

C.F.D. Moule, *Man and Nature in the New Testament: Some Reflections on Biblical Ecology*. The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 9 March 1964. London: The Athlone Press, 1964. pp.22.

*Man and Nature
in the New Testament*

Some Reflections on Biblical Ecology

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Gavin Maxwell, the well-known writer of books about otters, described, in an article in the *Observer* for October 13, 1963, how he lost two lovely otter cubs brought back from Nigeria: 'a minister of the Church of Scotland, walking along the foreshore with a shotgun, found them at play by the tide's edge and shot them. One was killed outright, the other died of her wounds in the water. The minister', added Maxwell bitterly, 'expressed regret, but reminded a journalist: "The Lord gave man control over the beasts of the field..."' A crime against sense and sensibility cannot be defended by the appeal to mere texts; but it cannot be denied that, so far as chapter and verse go, the Scottish minister had Scripture behind him:

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth' (Gen. i. 26);

and again, in Psalm viii:

...what is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?
Yet thou hast made him little less than God,
and dost crown him with glory and honour.

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Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;
thou hast put all things under his feet,
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,

Responsible authority is God-like. Of course, if God be God, God is accountable to no one: he is absolute, he is sovereign. But on any theistic conception of God—and most of all on a Christian conception—he wields his authority (as we might say) responsibly. He is not responsible to another; but he cares for his creation in the sense that he makes it his concern and responsibility; as 1 Pet. iv. 19 puts it, God is a ‘faithful Creator’—that is, a trustworthy, consistent Creator, one who, in that sense, is responsible. Now man is responsible in that other sense: he is responsible in the sense that he must render an account before God: ‘we must all appear at God’s tribunal’. But if we ask for what man is responsible to God, at least one Biblical answer is, for ruling over the rest of creation on this planet: man is responsible for ruling nature, and, in this sense, he wears God’s image. In a word, he is God’s vice-gerent within creation: he is like a

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provincial ruler in an empire; he is supreme over nature, he is accountable to God alone. This is very different from any non-religious view of the relation of man to the rest of created things. Any purely biological view sees man as capable, indeed, in a unique degree, of controlling his environment. But to say that he is intended to control it, and, in this, is God-like, is to bring in the notion of purpose: and teleology is no part of biology as such, nor can it be part of any non-religious view.

It would seem, then, that, bound up with a well-known Biblical view of man as made in the likeness of God, there is a far-reaching doctrine of divine purpose in respect of what we might call human ecology. The Bible bids us view the problems of man’s use of the world, and his relations with the world—both in acting upon his environment and in being acted upon by it—in the light of a divine charge: ‘thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands’—a dominion which is correlative to man’s subjection to God: ‘thou hast made him ... less than God’. It is in the light of this that a Christian must ask such ethical questions as (on a comparatively trivial level): Had that man a right to shoot Gavin Maxwell’s otters? and (on a level of supreme importance): What should control the exercise of man’s ability to interfere with the whole course of nature—his now terrifyingly vast ability to alter inanimate matter by nuclear fission and the genetics of living creatures by biological selection and manipulation? And then there is this other question of theodicy: What light, if any, does a Biblical doctrine of man throw upon what we call natural disaster (or, paradoxically, ‘acts of God’), when man becomes the victim of natural forces seemingly beyond his control?

This is meant to be mainly a Biblical study. But, in attempting to expose some of the implications of Biblical views, I should like to hope that I might be able to show that they can, in fact, be successfully related to the findings

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of biology, and that the doctrine of purpose illuminates scientific findings rather than conflicting with them.

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I

We start, then, with the Bible's treatment of the nexus between man and nature in the divine purpose. There are some striking hints scattered through the Bible to show how Hebrew thought recognized in non-human nature the repercussions of human morals.

The classic instance is, of course, in God's address to Adam after his disobedience: Gen. iii. 17-19:

And to Adam he said,
'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you,
"You shall not eat of it,"
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken;
you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'

This is the characteristically moral form of the legend which, in Virgil for instance (*Georg.* i. 121 ff.), treats the stubbornness of nature as part, simply, of Jupiter's stern and educative fatherhood—a reform of the lazy indolence of the Saturnian age. But the story of the fall in Gen. iii is by no means the only Old Testament passage which bears witness to a sense of the connexion between man's morals and nature's condition.

In Isa. xi, after the description of the wise ruler from Jesse's stock, there follows a poetical vision of harmony in

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nature, which is evidently intended to be the result of the wise ruler's goodness:

Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist,
and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.
The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall feed;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp,

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and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.² (Isa. xi. 5-9.)

