

THE SHAKING OF THE FOUNDATIONS

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Chapter II

"We Live in Two Orders"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength;

They shall mount up with wings as eagles;

They shall run and not be weary

And they shall walk and not faint." -- Isaiah 40.

1. These tremendous words were written by that unknown prophet of the Babylonian exile, whose sayings are united with those of the prophet Isaiah and whom we therefore call the Second Isaiah. Let us imagine that these words are being spoken to the exiles of our time, to those in prisons and concentration camps, separated from their husbands or wives, their children or parents, to those toiling in despair in foreign countries, to those in the hell of modern warfare. How would they respond to such words, and how should we, if they were spoken to us? Probably we should challenge, ironically or angrily, their seeming pretentiousness; and we should point to the immense gap between the ideal situation, dramatized by the prophet, and the catastrophic reality in which we live. We should dismiss him as an annoying optimist, not worthy of our attention. Perhaps we should become bitter and full of hatred toward him. That would be our natural response to someone who desires to comfort us in a situation in which we do not see any possible comfort and desperately disbelieve any possible hope.

2. But the situation of the exile of Babylon, sitting by the rivers and weeping, was one of just such hopelessness. The prophet must have expected this kind of reaction, for he spoke in a way that made the exiles listen to him, 2500 years ago. And his words should be significant for us, the exiles of today. He was not less, but rather more, realistic than we are. He knew that such a situation was not a matter of chance and bad luck, but that it is the human situation, which no man and no period can escape. The human situation is one of finiteness all flesh is grass and the grass withereth. It is one of sin we receive double for all our sins. It is one of vanity and pride we are brought to nothing and fall utterly. But in spite of his realistic knowledge of human nature and destiny the prophet gave comfort and consolation and hope to the exiled nation, to the exiled of all nations, to man who, as man, is exiled in this world.

3. The words of this great chapter sound like the rising and falling waves in a turbulent ocean. Darkness and light follow each other; after the depth of sin and punishment, the prophet announces forgiveness and liberation. But the wave falls, and the prophet asks himself how he could have made such an announcement, when all the goodness of mortal men is as the flower of the field, which fades because the breath of God blows upon it. But he does not remain in the depths of his melancholy: over against human mortality the word of God shall stand forever. There is something eternal to which we can cling: Be not afraid, the Lord God shall come with strong hand. So the wave rises, and then again it falls: the nations are as a drop of water and a piece of dust; all the nations are as nothing before Him, they are counted as less than nothing . . . Again the wave rises: God stands above the circle of the earth, above

all created things, above the highest and the lowest! And when once more the wave falls and the servant of God complains that he does not receive justice from God, the answer is that God acts beyond human expectation. He gives power to the faint and to him that hath no might, He increaseth strength. He acts paradoxically; he acts beyond human understanding.

4. How shall we interpret these words? Is there a way to unite the heights and depths contrasted in this chapter? Shall we understand the words of consolation and hope as vain promises, never fulfilled in the past and never to be fulfilled in any future? Shall we understand them as an escape from the realization of man's real situation, through mysticism and poetic elevation. If so, what about the probing realism of the prophet's analysis of the human situation? He saw history as it is, but at the same time he looked beyond history to the ultimate power and meaning and majesty of being. He knew two orders of being: the human, political, historical order, and the divine, eternal order. Because he knew these two orders, he could speak as he did, moving continually between the depth of human nothingness and the great height of divine creativity.

5. Let us look at these orders, these different natures, and their interrelation. In speaking of them we speak of ourselves, because we belong to both of them in every moment of our life and history.

6. The human order, the order of history, is primarily the order of growing and dying. "Surely the people is grass." Man's experience of melancholy, awakened by fading and perishing nature, is symbolic of his transitoriness. Generations after generations grow up, struggle, suffer, enjoy and disappear. Should we take all this seriously? Should we take it more seriously than the growing and fading of the grass? The prophet, when he was asked to speak to the nation, raised the question: Why speak to them? They are grass. Why write and work and struggle for them? They are grass. What matter, when after a few years all those for whom we wrote and spoke and struggled will have vanished? They were grass, the grass withered, the flowers faded. That is the order of history. But the other order appears at the horizon: the word of God shall stand forever.

7. Second, the order of history is an order of sin and punishment. The exile, following the destruction of Jerusalem, was, as all the prophets said, the punishment of the people for their sins. We do not like words such as "sin" and "punishment". They seem to us oldfashioned, barbaric, and invalid in the light of modern psychology. But whenever have met exiles of high moral standards and insight, I have discovered that they feel responsible for what has happened within their own countries. And very often I have met citizens of democratic countries, citizens of this country, who have expressed a guilt for the situation of the world today. They were right, and the exiles were right: they are responsible, as are you and I. Whether or not we call it sin, whether or not we call it punishment, we are beaten by the consequences of our own failures. That is the order of history. But at the horizon the other order appears, saying that our struggles are not in vain, that our iniquity is pardoned.

8. There is a third element in the order of history, uniting finiteness and sin: the tragic law which controls the historical process, the law which ordains that human greatness utterly falls. There is human greatness in history.

