

The virtuous middle ground in the ethical sense may be expressed thus:

Do not swerve to the right or to the left;
turn your foot away from evil (Prov 4,27).

God is above and outside both human and cosmic extremes. However, the poet of the exile can only express this using a series of polarisations: first and last, before and after, near and far, hidden and present. Given the coherence of Isa 40–55 the verses which I am going to select here are in no way out of place and present a unitary vision:

It is I, the Lord, I am the first,
and to the last of them I am He (Isa 41,4).

Before me there was no god fashioned
nor ever shall be after me (Isa 43,10).

I am the first and I am the last
and there is no god but me (Isa 44,6).

I make the light, I create darkness,
author alike of prosperity and trouble (Isa 45,7).

Thou art a god that hidest thyself (Isa 45,15).

They shall know that it is I who speak:
here I am (Isa 52,6).

A load on me from your birth,
carried by me from the womb:
till you grow old I am He,
and when white hairs come,
I will carry you still (Isa 46,3-4).

The heavens grow murky as smoke,
the earth wears into tatters like a garment,...
but my deliverance is everlasting
and my saving power shall never wane (Isa 51,6; cf. Ps 102).

Inquire of the Lord while he is present,
call upon him when he is close at hand...
for as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways (Isa 55,6.9).

CHAPTER VIII

Images

I. Introduction

We come to the most important, and most difficult, chapter: images. Images are the glory, perhaps the essence of poetry, the enchanted planet of the imagination, a limitless galaxy, ever alive and ever changing. Is it not presumptuous to attempt to explain such a world created for contemplation and surprised delight? Perhaps, in the knowledge that our attempt is condemned to failure, we might first skirt around the subject to decorate it with some peripheral reflexions.

a) The human spirit experiences reality through the senses and then tries to transform its experiences into words by describing the objects perceived. The description may be detailed and leisurely, or it may be limited to a couple of well-chosen and decisive features. b) The human spirit undergoes experiences, makes discoveries and establishes relationships between different things, finding harmony and unity in the plurality it sees. c) The imagination takes over experience and transforms it into a new and coherent system. d) The human spirit goes through what can be perceived with the senses only to go beyond it, it penetrates what can be perceived in order to discover something more. e) The human spirit seeks the help of sense experience in order to approach with it something which is transcendent, in order to express what cannot be expressed.

a) The first section concerns description. I have already dealt with it as a particular genre alongside others. It has its place here too, as a technique, because images always include a certain element of description. But very often the descriptive element is simply a bare outline, so that we cannot speak of description, or it is simply concerned with a couple of features and we may call it a characterisation.

Jeremiah is able to accuse the Lord: "Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?" (Jer 15,18). The image is not detailed, simply noted and very suggestive in its context. Job on the other hand reproaches his friends for their lack of loyalty:

My brothers have been treacherous
 as a mountain stream,
 like the channels of streams that run dry,
 which turn dark with ice
 or are hidden with piled-up snow;
 or they vanish the moment they are in spate,
 dwindle in the heat and are gone.
 Then the caravans, winding hither and thither,
 go up into the wilderness and perish;
 the caravans of Tema look for their waters,
 travelling merchants of Sheba hope for them;
 but they are disappointed, for all their confidence.
 They reach them only to be balked (Job 6,15-20).

In this case the poet takes advantage of the image to make a short journey contemplating the changing landscape and the people who pass through it.

The concise descriptive note is the more frequent form. While Job 7,6 says: "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle", in Isa 38,12 Hezekiah reflects: "Like a weaver I have rolled up my life, he cuts me off from the loom". In the latter text the poet contrasts the regular, cumulative movement of rolling with the brutal and pitiless "he cuts me off".

This is the first stage. In every image the contribution of the senses is seen in the language.

b) No less important is the element of correlation, the relationships found between the two panels of the image. This needs more time to explain. The correlation may be on different levels.

The relationship may be between two perceived sense objects, between the spiritual and the sensed object, between the general and the individual, the abstract and the concrete, the transcendent and the empirical. ...

Let me begin with the easiest case, that of two perceived sense objects. Ben Sira contemplates "the hoarfrost upon the earth like salt", the ice on the pool "like a breastplate" and the snow "like locusts alighting" (Sir 43,19-20). We must bear in mind that the placing together of the two objects does not necessarily put them on the same level. In elements like snow, frost and cold there is clearly something which transcends man, which he cannot control or manipulate. In comparing the two objects the poet domesticates these elements without removing their fascination. There is no exact correspondence between the objects, even though they are both perceived by the senses.

c) Let us turn our attention to human qualities in social life. What about the effect the fool has on others? This is not something which is perceived by the senses, seen or touched. In English we might exclaim: "What a drag he is!" With this expression we compare our experience of the fool with our impression of a great weight to be pulled along. Let us look at a Hebrew proverb:

Stone is a burden and sand a dead weight,
 but to be vexed by a fool
 is more burdensome than either (Prov 27,3).

The image is very clear, and presents very effectively the feelings we have towards such a person.

d) Let us move on to an example which seems to belie what I am saying:

A full stomach refuses even honey,
 to a hungry stomach even the bitter is sweet (Prov 27,7).

The descriptive panel is certainly there: the full or hungry stomach. But where is the other panel? This is simply alluded to so that the reader can discover it for himself and thus be just as pleased by his skill at understanding as he is by the poet's cleverness. The object which is sensed, the appetite, leads the reader to think in more general terms of man's cravings and desires.

e) The object of comparison might however be something which transcends man. Something which moves the ordinary mortal and leaves him speechless may be captured by the poet through a comparison and fixed in a poetic image. Let me give two examples of this rather more difficult type. Isn't our consciousness something rather mysterious? How is it that we can be present to ourselves? Who is it who does the perceiving? Is the subject and the object the same? No alien is present in this interior world, which can summon up in a moment things which are absent. Who is it who summons them up? The poet does not ask such questions. This would be to abandon poetic intuition and begin philosophical reflexion. But the poet wonders at the mystery, and does not hesitate to say something about it:

The spirit of man is a lamp of the Lord,
 searching all his innermost parts (Prov 20,27).

On the sense level, we have a cellar or a store-cupboard within us where we keep what we have experienced; the householder lights a

lamp to go and rummage around, or simply to browse. This lamp was given by the Lord when he gave man the breath of life (*nēšāmā*).

In the following example the poet is explicit. He is not speaking about individual consciousness but about the mysterious relationship between the sexes, the perpetual enigma about which so much has been written without ever reaching an explanation. This time the poet does not say what cannot be said, but says that it cannot be said. Nevertheless he does not remain silent but generously and calculatingly he exalts the mystery with a build-up of three images:

Three things are too wonderful for me;
four I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a serpent on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a maiden (Prov 30,18-19).



Whoever wrote these lines is a great poet. Are we now going to try to explain how he explains what is inexplicable?

f) And what should we say about God? Maybe here the best thing is to remain silent, as Job 13,5 suggests: "Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom!" Except that the poet is there to speak, he has to express himself, and the inspired poets had the task of bequeathing us vocabulary for speaking about God and to God. God is my rock, my soul is thirsty for God. God is my rock, and in him I take refuge. God is the light which makes me see light. The two elements here are the sense object and the One who is Other and Transcendent. (I will return to this.) If theology is speaking about God, the biblical poets constructed a proto-theology. If theology is reflecting on God, then we should think and rethink these images. The "way of a man with a maiden" was too difficult for the poet to express; another poet, imagining the crossing of the Red Sea as a theophany in a storm, ended up by saying of God:

Thy way was through the sea,
thy path through the great waters;
yet thy footprints were unseen (Ps 77,20).

A poetic image of God's passage through the waters much like Moses' vision of the Lord's back.

A. Dulles, "Symbol, Myth and the Biblical Revelation", *TS* 27 (1966) 1-26.

As I explained the different cases I have made it clear that the correspondences are always of two panels. And when one of the correlated objects was not stated we have uncovered it. The essential thing about poetic imagery is this placing of two levels alongside each other: it may be the approaching in spirit of what is far away, it may be the fusing of two objects without confusing their diversity, it may be a union which is not simply juxtaposition. It is as if different beings correspond to each other and desire each other's presence (like the northern pine and the southern palm tree in Heine's poem). It is the poet who is the match-maker.

Of course, correspondences between beings are innumerable, and the last verse of poetry therefore will never have been written. When distances are overcome and unexpected similarities discovered, a poetic image is born. It will provoke surprise, joy, recognition. What has war to do with the hearth, an invading army with a boiling pot? Jeremiah replied in 1,13-14:

- I see a boiling pot, its contents spilling out from the north....
- Out of the north evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land.

What do a city being conquered and a pool have in common? Nahum replies in 2,8:

Nineveh is like a pool whose waters run away.
"Halt! Halt!" they cry; but none turns back.

So we have established that the poetic image is not mere juxtaposition of similar objects, not simply the giving of an added meaning to a word. In the poetic image there is in some way the placing together and interchange of certain qualities. That is our conclusion, for the time being.

II. Cautionary Remarks

As we begin the study of biblical images we must beware of certain common errors. They may perhaps be applied to other literatures, but we must denounce their application to biblical literature.

a) Let me begin with what is known as the *oriental imagination* (about which one hears gradually less and less). It has been said that in the Bible the oriental imagination runs riot: this statement can be

understood as an accusation of excessive behaviour, or as a condescending assessment. It is therefore either a calumny or a mistake. This false judgement is based on comparing the style proper to the academic professions with poetic style. If in fact we compare Hebrew poetry with others, we will appreciate the moderation of the biblical poets. Fray Luis de León had already made this observation when he compared the Song of Songs to love poems of his time. Commenting on Cant 4,1 — “Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead” — he writes:

What causes surprise here is the comparison which seems gross and different from what one is used to. It would be acceptable if the text spoke of locks of gold or said that her hair rivals the rays of the sun in fulness and colour, as our poets say. I would answer that if one thinks of it correctly, the comparison is graceful and quite proper, provided one takes into account the person who is speaking and exactly what it is that he wishes to praise about the hair of the beloved.

After the exaggerations of the baroque, the symbolist movement, creationism and surrealism, all this about the “oriental imagination” makes us laugh. It is only the apocalyptic writers who really let themselves go in using their imagination.

b) The second danger is more insidious, because it comes from a mentality which is firmly rooted and little criticised. It is found in the expression: images serve to *dress up ideas*. The hackneyed image of “dressing up” will help us to analyse this mentality.

The supposition is that first of all comes the idea or concept, which the normal person will enunciate with its corresponding vocabulary. The poet on the other hand, in the interests of decency or fashion, searches around in his imaginative wardrobe, gets out a set of clothes and dresses up his concept or idea. It is the task of the intelligent reader to remove the clothes and understand the idea. If the reader cannot do this alone, the exegete will help him. The biblical text says “the hand, the arm of God”; but it means “the power”. The text says “I take refuge in the shadow of your wings”; but it means “I seek the protection of God”.

