'This and That'

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Luke 17 : 34. ταύτῃ τῇ νυκτί.

When I was at school, if I had translated these words as 'in that night' I should have got into very serious trouble, and if I had pleaded that the context seemed to demand 'that night' rather than 'this night', I should have been told that the Greek language has a perfectly good word for 'that' which the author of the Gospel had used in a similar context only three verses previously, and that if he had wanted to say 'in that night' here also, he could very well have said it. And yet the English versions, i.e. A.V., R.V., R.S.V. and *N.E.B.*, all translate these words 'in that night' and the Bengali version follows in their wake. It was the Vulgate that began it with *in illa nocti* ('in that night'), and the others have followed its lead. I want to consider whether they are justified in doing so, or not.

The rule of translation is that you begin by giving a word its normal meaning, and see what sense it makes; and if it makes no sense that way, you try to think of other meanings that it might have; and if you can only make sense by paying the word over-time to mean something which it has never meant before (like humpty-dumpty), then you begin to wonder whether either the text is corrupt, or your conception of the context is not entirely wrong. So let us begin by giving 'ταύτῃ τῇ νυκτί' its normal sense of 'on this night', a sense which it undoubtedly has in a somewhat similar context of judgment in Luke 12:20 of the man who pulled down his barns to build greater: 'This night shall they require your soul of you.'

If this verse (Luke 17:34) stood alone there would be no difficulty whatever in understanding it as a warning uttered by our Lord that we should be always ready, because this very night somewhere there will be two on one bed, and one will be taken; two women grinding together, and one will be taken. The disciples are startled and ask at once, 'Lord, where will that be?', to which our Lord replies in effect, 'Wherever the circumstances justify it.'[1] As a little 'saying' by itself this is perfectly intelligible, and characteristic of our Lord. The question is whether

[1] *R.S.V.*: 'Where the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.' Luke 17:37.

we can take this as a separate saying or must take it in its present context, and if the latter, whether the context forces us to take it as referring not to 'this night' but to the Last Day.

If we look at the parallel passage in St. Matthew, we see that most of the verses in this paragraph from verse 22 onwards occur in Matt. 24. Verse 33 occurs again in quite a different context both in St. Luke and in the other Synoptists, and the references to Lot and to Lot's wife are peculiar to St. Luke, as is also the disciples' question, 'Where Lord?', in the concluding verse (37), which gives point to the proverb in our Lord's reply. Of the verses that are paralleled in Matt. 24, v. 31 comes in quite a different context, and by the omission of other verses our particular verse in a slightly different form is brought into close connection with the saying about Noah and the flood (Luke 17:27), and consequently 'then' is substituted for 'I am telling you, this night . . .' Matthew undoubtedly meant us to understand the saying about the two men in the field to refer to the same occasion as the previous verses, that is to 'the coming of the Son of Man', and which with him is not clearly distinguished from the Last Day. Here it is very illuminating to compare Matt. 24 with Mark 13. Mark 13 seems to have a fairly clear scheme: (1) vv. 5–8: 'Don't panic; all sorts of things will happen; but this is only the beginning of trouble'; (2) 9–13: A warning of persecutions to come; (3) 14–23: The destruction of Jerusalem and accompanying false prophets; (4) 24–27: 'In *those* days', which are apparently really the end of the world; (5) 28–31: 'Mark the signs of the times, when something, or someone (undefined), is at the door'; (6) 32 ff. (contrasted with the preceding verses): 'But of that day and hour (i.e. the Last Day) no one knows; therefore keep awake'. In Matt. 24:36 the contrast between the foreseeable crisis and the unforeseeable Last Day is preserved, because he quotes verbatim from Mark (or from the same tradition as Mark had received). But I doubt if in his own mind the distinction was so clear.

Luke has quite a different arrangement of our Lord's sayings on these subjects. To begin with he divides them into two separate passages, the one (17:20 ff.), introduced by a question of the Pharisees about the coming of the Kingdom of God, to which our Lord replies, 'It is within you' (or 'in the midst of you'), and the other (21:5 ff.), introduced by a conversation which, unlike Matthew and Mark, only refers to the destruction of the Temple. In this latter passage there are certain significant changes from the synoptic parallels. In v. 9, 'these are the beginning of troubles' has become 'the end will not be at once'. In v. 25, Mark's 'But in those days, after the tribulation' (strongly contrasting what follows with the events accompanying the destruction of the Temple) has been altered to the quite indefinite 'And there shall be signs in the sun . . .', etc. And in v. 28 instead of the reference to the angels gathering the harvest of the world, we have the saying, 'Then look up and lift up your heads; for

your redemption is drawing near.' Luke then makes a fresh start in v. 29, 'And he told them a parable', and in v. 31 the inexplicit 'it (or he) is near' of Mark and Matthew is made explicit: 'The Kingdom of God is near.' Finally in vv. 34 and 35 in his final warning to his disciples is a reference to 'that day'; for it will come upon all that dwell upon the face of the whole earth.