There are great and conquering nations and empires; there are even nations and empires which manifest a certain righteousness. There are princes and even good princes; there are judges and even just judges. There are states and constitutions and even states and constitutions which provide a certain amount of

freedom; there are social orders and even some which provide a certain amount of equality. There are creative spirits and even some which have the power of knowledge and understanding. But just in being great and powerful and righteous they touch the divine sphere, and they become arrogant, and they are brought to nothing. They are without roots; they wither; the divine storm blows over them, and they vanish. That is the subject of Greek tragedy. That is the message of the prophet to the nations of the world. They are all subject to the law or tragic selfdestruction the bad and the good, individuals and nations, the weak and the heroic. And again the other order, the order beyond history and tragedy, appears at the horizon: He gives power to the faint and their strength is renewed, so that they shall mount up with wings as eagles.

9. The order beyond the order of history is the divine order. And it is paradoxical: men are like grass, but the word of God spoken to them shall stand forever. Men stand under the law of sin and punishment, but the divine order breaks through it and brings forgiveness. Men faint, falling from the height of their moral goodness and youthful power, and just when they have fallen and are weakest, they run without weariness and rise up with wings as eagles. God acts beyond all human assumptions and valuations. He acts surprisingly, unexpectedly, paradoxically. The negative character of the historical order is the positive character of the divine order. The weak and despairing, the sinful and tragic in the historical order and the strong and victorious in the divine order.

10. A few chapters later, the prophet speaks of the paradoxical destiny of the servant, the elected nation. described as a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, it is despised and rejected in the human order. Who does not think, hearing these words, of the exiles not only of Israel but of all nations of the world? But the divine order appears. The exiled nation, or (as the Christians later, historically wrong, spiritually right, interpreted it) the Man on the Cross, represents another order, an order in which the weakest is the strongest, the most humiliated, the most victorious. The historical, human order is overcome by the suffering servant, the crucified Savior.

11. If we doubt this paradox, if we despair about our human situation, if our exile is without hope or meaning for us, the prophet should fill us with shame for the arrogance of our rationalism and the narrowness of our moralism. He points to the creation of the world, of mankind, of history. He asks, "Who has directed the Spirit of God? With whom took He counsel and who instructed Him and taught Him the path of justice?" We always wish to teach God the path of justice. We tell Him that He must punish the bad and reward the good, especially in relation to ourselves. But He accepts no counsel concerning the course of history, as He took no counsel concerning the structure of the world, with all its natural destruction, cruelty and transitoriness. The divine order cannot be judged according to the measures of the historical order, the measures of human comfort and morality, democracy and civilization. That was the answer Job received from God when he struggled with Him about the unintelligible injustice of his historical fate. God did not justify Himself in moral categories; He triumphantly pointed to the unexplorable greatness of nature which cannot be measured according to the measure of human righteousness.

12. But if the divine order and the historical order have nothing to do with each other, how can the divine order concern us at all? How can eternity and forgiveness and divine help concern us if we are in the other order, the historical order, standing under the law of finiteness and weakness and punishment? How can the divine order comfort us in our misery? How can we listen to the words of the prophets

which tell us of the end of our warfare? There are three answers to this question. First, the divine order is not the historical order; and we should not confuse these two orders. No life is able to overcome finiteness, sin, and tragedy. The illusions of our period have been that modern civilization can conquer them, and that we can achieve security in our own existence. Progress seemed to have conquered tragedy; the divine order seemed to be embodied in the progressive, historical order. But for nearly three decades our generation has received blow after blow, destroying that illusion, and driving to despair and cynicism those who wanted to transform, and thought they could transform, the historical order into a divine order. Let us learn from the catastrophe of our time at least the fact that no life and no period are able to overcome finiteness, sin, and tragedy.

13. The second answer is that there is another order to which we, as human beings, belong, an order which makes man always dissatisfied with what is given to him. Man transcends everything in the historical order, all the heights and depths of his own existence. He passes, as no other being is able to pass, beyond the limits of his given world. He participates in something infinite, in an order which is not transitory, not selfdestructive, not tragic, but eternal, holy, and blessed. Therefore, when he listens to the prophetic word, when he hears of the everlasting God and of the greatness of His power and the mystery of His acts, a response is awakened in the depth of his soul; the infinite within him is touched. Every man knows, in some depth of his soul, that that is true. Our despair itself, our inability to escape ourselves in life and in death, witnesses to our infinity.

14. The third answer is that the two orders, the historical and the eternal, although they can never become the same, are within each other. The historical order is not separated from the eternal order. What is new in the prophets and in Christianity, beyond all paganism, old and new, is that the eternal order reveals itself in the historical order. The suffering servant of God and the enemies because of whom he suffers, the Man on the Cross and those who fainted under the Cross, the exiled and persecuted in all periods of history, have all transformed history. The strong in history fall; the strength of each of us is taken from us. But those who seem weak in history finally shape history, because they are bound to the eternal order. We are not a lost generation because we are a suffering, destroyed generation. Each of us belongs to the eternal order, and the prophet speaks to all of us: Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people!