

The Devil and his Angels

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There is a parlour-game in which a whispered message is passed down a line from player to player and comes out unrecognisably distorted at the end. Sometimes the result is whimsical, sometimes hilarious, sometimes it is merely flat. Invariably it is ridiculous. Now this is not merely a game for parlours. It is a game which the succeeding generations of mankind have been playing with one another throughout history; and there we call it *tradition* (which is after all only a Latin word for *handing on*). Men of one generation after another have handed on their thoughts, their customs, their institutions to succeeding generations who have often made extraordinary and unrecognisable use of them. Sometimes the results are whimsical, more often they are tiresomely childish.

We in the Christian church have on our hands a great number of conceptions that started their life as adult, but, because they have been let slip from generation to generation by mere tradition without understanding, are now thoroughly and tiresomely childish. This article is an attempt to rescue one such conception from the childishness in which it is wrapped: namely, our conception of the Devil and his angels. It is an attempt to unroll tradition, so to speak, and catch our present conception in the making; to watch generation pass on its message to generation, and ask what message we would have received if each generation had made sure it understood what the previous generation was saying. Perhaps such an article can serve to start the original message on its way again. Though what will have happened to it again in another thousand years is, of course, anybody's guess.

Angels

One of the causes of bad tradition is lazy translation. To translate for example *prudencia, iustitia, fortitudo and temperantia* as *prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance* is lazy, and it just asks for trouble. Later generations find it difficult to recognise the qualities of discretion, social responsibility, courage and moderation which the Latin words described. Part of the bad tradition about the Devil lies in describing him as a fallen angel, for *angel* is here a lazy translation of the Hebrew and Greek words for *messenger* or *ambassador*. In this case it was the Latin translators who were lazy: a Latin text which talked of mysterious creatures called angels was substituted for a Greek text which talked of messengers.

Of course it is possible to make out a case for such translation on

occasions. One of the common New Testament words for *service* could be anglicised as *diaconate*, and though it would generally be lazy so to translate it, occasionally the context suggests that the word has become a technical term for a particular ecclesiastical office. Better then, some may say, to translate *diaconate* in those passages and so distinguish the technical from the ordinary usage. A similar thing is true of the word *messenger* in Hebrew. About 100 occurrences of this word are ordinary references to human go-betweens; but a further 100 clearly refer to some special kind of non-human go-between sent by God to man. It could be argued then that *angel* is here the better translation. But the argument is spurious. For if the passages are well translated the very same context which suggests technicality in the Hebrew and the Greek will also do so in the Latin and English, and there will be no more need for a technical word in these latter languages than there was in the former.

So if we are to understand the notion of a fallen angel, we must examine those passages which talk of some sort of non-human messengers of God to man. There are, as we said, about 100 such references. In just over a third of these the word seems to be nothing more than a reverent way of talking about an appearance of God himself. Hagar, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Balaam, Gideon, Samson's parents and Elijah are all visited by 'the angel of God' or 'the angel of Yahweh'; but in seven of these appearances the angel speaks of himself as though he were God: 'I am the God of your father Abraham . . .'; in six there is reference to the recipient of the angel's visit having 'seen God'; and in all there is very definite difficulty in distinguishing God's angel from God himself.

An explanation is possible if we see these stories as themselves the product of tradition. The earlier so-called 'yahwist' traditions in the bible portray a God who lives in some intimacy with man: in the 'yahwist' account of creation, for example, God walks with man in the garden in the cool of the day. The later 'priestly' traditions – for example, the priestly account of creation in Genesis I – portray a God utterly majestic and transcendent. It appears that the stories of angelic visitations are modifications by later editors of earlier stories telling of Yahweh's appearance to men face to face. The motive would be solicitude for the transcendent majesty of Yahweh: not he but a go-between appeared to man.

The same motive can be seen at work in the descriptions of David as 'like the angel of God' for wisdom or innocence. It is really God to whom the king is being compared, but a later reverence has modified the texts. In Zechariah in fact we read: 'The house of David shall be like God, like the angel of Yahweh, at their head'.