We shall return later to the question how to interpret that harmony which is here poetically described in terms of a reversal of natural instincts.

Meanwhile, in Hos. ii. 21-23 there is a strange chain-reaction of blessing in a description of a good time that is coming:

And in that day, says the Lord, 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;
and I will sow him for myself in the land.
And I will have pity on Not pitied,
and I will say to Not my people, 'You are my people';
and he shall say 'Thou art my God.'
(Hos. ii. 21-23.)

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In Job, again, that exasperating comforter, Eliphaz, exhorts job to think how good it is when a man recognizes that his misfortune is God's just judgment on him, and repents; and though the words of Eliphaz are, for job's actual condition, cruel and inappropriate, they are clearly intended to be valid in the case of one who has indeed sinned and has repented:

Behold, happy is the man whom God reproves;
therefore despise not the chastening of the Almighty.
For he wounds, but he binds up; he smites, but his
hands heal.
He will deliver you from six troubles;
in seven there shall no evil touch you.
In famine he will redeem you from death,
and in war from the power of the sword.
You shall be hid from the scourge of the tongue,
and shall not fear destruction when it comes,
At destruction and famine you shall laugh,
and shall not fear the beasts of the earth.
For you shall be in league with the stones of the field,
and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with you.
(Job v. 17-23.)

² Cf. *Jubilees* 3. 28: before Adam's fall, the beasts could talk to each other; afterwards, they grew dumb. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* i. 50: God took away the serpent's voice.

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Thus, by the time we reach the New Testament, we are ready for a similar view of the nexus between man and nature; but now it is in terms of man in Christ. The most noteworthy instance is in Rom. viii, and to that we must turn directly. But in the meantime, to remind ourselves that this is not an exclusively Pauline application of the Gospel of the incarnation, here is the writer to the Hebrews affirming that it is Christ alone—and that, by his acceptance of death who restores man to his true relationship to both God and nature:

It has been testified somewhere,

‘What is man that thou art mindful of him,
or the son of man, that thou carest for him?’

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Thou didst make him for a little while lower than
the angels,
thou hast crowned him with glory and honour,
putting everything in subjection under his feet.’

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. (Heb. ii. 6-9.)

Psalm viii, with its vision of man, subject to God, superior to Nature, was brought by Christians into relation with Psalm cx, in which God is heard addressing his vicegerent:

Sit at my right hand,
Till I make your enemies your footstool;

and in 1 Cor. xv, Paul applies this to Christ, as the King who is already reigning but whose total rule over the sum of things has yet to be implemented:

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ‘For God has put all things in subjection under his feet.’ But when it says, ‘All things are put in subjection under him,’ it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one. (1 Cor. xv. 25-28.)

But the most remarkable statement in the whole New Testament about the relation of man to nature occurs, as I have said, in Rom. viii. Paul has been accused, as a town dweller, of being ignorant of nature and of lacking that intuitive understanding which is so clear in the words of

Jesus. It is not one of my ambitions to show that Paul is always right; but I suspect that, in this particular case, his critics have got it wrong; and Rom. viii, at any rate, has not

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unjustly been described as almost 'Franciscan' in its sensitive awareness of the rapport between man and nature.³

The passage in that mighty chapter that concerns us begins at verse 12. May I attempt to expound it by offering an explanatory paraphrase? There is not opportunity, here and now, to defend the exegesis implied by the paraphrase; this I must submit to the scrutiny of any scholars who may be concerned, and I must defend it then as best I may.

In view, then, of what God has done for us in Jesus, we are under an obligation; but it is not to obey the dictates of sensuality. To live sensually leads to death. But if, by the help of God's Spirit, you kill sensuality dead, then you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of servitude again, leading to fear, but a Spirit which causes our adoption as God's sons, a Spirit enabling us to cry, 'Abba! Father!'. The very Spirit of God joins with our spirit in bearing witness that we are children of God; and, if children, then heirs: heirs of God, and fellow-heirs with Christ—if, that is, we share his sufferings, for then we shall also share his splendour. For I reckon that the sufferings of the present time are negligible, compared with the splendour that is destined to be revealed for us. For creation, with eager expectancy, is waiting for the revealing of the sons of God. For creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice but because of Adam's sin which pulled down nature with it, since God had created Adam to be in close connexion with nature. But the disaster was not unattended by hope—the hope that nature, too, with man, will be released from its servitude to decay, into the glorious freedom which characterizes man when he is a true and obedient son of God. For, up to the present time, we know that the whole of creation joins together in common groaning and agony; and not only creation in general, but we Christians too—even though we have the Holy Spirit as a foretaste of that hope—groan inwardly in our longing for that adoption as sons which means the release of our bodily existence from decay....