Following this path we can translate the Bible into a language which is more abstract and less expressive, but we will not reach the original meaning. We are dealing with poets, and what comes before the image is not the concept, but the formless experience. The image gave a certain form to the experience; it was the first vision or spiritual reflexion, the first formulation which could be communicated.

By means of the image the author understood what he had experienced and expressed it and it is the image which he intends to put across.

The tragic experience of mortal danger which approaches and increases is expressed in the symbol “the waters have come up to my neck, I sink in deep mire” (Ps 69,2-3); “danger of inevitable death” is a later conceptual translation which we may wish to apply, not a mental formulation of the poet which came before the symbol. The man attacked by his enemies and about to fall feels like “a leaning wall, a tottering fence” (Ps 62,4), and not “like a contingent being exposed to human hostility”. Man’s deep desire for God is experienced as a thirst: “My soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee, as in a dry and weary land where no water is” (Ps 63,2). It is a later generation which may wish to speak of “an intense and total desire for God”. “Evil talk, false accusation” are precise concepts. Before arriving at this conceptual precision the poet could speak thus of verbal attacks: “... who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows, shooting from ambush at the blameless, shooting at him suddenly and without fear” (Ps 64,4-5). This may be less precise, but it is more alive, and no less real and authentic.

Conceptual translation is legitimate as long as its working, its function and its limits are recognised. We have seen one way of viewing the process: experience — conceptual formulation — imaginative dressing up — conceptual translation. I proposed another sequence: experience — imaginative formulation — conceptual translation. The first sequence does work in forms which are purely didactic and in certain allegorical exercises. The teacher knows that putting forward ideas in images helps the pupil to understand. But the first sequence cannot be applied to the Psalms or to prophetic poetry in general. Anyone who tries to apply this sequence throughout the biblical material will neither understand nor be able to explain biblical language, but will put something else in its place. The second sequence is legitimate as long as its limitations are realised. Conceptual translation may gain in precision but it loses in richness, it may gain in clarity but it loses in allusiveness, it may be more manageable but it loses its immediate impact. Furthermore, this added conceptual translation must lead us back to the original language. It is simply a passing stage. The symbolic language of the Bible remains always the essential.

c) The image brings together and places alongside two beings. When they cannot be distinguished or when one disappears, the image ceases to work. For such cases we may use the terms

premetaphor and *lexicalised metaphor*. When the grandson of Victor Hugo (*The Art of Being Grandfather*), visiting the zoo, pointed to a crocodile and said “it’s made of handbags”, he was not using a poetic image. For him that animal really seemed of the same substance as his mother’s handbag. If I did not know that a child had said it, I might read it as an image. It is not an image when a Hebrew says that the sun comes out and goes across the sky; but it certainly is when he says it comes out “like a bridegroom leaving his chamber” (Ps 19,6). If for the Hebrews the emotions really have bodily organs with which they are associated it is quite logical that by metonymy the emotion may be referred to with the name of the organ. Thus ‘*ap*, “nostril”, may mean “anger” without being an image; a “bad eye” will refer to “meanness”.

On the other extreme we find the lexicalised image. This is the image which due to excessive use has lost its reference to the sense object. The lexicon of any language contains very many words of this type: the foot of the page, the head of the department. Not only individual words but also phrases and comparisons: to burn with anger, to grease the palm, like greased lightning. Something similar happens in Hebrew poetry, though it is not so easy to identify. When I come across for the tenth time “numerous as the sand on the seashore” I may begin to think that the image has become part of the lexicon. “Rock” as a title of God may be another case in point. We have no means of being sure, but we must consider the possibility. And we must remember that in biblical exegesis there is a lack of imagination and perception rather than a surfeit. Finally, let us bear in mind that a lexicalised image may regain its sense quality when used by a skilled writer.

d) We must also be wary of something which follows logically from the preceding point, the hasty *spiritualisation* of what is perceived by the senses. Let me explain by referring to the word *nepeš*, the word which perhaps more than any other has suffered from this spiritualisation. Often, too often, it is translated as “soul”; often it means “person”, “life”; it also means “breath” and “appetite”, and also “neck”. When *nepeš* means neck, it must not be translated as “soul” (*anima*).

First, some obvious cases: “the waters reached my neck” (Jon 2,6); “the waters have come up to my neck” (Ps 69,2); “the torrent would have gone over our neck” (Ps 124,4). In the Vulgate we read: “Intraverunt aquae usque ad animam meam”. Again, when the text speaks of thirst, it is normal to think of the throat, since we do not feel thirst with our souls. Consequently, Ps 63,2: “my throat thirsts for you” (perhaps a symbolic use of the senses; see the end of this chapter).

Following this line of thought, the phrase *mar nepeš* could mean “to feel bitterness in the throat”; as long as the expression has not been lexicalised to mean simply any interior bitterness, even metaphorical. The frequency of the phrase could lead us to consider it a set phrase: 1 Sam 1,10; 22,2; 2 Sam 17,8; Isa 38,15; Ezek 27,31; Job 3,20; 7,11; 10,1; 21,25, etc. I cannot think the same of the expression *qšr npš bnpš* / *qšr npš* ‘l..., which is usually translated “to love deeply”. Read with some imagination it would be “to bid neck to neck”, perhaps an image of two animals in the yoke together, walking and working side by side. Since the phrase is found only twice in the whole of the OT, Gen 44,30 and 1 Sam 18,1 (of father and son, and of friends), we cannot affirm that the expression has become lexicalized.

The sense of Ps 105,18 is clear: “his neck was put in a collar of iron”, parallel with “his feet were hurt with fetters” (the Vulgate translates: “ferrum pertransiit animam eius”). I have no doubts about the meaning of Jer 4,10: “the sword has reached their necks” (Vulgate: “et ecce pervenit gladius usque ad animam”). If this is true I must be consistent and read Isa 53,12, *he’ērā lammāwet napšō*, in a realistic way, “he bared his neck to die”; this is in clear harmony with the silence and total surrender of the Servant. Also one ought to take in a realistic sense *mitnaqqēš be’napšī*, 1 Sam 28,9, “putting a noose around my neck”, with a metaphorical meaning. Ps 19,8, *mešibat nāpeš*, would mean “restores the breath”. Ps 31,8, *bešārôt napšī*, quite apart from “the adversities of my life” could also mean “they are at my very neck”, with metaphorical meaning too. In Ps 107,26, which speaks of shipwreck in a violent storm, we are not being told about a generic “evil”, but about seasickness in particular; it is not concerned with the soul, but with the body from the neck down: “their stomachs were revolted by seasickness” (Vulgate: “anima eorum deficiebat in malis”). Similarly in Isa 29,8 there is talk of “the dry throat” and “the empty stomach”. Isa 1,14 could be “my heart/soul hates” or “I feel nausea”.

In our modern languages too we still have expressions which go back to the practice of beheading, and of binding prisoners around the neck. These expressions often have metaphorical value or have become lexicalised. We have the English expressions “to cut someone’s throat”, “a lump in one’s throat”. In Spanish: “con el agua al cuello, cortar el cuello, con la soga al cuello”. In German: “es kostet ihm den Hals, den Hals abschneiden, brechen”. In Italian: “con la corda al collo, prendere per il collo, rompere il collo, piegare il collo”. In our modern languages we can sense when the image is still alive and when it has lost its vigour. But in Hebrew it is difficult to make this judgement.

e) I will add a fifth point, a piece of advice. Both the *reader* and the interpreter of the Bible must alert their imagination when they read or study biblical poetry. What has been written with imagination, must also be read with imagination, provided the individual has imagination and it is in working order.

Let me illustrate with examples.

Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord,
keep watch over the door of my lips!
Incline not my heart to any evil (Ps 141,3-4).

Even though for a Hebrew it may not be a metaphor to say that words come out of the mouth, it is a fine image to see a guard at the door of the mouth to prevent undesirable words from leaving. Ben Sira goes further and pleads: "Who would place a captain to guard my thoughts!" (Sir 23,2). On the other hand, I would say that "to turn the heart" is a lexicalised formula, read in similar contexts (Ps 119,112; Prov 2,2; Josh 24,23; 2 Sam 19,15; 1 Kgs 8,48; 11,2.3.4, etc.).

Although the image of the hunt, with nets and traps, is very common, the accumulation and development of the images gives a certain value to Ps 141,9-10:

Keep me from the trap which they have laid for me,
and from the snares of evildoers!
Let the wicked together fall into their own nets,
while I escape.

The root *šrr* originally meant to be narrow, to constrict; it develops its meaning to refer to the objective danger, or the corresponding subjective feeling of being under constraint. The poet may use the lexicalised metaphor with an antonym which makes the spatial quality apparent again: "Thou hast given me room when I was in dire straits" (Ps 4,2).

I have translated Ps 143,3: "He crushes me alive against the ground"; literally it would be "he crushes against the earth my life". How does the ordinary reader understand this? There is more here than is immediately apparent. Man is dust and will return to dust, and when he dies he will return to the earth (cf. Ps 146,4); this dust which was a living being is now crushed and trodden down and becomes part of the ground we walk over. This is how man enters the kingdom of death. Ps 144,4 says: "Man is like a breath, his days are like a passing shadow". These comparisons are repeated in the OT.

One can easily appreciate how deeply cultivation and architecture are valued when one sees the comparisons used in Ps 144,12:

May our sons in their youth
Be like plants full grown,
our daughters like corner pillars
cut for the structure of a palace.

Without having to imagine caryatids, the vision is still delightful. The Song of Songs has recourse to architecture when the bride describes the lover: "His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of gold" (Cant 5,15). Ben Sira affirms: "Children and the building of a city establish a man's name" (Sir 40,19). Of the beautiful woman he says: "Like pillars of gold on a base of silver, so are firm legs over beautiful feet" (Sir 26,18).

The statement that the stars form the army of the Lord can lose its quality as an image due to frequent repetition. In Ps 147,4 we have the image of the chief who recruits an army or summons his servants: "He determines the number of the stars, he gives to all of them their names". Ben Sira also takes pleasure in this image:

At the command of the Holy One they stand as ordered,
they never relax in their watches (Sir 43,10).

We do not know whether in ancient times the military function of the stars was taken literally. We read as an image a verse of the so-called Song of Deborah, which seems very ancient:

From heaven fought the stars,
from their courses they fought against Sisera (Judg 5,20).

In the following line the Kishon torrent also takes part in the action, a decisive factor in the victory (like the river Scamander against Achilles):

The torrent Kishon swept them away,
the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon (Judg 5,21).