This angel-as-theophany seems to be the primary source of the concept of angel-as-guardian. God's presence with his people during the Exodus is sometimes talked of as a leading by God himself, sometimes as a leading by 'his angel sent before them'. In Genesis

48. 16 'the angel who has redeemed me' is parallel to 'the God who has shepherded me'. In Exodus 33-34 we are told that the angel replaces the presence of Yahweh himself because such presence would be too terrible. The guardian angel is originally the guardian God, but the substitution is made in order to preserve God's transcendence.

And here we can remember that *angel* is a lazy translation for messenger. It is the God who rules and directs the world by his word that is thus appearing to man, and it is natural that if some go-between is to be substituted for him, then it will be that type of go-between who transmits and executes the word of him who sent him. In many cases indeed it is the very execution of God's judging word, especially in the form of a sudden plague, that is hypostatized as an angel.

From all this it appears that the bible is not so much teaching the existence of special creatures called *angels*, as using the concept of angels to teach the transcendent majesty of God, judging and governing man through his word. For the criterion of what the bible teaches is not what its human author believes, it is rather how he uses his beliefs to enlighten us about God. The human author of Genesis believed in a flat earth and solid sky, but the bible does not teach this; it teaches that God made both earth and sky, whatever their nature. Similarly, there can be little doubt that the human authors of the bible believed in the existence of angels, but this alone does not justify us in regarding the bible as teaching their existence (nor yet, of course, as denying their existence). But what the bible certainly teaches, by way of the concept of angels, is God's transcendence. And this helps us to interpret better the two collective references to 'the angels of God' and the similar references to 'the holy ones' or 'the sons of God' which seem to have the same meaning.

Jacob, sleeping at Bethel, sees in a vision the angels going up and down upon a huge staircase stretching from earth to the heaven above the sky. He exclaims on the awesomeness of the place: 'the house of God and the gate of heaven'. The picture in his mind is of some old Babylonian ziggurat: a shrine of God perched on the top of a great pyramid of steps. The angels are the go-betweens between this world and the awesome 'other world' in which God dwells, his shrine; in them we feel the awesomeness of God himself.

Or again, at the beginning of the book of Job and in a vision of Micaiah in the first book of Kings, we see God in his throne surrounded by 'the sons of God' or by 'the host of heaven, standing beside him on his right hand and on his left'. What we see, in other words, is a court of judgment composed of God and his angels determining the course of events upon earth. The angels are not individual creatures acting independently of God or worshipped independently of him; they are a representation of God in his glory

and power and holiness, that majesty which separates him from man and through which he rules and judges man.

The angels, then, are part and parcel of a certain view of God. Whenever we see God as primarily a terrible judge sitting above us on his throne, exercising power over us, dispensing reward and punishment according to our innocence or guilt, we are accepting that view of God represented in the Old Testament by surrounding God with angels. For the angels are non-human, are, one might say, the non-humanity of such a God.

Satan

What then of Satan, the fallen angel? In the Old Testament we find him coming and going among these 'sons of God' in heaven, one of the angels by the throne of God, the angel specially entrusted in the heavenly court with the office of prosecuting counsel. We have here another case of lazy translation, for the word 'Satan' is in Hebrew an ordinary word for 'adversary, accuser, incriminator'. Men can be 'satans', and often are in the psalms. The political enemies of Solomon are said to be his 'satans' raised up against him by God. Nay, God himself (in the guise of 'the angel of Yahweh') is a 'satan' to Balaam. In the vision of Micaiah one of the host of heaven offers himself to act as a lying spirit sent from God into the mouths of the false prophets in Israel, sent, one might say, as a 'satan' to the kings who heeded their prophecies. It is not surprising then to see develop the notion of *THE* satan, *THE* adversary, whose office it is, in the heavenly court, to put the case against man. So we see this figure opposing Joshua before God in the third chapter of Zechariah, and denigrating Job in the first two chapters of the book of Job.

