

THE POWERS THAT BE

by William H. Ralston

William H. Ralston, priest, teacher, writer, and church leader, is currently rector of St. John's Episcopal Church, Savannah, Georgia.

Fr. Ralston was born in Middlesboro, Kentucky, in 1929. He attended the University of the South (Sewanee), the General Theological Seminary, New York, and the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Kentucky.

He was American Fellow at St. Augustine's College in Canterbury, England, from 1960 until 1962. In 1962 he assumed a position in the faculty of theology of the University of the South. In 1965 he was appointed associate editor of The Sewanee Review, and in 1966 was transferred from the seminary to the college faculty as a member of the English department, in which he taught until 1973. He is a founder and a member of the Board of the Society for the Preservation of the Book of Common Prayer.

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When St. Paul wrote, in the Epistle to the Romans, "the powers that be are ordained of God," I am sure he was not aware that he was writing what we have learned to speak of as "Holy Scripture," and I venture to think he would have been astonished at what has been made of his sentence. For all the years of Christendom since its inception in the time of Constantine to its dissolution during this century St. Paul's dictum to the Christian congregation in Rome has been the proof-text for everyone who argues either a form of union between state and church, or, contrariwise, an opposition.

The text can be read in the sense understood by Cecil, Lord Burghley, who on his deathbed, after a



lifetime spent as chief minister to Elizabeth, told his son: "Serve God by serving the Queen."

On the other hand, this very text can be and has been construed to mean just the opposite. The powers that be are ordained of God, and woe betide those who resist the sword they wield. But the sword they wield is the sword of punishment. The state is a creature of God designed for our correction. Its justice is a splendid vice, and its energies retributive and evidential of the wrath of God. Toward such a state the Christian man can be either patient under tribulation or positively glad of the opportunity to be proved at the martyr's stake.

Whatever the permutations of these two ideas, and they are legion, St. Paul's famous text is evidently a dark saying, or at least ambiguous. I do not think it was ambiguous for him. St. Paul viewed the Roman state not only as benign, and protective of the rights of

im•pri•mis (im-pry-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things)....

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its citizens, but even as in some way part of the Providence of God, the fullness of time. For him Rome provided those two things the civil authority must provide, but which are so hard to balance with each other, security and liberty.

But St. Paul is by no means the sole Biblical witness, or even the most authoritative one. If we are to explore without political prejudice what the Bible has to say of the state we must begin elsewhere.

I.

The primary literary document of the Old Testament is an historical narrative, complete in its first form sometime around the middle of the tenth century before Christ. This writer, with comments from his editor or scribe, portrays the evolution of his nation from the creation of the world by Jahweh until the accession of Solomon and the disruption of the Davidic monarchy at Solomon's death.

His central idea is the victory of God over chaos. He shapes his story into what we might call five "books," and provides as a preface to it an account of three mythological events.

He begins with the primal victory of Jahweh over chaos. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.... And God said, Let there be light; and there was light."

Following the myth of creation, the early writer tells of the garden and the fall from grace of the creature God fashioned for Himself out of the dust of the ground. The priestly editor six centuries afterward formulates this as explicit theology: "God created man in his own image." The earlier writer emphasizes what we are made from, the dust of the ground; the later what we are made for, to bear the image of God.

Humankind is thus sprung from chaos, but endowed by the Creator with a power to imitate God by giving meaning to what otherwise would be chaotic, nameless, raw experience. Language is our victory over such chaos, and the emblem of our kinship with the Word itself of God.

In this lay grave danger, because to entrust us with the power of language meant also to trust us with a kind of freedom. Since God is free, for Him to share any part of His activity with us means that we must have some share also of his freedom. It is conditional and limited, but it is necessary to us, an essential part of our nature as His creatures, and at once the most dangerous and the most glorious of our possibilities.

