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THE CROOKED SERPENT

Leviathan the swift serpent, . . . leviathan the crooked serpent, . . . the dragon that is in the sea (Isa. xxvii. 1).

The great dragon . . . the old serpent, he that is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole inhabited earth (Rev. xii. 9).

CHARLES WESLEY, in one of his numerous hymns on the Incarnation, acclaims our Saviour's birth in the following lines:

Gaze on that helpless Object
Of endless adoration!
Those infant hands shall burst our bonds
And work out our salvation:

Strangle the crooked serpent,
Destroy his works for ever,
And open set the heavenly gate
To every true believer.

Now, we know what he means. He is expressing in poetical language the teaching of Scripture that "to this end was the Son of God manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John iii. 8); that the purpose of His incarnation was "that through death he might bring to nought him that had the power of death (that is, the devil), and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. ii. 14 f.). But where did he go for his poetic imagery? One of his sources was classical mythology; the picture of "infant hands" strangling the serpent immediately recalls the story of the child Heracles in his cradle strangling the serpents which Hera sent to kill him as soon as he was born. But it is not only the familiar mythology of Greece that lies behind Wesley's language.

There are in Western Asia abundant traces of a pictorial form of creation story in which the Creator is depicted as bringing the ordered universe into being by destroying the monster of chaos. The best-known form of this story is the Babylonian saga of the victory of Marduk over the monster Tiamat. With the monster of chaos is allied another power actively opposed to the Creator and usually represented as a serpent or dragon (we may perhaps compare Kingu, the first-born of Tiamat, in the Babylonian account). Part of the creative work is the destruction or at least the disabling of the dragon.

We look in vain for these pictorial forms in the creation narratives of the Old Testament. The religious associations of these sagas were far removed from the lofty monotheism of Genesis. There is, indeed, a verbal reminiscence in the statement of Gen. i. 2 that in the primeval unorganised condition of the world "darkness was upon the face of the deep", for *tēhōm*, the Hebrew word translated "deep", may be cognate with Tiamat. But if so, the connection is purely verbal.

Here and there in other parts of the O.T., however, there are references to the pictorial version of this primeval conflict. Such a reference we find in Job xxvi. 12 f., at the end of a section which celebrates God's creative might :

He stirreth up the sea with his power,
And by his understanding he smiteth through Rahab.
By his spirit the heavens are garnished;
His hand hath pierced the swift serpent.

Here we have Rahab, the chaos monster,¹ and her serpent or dragon associate, both destroyed by the Creator. But in general when this imagery is found in the O.T., it is transferred from the creative to the redemptive activity of God. Take for example a passage like Ps. lxxiv. 12-17:

Yet God is my King of old,
Working salvation in the midst of the earth.
Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength;
Thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters.
Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces,
Thou gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness.
Thou didst cleave fountain and flood:
Thou driedst up mighty rivers.
The day is thine, the night also is thine:
Thou hast prepared the light and the sun.
Thou hast set all the borders of the earth:
Thou hast made summer and winter.

The language here shows clearly enough that it is drawn from the story of the creation conflict; but it is not creation that the Psalmist is thinking of primarily in this context. Here is another passage of the same kind (Ps. lxxxix. 9-12):

Thou rulest the pride of the sea:
When the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them.
Thou hast broken Rahab in pieces, as one that is slain;
Thou hast scattered thine enemies with the arm of thy strength.

¹ Cf. Job ix. 13: "God will not withdraw his anger; the helpers of Rahab do stoop under him."

The heavens are thine, the earth also is thine:
 The world and the fulness thereof, thou hast founded them.
 The north and the south, thou hast created them:
 Tabor and Hermon rejoice in thy name.

The idea of God's quelling the unrestrained raging of the sea, or dividing the waters, which is prominent in both these passages, is a notable feature of His creative work, for which the famous lines in Job xxxviii. 8-11 may be compared.¹ But there was another occasion when God showed His power over the sea and divided the waters, and that is the occasion which is really alluded to in both these Psalms. What that occasion was is made clear in Isa. li. 9 f., where the same imagery recurs:

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of Jehovah;
 Awake, as in the days of old,
 The generations of ancient times!
 Art thou not it that cut Rahab in pieces,
 That pierced the dragon?
 Art thou not it which dried up the sea,
 The waters of the great deep;
 That made the depths of the sea
 A way for the redeemed to pass over?

Here at last the reference is plain; it is to the Exodus from Egypt. The prophet is calling upon God to act for His people again as He had done in the past; as He brought them out of Egypt, so let Him now bring them out of the land of their captivity, so that "the ransomed of Jehovah shall return, and come with singing unto Zion". And it is the Exodus that the two passages from the Psalms likewise refer to, despite the retention of the language and imagery from the original creation context. All three scriptures call upon God to intervene for His people's deliverance as He delivered them from the house of bondage then. The old creation imagery is used, not for the conflict with chaos, but for Jehovah's victory over Egypt. Rahab, the old name of the chaos monster, has become a name for Egypt (indeed, it is used elsewhere as a synonym for Egypt quite apart from this sort of context, as in Ps. lxxxvii. 4;² Isa.

¹ "Or who shut up the sea with doors,
 When it brake forth and issued from the womb;
 When I made the cloud the garment thereof,
 And thick darkness a swaddling-band for it,
 And prescribed for it my decree,
 And set bars and doors,
 And said, 'Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further,
 And here shall thy proud waves be stayed?'"