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Now, all this means that man is responsible before God for nature. As long as man refuses to play the part assigned him by God, so long the entire world of nature is frustrated and dislocated. It is only when man is truly fitting into his proper position as a son in relation to God his Father that the dislocations in the whole of nature will be reduced.

Such a conception of the relationship begs, I fully realize, many questions. What, to begin with, is this alleged dislocation in nature? Would a scientific biology recognize any such thing? And

³ W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *Romans* (T. and T. Clark, 1896), 2:12: 'He is one of those (like St Francis of Assisi) to whom it is given to read as it were the thoughts of plants and animals.'

what is meant by servitude to decay? ‘Servitude’ is a loaded word: what right have we to describe completely natural and necessary processes of change such as metabolism and death as something so alien and wrong as is suggested by that word ‘servitude’? And in what terms are we to conceive this great liberation that is contemplated as the happy ending? How translate all this mythological language?

It might seem easy enough to shoot down the whole structure as fantasy. No one with a grain of sense believes that the passage I quoted from Isa. xi is intended literally, as though the digestive system of a carnivore were going to be transformed into that of a herbivore. What blasphemous injury would be done to great poetry and true mythology by laying such solemnly prosaic hands upon it! If we believe at all in God as Creator, and in the evolution of species as part of his design, it seems we must accept universal predation as integral to it. Indeed, it would be a catastrophic dislocation of the whole ecology if the lion did begin to eat straw like the ox—or, for that matter, if the microscopic defenders within the body gave up attacking the invaders which may cause disease.

But here, in this latter example from within the human body, is, as I see it, a clue to an interpretation of the facts which might, I dare to hope, make sense. Suppose that the human individual may, as is often not unreasonably assumed,

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be regarded as a microcosm, reproducing in miniature conditions which obtain also in the large—scale macrocosm—in the world as a whole. On the level of the human individual there is a great battle continually being waged. The attack by viruses and by bacteria producing antigens is repulsed, we are told, by the activity of certain body cells and by the work of leucocytes and lymphocytes; and, woe betide a man in whom these soldiers suddenly turned pacifist! That thing we call the human personality floats upon the blood-red surface of a pool of conflict: and, so far as this life goes, he would not even exist to exercise kindness, generosity, and unselfishness—perhaps, to press the cause of pacifism—if those inner armies laid down their weapons and proclaimed a truce.

So, in the microcosm at least, man’s morality and gentleness towards his fellows is the apex only of a pyramid which is essentially predatory. It is only ruthless strife on lower levels of his existence that gives him freedom to exercise mercy and gentleness on a higher plane. I suggest, then, that equally in the macrocosm of the world at large mankind stands on the pinnacle of a predatory ecology, unlike the rest of the animal world in that he has reason and is capable of morality, but dependent, nevertheless, on the rest of the animal world continuing in its natural, competitive ecological strife.

This is uncommonly like the non-Christian ‘world-soul’ notion, but I see no incompatibility for it (in this form) in Christianity. You will recall the famous phrase in the *Epistle to Diognetus* (vi) which compares the relation of Christians to the world to that of the soul to the body. On this

principle, it follows simply enough that just as an immoral individual may, by gluttony and incontinence, upset the balance of his physical constitution and ruin his health, so man, within the natural world, can dislocate the whole frame of its ecology by abusing instead of using it.

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Thus we discover a far-reaching ethical principle to control man's relation to the rest of nature. In his competitive avarice, a huge landowner, let us say, overworks his earth: trying to extract the last ounce of yield, he over-fertilizes, over-cultivates it, until at last it turns into a dust-bowl and blows from beneath his feet into the next state. I suspect that the same curse attaches also to certain systems of rearing animals for produce, from battery hens to broiler calves, which force the pace to extremes, unnaturally and perhaps even cruelly.⁴ Reduce that principle to a smaller scale, and the glutton who takes life needlessly, not to support life but to satisfy his greed, is also, in his measure, behaving unlike a son of God. And it is the aggregate of such abuses of nature, by man acting contrary to his sonship, that adds up to that frustrating decay described by Paul. So that—conversely—restoration and liberation come when man assumes his proper position in ecology, not contracting out of his responsibilities and giving up the use of nature, but using it responsibly and according to the will of God. The thesis, then, is that, on the Christian showing, non-human nature has no independent rights. According to the Gospels, Jesus did not hesitate to say that a human being was of more value than many sparrows. At the same time, not a sparrow falls to the ground without your heavenly Father; and the merely wanton shooting of a tiny bird (or an otter) is an abuse of man's position—a marring of the image of God in him.