III. A Beginning of Classification

a) The simplest way of joining two panels is the *comparison*. Various particles can serve as hinges to join the two elements together, like the two pictures of a diptych. They can also be placed

together without any particle between them: similarity holds them together. They can also be joined together as subject and predicate. The same effect is achieved and the choice of any of these techniques is not usually relevant on the stylistic level. Furthermore, in passing from one language to another one has to bear in mind the literary conventions of each language. What is still of great expressive value in the original may turn out to be dull if translated literally into another language. See *Proverbios*, pp. 128-133.

In the following translations I keep very close to the original so that the different techniques may be plain.

Remove the dross from the silver
and the smith will make a vessel.
Remove the wicked man from the presence of the king
and his throne will be established in righteousness
(Prov 25,4-5).

The two have simply been placed alongside each other. The repetition of the verb "remove" serves as the hinge. The two pictures are very similar in the first half, less so in the second half. The precious vessel and the royal throne are related.

Like the freshness of snow in the time of harvest,
a faithful messenger to those who send him (Prov 25,13).

This example begins with the comparative particle; the verb "to be" is unnecessary in Hebrew.

With patience a ruler may be convinced
and soft tongue breaks a bone (Prov 25,15).

In English the "and" joining the two triple elements seems strange. Perhaps a colon should replace it.

Prov 25,18 is remarkable for the triple comparison before the corresponding element is stated: "A war club, and a sword, and a sharp arrow, a man bearing false witness against his neighbour". Note that the three elements of comparison come from the same field.

Job 9,26 simply duplicates the comparison: "My days slip by like skiffs of reed, like an eagle swooping on the prey".

The final example can serve too to give an important warning about the so-called *tertium comparationis*. The teaching of rhetorical principles has supposed that between the two elements under comparison there is one common point or factor, a third or

mediating element which allows the comparison to be made. The two elements are supposed to have nothing else in common. In fact, this may happen, but usually it is not the case at all. Certainly, the obvious point of comparison serves to bring the two elements together, but once they are together we cannot avoid keeping them together and discovering other similarities and dissimilarities. Mechanical explanations are not appropriate here. In the last example, from Job: his days slip by "like skiffs of reed", without clamour, one after the other, until they are lost from sight, they are the past. Or they group together in the distant future, and suddenly swoop down onto the prey, the poet himself. One future day, whether distant or near, it will be all finished with him. In a case like this the rationalistic explanation of the *tertium comparationis* is quite out of place. It is not insignificant that the poet chose as his points of comparison the water of a calm river or sea, and the air where the birds of prey circle. In between the two is the "third element", poor, suffering Job himself.

Sometimes the comparison intends to contrast two elements, so that some would say this is not true comparison. I think, since two things are placed together, we should also speak of this in this context. Let me take a fairly developed biblical comparison. It frequently happens that human life is compared to a flower, to the grass which dries up (Ps 90,4-6), to the leaves of a tree (Isa 64,5; 1,30): this is due to their frailty. Other comparisons with plants focus on their vitality, like Prov 11,28; Jer 17,8, etc. The really adventurous thing is to take up the well-known comparison in order to challenge it. Man and the tree are not similar: the tree has hope; man does not:

For there is hope for a tree,
if it be cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that its shoots will not cease.
Though its root grow old in the earth,
and its stump die in the ground,
yet at the scent of water it will bud
and put forth branches like a young plant.
But man dies, and is laid low;
man breathes his last, and where is he? (Job 14,7-10).

The slow description of what happens to the tree makes the brief description of human destiny even more tragic. This comparison was designed to bring out the contrasts.

D.F. Payne, "A Perspective on the Use of Simile in the Old Testament", *Semitics* 1 (1970) 111-125.

D. Rosner, "The Simile and its Use in the Old Testament", *Semitics* 4 (1974) 37-46.

b) The *metaphor* is usually distinguished from the comparison at least by two characteristics: it consists of one word or phrase, and it does not give the two elements of comparison, but simply substitutes one for the other. It is as if only one of the elements were given so that the reader could use it to guess the other element. It says one thing, it means another. In this case too some people speak of *tertium comparationis*. We might use the linguistic model of paradigmatic substitution. In the paradigm “grow – develop – grow up – reach adulthood” we could add the expression “shoot up”. Instead of saying “he is growing”, I could say “he is shooting up”, using a metaphorical expressions more commonly used, still in a metaphorical sense, of plants. In this case it is used of a young man.

It is clear that the metaphorical expression occupies the place of the proper expression, in this case “to grow”. Thus far the model of the paradigmatic substitution is fine: words with metaphorical meaning can fit into a paradigm *a posteriori*, as it were. But this is not simply a substitution, and nothing more. The metaphorical expression brings in its own world, its own connotations, and it brings them in quite aggressively. It does not simply enter timidly, but brings with it all its range of meaning, and perhaps a whole new context. Only the tips of the toes touch the trampoline, but the full weight of the body is on it.

P. Ricœur, *La métaphore vive* (OrPh; Paris 1975).

The rapid, one word metaphor is not however common in Hebrew poetry. One is surprised by the scarcity of metaphors, though not of images.

The words of the enemy are “words that devour” in Ps 52,6: *dibrê bāla*. In the next verse comes the threat to the wicked man: God “will uproot you”; both in Hebrew and in English this is from the lexical root “root”: man is planted in the land of the living, the living earth. In that earth he has his roots and grows; God violently uproots these roots from the life-giving soil. The false language of the wicked is “more slippery than butter”, his words are “softer than oil” (Ps 55,22).

An individual prays to God: “Collect my tears in your wine-skin”, Ps 56,9. The wine-skin is metaphorical; by using this word the poet transforms the whole phrase, the verb “collect” is altered, and the tears of the man come to represent every aspect of his troubled situation. In Ps 58,7 the Psalmist prays: “Tear out the fangs of the lions”, every element of which is a metaphor. Ps 59,13 asks that the wicked “may be trapped in their pride”, with the verb *lākad* = “to capture”. In Ps 69,10 the Psalmist says: “Zeal for your

house devours me”; the metaphorical verb “devour” makes the “zeal” into a person or an animal. Isa 66,14 promises: “Your bones shall flourish”.

It is not easy to find pure metaphors in Hebrew poetry. One always has a question about pre-metaphors, and post-metaphors or lexicalised metaphors. When Ps 65,9 says: “The doors of morning and evening you fill with joy”, are these doors a metaphor, or are they a proper statement from one who imagines that the sun really comes out from a door? We of course value it as a beautiful metaphor; due to our discoveries, which are already part of our nature, we cannot take it in a literal sense. At the other extreme we have the stereotyped phrase *hārôn ’ap* = “burning of the nostrils” = “burning anger”. There is perhaps reason for saying that the expression results from a human process: heat comes to the face of an individual, then this is identified with an interior emotion, and finally we have a cliché.

It is arguable that in Hebrew poetic culture there was not yet sufficient imaginative agility to produce the pure metaphor; still less the original and surprising metaphor. The fact is that the poets prefer to delay and widen the metaphor, treating it like a comparison.

We might say “I am full of anger”; the word “full” is in this case a lexicalised metaphor. The poet may feel it is still a metaphor. An old man is “full of years”, Jer 6,11; a prince is “full of wisdom”, Ezek 28,12. A prophet may feel “full” of the anger of God, just as a cup is full (Ps 75,9); Jeremiah is full, overflowing, with anger:

- I am full of the wrath of the Lord;
I am weary of holding it in.
- Pour it out upon the children in the street,
and upon the gathering of young men, also (Jer 6,11).

c) I distinguish the *allegory* by two qualities. One is general: in its production the conceptual perception comes first and the imaginative transposition follows. The second quality concerns its development: there is strict correspondence, element for element, between the intellectual perception and the imaginative projection of it. A simple concept cannot produce an allegory, a global and continuous perception cannot produce one. The intellectual concept must have several elements and the image must parallel this. If we give small letters to the intellectual perception and capitals to the image, an allegory would have a structure like this:

- a = A
- b = B
- c = C
- d = D

The apocalyptic writers are the experts in this technique. History is divided into four epochs, defined by successive empires: Babylonians – Medes – Persians – Macedonians, of lessening prestige and of increasing cruelty. They can be portrayed as a human body: head – chest and arms – stomach and thighs – legs and feet; or as four ferocious beasts: lion – bear – leopard – an unknown animal.

Allegory is in fact a rather poor literary technique, weak poetically (the Daniel examples cited are in prose). In my opinion, it finishes in one of two extremes. A lucky and talented writer will select a suitable image as the basis of his allegory, and such an image may become popular in a particular culture. On the other hand, a less talented writer will become disastrously entangled in the artificial game of working out the corresponding elements. In the eighth chapter of Daniel, for instance, an author begins to allegorize and enters the rather dangerous area of “horns”, only to suffer a serious goring. And though we may accept that seven thin cows eat one by one seven fat cows, we cannot accept the same process where ears of grain are concerned. Allegory often takes refuge in dreams.

When a writer has used a series of allegorical elements, the reader has to work them out one by one. One may also come across an allegorical interpretation of a text which is not allegorical. Ezekiel himself allegorizes his magnificent vision of the bones (thereby rendering it less momentous): the bones are the exiles, the tomb is Babylon, the resurrection is the return home.

d) The *symbol* is the highest peak of the imagination. What is essential to the symbol is that it means more than is at first apparent. The symbol is the object perceived plus something else that is revealed in it. While allegory needed the removal of the image to find the sense, the symbol would cease to exist if the image element were lost. The symbol leads us beyond itself without itself retreating from sight. The symbol does not sacrifice its material nature, because only in this is the transcendent element manifest.

The symbol takes the risk of expressing what cannot be expressed in an all-embracing way. The symbol lets itself be seen to allow the reader to catch a glimpse of something more. The symbol is translucent, rather than transparent.

The symbol is rooted in the most profound part of man, at the point where the spirit and the body are not divided as opposing parts. For this reason the symbol appeals to the whole man: imagination, intuition, emotions. The symbol sets vibrating anyone who opens himself to the symbol in an attitude of contemplation. The symbol is open, even expansive.

The poetic symbol, in spite of its name, has nothing to do with the mathematical symbol. It may issue from a metaphor or a comparison, but it hates allegory.

The symbol is the proto-language of transcendent experience, and thus also of religious experience. The symbol does not provide intellectual information, but simply mediates communion. The symbol cannot be reduced to a collection of concepts.

Biblical poetry is a treasure-trove of religious symbols, magnificent or simple. Since the symbol provides material for thought (Ricœur), biblical symbols are the indispensable basis for theological reflexion.