When we forget what we are, creatures sprung from the chaos of dust, and attempt to be gods for ourselves, then our imagination works desperately against us. The gifts of the gods are ever dangerous, and none more so than the supreme creative gift of the imagination. Our attempt to seize power for ourselves destroyed our

communion with God, with each other, and with our world.

In the third of the prefatory myths with which this writer introduces his version of the story of his people we see the flood of darkness and chaos which rebellion unleashed in the world very nearly overcome creation. The waters of the deep cover the earth again, but in the ark the pitiful remnants of God's living creatures are preserved, and at the end the rainbow arches over the earth as the sign of God's invincible determination not to "let us go." He shall not give up His world to chaos, no matter what we do. It is finally not in our power to frustrate His nature or His purpose.

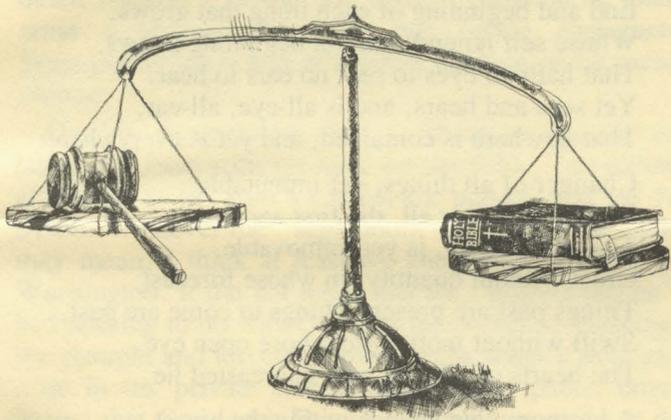
The writer then narrates his history. In the first "book" (to use an anachronistic term) he portrays the settling of Palestine through recounting the legends of the patriarchs. He then gives us the saga of the Exodus. The overwhelming symbolic meaning of this event for the whole of the rest of Biblical literature indicates the power of his original insight. The deliverance of His worshippers from oppression and tyranny by God Himself, acting through the agency of the winds and waters, is an unmistakable sign that the power of God to bring order from chaos is still at work in His world.

For God to give freedom and victory to those who worship Him is as natural to Him as creating a world in the first place. It is, as we would say, a "property" of God. It is an attribute of the divine nature.

The end of this author's next "book," what we call the Biblical Book of Judges, is a hideous tragedy. The old chaos of power reasserts itself in its most vicious form. First there is a rebellion against the order of religion, an assumption of priestly power by those who have no right to it. Then follows, as surely as from the rebellion in the garden, chaos in human personal relationships. The story of the Levite's concubine is the most gruesome and piteous in the Bible. "And it was so, that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day."

Immediately afterward there follows civil war, the eruption of chaos beyond the personal into all social and political relationships. By now, I think something of this author's mode of understanding will be clear. The absolute condition of our peace, our happiness, and our freedom is the fixing of our imagination upon the God in whose image we are made. We will return to dust and chaos apart from this. When we rebel against it, the immediate result is a chaos of knowledge and relationship in the private and most intimate places of our personal existence, a chaos this author has unerringly represented as a disordering of our sexuality. The further consequence of the rebellion is a disordering of all our social and political knowledge and relationships, as the evil spreads from the mind and soul into the heart and out through the will, bringing chaos and oppression in its wake.

It is in the establishment of a monarchy under David that this writer sees still another sign of God's power to bring order upon chaos, to deliver His people from destruction, and to give them freedom from their enemies. The first Book of Samuel records the immediate preparation for this event, the abortive monarchy set up in the days of Saul, a noble and magnanimous man fatally flawed and finally incapable of becoming the instrument through which the form of the monarchy could be realized.



But later we see how David in his turn, the greater man by far than Saul, proved also to have the greater fault. He could not bear not to be loved; he had to be the only one; and he could not consistently face the truth of his own self-indulgence. The Davidic monarchy declines again into bloodshed and dissension. It is finally handed on to Solomon, a crafty court-intriguer, a man who ruthlessly eliminates all his opposition. The promise of the monarchy became the Oriental despotism of a vain and egregious tyrant, the result of whose brutal and selfish reign was civil war, rebellion, and the dismemberment of the country.