To what, then, is man's true sonship going to lead nature? To some spurious immortality? By no means! The emancipation of nature from its servitude to decay consists, exactly as in the emancipation of an individual from lust, in its material still being used—indeed, being used *up*—but in an overall purpose that is part of God's design. Man's

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responsibility is not to refrain from using material: it is for him to use it responsibly, both within his body and outside it.

There is another passage in St Paul's epistles which, in many respects, is closely parallel to Rom. viii, and that is 2 Cor. iv. 7-v. 10.⁵ It is different in that it concentrates, not on nature as a whole—the macrocosm—but on the microcosm—the human individual. But it is like Rom. viii in this, that it, too, wrestles with the frustration of decay. Let me briefly paraphrase its gist, as I understand it. The human individual naturally resists and regrets and resents the whole process of

⁴ See Mrs R. Harrison in the *Observer* for March 1 and 8, 1964, and in her book, *Animal Machines* (Stuart, 1964). See also comments, adverse and favourable, in the *Observer* for March 15, 1964.

⁵ Among the many treatments of this passage, note: A. Feuillet, 'Demeure céleste et destinée des Chrétiens', *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 44 (1956), 161 ff, 360 ff; R. F. Hettlinger, '2 Corinthians v. 1-10', *S.J.T.*, 10. 2 (June, 1957), 174 ff; E. E. Ellis, 'II Cor. v. 1-10 in Pauline Eschatology', *J.N.T.S.*, 6. 3 (April, 1960), 211 ff.

ageing, the weakening and limiting of life by the inroads of wear, fatigue, and mortality. He would like to make the transition into eternal life by putting on immortality like an extra garment—a pullover on top of the rest, without any antecedent process of stripping and divestiture and loss. None of us relishes having to let go. But no, insists St Paul, we must not resent this necessity. It is precisely for this (and I interpret that to mean this process of exchange) that God has made us. It is not God's principle for us 'to have our cake and eat it'. It is our duty and our destiny to use and use up and consume and part with our mortal frame—to spend and to be spent. What saves this process from being a frustrating and merely negative decay is the conviction that obedient use, obedient subjection to the wear and tear of life, is a constructive process by which God can build up an eternal life for us—a dwelling eternal in the heavens. Using of this sort is not wasting: it is constructive, it is creative.

It is along these lines that ethical problems presented by man's power over nature must be solved. Man is placed in the world by God to be its lord. He is meant to have

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dominion over it and to use it and use it up—but only for God's sake, only like Adam in Paradise, cultivating it for the Lord. As soon as he begins to use it selfishly, and reaches out to take the fruit which is forbidden by the Lord, instantly the ecological balance is upset and nature begins to groan.

II

I believe that Christians will all agree with the view I have tried to sketch of man's responsibility towards nature in terms neither of contracting out from its use nor yet of avaricious abuse but of scrupulously careful use in the name of God. There is nothing new in this. George Herbert summed it up tersely in his aspiration,

That, as the world serves us, we may serve thee,
And both thy servants be.
(G. Herbert, *Everyman* edition, p. 91.)

But, beyond this, I have some hopes that some of you, at least, may think also that there is some sense in my attempt to relate this Biblical view of man to the ecological ideas of modern biology. While man is part, indeed, of his environment, he is, on this showing, distinctive because he alone is a consciously purposeful part, and therefore a part which is decisive for the future of the entire frame of being. His distinctive contribution to the ecological set-up is meant to be rational and conscious manipulation in accordance with the will of God. It seems to me that such a view is integral with the confession of a real incarnation and of a new creation in Christ.

But, if so, we are now confronted with the exceedingly stubborn and recalcitrant problem of what is usually called natural disaster. It is, I have suggested, possible to give meaning to the idea that it is man's disobedience which causes strains and distortions in the world's fabric by manipulating the ecology of the world of living creatures in a

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way contrary to God's will. But surely the apparently blind forces of inanimate nature stand outside any such scheme, and remain an insuperable objection to the view that morals control the working of the universe? Anyone who finds personality and purpose at the very heart of things, and hopes to find in harmony between man and God the key to harmony in nature, is under an obligation to offer some answer to the dismaying question posed by such a phenomenon as the hurricane named Flora, which, in October 1963, swept thousands of human beings to death in Haiti and Cuba; or to the appalling earthquake which, shortly before, had made a shambles of the lovely city of Skopje, or the burst dam which, at about the same time, brought nightmare horror to the Piave valley.