I have attempted to conjure up the symbol and sing its praises, I have not given a definition. I do not think I am able to. I admit that in many cases it is difficult to decide whether an image is working as a symbol or as a simple comparison. Furthermore, by repetition and frequent use a metaphor or an image may be transformed into a symbol. The context in which it is found is usually of decisive importance.

The garden has a symbolic function where the love of a couple is concerned: he goes down to his garden, she is the princess of the gardens; he even courts her with the words: “You are a locked garden”. At the other extreme, the desert landscape of Second Isaiah is a symbol of human desolation. This way of using the landscape, so familiar to us in poetry, narrative and cinema, is rare in the Old Testament. But we must not confuse landscape with cosmic elements, which can serve as symbols of the divine presence and action.

e) We can distinguish various types of symbols: archetypal, cultural, historical and literary.

Those which have their root in man’s condition, spiritual and bodily, I call *archetypal*. Others call them proto-symbols to avoid seeing the archetype as a conceptual abstraction. We should not consider them to be innate, but they certainly do have some kind of natural matrix which makes them possible. The heavens and the earth, light and darkness, water and fire, home and road, the dream, the mountain ... It is not the objects themselves which are symbols, but our experience of them, which begins as soon as we are born

and is deposited even in subliminal form. These examples, even though they may be realised in different forms, are translated easily in time and space. The presence and even abundance of such elemental symbols in the OT make biblical poetry both contemporary and accessible without special difficulty.

Cultural symbols are those which belong to one or more cultures, without being universal. The polarised relationship of man with the animals, wild and domesticated, is universal, because man finds himself surrounded by animals. But the particular relationship of the hunter or fisherman is a cultural realization of this. The juridical institution of the *gō'el* is used as a cultural symbol in the Bible.

Historical symbols are those which arise from a historical (or legendary) event, which comes to assume symbolic value for the people. The liberation from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea have such a value for Israel.

Literary symbols are those which arise from literature, from fiction, and assume symbolic value. (These days nobody confuses fiction with falsehood.) Cain could perhaps be included in this group.

In the final section one might also include those cosmic and human symbols which have undergone a certain elaboration in myths or stories of the origins (see the chapter on genre).

I am going to present just one example, which ought to be seen in a broader context of symbol. Let us imagine those two humble and serviceable domestic objects: the hand-mill and the oil-lamp. The stone hand-mill has two handles opposite each other which are turned by two women seated on either side, and it continues turning with a grinding noise when the women's hands are removed. The oil-lamp goes out when the wick has no more oil to burn. And now let us turn to a tragic situation: an invasion, a siege, fire, killing, a city and its houses dead. And the poet who sings:

I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of
gladness,
the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride,
the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp
(Jer 25,10).

The mill which comes to a halt, the lamp which goes out, both symbolize the final catastrophe.

f) Should the prophets' *symbolic actions* be included in this chapter? Due to the adjective "symbolic" I would say they should; but the noun 'actions' would go against this. The actions are performed, and when the prophets narrate them they do so in prose. However, we should consider them here. These "pantomimes" are dramatic actions performed in silence before a curious and intrigued audience. They are then interpreted as oracles concerning the future. Here we find again the fundamental relationship of two corresponding panels: the action performed and the future event. The former will always have something of the image, though this will vary considerably.

When Ezekiel makes his bundle of his belongings, puts it on his shoulder and ostentatiously leaves his house, he is presenting the departure for exile before it happens. The correspondence is clear: he does what they will do; he does it like a scene from a mute play, they will do it in all reality (Ezek 12). The same kind of correspondence is there when his wife dies and he does not mourn, except that the correspondence here is partial. His compatriots too will not mourn because they will not be able to; however, it is the destruction of the temple and city which corresponds to the death of the wife (Ezek 24). The correspondence in a symbolic action of Jeremiah is very suggestive: Jeremiah buys an earthen jar, takes with him some reliable witnesses, goes to the Potsherd Gate and there smashes the jar on the ground. In this way God will smash the people and the city (Jer 19). The correspondence is not exact, but the image is very powerful.

The symbolic actions of the prophets do not belong to Hebrew poetry, but they do illustrate well the function of poetic images.

G. Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen der Propheten* (ATANT 54; Zurich-Stuttgart 1968).

g) The *parable* becomes an allegory with a narrative structure. An event which is articulated with various characters and in various stages is transformed into an image, articulated with corresponding characters and stages. Ezekiel is fond of parables, some of which are derived from traditional metaphors or symbols. The parable of "The eagle and the cedar" (Ezek 17,1-10) is typical; and if the listeners have difficulty in interpreting it, the prophet (or a disciple) adds the interpretation (vv. 11-15). Other examples are "The lioness and the cubs" (Ezek 19,1-9), "The uprooted vine" (Ezek 19,10-14), "The two sisters" (Ezek 23), "The pot on the fire" (Ezek 24,1-8), which has its explanation (vv. 9-14). Ezek 16, "A history of love",

can be classified as a parable, with all its additions and expansions. It is based on the great symbol of God's marriage with Jerusalem, or the people of Israel.

When a parable presents a typical (not historical) aspect of human life and uses animals or plants as characters, it is usually called a fable. The classic example in the OT is Judg 9,8-15.

IV. Further Classification. Various Techniques

Let me return to the description of the image as the placing alongside of two panels, at least one of which is perceived by the senses. We leave the previous classifications to one side because the remarks which follow do not coincide with what went before. They can simply be superimposed without rigid rules.

a) I will begin with a rather complex case, which is however quite easy to explain and which will open the way to other instances. The poet stands at the *point of intersection* of the two panels and goes on developing the poem on both panels focusing in turn on one or the other. Some verses may apply to both panels, others apply to one panel. A clear example of this is Ps 23, which begins by comparing the relationship of man to his God with the image of a shepherd and his flock. Ambivalence and indecision produce a curious and allusive vibration in the poem. I will show this by writing some verses at the centre and others at either side:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;	
he makes me lie down in green pastures,	
he leads me beside still waters,	
he restores my strength	
He leads me in right paths,	
for his name's sake.	
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,	
	I fear no evil, for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff	they comfort me.

b) An image is given and an *explanation* follows. Often the explanation is not necessary and serves rather to complete the parallelism:

I would hasten to shelter from the storm,
from the hurricane which devours, O Lord,
from the torrent of their tongues (Ps 55,9-10).

The mention of tongues clarifies the metaphorical value of the previous elements. This explanation was unnecessary since we already knew from the context and from tradition that the metaphors referred to the enemies.

Do not deliver the life of thy dove to the wild beasts;
do not forget the life of thy poor for ever (Ps 74,19).

We knew that the dove represented the oppressed, and we could identify the wild beasts already. However, the final mention of "your poor" intensifies the emotion of the prayer.

Similarly, we find academic proverbs where the second part, the explanation, is unnecessary. Read this example with and without the second part: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will" (Prov 21,1). "He who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and he who guards his master will be honoured" (Prov 27,18).

c) *Development of the image*. Let us consider new and old friendships. It is just like new and old wine. Let us make these two things, friendships and wine, our two panels. If I do this I have two possibilities. I can develop the comparison at one level or the other. So there are two possibilities I can offer:

A new friend, new wine: cultivate him and you will gain his affection.

or: A new friend, new wine: when it has aged you will drink it.

In perfect good taste Ben Sira chose the second solution (Sir 9,10).

As a father grows old, the sons he produced when young go out in his name. It is like what happens with the arrows of a hunter or warrior. Once again there are two possibilities:

Arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth:
Happy is the man who has many sons!

or: Arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth:
Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them!

Ps 127,4-5 cleverly chooses the second solution. He offers a delightful surprise, he is less intellectual and less explicit.

d) *Grouping of images*. A series of homogeneous images may be used to develop one panel of imagery alone. We have already

seen some examples of proverbs showing such features. This is frequent in the psalms. A good example is the series of metaphorical titles at the beginning of Ps 18 or 144: "Blessed be the Lord, my rock ... my ally, my fortress, my stronghold where I take refuge, my shield, my haven". Ps 133 offers two comparisons: like oil, like dew. We will return to this psalm.

On first reflexion fire and water seem opposites. But as elemental dangers they can represent the same grave risk. This is Ps 124,2-5:

... when men rose up against us,
then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;
then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
then over us would have gone
the raging waters.

The fire consumes with great rapidity; the waters grow higher and higher. The same pair is found in Isa 43,2.

In the world of images, especially if they are symbols, we may even find that two elements which seem to exclude each other may be coupled together. Is the enemy who is tracking me down wild beast or hunter? Ps 57 has no hesitation in combining both images:

I lie in the midst of lions that greedily devour the sons of men ... (v. 5).

They set a net for my steps ... (v. 7).

More than a grouping of images we may at times find what we might call a *constellation*, various images or symbols in the same poem. A well-known example is Ps 23: the double image of the shepherd and the host brings forward a series of elemental symbols. Green pastures to rest in, water to restore strength, the path and the dwelling place, food and drink, darkness: all appear in the psalm.

The starting point for Joel 2,1-11 is a plague of locusts: millions of them darken the sky, they swarm down on the crops, they leave them bare. A horrifying and tragic picture, for man is quite unable to oppose this evil and destructive force: a swarm unable to be counted, an irresistible advance, ominous darkness, utter desolation. The advancing multitude is experienced as an army: infantry, cavalry, chariots; they advance, they assault and they plunder. Imagination superimposes images. The army is a plague of

voracious insects, the locusts are of gigantic size, and organized in battalions. This is some kind of hallucination: locusts in the form of horses and soldiers. The desolation is experienced as a fire, for this mythical, elemental force needs only to pass by to change the garden into desolate desert, a dream of fruitfulness and vegetation into a chaotic, inhospitable land. The wings crackle like fire. The darkness deepens at the beginning with four adjectives, it is a cloud, a theophany, which both reveals and hides the presence of God. At the end even the sun, moon and stars darken. This plague which man suffers and can do nothing to impede has someone who controls it, like a general his army. The locust-army and the army of fire are in fact a theophany, the day of the Lord. The army is the Lord's and carried out his orders powerfully; it is a holy war. The fire may also be an allusion to the Five Cities, which were like a "garden of the Lord" (Gen 13,10) and were razed by fire (Gen 19).

e) *Diffusion* of an image. This happens when a central or dominant image reappears at different moments in a poem perhaps in new ways. This technique will come in the chapter entitled "Development and Composition", but I refer to it here for convenience.

In Ps 69 danger is presented in the image of waters. It appears at the beginning of the long poem, reappears just before the middle and resounds as a faint echo towards the end. The danger of the waters is threatening at the beginning, is on the point of conquering in the middle of the poem, but at the end they are dominated and recognize God. Let me quote the relevant verses:

- Ps 69,2 Save me, O God,
for the waters have risen up to my neck.
3 I sink in muddy depths and have no foothold;
I am swept into deep water,
and the flood carries me away.
15 Let no flood carry me away,
no abyss swallow me up,
no deep close over me.
35 Let sky and earth praise him,
the seas and all that move in them.