For the Biblical writer the failure of the Davidic monarchy brought neither cynicism nor disbelief, but rather a deepened awareness that the form of this kingdom was not what God intended, and so it was destroyed. It did not mean that Jahweh had ceased to preside over history or that He would not, in His own time and way, provide a kingdom which would protect us from the chaos of our enemies and the chaos of ourselves.

II.

Two hundred years after the disruption of the Hebrew kingdom, in the middle of the eighth century, there occurs a phenomenon without parallel in literature. I mean the emergence of Hebrew prophetic poetry in Amos, Hosea, Micah, and, above all, in Isaiah of Jerusalem, who ranks with his contemporary Homer as among the half-dozen supreme poets in history. I have no intention of attempting to discuss the origins of this poetry or to survey the various authors of it. They

would themselves disclaim authorship. They speak in the name of God.

What is germane to our particular argument is the implacable prophetic proclamation that the existing political order is determined for destruction by God, a destruction brought about because the political structures have failed to realize their proper function, have abused their powers, and corrupted themselves and their people.

The most terrifying image in the Bible is in Hosea. The Lord says: "I will be unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness." That God himself is the destroyer and corrupter of His own people when they have perverted His power to their own ends; that the very freedom of God demands the enslavement of His people and the dissolution of their community; that God's victory is man's experienced defeat was a complex of ideas wholly strange and paradoxical. No wonder it took over two hundred years, and the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities to make it credible. Nevertheless, this is the spiritual watershed of the Old Testament, and the necessary movement toward the New. We find it best expressed, perhaps, in a small, strange body of poetry scattered through the last chapters of Isaiah. These are the so-called "Servant Poems," which speak of the heir to the kingdom as a suffering servant, one who comes to his kingdom representing, or as himself the embodiment of, a small, despised, but faithful remnant. His mission is to tell the truth, and to die. In this personification and sublimation of the classical prophetic poetry, which interpreted the death of the nation as the triumph of God, we come to the deepest level of insight attained in the Old Testament.

But it is through these three things—the divine provision of the Davidic monarchy, the meaning given by the prophets to the later history of the nation, and the mysterious idea of a remnant whose vocation it was to be patient—that the passage can be found to Jesus. He accepted his inheritance from David's line; he spoke like the prophets, with the absolute authority of God; he suffered finally alone, and through his dying God established His kingdom, unshakable, eternal, and victorious. But it is a kingdom "not of this world," and we must try to see what this means before we return to St. Paul and our problems with his statement about the "powers that be."

There are two moments in the life of Jesus which I take as tests of what he means and is. The first is the famous challenge, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?" Jesus' answer is at the finest level of subtle irony. In the story the two groups who oppose him have combined to trick him. On the one hand the Pharisees despise and repudiate the Roman government; for them, to pay the tribute is to collaborate and to compromise the purity of divine obedience. On the

other hand the Sadducees believe in cooperation and civil obedience, convinced that the country has more to gain than to lose by playing the game with the "powers that be"; for them, not to pay the tribute money would be tantamount to treason. Jesus sees the trap and the hypocrisy lurking in the question. He asks for a coin: "Whose is this image and superscription?" They answer, "Caesar's." He replies: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."

If Jesus meant no more than just "pay your taxes," neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees would have been "astonished," as the story tells us they were. We must try to see the point of Jesus' question about the "image." The coin is stamped with the image of Caesar. Therefore it is his. It belongs properly to him. Insofar as we are dealing with the obligations implicit in that coin, let Caesar demand it. But whose is the image and superscription on the human being? Jesus invokes our recollection of the root idea of man in the Bible, the conviction of the primary writer of the Old Testament: Man is made in the image of God, in likeness to his Creator. Therefore do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing, and be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. Give Caesar his money, since his image is on it; but give yourself only to God, whose image is on you. This is not an evasion. It is a definition of the limits within which we must live insofar as we care whether or not we have the mind of Christ.