Many, perhaps most, people will say that 'your redemption' in v. 28, 'the kingdom of God' in v. 31, and 'that day' in v. 34 all refer undoubtedly to the Last Day. I wish to question that, and to suggest that St. Luke deliberately compiled his quotations of our Lord's words in such a way as to leave the matter open, since he believed that visitations of our Lord with power, and judgments of the world, and days of redemption for the faithful were not to be confined to the end of the world, but that such a day might come to anyone or any nation at any time.

With this theory in mind let us return to chapter 17, verse 22. Our Lord has already said, 'It is no use trying to forecast the coming of the kingdom, because it is there among you (or within you).' Then St. Luke quotes him as saying, 'The days are coming when you will desire to see *one of the days* of the Son of Man.' Why '*one* of the days'? There must be some valid reason why St. Luke used this expression. The coming, when He came, was to be on one day (v. 30) and not a prolonged affair. And anyhow, if it were prolonged, he might simply have used the plural 'the days of the Son of Man', as a schoolboy looks forward to his *holidays* as a prolonged period. Why then 'one of the days'? Unless it was a thing which could happen more than once? What I believe St. Luke is representing our Lord as saying is roughly this: 'There will be days of crisis, which will be days of visitation, and redemption, and judgment. When they come there will be only one thing to think about, and that will be God. It will be fatal to be thinking about worldly cares. And in case you think such a day is far removed, I am telling you that this very night there will be two on one bed, one will be taken and the other left: two women grinding together, one will be taken and the other left.' 'Good heavens, Lord! Where?' say the startled disciples. 'Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.' Where God sees fit, there it will happen.

The advantage of this interpretation is primarily that we are not forced into giving an unnatural meaning to the Greek word ταύτῃ 'this'. It is not absolutely impossible to make the word refer directly to the sentence three verses above and mean the day there referred to. But it is most unnatural to do so, and it is only the presupposition that our Lord spoke of only one day of judgment, and that the Last Day, that has led to its being thus interpreted. I personally think that the varying order in which our Lord's sayings are quoted, in Luke 17 and 21, Matt. 25 and Mark 13 respectively, make it extremely likely that the source or sources

from which they were quoting did not give the sayings as a connected discourse, but as a collection of aphorisms which the evangelists collected in what they considered a suitable order. If that be the case, if Matthew had the same presupposition as presumably St. Jerome had when he translated 'this night' as if it had been 'that night', he might quite reasonably alter 'this night' into the simple 'then', which we find there, and also omit the startled question, 'Where Lord ?', which in the altered context would have no particular meaning. Luke, on the other hand, finding the original saying to run 'I tell you, this night there shall be two . . .' preserved it intact along with the disciples' question as a fitting climax to our Lord's warnings. But whether Luke found the sayings as separate ones or as a connected discourse, I suggest that he understood it as a present warning and preserved it as such.

I think that this point has importance, because, if my interpretation is correct, it means that we find among our Lord's so-called eschatological warnings one which is by no means eschatological in the normally accepted sense. He speaks of a day of reckoning for someone somewhere (which might be anyone anywhere), which could happen any day. 'Be ye also ready' takes on a different shade of meaning. Prepared by this, one goes on to consider the problem caused by the apparent inconsistency between the verses which speak of the signs of the coming of the Son of Man, and the verse which says, 'But of that day and hour no one knows, not the angels in heaven, not even the Son, but only the Father'. The explanation offered that it is the day and the hour which no man knows, but the time of the end in general can be foretold has never seemed to me at all satisfactory, since we are again and again told that He comes 'as a thief in the night'. The contrast in Mark 13:32 is between the days referred to previously, the days which could be, and should be, foreseen by those who have eyes to see, and THAT day. The same contrast occurs in Mark 13:24 between the woes accompanying the destruction of the Temple, and the woes preceding the final coming of the Son of Man. The significant word in both cases is the Greek word for 'that' (ἐκείνῃ) which is consistently used in the LXX version of the prophets for the great day of visitation, except when it is called more explicitly 'the day of the Lord'.

Can we say that our Lord warned his disciples of many comings, many visitations which would be accompanied by special times of woe ? It will certainly be very convenient if we may. It will remove the difficulty of our Lord's saying that 'this generation shall not pass away till all this happens'. It happened, he came, in the Neronic persecution, and in the destruction of Jerusalem. Again it removes the inconsistency between the sayings like 'Of the fig-tree learn her parable . . .' which tell us that there will be signs by which we shall know he is at the door, and the other sayings which insist that his coming will be

unexpected. We do in fact see our Lord's presence both in judgment and in redemption in all the great crises of the world's history. In those times there has been a judgment, and those who were 'for salvation' have found their salvation both in suffering and in service. He is here now in all the unrest and disquiet of the present world both for condemnation and for redemption. So he told us to read the signs of the times and to realize his special presence in all times of fear and trouble.