In the great lawsuit of Jer 2-3 the matrimonial image dominates: the people is the bride and young wife, the unfaithful woman, the easy lover, the repudiated wife; in a moment the noble matrimonial image descends to the contrasting level of instinctive animal rutting.

In Ps 62 man's stability and his destiny are seen first in the image of a well-built construction; and then in the contrasting images of weight and lightness.

f) *Total transposition*. This is similar to what preceded, but it differs in the sense that the whole poem is transformed. It is not that the image reappears in different points of the poem, but the whole poem is born out of the imaginative transposition of an experience or a situation.

The famous poem of the mountain in Isa 2,2-5 is a poetic, even a visionary, transformation of a pilgrimage of the nation to Jerusalem at a particular feast: from their various places the different tribes converge on Jerusalem in a spirit of reconciliation and go up to the temple. The scene is transformed: the mountain becomes the eschatological peak rising above the highest mountains; a universal pilgrimage of peoples and nations converge on Jerusalem in a spirit of peace and go to the temple of the Lord.

g) *Visions or inventions*. The poet attempts a description of something in the future, something unknown. He must describe it but he does not know what it will be like. He must proclaim it without precise details. This is when his creative imagination must come into play, combining and transforming known facts.

This is the technique for the prophetic eschatologies, which give way then to the apocalyptic genre. The problem in such cases is to discipline the imagination sufficiently so that a coherent and intelligible picture emerges. Isa 34 is short and achieves unity and coherence in the fantastic vision of a kind of final judgement. This is not the case with Isa 24-27, the unity of which is doubtful; great imaginative blocks follow each other leaving some space for pieces of different types. The imagination hits the mark only in certain sections of this eschatological composition. Too many diverse elements struggle for a place in the vision: the city and the countryside, the cosmos and the elements, heavenly bodies and kings, the royal banquet, the destruction of the dragon.

Chapter 34 of Isaiah describes a catastrophe and its devastating consequences. Perhaps "describes" is not the appropriate word and one ought to say rather "composes" or "creates". The structure of the first part is seen in the four-fold use of the particle *kî* to introduce: the anger of the Lord, the sword of the Lord, the slaughter of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of the Lord. These are not four things, but simply one. Anger is the sentence of condemnation, vengeance is the act of vindicating justice, the sword is the weapon, the slaughter is the execution of the sentence. Such a structure is logical, it presents no difficulties, nor does it baffle or

excite the imagination. The poet presents a picture with these elements, using their imaginative value and combining them in a poetic logic and coherence. The slain human corpses are like a slaughter of animals: lambs and goats, rams, oxen, bulls and steers. Their blood reddens the land of Edom, inviting us to hear the assonance *dam* – *'ēdôm*: the sword is sated with blood, the land is soaked with blood, the mountains flow with blood (vv. 6.7.3). But this liquid neither contradicts nor quenches the fire of sulphur and pitch, like some new destruction of the Five Cities. A stench rises from the corpses, smoke from the sulphur and pitch, and this makes the land permanently uninhabitable (vv. 3.10.10b). Edom is seen in a cosmic setting, at the eschatological time. One might consider that the destruction of Edom is transcended in the poetic vision, or that an eschatological vision is being located in the emblematic land of Edom (as happens with Moab in Isa 25). The destruction involves not only mountains and "hills" (correcting v. 3b), but also the very heavens. For, just as men have their armies and retinues and hordes (v. 3), so also do the heavens have their "armies" (v. 4). The heavens, usually stretched like the canvas of a tent, "roll up like a scroll". Does this image suggest that the heavenly book of destiny becomes illegible for man? The stars, like leaves or fruit of a cosmic vine or fig-tree, wither and fall; a plant metaphor to indicate coming to an end, and on a cosmic scale. The sword, before it descends to glut itself on the earth, already "drinks its fill" in the heavens, as if the execution of the powers of the stars was beginning (compare Isa 24,21). Fire, scorching heat, desolation continue "day and night" without rest, "from generation to generation" without end.

What follows in the chapter is a parade of wild-beasts, unwelcome and even fantastic and diabolical, like *lîlî* (v. 14). These will be the new inhabitants of the wilderness of Edom.

I feel I ought to include here the visions of Zechariah. Some, like the flying scroll and, above all, the woman in the great pot carried by two women with wings like the wings of a stork, should certainly be mentioned. These visions are written in prose but deserve special mention in this chapter on imagery. They seem to me like remote ancestors of surrealism. It is of some significance how little influence these images of Zechariah have had in later tradition.

Let me first take Zech 5,1-4 as an example of a "surrealist" image. When an alliance or a covenant is made there are curses associated with in the event of one party not adhering to the agreement. The curse is unleashed against the one who has not been loyal. Curses can also be pronounced outside a pact and have no

efficacy, for there are those whose "mouths are filled with cursing" (Ps 10,7). The curse of the covenant is said to settle on the guilty party to exact punishment (Deut 29,20). The curse may be written in the laws of the covenant or in the special book of the rite concerning jealousy (Num 5). In the second version of this rite the curse is written, the book is placed in the water so that the curse may be released and pass into the water, and this water is drunk by the woman suspected of adultery. It will damage her body if she is guilty. (Consult a commentary for the critical discussion of this passage.) From these three elements — the curse, the writing and the efficacy of the curse — the vision of Zechariah takes shape. A scroll comes flying through the sky; it is huge, ten metres by five, and is written on both sides in gigantic letters that the eye manages to read. One side is against those who steal, the other against those who swear falsely, who seem to live on unpunished. The scroll enters the house of the guilty man by the window, sits down there and begins to corrode both timber and stone.

The other vision follows in Zech 5,5-11. The personification of evil — a feminine noun — as a woman is not an unheard of device; but the transportation of this woman from one place to another is. This happens in an act of purification which may recall the ceremony of expiation (Lev 16) in which the goat is led by a man into the wilderness for Azazel. But this "surrealist" vision contains so many realistic features that the image is perceived as rather strange. For here personified evil is trapped in a great pot with a leaden cover so that she cannot escape. She is carried away by two women, angelic or diabolical, on wings like those of a stork, and deposited in the remote and hostile region of Shinar.

This is indeed a new way of dealing with images, which Ezekiel did not anticipate and Daniel did not choose to develop. As a technique it may have some influence on the author of the Apocalypse in the New Testament.

V. Images and Their Subjects

Remembering our model of the diptych, I might analyze and classify images in two columns. What kind of images are used? And what are the subjects transformed into images?

The first question has led to the compilation of *catalogues*. Catalogues of cosmic images, the elements, plants, animals, human beings and human culture. These lists are a useful resource, a kind of concordance of the imagination. But they do not really help because each image has to be analyzed according to its function in

the context. They serve only as lists of material classified according to groups. The following works may be regarded as catalogues:

A. Werfer, *Die Poesie der Bibel* (Tübingen 1875).

A. Wünsche, *Die Bildersprache des Alten Testaments. Ein Beitrag zur ästhetischen Würdigung des poetischen Schrifttums im Alten Testament* (Leipzig 1906).

A. Heller, *200 biblische Symbole* (Stuttgart 1962).

M. Lurker, *Wörterbuch biblischer Bilder und Symbole* (Munich 1973).

This last is arranged in alphabetical order with various indices, of authors, themes and biblical citations.

The catalogues provide material for comparative studies. By cataloguing the images used in a book or by an author and studying them I may be able to reconstruct part of the world in which he lived, for example, the world mirrored in Proverbs.

If, on the other hand, instead of producing catalogues, I concentrate on a restricted field, I can produce useful comparative studies. If I focus, for example, on the rich field of the elements, water, or fire, or earth, I will be able to appreciate their persistence in the tradition, and changes in their use according to epochs, authors, books, or genres.

Though I would not place too much importance on the *field* from which the images are taken, I would make exception for two important cases: the Song of Songs and Ps 45. Sense images of taste, smell and touch are rare in biblical poetry. But in the Song of Songs they are frequent: perfumes, aromas, balsam, incense; "my nard gave forth its fragrance", "a bag of myrrh", "the vines are in blossom, they give forth fragrance", "the scent of Lebanon"; together with apples, figs, honey, wine, exquisite fruits, bunches of dates... In a book of love songs such phrases create an all-embracing atmosphere; it envelops the reader invisibly. Feelings have no profile or figure, said A. Brunner. It is an atmosphere of joys brought by the senses, the material accompaniment of an intensely personal love, a love of the person for the person, not purely sensual. All this is counterbalanced by the contemplative attitude of sight and hearing. We might recall the "five lines" of the classical and baroque cultures: see — hear — touch — kiss — come together; smell and taste would be in the third and fourth place. At the same time tastes and scents cannot be easily qualified, a detailed description cannot be made. The poet simply refers them to various delightful objects. In the midst of contemplation, which is the domain of the sense of sight, come allusions to scent and taste. Cant 7,3: "a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies"; 5,13: "his cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance".

In the wedding song, Ps 45, quite apart from the perfume of the anointing of the king, the robes of the new king "are all fragrant with myrrh, aloes and cassia". The prominence of the senses in narrative texts is also remarkable, even taste and smell as in Gen 27 (see L. Alonso Schökel, *¿Donde está tu hermano?*, pp. 135f.).

Ps 133 sings of the delight of life lived in fraternal harmony. It is a joy difficult to describe, perhaps indescribable. It is a blessing which is all-embracing and penetrating, indescribable but sure. The author uses two images which fit together: aroma and freshness.

But let me now turn to something more usefully examined, the subjects transformed into images. This will allow me to bring together certain categories which seem disparate. I will focus on nature, man and God. It will be seen that everything is in some way referred to man.

a) Inanimate beings behave like men, they become human by means of the image: blood cries to the heavens (Gen 4,10); the heavens assist, bear witness, announce; mountains look on with envy (Ps 68,17). Ps 98,8: "Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together". Isa 55,12 concludes: "mountains and hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands". In the descriptive section of Job this technique is used with skill and originality: the sea is born and grows up like a child; the morning carries out commands like shaking its clothing, giving form, and applying dye; the lightning presents itself and says "Here we are". In Isa 24,20: "The earth staggers like a drunken man". This comparison transforms the earthquake into some kind of living being. The land of desolation "will be married" (Isa 62,4), and "the land of the shades will give birth" (Isa 26,19): both of these examples are "animations" of mythical origin. Hos 2,23-24: just as in a human chain a command can be passed on or a reply can be made to a question or to an action, similarly the chain of fertility is welded together: "I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth; and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel". The earth must "keep silence" in the presence of God, its sovereign (Hab 2,20). Ps 48,12 mentions the gladness of Mount Sion. The mountains see the Lord and tremble (Hab 3,10); they jump like rams (Ps 114,4). The trees will know and understand (Ezek 17,24), they are envious of an exalted tree (Ezek 31,9): these texts present trees as an allegory of princes. Stones "cry out", as in Hab 2,11. The Psalmist calls on his musical instruments: "Awake, harp and lyre!" (Ps 57,9).