The second moment in Jesus' life which seems to me definitive for our understanding of this topic occurs on his last day. He is standing before Pilate, accused of treason. He has answered categorically: "My kingdom is not of this world.... My kingdom is not from hence." At this Pilate is convinced that Jesus is not a threat to the state, and finds no political fault in him at all. The scene becomes increasingly more tense, from the sophisticated bantering about truth to Pilate's increasing apprehension of the religious dimension of his decision. The climax arrives when the crowd, led by the priests, plays to Pilate's weakest suit: "If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend; whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar." Finally, the whole reality of the kingdom of God, propounded by the historian of the Davidic monarchy, probed to its depths by the prophets, and adumbrated at last in the heir of David standing on the pavement under Roman judgment, comes down to a single question: "Shall I crucify your king?" The answer is categorical and tragic, both in its substantive statement and in the devastating irony of the office of the persons who utter it: "The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar.'"

III.

One thing which the New Testament writers do not contemplate and which the Old Testament portrays

everywhere in dark terms is rebellion or revolution. The revolution of Jehu after the death of Ahab, comprehensible as the reasons for it may be in terms of political and social analysis, nonetheless ushered in a period of exhaustion and futility hitherto unknown to the Hebrew people. Later revolutions, productive as they always are of folk heroes and brave men, resulted in the obliteration of the holy city and its temple, and the final dissolution of Palestine as a political entity. When Christendom has taken the sword, whether to save the tomb of Christ from the heathen, or to batter each other for a hundred years to decide between Protestant and Catholic, or even in our own century to defeat a hideous political aberration, it seems that we have sown dragons' teeth. For every ill we cure, a hundred others are born in its place. And to be sure, neither Calvin's Geneva, Knox's Edinburgh, nor Torquemada's Spain is high on anybody's list of desirable locations to live.

Does this mean that we become indifferent to social injustice and tyranny, and never allow cause to fight? Certainly not the former, but the latter is more problematic. I take the present division in the Jesuit order of the Roman Catholic Church and the confusion of understanding in the so-called Moral Majority as indicative of our difficulty. One part of the Jesuits finds no problem at all in locating the enemies of justice, and no problem whatever in taking every active means to their subversion and destruction. They wish to establish other "powers that be." I suppose they viewed the destruction of the Roman Catholic Church in South Vietnam and Cambodia with great moral satisfaction. I have not heard their comments on the thing that has replaced it.

Less grim, but not less confused, is the attempt to maintain what some people think the separation of Church and State means at the same time one appeals to the government for a restoration of moral rectitude and public decency. Have we not ceased, in our vast pluralistic nation, to represent a common agreement about what the values are? Citizens who cheerfully commit adultery and claim the rights of privacy are out on the hustings for the reform of "government." It is fascinating to observe the choices made of which laws certain people choose to disobey or ignore. They consider it their "right" to do so, even their inalienable right. Perhaps it is, but it would not be easy to reconcile any of this confusion with St. Paul's reverence for the "powers that be."

Can St. Paul mean simple acquiescence in whatever power happens to be in control? Many Christian moral theologians have denied any right of rebellion whatsoever. Or do we simply give up any pretense of accepting the authority of the Bible and cast out on the political seas with our native wits to guide us and our instincts for power to sink us?

I want to take the American Revolution as a test case. Except perhaps for old Franklin and the usual quota of New England and Southern hotheads, the men who guided the course of the War of Independence and the formation of the United States were indubitably religious. They believed firmly that God, their "Creator," whose guidance of events was "Providence," was with them. It has become fashionable to diminish George Washington's capacities as a general and to dismiss his churchmanship as conventional. Such a view is very silly. At the news of Washington's death Napoleon bowed his head. I presume he knew what a soldier was. The last public appearance Washington made was at a vestry meeting of his parish church.