² "I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon as among them that know me."

xxx. 7¹); and the dragon who opposes God becomes a figure of Pharaoh (cf. Ezek. xxix. 3²).

Now, the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt has provided a form of language in which the redemption accomplished by Christ has often been described. The Pauline analogues³ of the Passover lamb and Christ, the waters of the Red Sea and Christian baptism, the divinely provided sustenance in the wilderness and the nourishment which the believer finds in Christ, have been amplified in Christian literature and hymnody. But just as the ordinary account of the Exodus has been used for the figurative portrayal of the eschatological deliverance, so too has the pictorial account of the Exodus in terms of the creation saga been used. The dragon who was undone then is the prototype of the dragon whose undoing belongs to the time of the end. So we read in Isa. xxvii. 1:

In that day Jehovah with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the swift serpent, and leviathan the crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea.

So far as the language itself goes, this verse might almost have come from the Ras Shamra tablets, where Leviathan (*Lotan*) is described in similar terms.⁴ (In these tablets he is also described as seven-headed, which gives precision to the "heads of leviathan" in Ps. lxxiv. 14, and links him with the seven-headed dragon of Rev. xii. 3.⁵)

With all this in our minds we turn with fresh understanding to the Book of Revelation. In Rev. xii the old imagery reappears, and is applied neither to the creation story nor to the deliverance from Egypt, but to the final and cosmic redemption achieved by Christ in His triumph over sin and death. In the war against the dragon in this chapter all the old pictorial dragon-stories are summed up; the great dragon, the age-long antagonist of God and His cause, is identified with the old serpent of Eden's garden and with the malevolent Accuser of God's elect.⁶

¹ "For Egypt helpeth in vain, and to no purpose: therefore have I called her 'Rahab that sitteth still'."

² "Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon (Heb. *tannin*) that lieth in the midst of his rivers."

³ 1 Cor. v. 7; x. 1 ff.

⁴ Cf. C. Viroilleaud in *Syria*, xv (1934), p. 306; J. W. Jack, *The Ras Shamra Tablets* (1935), pp. 45 f.; C. F. A. Schaeffer, *The Cuneiform Tablets of Ras Shamra-Ugarit* (1939), p. 65.

⁵ Cf. also the seven-headed serpent in *Pistis Sophia*, ii. 146 b-147 a.

⁶ In Rev. xii. 9, ὁ καλούμενος διάβολος καὶ ὁ σατανᾶς, the Greek and Hebrew forms of his name as the Accuser are given to emphasise this identification.

Let it be well noted that this does not detract from the authority of the Apocalypse. On the contrary, the Apocalypse casts the mantle of its authority over all that the seer incorporated in his work. There is more in ancient mythology than often meets the eye. We may aptly cite an expositor of Revelation of the strictest orthodoxy. In his *Revelation of Jesus Christ* (1945), Mr. G. H. Lang interprets the words of Christ in Rev. i. 17 f. as implying a denial of the claim of Osiris to be lord of the realm of the dead and an assertion of His own unchallengeable right to that title. Then he adds (p. 78):

This is one instance of many where great truths lie at the heart of some beliefs of the ancient world; obscured, distorted, misapplied, but there. Perchance they are the corrupted remembrance of knowledge of the purposes of God given to man in earliest times that he might expect by faith God's promised Deliverer and Ruler, who should be of heaven, yet man on earth. When under Satanic deceit he was led to renounce the true and holy God (Rom. i), the arch-deceiver seems to have taught him to misapply the facts he knew of that other world and the hopes which should have been set on the Seed of the woman. Faith, fear, worship and hope were thus misdirected, and "the things which the Gentiles sacrificed they sacrificed to demons, and not to God" (1 Cor. x. 20).

There is reason to believe that behind great tracts of early mythology, especially these creation sagas, there lies a primeval revelation, conveyed in pictorial language. The pagan myths contain disconnected fragments of this revelation mixed with much extraneous matter; the original picture has been broken into small pieces like a jig-saw puzzle, and these pieces have been scattered and mixed up with pieces belonging to other patterns until it is difficult to discern the original picture. It was a limited measure of insight into this, for example, that led Evangelical writers like Frances Rolleston,¹ J. A. Seiss,² and E. W. Bullinger³ to propound the fanciful theory that the signs of the Zodiac originally related the Gospel story in hieroglyphic form!

The Apocalypse, which so appropriately concludes the canon of Scripture, puts these *disiecta membra* together again and shows

¹ *Maxxaroth or the Constellations* (London, 1862-5).

² *The Gospel in the Stars* (Philadelphia, 1885).

³ *The Witness of the Stars* (London, 1921). Whatever may be said of these works from the viewpoint of astronomy, much of their reasoning is vitiated by etymological monstrosities. Mr. Robert Graves, of course, works the Zodiacal pattern into his fantastic reconstruction of the Gospel narrative in *King Jesus* (London, 1946), but in a totally different fashion.

how the restored pattern, purified from all idolatrous accretion, finds its true interpretation in Christ. The conflict between God and evil which dates back to primeval times is seen to find its resolution in the victory of Christ. In Christianity, as Mr. C. S. Lewis has reminded us, all the myths come true.¹

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¹ Or, at least, all that is true in them comes true—which is not the circular argument that it may at first sight appear to be! See also C. R. North, *The O. T. Interpretation of History* (1946), p. 190, ll. 12-20.