The question arises: if we are right in seeing the angels as a representation of God in his awesome apartness as judge of mankind, then is not Satan the element of hostility-to-man inseparable from such an apart God, the wrath of God with man? An examination of the biblical tradition supports this interpretation. In the book of Chronicles we read a late account of David's sin in taking a census of Israel: 'Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to number Israel'. But we have an earlier form of this same story in the book of Samuel, where we read: 'The anger of Yahweh was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying: Go, number Israel and Judah'. Clearly, the wrath of God in the course of tradition become hypostatized as Satan. In a sense, this is a purification of the notion of God, for now God's anger is seen not so much as the character of God himself, but as an instrument of God in his dealings with men. Yet Satan still dwells in heaven, he is an inseparable element of the whole picture of God as a judging God with a court around him, that element in God's awesome transcendence and holy apartness which is felt as hostile to man.

Jesus Christ, son of man

However, even in the Old Testament there was always protest against such a conception of God. Isaiah, the prophet of 'Emmanuel – God with us', insists that it was 'not an angel, but God's presence' which saved the Israelites at the Exodus. And Job, throughout his complaints, maintains that if he could only come before the judgment seat of God he would discover God to be on his side, he would find God not to be a hostile judge but to be his *goel* or redeemer, one who was prepared to go bail for him. And at the end of the book, when Job no longer insists on his innocence (and to that extent no longer insists on getting before God the judge to have his innocence exposed), we do suddenly find God acting as Job's redeemer.

When we come to the New Testament we can see in Jesus Christ the final protest against any view of God which sees him simply as awesome, apart, judging and hostile. 'God sent his only Son into the world not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him'. 'The son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'. Indeed the very title of 'son of man' comes from the prophet Daniel, and seems to be a figure representing God's power and kingdom not in angelic form but in human form. And Christ so used the title that it became synonymous with the Isaian figure of the 'suffering servant', the Messiah who would redeem through humility and suffering and love. In Jesus we have a picture of God not sitting upon some powerful throne to judge, but coming with man into the dock, taking upon himself man's punishment, allowing himself to be held up to mockery and scorn while the world in the person of Pilate usurps the judgment seat. In Jesus, God appears not as someone who sits in judgment upon criminals, but is crucified between them, sharing their lot *in extremis*.

In the New Testament the angels are subject to the son of man. The picture of God as awesome and apart has been made subject to the picture of God presented by Jesus, a God showing himself in intimate love for suffering and criminal mankind. It is to be noted that the gospel appearances of angels occur, so to speak, in epidemics: one epidemic at Jesus' entry into the world (with which we can include the temptation narrative at the beginning of his public life); one epidemic at Jesus' exit from this world (with which can be included the narrative of the agony in the garden); and one epidemic prophesied for the second coming of Jesus. At that time 'the son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father'. At all these moments the angels serve Christ; and it should be noted that they are the particular moments which reveal his divine transcendence and his share in the glory of the Father. But the revelation is primarily through humility and obedience, obedience to death on a cross. One might say that the subjection of the angels to the son of man is teaching us to look for God's transcendent majesty no

longer in his awesome apartness, but in the infinity of that generous love which he has made known to us in Jesus. His transcendence of man is not shown in his super-angelic non-humanity but in his free, loving taking-on of human form and human suffering. And in this change God has to so speak vacated the judgment seat, and has become our redeemer, our defendant, our fellow in the dock, a true son of man.

The fall from heaven

This changeover from the God of judgment to the God of suffering service, 'represented' in the New Testament by the subjection of the Old Testament angels to the son of man, is also expressed in another way: by saying that Satan has fallen from heaven. The figure who most of all 'represented' the wrath of God has been rejected as part of God's world.

The traditional concept of Satan's fall from heaven is that it took place at the beginning of the world, before man's creation. This idea was already present in Jewish apocalyptic writing before New Testament times. But this traditional concept is modified by the New Testament, although that modification is rarely adverted to. For in the New Testament Satan's fall took place at the moment when Christ ascended into heaven by way of the Cross to sit at the right hand of God. It is the figure of God as suffering servant – it is this manifestation of God's glory – that casts Satan from heaven.

The clearest account is to be found in the book of Revelation, in chapter 12.

Then God's temple in heaven was opened . . . And a great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and cried out in her pangs of birth in anguish for delivery. And another portent appeared in heaven: behold, a great dragon with seven heads and ten horns . . . And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth. She brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron . . .

The last phrase reveals the identity of the child, for it is an Old Testament description of the coming Messiah. The woman is apparently the heavenly representative of God's chosen people from whom the Christ was to be born. The dragon, identified later as 'the Devil and Satan', waited to wage war on this Christ. We remember how Jesus' life in the gospel is presented to us as a warfare with Satan: first, in his miracles in which the kingship of God wars with the kingship of Satan; secondly, in the falsity of the people among whom he lives, in the Pharisees, in Judas, at moments in Peter; and thirdly, at the hour of his death, at once the 'hour of the prince of this world' and the hour of his conquest. This is the final

victory described in the remainder of the passage from Revelation.

. . . but her child was called up to God and to his throne . . . Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down – that ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to earth and his angels were thrown down with him.

And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying: Now the salvation and the power and the kingship of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony (i.e. martyrdom), for they loved not their lives even unto death . . .

It is the moment of Christ's glorification, the moment of the shedding of his blood, the loving not of his life even unto death, that is the moment of Satan's fall. 'Now is the judgment of this world', Jesus says as he approaches Calvary, 'now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself'. And Christ's first missionaries proclaimed to him with joy: 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!' To which Christ replied, as though repeating their statement in a more figurative language: 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven'. It was in his name, in his sight that Satan fell. For God chose to reveal himself in Christ as a human redeemer, and there is now no longer room in heaven, no longer room in God's scheme of things for the wrath revealed through the figure of the devil and his angels. Men are no longer to be accused at the throne of God, they are to be interceded for. God has vacated the judgment seat and entered into the dock with man.

However, Satan is thrown down not to hell (as in our traditional conception) but to earth. This is no careless statement, as the next verse of our passage makes clear:

Rejoice then, o heaven and you that dwell therein! But woe to you, o earth and sea, for the Devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!

This must mean, if our interpretation is sound, that although God has rejected the picture of himself as hostile judge, earth and mankind have not altogether rejected this image but keep it alive among themselves. And, of course, this is precisely the theme of Christ versus the Pharisees in the gospel, of Christ versus anti-Christ in the first epistle of St John, of Christ versus continued observance of the Law in St Paul.

Pharisaism, anti-Christ, the Law

For consider the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector. Both pray to God in his temple. But the tax-collector prays to a God of redeeming mercy: 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' The Pharisee, on the other hand, appeals to a God of justice, and by naming his good works attempts to win a verdict of innocence from God. 'Jesus told this parable to some who were trusting in themselves that they were righteous'. The Pharisee is the type of all men who will not accept God as he revealed himself in Christ, will not accept a God who suffers with them and bears their guilt. They will only accept a God who, in his turn, accepts their innocence. They need no redeemer. And so they choose to keep God as judge, to keep him on high among the angels and not let him stoop down to man. The Pharisee is the man who keeps the devil alive.

And we are all Pharisees. Or rather, there is in each of us Pharisee and publican. There is in each of us the weak self and the judging conscience, and we are ashamed of our weak self and proud of our judging conscience. Our judging conscience persecutes our weak self like a screaming fishwife her henpecked husband: 'If it were not for you life would be fine for us. It is you who let me down all the time'. We forget that Christ came to befriend our weak self and not our judging conscience, came to befriend the publican in us and not the Pharisee. (Here note also that Christ befriends not simply the weak in the flesh – represented by the harlots – but the weak in social responsibility and justice – represented by the tax-collectors. Something that our modern tendency to equate Christianity with a relentless social conscience might ponder!) The Pharisee is not dead; he lives in our own proud consciences which prefer judgment to compassion, prefer to keep God on his throne surrounded by the devil and his angels, rather than to accept the new image of God which came to us in Christ.