On his inauguration day Washington insisted on taking the oath with his hand on the Bible, and retired afterward to St. Paul's Chapel for prayers and the *Te Deum*. Whatever the "separation" of Church and State may mean, I think at least we know what it meant to Washington. It did not mean that the "powers that be" had nothing to do with God. On the contrary, Washington thought and fervently believed (he states it over and over in his private correspondence and public utterances) that God in his Providence had everything to do with the United States becoming what it was, and with his own personal duties as its leader and servant. Congress should make no laws respecting the "establishment" of religion—as the Church of England was legally established in Virginia and the Roman Catholic Church in Maryland—but Washington would have considered it heathenish and a blasphemy to fail to acknowledge the "Creator and Preserver of all mankind."

We must recognize that our revolution was different. Edmund Burke understood it for what it was; but, then, Burke was Irish. Our revolution, as has been endlessly said, was in most ways no revolution at all. It was more like an insistence that Magna Carta and the principles of English common law applied in the colonies just as they did at home. In any case the result was a triumph—partial and tentative at first, but no less real—of unity and order over incipient social violence and chaos. George Washington, without children of his own, is rightly called the Father of his country. His moral character was the decisive factor in our origin as a nation, and his performance as soldier, president, and private citizen remains the paradigmatic measure of our national life.

For Washington, the Revolution was a practical matter. Had it failed he would have been hung and Mt. Vernon destroyed. But it was more than that. Washington fought for his land; he fought for his honor; he thought a principle of justice was at stake; and he saw that the colonies must determine their own future on this continent. He thought God had a hand in all of it.

When one surveys the story of other revolutions—in France nearly as long ago as our own; in Russia and in

China; in Southeast Asia, all over Africa, and ceaselessly in Central and South America—it is not so easy to think the hand of God is there, except for judgment, not any longer on his peculiar people, but on all the sheep of his hand. So I think St. Paul is correct. Whether the powers that be are a blessing or a curse, whether the course of events evidences God's pleasure or His wrath, whether the powers operate for good or for ill, there is a logic to them and they are comprehensible. Beneath their apparent chaos and over it are the hands of God. Whether one concludes that Rome, as St. Paul went on to say, was a bulwark against those who would do evil works, the keeper of order and justice; or whether, starting from the same premise that the powers that be are creatures of Providence, one concludes, as does St. John, that Rome is Babylon, a necessary stage in the worldly triumph of evil before the heavenly order of the City of God descends to the sound of trumpets; whether the State is a divine provision against chaos or an evidence of the wrath of God, its powers are finally in God's hands. This means that the political and social community must be taken seriously on its own terms, and paid its due respect. "Render unto Caesar..." Every person must determine in what light he views that obligation, and then take his own risks. If security is the governing value, then the risk will be compromise, adjustment, acquiescence, and the peril of an atrophied conscience. If liberty is the governing value, then the risk will be violence, a resurgence of chaos, anarchy, and the peril of a worse state to come. All of this has to do with Caesar.

What has the Church to do with this, and what is her relation to the State? Insofar as the Church is an organization, a temporal agency or part of something we call Christendom, then she is part of the secular power, and it is a matter of balancing one authority with another. The Church in this construction is no more (and sometimes less) than another political party. She is an element in the play of forces, and she is part of the State. The State is perfectly correct in treating the Church as an institution in the same way it treats any other corporation. It strikes me as absurd for the Church to intrude her supernatural standards in the political arena, and try to play both games. You cannot claim to be not of the world, and then play in the world as if the world were your primary end in view.