Many of the examples given show that the "animation" of inanimate beings is a particular instance of the metaphor or comparison, and may be of mythical origin.

We can therefore call this type of image an *animation*. Many scholars call it a personification, but I prefer to reserve this term for a technique which is very different.

b) *Personification*. I use this term for those cases where an abstract quality acts like a human being, like a person in society. This point of style has not yet been systematically studied in the Bible, in spite of its frequency and importance.

A clear example is Ps 85, which is almost a gathering of ladies on the poetic scene — the qualities personified tend to be denoted by feminine nouns. They meet, they kiss, they salute each other:

His Salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
His Glory will dwell in our land.
Steadfast Love and Faithfulness will meet;
Righteousness and Peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and Righteousness will look down from the sky ...
Righteousness will go before him,
and make his footsteps a way (Ps 85,10-12.14).

The scene described in Isa 59,14-15 is quite the opposite: the noble ladies are barred from the city which is overrun by injustice:

Justice is turned back,
and Righteousness stands afar off;
for Truth stumbles in the public squares,
and Uprightness cannot enter.
Truth is lacking.

These cases and many other similar ones help us to complete the picture given in Isa 35: a caravan of people returning from exile is crossing a desert which is being transformed into thickets and plantations by the abundance of water; the blind and the lame recover, wild beasts depart, the caravan turns into a procession:

They will come to Sion with singing.
Everlasting Happiness will be at their head;
Joy and Happiness will follow;
Sorrow and Affliction will depart (Isa 35,10).

Cf. L. Alonso Schökel – C. Carniti, "‘In testa’: Is 35,10", *RivBib* 34 (1986) 397-399.

The study of personification in biblical poetry brings with it the difficulties of perceiving and determining the presence of personification. Personification of qualities or events has become so commonplace in our modern languages that it has almost always been lexicalised and that hinders our perception of it in poetical texts. The poet has to go to great pains to bring alive our lost sense of imagination. As far as the Hebrew poets are concerned, we do have many clear cases and others that are less clear, but we do not have sure criteria for deciding whether the personification in question has not yet been lexicalised. However, since the danger for us is that of not seeing and not listening, it is better to exaggerate the number of personifications than to underestimate them. Let me propose some examples which should appear in any study which might be undertaken.

Ps 23,6: when the psalmist has finished his banquet and is about to depart he is offered a sure escort: "Your Goodness and Kindness follow me." Ps 43,3: the exile hopes that the Lord will send two messengers to announce the good news and to accompany him on the return to the temple: "Send out your Light and your Truth; let them lead me and bring me to your holy hill, to your dwelling!" Along the same lines is Ps 40,12: "Let your Kindness and your Faithfulness ever preserve me!" Probable personification are found in Ps 91,10 (without the article): "Evil shall not befall you, Scourge shall not come near your tent". Along the same lines the evil in Ps 40,13 may also be seen as a personification: "Evils have encompassed me without number, my iniquities have overtaken me". In Ps 22,13,17 the psalmist is hemmed in and surrounded by bulls and dogs. Disaster "looms from the north" in Jer 6,1. In Prov 13,21 "Misfortune pursues sinners"; and in Prov 17,13 "Evil will not depart from his house"; it is like a persistent and unwanted lodger. By contrast the noble dweller in Jerusalem was Justice (Isa 1,21).

In Gen 4,7 Sin (feminine) is crouching (masculine) at the door. In Isa 59,12 "our sins accuse us" like witnesses or prosecutors in a trial. The personification of cities, especially capital cities is very frequent in the feminine figures of young ladies (*bat*) or mothers (as will be seen in marriage symbolism). In Ps 19,3 one night passes information to the next. Job sees the wicked man threatened ceaselessly by hostile forces: "By day Terrors assault him, by night the Whirlwind carries him off". "Darkness" claims possession of a day of misfortune in Job 3,5.

In Isa 58,8 a welcome promise is made to the just and generous man: he will have an illustrious escort before him and behind him:

"Your Righteousness shall go before you, the Glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard". In the great restoration announced in Isa 32,15-17: "The wilderness will become a fruitful field, and the fruitful field will be deemed a forest; Justice will dwell in the wilderness, and Righteousness abide in the fruitful field; and the effect of Righteousness will be peace, and the result of Righteousness quietness and trust for ever". I conclude this catalogue with some verses taken from Ps 89: "Righteousness and Justice are the foundation of your throne, Steadfast Love and Faithfulness go before you.... My Faithfulness and my Steadfast Love shall be with him" (vv. 15,25).

The biblical personification which has had most success is that of *ḥokmâ*, Lady Wisdom. She parades through the pages of Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom as a courted bride, a hospitable wife, a mother, a rich lady who invites people to a banquet, and as a heavenly character who collaborates in the creation and ordering of the world. She appears in Prov 3 and 9, and again in Sir 4, 6, 14 and 51; and she makes a final appearance in Wis 8. She also appears in two poems of extraordinary worth: Prov 8 and Sir 24. The reader can consult the volume *Proverbios*, pp. 33-35, 76-78, 238-243.

In this section on animation and personification we have to make room for a special group. The reign of death or *šē'ôl* "has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure" in order to devour both nobles and common people (Isa 5,14); or Sheol "is stirred up to meet you" (Isa 14,9); a pact is made with Sheol (Isa 28,15). Death too is personified: "Death enters by the windows" (Jer 9,20); "Death shall be their shepherd" (Ps 49,15); "Death and Perdition say" (Job 28,22); the plague is the "first-born of Death" (Job 18,13).

The sea too is personified: "Sea says: it is not with me" (Job 28,14). Sun and Moon too: "Moon will be confounded, Sun ashamed" (Isa 24,23). We have already seen Sun coming out like a bridegroom (Ps 19,6), the stars come down to fight (Judg 5,20); and we have already heard "the singing of the morning stars" (Job 38,7).

From our point of view these and other examples are to be regarded as animation or personification: inanimate beings are transformed poetically into living or personal beings. In the biblical tradition the movement is different: mythological beings are dethroned and reduced to poetical figures. This is an act of demythologization, which may have a polemical tone: as when the king of Babylon is presented in the figure of Venus, the light of dawn. The star which shines low over the horizon has ambitions to rise to the highest point, the height of the divine heavens; but it is brought down and drowned in the abyss (Isa 14,12-15).

c) *Man*. Since the examples here are so numerous I am going to select a few of the more significant ones.

The *elements* must be mentioned first: water, earth, air, fire. Man is made of earth, he returns to the dust; the air is breath, life; fire is anger and similar passions; water brings fertility. Many of these uses may be premetaphors. The poetic identification of life with the light is frequent, and this has its opposite in the underground of the tomb.

Some scholars interpret as an image of fertility the verses of Balaam in Num 24,7: "Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters". The advice given in Prov 5,18.16 corresponds to this: "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. ... Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets?" The loved one is a "sealed fountain" in the Song of Songs. In Job 4,19-20 Eliphaz speaks of the earthly condition of man: "They dwell in houses of clay, which are founded in the dust... between morning and evening they are destroyed".

I have already spoken of plant images used for man. These usually refer to his vitality, or lack of it. The correspondence between plant fertility and human fertility is especially stressed. In some cases this might be viewed as a vestige of mythical representations. In many cases we must proceed in the opposite direction: the symbol is more original than the myth; the symbol appeared and gave rise to the myth. In other words, the biblical text and the foreign myth arise from the same symbolic matrix.

The tree may be reduced to a comparison, as in Ps 37,35: "I have seen a wicked man overbearing, and towering like a cedar of Lebanon". In another instance there is a development:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
They are planted in the house of the Lord,
they flourish in the courts of our God.
They still bring forth fruit in old age,
they are ever full of sap and green (Ps 92,13-15).

Another case, and we find an accumulation of images:

I will be as the dew to Israel;
he shall blossom as the lily,
he shall strike out roots as the poplar;
his shoots shall spread out;
his beauty shall be like the olive,

and his fragrance like Lebanon.
They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow,
they shall grow like grain;
they shall blossom as the vine,
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon...
I am like an evergreen cypress (Hos 14,6-9).

Cf. *Profetas*, p. 920.

The image of a tree is the unifying theme developed in Ezek 31. And seven kinds of trees are found as symbols of the landscape of paradise in Isa 41,19.

What was said earlier, that the function of the image in the poem is as important as the field from which it comes, has been clearly demonstrated.

Man can also be seen as an *animal*. One might say that the biblical poets have a preference for animals when they wish to describe the character of certain types of men, especially when they are speaking of negative characteristics. It is as if the animal image were used to bring out the lower instincts of man, something animal-like in his humanity. This presupposes the superior dignity of man and his calling to subdue the animals.

The most frequent are wild animals, used to describe the hostility of enemies. This is a major topic in the Psalms; Ps 22 takes pleasure in accumulating such images:

Many bulls encompass me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
Dogs are round about me;
a company of evildoers encircle me (Ps 22,13-14.17).

Leaders of certain foreign countries used to take the names of animals as their proper name or the name of their office. One Ammonite king was called *nāhāš* = "Serpent"; there were Midianite leaders called Raven and Wolf; another group of officials are called the Bulls. Ezekiel seems to have used such titles in composing his great speeches on the nations, their kings and emperors. Egypt is compared to a crocodile, Ezek 32,1-6; and again in 29,3-5; in 19,1-9 Israel is a lioness with her cubs.

In Isa 11,6-9 peace between domesticated and wild animals becomes a symbol of universal peace. Job 40-41 gives a full description of two wild animals, Leviathan and Behemoth — the crocodile and the hippopotamus, both images of evil forces.

Here are some images of man as an animal taken from the book of Proverbs:

All at once he follows her,
as an ox goes to the slaughter,
or as a stag is caught fast (7,22).

Like a dog that returns to his vomit
is a fool that repeats his folly (26,11).

The dread wrath of a king is like the growling of a lion
(20,2).

The righteous are bold as a lion (28,1).

Like a bird that strays from its nest
is a man who strays from his home (27,8).

The leech has two daughters;
"Give, give", they cry (30,15).

d) *God*. Biblical poetry is basically religious poetry. It speaks of God through the human experience of God. It sets forth revelation in human form. Its theme is transcendent; its means of expression are human.