In the first epistle of St John we are taught this same truth. God is light and in him there is no darkness at all; we too must walk in the light. But to walk in the light is not to be without sin; it is not to be innocent in the face of the law. Rather, it is to confess our sin and rely on the loving forgiveness of God in Christ. 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves . . . we make him a liar'. The devil is the father of this lie; it is he who persuades us that innocence is possible and that there is no need for a redeemer. He keeps alive in our hearts the proud hope that we can justify ourselves before the tribunal of conscience, and so sets himself against the need for a Christ. 'Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the anti-Christ' 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to dissolve the works of the devil' 'By this we shall know that we are of the truth and satisfy our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us: God is greater than our hearts . . .'

One can trace the theme, too, in St Paul. The angels are there

represented as 'principalities and powers' in whose thralldom heaven and earth lay: they were the guardians of 'the Law'. But Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law, the whole purpose of which was to convict us of sin. He has nailed the Law to the cross, has killed it with his life and death of loving service, disarming the principalities and powers. So Christians are now to find their heaven in Christ, in whom all hostility has been done away with, whether on earth or in heaven. Yet there remains abroad on the earth a mystery of iniquity, the unreconciled Satan and those he deludes until the last day. Who is the unreconciled Satan but those angelic 'principalities and powers' which have been kept unsubjected to Christ by men on this earth?

God's true transcendence

We can summarise. God is transcendent. But if that transcendence is conceived of as basically hostile to man or as something in which there is a basic indifference to man, a source of servile fear – then the worship of God will be like that of the heathen religions, and cannot be distinguished from the worship of Satan. If that transcendence is realised ambiguously as both love and wrath, a love covenanted to man and yet ruthlessly maintaining the Law, so that love and judgment are not properly integrated – then we have the Jewish religion in which God and Satan are distinguished, and Satan is subordinate to God, but both live in heaven together.

But if that transcendence is seen not to be an angelic, superhuman matter, but rather a transcendence of *freely* being human over against man's necessity to be human, a transcendence of infinitely generous love which lets itself be seen within humanity – then we have the Christian religion. God is still a judge, but not a hostile judge, rather the kind of judge that a friend is that watches you in love. Man can reject Christ, and then he makes God again into a hostile judge. 'Christ came not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. But he who does not believe is judged already . . . And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the light . . . and do not come to the light lest their deeds should be exposed'. They choose to hope in an innocence before a judge, rather than a guilt by the side of a redeemer. For such people the love of God in Christ becomes the most terrible judgment there can be.

Good and bad tradition

We in the Church are bound not only by our scriptural origins but by tradition. But tradition here is a name for that perpetual work of the Church through the centuries, by which she preserves within the handing down of her message the true form of it. The tradition by which we are bound is a continual correction of bad tradition and is enshrined in the pronouncements of the Church. How has

the Church cared for this message that we have uncovered in the scriptures?

First of all, she has not, as far as I can see, ever taught officially the reality of the devil in the way we normally take that phrase. She has often taught the reality of 'the power of the devil' or of 'slavery to the devil'; and this is certainly real. The love of God in Christ is real, and because there are really people who reject it, and because there is a real tendency in man to reject it, what is symbolised as the devil is a real force in the world. But he has power only over those who serve him.

Secondly, the Church has taught that the devils were created by God good in nature, and themselves chose to be evil. Does this imply a real personal being called the devil? It must be remembered that what the Church is doing is *correcting* a tradition: in this case, the Manichean tradition that the principle of evil is uncreated and equal with God. The force of evil, on the contrary, says the Church, is not a force in the uncreated world, it is only a force in creation. And this is not of the nature of creation, but by the free choice of creatures. Indeed, the whole concept of angels, representing as it does the transcendence of God, is in itself valid and wholesome, as long as it remains subordinate to the Christian realisation that the love of God in Jesus best represents God's transcendence. Otherwise, the concept of angels gets out of line and we start to worship a devil.

Finally, the Church teaches the eternity of the disassociation of God and the devil which has taken place at Calvary. There is no possibility of reconciliation here, for God is now associated with Christ eternally, and the devil is nothing but anti-Christ. The devil therefore and his angels and those who serve him have nothing to look forward to but the eternal death of hell. This, of course, takes us a step further in the history of the devil. He started life in heaven, he lives now on earth, but the scripture says that at the end of time he will be cast into hell. What that means would require another article on this further tradition of hell.

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