From what we can see of the protagonist of the New Testament, and from what we can read of what he said, his Church was strictly not intended to function in this way. It represents an absolute kingdom, not of this world. Its chief purpose on earth is to tell people, everyone from the king to the poorest of the poor, that they belong to another Kingdom and another King. Not liberty, but freedom itself is the touchstone of that other City, never seen on land or sea, but as ineluctably present and powerful as the stars in their courses

or the proportions of geometry. The Church does not preach submission or rebellion. The Church tells the story of the kingdom of God. The Church does not teach social activism. The Church preaches the Sermon on the Mount. Once you know where your home is, you live as a stranger and a pilgrim, working out your salvation with fear and trembling.

Socrates decided that even though wicked men had abused the laws of Athens and twisted them into condemning him to death, it was better for him to die than to live. St. Thomas More was convinced that he died the king's good servant, but he was willing to die because he knew a higher loyalty even than that. George Washington lent his life and his character to a cause when he saw law betrayed and liberty at the stake. Solzhenitsyn, whom I take to be the purest Christian intelligence of our own day, lives in physical isolation from his own country, but in the spiritual freedom his suffering has brought for him he continues to bring us news of that other Kingdom, news which no one else can see or say so well as he. Both these latter, and both those former heroes are concerned with the powers that be. And in some way or other all four of them accept these powers as part of the necessity of the world, for good and for evil. They are part of the Providence that shapes our ends.

The Church herself, like Plato's Republic, is of a different order of things. What has she to do with Caesar? It may be that her business is to suffer and die. She has a good precedent for thinking so. Nothing but confusion and disorder will come of the mixture of herself as institution with Caesar's affairs. The pitiful gestures of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, for example, condemning nuclear war and shares of South African gold and interference in Nicaragua, while continuing to relish the securities and liberties of the United States and planning their retirement in North Carolina as recipients of the Church's pension funds: can anyone take that seriously? Isaiah would spew them out of his mouth.

Sion lies waste, and thy Jerusalem,
O Lord, is fallen to utter desolation...
Thy powerful laws, thy wonders of creation,
Thy word incarnate, glorious heaven, dark hell,
Lie shadowed under man's degeneration...
That sensual unsatiable vast womb
Of thy seen Church thy unseen Church disgraceth.
There lives no truth with them that seem thine own,
Which makes thee, living Lord, a God unknown.¹

The end of the story that began when God said, "Let there be light," and when He took the not inconsiderable risk of forming a creature out of the dust who in one limited way resembled Himself, we cannot know. But after two thousand years I suppose we can tell that the attempt of the institutional Church to be both in, and yet claim to be not of the world has ended with the Church becoming a dreadful part of the chaos she is meant to inform.

In midst of this City celestial
Lightened the Idea Beautiful...
End and beginning of each thing that grows,
Whose self no end, nor yet beginning knows,
That hath no eyes to see, no ears to hear,
Yet sees and hears, and is all-eye, all-ear,
That nowhere is contained, and yet is everywhere;
Changer of all things, yet immutable,
Before and after all, the first and last,
That moving all, is yet immovable,
Great without quantity, in whose forecast
Things past are present, things to come are past,
Swift without motion, to whose open eye
The hearts of wicked men unbreasted lie...

A harmony that sounds within the breast,
An odour, light, embrace, in which the soul doth
rest...²

Each of us who has any dealings with Christ must consider of this, take thought, and speak his mind, how he is to be in and yet not of the world. It is only too pitiful that most of our churches are part of our problem rather than doors to its resolution. The only way that this can be remedied, I think, is for the Church once again to remember that the powers that be are ordained of God; to try to read God's purpose in them, for protection or for punishment; and to recollect the chief part of her own vocation on this earth, which no other agency can duplicate or perform—to wit, to tell you and me, in season and out, that we shall be at home elsewhere, never here, because we are made in the image of God. The story of the Bible is the story of this other King and this other City. "What have the Caesars but their thrones?"

¹ Fulke Grezille, "Caelica," Section CX.

² Giles Fletcher, "Christ Victory and Triumph."



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