In the broad sense everything we say about God is anthropomorphism, for it humanizes God. We experience God in our image and likeness, justified in so doing by the first chapter of the book of Genesis which states that we are made in the image and likeness of God. However, it is possible to make more precise distinctions: we can speak of God in metaphysical terms and in imagery. Alongside the *analogia entis*, we have the analogy of the symbol. And then we can make the distinction of spiritual and abstract qualities, and images perceived by the senses. It is difficult to trace the boundaries of anthropomorphism: roughly speaking it means attributing to God human qualities. Some scholars make another distinction: anthropomorphism gives God a human form: a nose, eyes, arms; while anthropopathism gives God human feelings: anger, pity, repentance.

Let me begin an analysis of some verses from Ps 36:

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like the mountains of God,
your judgements are like the great deep;
man and beast you save, O Lord.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!

The children of men take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light do we see light (Ps 36,6-10).

Various qualities known through human experience are attributed to God: faithfulness, steadfast love, righteousness, just judgements. God is also said to come to the aid of man and animals; this too comes from human experience. The poet is unaware that such statements are analogical, he has no metaphysical intentions, and we are not usually aware that these statements are images. Nevertheless, the writer feels that there is a difference in intensity, as in spiritual qualities. "The dimension of the spirit is intensity" (Bruno Snell). This intensity is expressed in a spatial image, which qualifies the simple statement of the quality: "extends to the heavens, to the clouds, like the mountains of God, like the great deep". The distinction between man and the animals begins based on the experience of going to the temple: a place of refuge, an abundant sacrificial banquet, with delightful drink. The physical experience is sacramental, a symbol of the experience of the divine: the temple is "the shadow of the wings" of God, the feast is offered by God the host at the banquet, the drink is "from the river of your delights". Note how the symbolic vision takes off at this point: the small cup that is drunk becomes a river, not of wine, but of delights, and it is "yours". At this height of symbolism the two final images of abundance come: not simply a little water for bodily thirst, but the fountain of life; and "your light" which gives sight to see the light, and discover the superior light.

The Hebrew poet attributes human qualities to God, and human actions, without much of a problem. We also do not really have a problem with such language, for it is only when we begin to speak of metaphysics that we apply the fundamental idea of analogy. Such discourses are quite different from poetic imagery and can be left to one side here.

Nevertheless, the Hebrew poet also felt that God was incomprehensible, unattainable, inexhaustible: the source from which all water flows, the light from which all light comes. One of the qualities of his God was to be unattainable and undescribable. This can be stated with or without imagery:

Such knowledge is beyond my understanding,
 so high that I cannot reach it...
 How deep I find your thoughts, O God,
 how inexhaustible their themes!
 Can I count them? They outnumber the grains of sand;
 to finish the count, my years must equal thine
 (Ps 139,6.17.18).

Here we have both affirmation and negation: "beyond my understanding", "high", "I cannot reach it", "deep", "inexhaustible", "outnumber".

I have not learned wisdom,
 nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.
 Who has ascended to heaven and come down? (Prov 30,3-4).

He is from eternity to eternity;
 nothing can be added, nothing taken away,
 and he needs no one to give him advice.
 How beautiful is all that he has made,
 down to the smallest spark that can be seen! (Sir 42,21-22).

However much we say, we cannot exhaust our theme;
 to put it in a word: he is all,
 Where can we find the skill to sing his praises?
 For he is greater than all his works...
 Summon all your strength to declare his greatness,
 and be untiring, for the most you can do will fall short
 (Sir 43,27.28.30).

Lo, these are but the outskirts of his ways;
 and how small a whisper do we hear of him!
 But the thunder of his power who can understand?
 (Job 26,14; cf. 36,26; 37,5.23).

A later author like Ben Sira (towards 180 B.C.) also uses negatives to affirm the positive, the super-abundance: where shall we find strength, he is greater, he will surpass, you cannot praise him enough. However, he does not use symbolic language.

One of the ways of saying what cannot be said is to use negatives. Often this includes a comparative reference to man and his tasks. The narrator of the book of Kings places on the lips of Solomon the following reflexion precisely when the temple is being consecrated; it is in fact a theological declaration:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth?
 Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you;
 how much less this house which I have built! (1 Kgs 8,27).

God cannot be "contained" either in the temple or in the heavens. This is a spatial concept, used symbolically to express the transcendence of God; and we can understand it as being in opposition to the contemporary idea of heaven as the dwelling place of God ("dwelling place" too is a symbol).

When the exiles complained that God had abandoned them and no longer cared for them, the prophet replied with negatives and comparisons:

He does not faint or grow weary,
 his understanding is unsearchable.
 He gives power to the faint, ... (Isa 40,28-29).

Work is another image when used of God. The poet affirms that God works, but denies that he grows tired. This is probably a reference to the week's task and rest in Gen 1.

Years, a human temporal category, are applied symbolically to God, with affirmation and negation: Ps 102,28: "your years have no end"; Mal 3,6: "I the Lord do not change".

Alongside these negations the poet also uses the symbol in speaking of God. He uses it not because it is vague and imprecise — it is as if we take concepts and terms as the point of reference or the ideal — but because it is undefined and open.

The *polar-nature* of many symbols is exploited within a certain poem or in the cultural context of different books. God is "a hidden God" (Isa 45,15), "the Lord set the sun in the heavens, but prefers to dwell in thick darkness" (1 Kgs 8,12-13). On the other hand, God is light and shows himself. He shows himself, hiding himself, in the cloud — a frequent symbol.

God does not sleep, "he who keeps you will not slumber", says Ps 121,4. But Ps 44,24 tries to wake up the sleeping God: "Rouse yourself! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?" The same is said in Ps 59,5: "Rouse yourself, come to my help!"; and Ps 78,65 uses a rather daring comparison:

Then the Lord awoke as from sleep,
 like a soldier shouting because of wine.

"God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent" (Num 23,19). Nevertheless, God repented of having

made man (Gen 6,6); of having made Saul king (1 Sam 15,11), but he would not repent of having removed him (v. 29). He repents of the threat pronounced against his people (Exod 32,12.14; 2 Sam 24,16b). "I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back" (Jer 4,28). But he does repent if man changes his behaviour (Jer 18,8.10). And the theme could be further developed with other examples.

In Isa 8,14 the polarity is in the change of attitude, and is expressed through the polarity of an image. The Rock is an unassailable place of refuge, a guarantee of security; the stone offers a firm foundation. But God will be "a stone of offence and a rock of stumbling".

This immense God, the synthesis of polarities, is experienced by man positively and negatively, by opposing contrasting qualities. The theme of polarity was first encountered in the chapter on antithesis and will return when I present some concrete symbols.

And so, the hidden God *reveals himself*, but this revelation is expressed in symbols. The Hebrew poet does not proceed with the help of logical reasoning to reach God, but he discovers him in symbolic manifestations. In other words, the poet is very open to what has been called the "symbolic structure of creation", found in nature and in history.

In nature, which becomes translucent, the presence of God is perceived in a kind of overflowing meaning. This does nothing to undervalue God's being and beauty. On the contrary, the urge to praise his God drives the Hebrew poet to describe and sing about nature. We might call it a theophany in the broad sense. In these poems we find the qualities of descriptive poetry to present the reality of creation, and the value of the symbol which goes beyond the empirical reality. The storm is one of the classic theophanies, but not the only one.

The following texts are well known: Pss 18; 29; 77; 104; Hab 3; Job 38-39; Sir 43. Since I must quote from at least one example of this poetry, which is so prominent in biblical literature, I will quote from a less well-known example, even though it is not the best. It is from the speech of Elihu, inserted into the book of Job:

Hearken to the thunder of his voice
and the rumbling that comes from his mouth.
Under the whole heaven he lets it go,
and his lightning to the corners of the earth.

For to the snow he says, 'Fall on the earth';
and to the shower and the rain, 'Be strong'.

From its chamber comes the whirlwind,
and cold from the scattered winds.
By the breath of God ice is given,
and the broad waters are frozen fast.
He loads the thick cloud with moisture;
the clouds scatter his lightning.
They turn round and round by his guidance,
to accomplish all that he commands them
on the face of the habitable world.

Do you know how God lays his command upon them,
and causes the lightning of his cloud to shine?
Do you know the balancings of the clouds,
the wondrous works of him who is perfect in knowledge,
you whose garments are hot
when the earth is still because of the south wind?
Can you, like him, spread out the skies,
hard as a molten mirror?

And now men cannot look on the light
when it is bright in the skies,
when the wind has passed and cleared them.
Out of the north comes golden splendour;
God is clothed with terrible majesty.
The Almighty — we cannot find him;
he is great in power and justice,
and abundant righteousness he will not violate.
Therefore men fear him;
he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit
(Job 37,2-3.6.9-12.15-18.21-24).

See also the theophany of judgement in Isa 30,27-30; and other shorter ones, like that in Mic 1,3-4.

A. Causse, "Sentiment de la nature et symbolisme chez les lyriques hébreux", *RHPilRel* 1 (1921) 387-408.

H. Fisch, "The Analogy of Nature, a Note on the structure of the Old Testament Imagery", *JTS* 6 (1955) 161-173.

History too is a theophany of divine action in the OT, and in this sense it too has symbolic value. Within this history some events are more important than others, like the departure from Egypt with the crossing of the Red Sea. Poets have abundantly exploited this in the Psalms and prophetic oracles.

I have already cited Ps 77. The instances where the crossing is transformed poetically into the struggle of God with chaos or the primordial dragon are quite remarkable (see what was said earlier about motifs).

God may sometimes complain of the people's blindness to the sense of their history:

But you did not look to him who did it,
or have regard for him who planned it long ago (Isa 22,11).

You saw many things without observing,
your ears were open, but you did not hear (Isa 42,20).

Just as creation is bringing something from non-being into existence, similarly in history what did not exist begins to be; and God is its creator. It does not suddenly appear, but progresses gradually, and one has to concentrate to realise it is the action of God. The poet uses an image to express this: "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isa 43,19).

In this section what interests us is the history of Israel in its symbolic value, as interpreted by the poets. The figure of Cyrus and the anonymous Servant are relevant here; and, on the other hand, aggressive empires, vanquished by the Lord of history.

We might examine also other particular manifestations of God, for example: the temple and the capital city:

Walk about Sion, go round about her,
number her towers,
consider well her ramparts,
go through her citadels;
that you may tell the next generation
that this is God,
our God for ever and ever,
He will be our guide for ever (Ps 48,13-15).

The face of a reconciled brother might also be a theophany: "like seeing the face of God", in the prose narrative of Gen 33,10 (¿- *Dónde está tu hermano?*, pp. 214-215).