But what justification have we for this interpretation of our Lord's words? I think the prophets of the Old Testament are on our side. There is not room here to make a detailed examination of all the references to the 'Day of the Lord'. But it is not unfair to say that seldom is it conceived of as a last 'Great Assize', but rather as an imminent judgment after which the world will continue for an indefinite period. In Joel 1:15 the 'Day of the Lord' simply refers to the imminent plague of locusts, in which the prophet sees the judgment of God. But the same prophet also has prophecies of a later and greater catastrophe and a greater blessing. One can look also at Micah. In 2:4 'that day' is a day of captivity for Israel, and in 5:10 'that day' is one of judgment on Israel's enemies. In Amos 5:18 'the day of the Lord', which is to be 'darkness and not light', is the day when they had prayed for deliverance, but found captivity. In nearly every case where 'the Day of the Lord' or 'that day' is mentioned the emphasis is either on judgment (on God's people or on his enemies), or on restoration and vindication of Israel and Judah, after which the world will continue presumably in an improved condition. Sometimes indeed this improved condition is an ideal condition, and in these passages we come nearer to the later idea of a last and final judgment. The conclusion is that the prophets looked to a coming judgment, which was to belong to this world, and a coming vindication, also of the Israel of this world: and they did not look beyond it. And because they did not look beyond it, the way was open for later generations influenced by the Apocalyptic writings which came after the prophets, and the undoubted New Testament teaching of a last Great Assize, to read such an idea into the prophetic messages also, wrongly, since that idea had not yet developed.

Now it has been very plausibly suggested[2] that the prophetic idea of the 'Day of the Lord' has been transferred bodily in St. Luke's Gospel to 'the Day of the Son of Man'. If that is so, then we shall expect the same kind of emphasis in the use of this phrase when it applies to the coming of the Son of Man, as we found in the prophets. The emphasis, that is to say, will be on a visitation, a judgment, and a vindication of the righteous, and not on a final Great Assize. The idea of the final day when

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[2] *See* A. W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament*, Chapter 7, especially p. 120.

'every eye shall see him' and 'the angels shall gather in the elect from the four corners of the earth' occurs, and must not be neglected. But there are also previous visitations and judgments. It seems to me that this is recognizable in Mark 13; barely traceable in Matthew, whose thought is all of the Last Judgment; and that it is the clue to the proper understanding of Luke. The parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16 ff.) and the teaching in Luke 12:35–48 point the same way and here we have that strange phrase, 'One of the days of the Son of Man'. The parable of Dives and Lazarus presupposes an individual judgment at the time of our death, such as I maintain is the presupposition behind the verse with which we started this discussion, 'I am telling you, this night one shall be taken and another left'. It has always been a difficulty how that could refer to the Last Day, when *all* shall be taken, bad and good together.

It would seem that our Lord in his teaching would have us mindful of three kinds of judgment and three kinds of visitation, the individual visitation of our death, the visitations and judgments which come in times of national crisis or of catastrophic events, and also the last and final judgment day. Perhaps he deliberately refrained from making clear distinctions between the three, because to him it mattered little, and he would wish it to matter little to us also: 'It is not for you to know times and seasons, which are in the hands of God—get on with the work of being my witnesses.'[3] The important thing for the disciples to understand was that they were 'as men who will have to give account'. Therefore he said: 'Be ye always ready . . . I am telling you, tonight someone will be taken somewhere.'

But he knew the shape of things to come if not the actual events. He knew the troubles the disciples would have to face and how they would long, like the Psalmist, for visible vindication; they would long for a day of visitation such as the prophets had foretold, for 'a day of the Lord', 'one of the days of the Son of Man'. But they would not see it: no, not in the form that they expected. But the visitation would be there with judgment and redemption in the times of special trouble. There would be judgment because some would succumb to the evil of the times, and redemption because others 'by their endurance', and by their shining deeds of mercy would 'gain their lives'.[4]

I plead therefore that first of all we be allowed to take the language of the Gospels as we find it, and when we find 'this night' translate it as 'this night' and not 'that night', and that starting from there we examine our presuppositions and see if they are correct. Is it possible that our Lord did speak of other 'comings' besides that of the Last Day? Were there to be foreseeable comings, as well as that one last unforeseeable

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[3] Cf. Acts 1:7-8.
[4] Luke 21:19.

Advent? This after all is what we normally teach and what corresponds with the history of the last nineteen centuries. In every crisis he has come with judgment. If our Lord, who knew the shape of things to come, foretold it, so much the better. And we are relieved of having to explain away any inconsistency in his sayings. And as for tonight—well, we all know any one of us may be taken and the other left.

Editorial

This number of the *Journal* will be the last to appear from the Editorial Board under the Chairmanship of the Revd. Dr. William Stewart. His retirement as Principal of Serampore College and his leaving India necessarily mean his retirement as our Chairman. He has been closely connected with the *Journal* ever since his arrival at Serampore, first as Registrar, then as Principal. His fellow-editors, past and present, are most grateful to him for his advice and encouragement and for the wisdom of his leadership. We wish him and Mrs. Stewart every blessing as they return to Scotland.

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We welcome to our Editorial Board the Revd. K. V. Mathew, a priest of the Mar Thoma Church, and Professor of Old Testament at Serampore College.

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The July–September number of the *Journal* will contain articles on the theme, 'The Cosmic Christ', presented at a joint Roman Catholic-Protestant Colloquium, held at Serampore in December 1965.