of knowledge he is trying to communicate. The Christian wise man is, like St Paul and St Thomas More, a man of faith who listens to his reason, who lets his “yes” be “yes” and his “no” be “no” when possible, but otherwise is content to let his “maybe” remain “maybe”.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (London: 1960), p. 39.