And so we have manifestation with hiddenness, a veiled revelation, both ambiguous and ambivalent. Man must open himself to it, he can also reject it. It is what S. Terrien calls "the elusive presence" (*The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* [RPS 26; San Francisco 1978]).

For this reason the manifestation of God will be qualified in some way. One could apply to many texts what is stated in Isa 28,21:

For the Lord will rise up as on Mount Perazim,
he will be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon;
to do his deed — strange is his deed!
and to work his work — alien is his work!

In one case the strangeness is disconcerting:

I will again do marvellous things with this people,
wonderful and marvellous;
and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish (Isa 29,14).

In another case the strangeness will be the great sign of revelation: "Kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has been told them they shall see; and that which they have not heard they shall understand" (Isa 52,15).

I will now go through some of the more common symbols used for God. Let me begin with *anthropomorphism* in general. The poet imagines God in human form, with eyes and ears, arms and hands, and the corresponding activities: "He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?" (Ps 94,9). Ezekiel goes to great pains to make clear that this is a figure, only a vision: "a likeness as it were of a human form. And upward from what had the appearance of his loins ... and downward from what had the appearance of his loins. ... Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ezek 1,26-28). These human comparisons can become monstrous: "Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth" (Ps 18,9). Is this a human figure or an imagery dragon?

Anthropomorphism may seem quite harmless, because we are used to it. On occasion due to its originality or strangeness it may provoke the reader to reject it and then accept it on a higher level. By surprise and strangeness what cannot be expressed is put into words. The reader must make the mental adjustment. But on occasion the poet himself does this.

One way is by attributing to the human figure or activity superhuman dimensions:

He who moves mountains without knowing it
when he overturns them in his anger (Job 9,5).

By your strength you have established the mountains,
being girded with might (Ps 65,7).

As wax melts before fire,
let the wicked perish before God (Ps 68,3).

At your rebuke, O God of Jacob,
both rider and horse lay stunned (Ps 76,7).

Superhuman dimensions reappear in some of the following anthropomorphic symbols too.

There are two or three from the sphere of family life: God as father, and mother also, and God as spouse. The paternal image is less frequent than the conjugal image, but it is expressed with great intensity. The classic texts are these:

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;

How can I give you up, O Ephraim!
How can I hand you over, O Israel! ...
My heart recoils within me,
my compassion grows warm and tender (Hos 11,3.8).

Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he my darling child?
For as often as I speak against him,
I do remember him still.
Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him (Jer 31,20).

As a father pities his children,
so the Lord pities those who fear him.
For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust (Ps 103,13-14).

The conjugal symbol is more frequent in the prophets; as frequent or more so than the symbol of political alliance. I do not think it is right to consider this conjugal symbolism as a secondary expression of the covenant. I believe it is autonomous. The principal texts are: Hos 2; Isa 1,21-26; Ezek 16; 23; Isa 49; 51-52; 54; 62; 66; Bar 4-5. They alone form a fine poetic anthology. We ought to read the whole of the poems so I will quote only two verses:

For, as a young man weds a maiden,
so you shall wed him who rebuilds you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you (Isa 62,5).

The bride is usually the personified capital city, representing the community.

Let me now list some offices and occupations used symbolically of God.

King. In the vocation of Isaiah, chapter 6. Certain Psalms, especially 93; 96-99; 47. In the eschatology of Isa 24-27 God is a king who inaugurates a new reign and offers a universal banquet.

Sovereign. This is implicit in the symbol of the covenant. The suzerain dictates terms for the vassal king. This is not found frequently in poetry.

Warrior. It may be found in a short reference, or it may fill a whole poem. In Ps 18 God struggles with the arms of the storm; Exod 15 sings of the military victory of the Lord: "The Lord is a warrior" (v. 3); he is defiant and incites battle in Ezek 39; Hab 3 displays great imagination. Ps 35 can even request of God:

Take hold of shield and buckler,
and rise for my help!
Draw the spear and javelin
against my pursuers! (Ps 35,2-3).

Craftsman. This is implicit in many poems of creation, when God's skill is mentioned. Gen 1 mixes the image of the Lord who gives commands which are carried out with that of the craftsman who performs the task. Ps 8 speaks of "the work of your fingers" (v. 4). The Hebrew verb *yṣr* = "to form", which is applied to God, comes from the world of crafts and skills. Prov 8 and Job 38 are two other good examples.

Judge or someone taking part in a trial. This can be linked with the symbols of King or Sovereign. The king judges his subjects, which are all the kingdoms and empires. The sovereign accuses his vassal who has been unfaithful to the covenant. This can be explicit or implicit in penitential liturgies (Ps 50-51); and in many prophetic accusations against the people. "The Lord judges the peoples" (Ps 7,9).

Avenger. The Lord is the *gō'el* who, in solidarity, ransoms his people from slavery. The son, though born free, must be redeemed. This symbol recurs in Second Isaiah.

Shepherd. The classic text is of course Ps 23. See also Ezek 34, and the title in Ps 80,2.

Farmer. God is portrayed as farmer in the second part of Ps 65; he plants and cares for his vine, which is Israel, in Ps 80.

Animals. Finding God compared to an animal, especially if it is a wild one, perhaps seems more strange to us. He is a protecting eagle (Deut 32,11); a lion and a bird (Isa 31,4f.); a bear (Hos 13,8); a moth (Ps 39,12).

W. Pangritz, *Das Tier in der Bibel* (Basel-Munich 1963).

The elements. I have already mentioned *light*, symbol of the divinity in many cultures. The light may come from the "radiant" face of God: Pss 31,17; 67,2, etc.

Fire too is an element of divinity, a symbol, or an accompanying element. It is inaccessible, can purify or destroy:

Who among us can dwell with the devouring fire?
Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?
(Isa 33,14).

Behold, the name of the Lord comes from far,
burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke;
his lips are full of indignation,
and his tongue is like a devouring fire;

For a burning place has long been prepared;
yea, for the king it is made ready,
its pyre made deep and wide,
with fire and wood in abundance;
the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, kindles
it (Isa 30,27.33).

Water too is a frequent symbol of the divinity. We have seen this already in Ps 36. It appears ambivalently in Ps 42: God is the water which quenches thirst and gives life, and the water which brings sweeping floods.

P. Reymond, *L'eau, sa vie et sa signification dans l'Ancien Testament* (VTS 6; Leiden 1958).

Many of these symbols have been studied in monographs, which usually focus on the doctrinal aspect and neglect or presuppose poetic analysis.

e) *Experience.* When man perceives the presence or action of God intellectually or spiritually, the poets do not seem to use images. However, when the poet uses the senses to express an experience of God, he uses them as symbols of another kind of experience, a transcendent experience, which cannot be described adequately. Using the senses the poet communicates the immediate, concrete character of the spiritual experience and the aspect of calm prolongation. The most frequently used sense is that of hearing: when the object is the word of God it seems to be used in a proper sense. But here too we must be aware of the analogy, for what the individual hears is a prophetic oracle, words of man, or images in his imagination. The sense of sight, with God as the object, is both used and denied in the OT; this ambiguity allows us to appreciate the analogical value of this idea. Man sees God, but it is a type of seeing which might be better described as not seeing. Less frequently we find the sense of taste, smell and touch. For this reason the instances where these senses appear are of some significance.

In Christian tradition the symbolic use of the senses as the expression of a transcendent experience, or perhaps as the initiation to this, has been prominent above all due to the influence of Bonaventure and Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*, where this is referred to as "application of the senses". The starting point is found in the OT, as the following examples show:

Look to him and be radiant. ...
Taste and see that the Lord is good ... (Ps 34,6.9).

The first verse may allude to the brightness on the face of Moses when he was exposed to the splendour of the Glory of God (Exod 34,29-35); that unique experience is offered by the psalmist to all people. The second verse refers to the sense of taste: taste how sweet and pleasing to the taste is the Lord. The sense of touch is referred to less explicitly; especially if the verb *dbq* = "to stick to" is already lexicalised to mean support for a cause or a person. Other uses, even in the Psalms, show its material sense. In conclusion we can read some verses of Ps 63, where this symbolism of the senses is proposed again, or suggested:

My throat thirsts for you. ...
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory. ...
I am feasted as with marrow and fat. ...
My being clings to you,
your right hand upholds me (Ps 63,2-3.6-9).

God "holds man by the right hand" in Ps 73,23 (*'hz*); Isa 41,13; 42,6; 45,1 (*hzq*).

VI. The Analysis of Symbols

When they have not been reduced to pure concept, despoiled of their imaginative quality, biblical symbols have been analyzed in different ways. And what we say here of symbols is valid also for imagery in general.

The interpretation based on *comparative religions* has been one of the most frequent approaches, especially where myths are concerned. Even biblical prayer has been compared to that in other religions. Since archetypal symbols are of necessity universal and since all people share many common experiences, it is not strange that other similar images in other nations correspond to the biblical images. The study of these corresponding images can be mutually illuminating and could be useful also in what is called these days inculturation.

The *psychoanalytical interpretation* runs the well-known risk of exaggerating sexual significance. See the studies edited by Yorick Spiegel, *Psychoanalytische Interpretationen biblischer Texte* (Munich 1972). Jung's approach is less limited, but has not had supporters in the biblical world.

G. Cope, *Symbolism in the Bible and the Church* (London 1959).

M. Kassel, *Biblische Urbilder. Tiefenpsychologische Auslegung nach C. G. Jung* (Munich 1982²).

E. Drewermann, *Tiefenpsychologie und Exegese. I. Die Wahrheit der Formen*. (Olten-Frankfurt 1985).

If we concentrate on the Bible itself *comparative* analysis is very useful, if possible diachronic, following the development of an image. This is very difficult since we know too little about the dating of the texts of the OT. Synchronic comparison is possible. It has in its favour the fact that the world of images and symbols is less dated than other aspects; it can be separated more easily from the original context. The kingdom of the imagination is less "historical", symbols are open and expansive. The persistence of conjugal symbolism through eight centuries, from Hosea to the book of Wisdom, is one fine example.

One very useful area would be the study of symbols in their post-biblical life, and practically nothing has been produced so far on this aspect. It would be an interesting chapter of the history of interpretation. The symbolic reading of the OT has dominated Christian exegesis right up to the 17th century.

Of fundamental importance is the analysis of images and symbols *within the work* to which they belong. One might say that this is the most important point of all. But in practice the better

procedure is an alternating or circular movement, going back and forth from the study of the text to a comparative analysis.

What is always essential, as I said at the very beginning, is to use one's imagination as the natural way to consider poetry. It is not right to say that understanding is objective and imagination is subjective. Both understanding and imagination are operations of the subject who contemplates or analyzes. The important thing is to use the faculty which is right for the object. I could confirm this point with some practical examples; but this chapter has already gone on long enough.

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