Dr G. B. Caird, in his popular commentary on St Luke's Gospel, expresses the Biblical view of just this problem when he reaches the adjacent narratives of the stilling of the storm and the Gadarene demoniac. He writes:

From this intimate association of man and nature in their relation to the mystery of iniquity it followed that the redemption of man would be accompanied by the restoration of paradise: the wolf would dwell with the lamb and the desert would blossom as the rose (Isa. xi. 6-9, 35; lv. 12-13). The miracles of Jesus were all 'miracles of the kingdom', evidence that God's sovereignty was breaking in, with a new effectiveness, upon the confusion of a rebellious world.

Now, there is a reminder that the Jews of Christ's day did not think in terms of a closed universe, an autonomous cosmos. They did not recognize a category of natural disaster as distinct from disaster caused by sentient beings. The determinism of a mechanically rigid system was alien to their way of thinking: rather, they saw the world as God's world, where he was free to act as he liked and in which whatever regularity there might be was not the regularity of a self-contained machine but the consistency of a personal God of

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whose very body nature was a part. Naturally, therefore, God could lay a finger on the sun and delay its setting, or speak to a hurricane and quell its rage, as easily as he could exorcise a demon from a man possessed.

But have we not outgrown such a naive idea? The answer, I would urge, is that, in principle, it is not naive nor alien to Christian thought today. If I do not believe that the sun literally stood still for Joshua at Gibeon, or the moon over the valley of Aijalon, it is, I should like to think, not

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because, contrary to the Biblical view, I believe that the regularity of natural laws reigns supreme over God, but, conversely, because I believe that God's character reigns supreme over all, and that there are certain things which do not seem to me to be in character with the God we know on other evidence. The delay of the sun is one such incompatible thing, not to mention that it is not (to put it mildly) borne out by any compelling evidence. But I think it is difficult to find any principle on which it could be maintained that there is a hard-and-fast dividing line between so-called 'natural' and so-called 'personal' events. Presumably even the most psychological of cures is theoretically capable of being described in terms of the release of what are known as neurohumours within the human frame; why, then, should not the most inanimate of meteorological changes be equally controllable by the moving (as it were) of the infinitesimally tiny pieces on the cosmic chessboard? No one who believes in a Creator who is both transcendent and immanent should find this idea impossible.

If so, perhaps it is not impossible that the interlocking system I have tried to posit for man and his biological environment may extend also to movements within what we call the inanimate: and all alike be within the hand of God. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not putting the clock back and asking you to believe that those eighteen individuals on whom the tower in Siloam fell were, after all,

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sinners above all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; I am not tracing disaster to the sin of the individuals overtaken by it; but I am asking whether collectively man may not be responsible, under God, for the whole system of interlocking movements in all the world, inanimate as well as animate—if, indeed, this distinction is not itself arbitrary.

For head with foot hath private amitie,
And both with moons and tides.
(G. Herbert, *Everyman* edition, p. 89.)

It was in one of C. H. Dodd's books⁶ that I first met a set of verses, which express tellingly this mystical union betwixt man and even inanimate nature. It is addressed to *Everyman*:

All things search until they find
God through the gateway of thy mind.
Highest star and humblest clod
Turn home through thee to God.
When thou rejoicest in the rose
Blissful from earth to heaven she goes;
Upon thy bosom summer seas
Escape from their captivities;
Within thy sleep the sightless eyes

⁶ *The Meaning of Paul for To-day* (Swarthmore Press, 1920; Fontana, 1960).

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Of night revisage Paradise;
In thy soft awe yon mountain high
To his creator draweth nigh;
This lonely tarn, reflecting thee,
Returneth to eternity;
And thus in thee the circuit vast
Is rounded and complete at last,
And at last, through thee revealed
To God, what time and space concealed.

‘To Everyman’ (Edith Anne Stewart,
The Nation, November, 1918).

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In the case of the Piave dam, inquiries were immediately instituted to see whether or not it was culpable negligence that caused that disaster. Is it illogical to see—in an infinitely subtle and tenuous degree, no doubt—the possibility of man having a share in ultimate responsibility for every movement in the world now that God has put him there in this position?

‘Now that God has put him there.’ I am not arguing about what may have obtained before the appearance of homo sapiens. I was looking the other day at the clearly visible signs of undoubtedly painful disease in the gigantic fossil flipper of a prehistoric reptile; and I have no doubt that archaeology can also adduce plenty of evidence for ‘natural disasters’ long before the emergence of homo sapiens on earth: indeed, the encroachment of the ice in glacial ages is an obvious instance. It would clearly be lunacy to suggest that ‘sin’, in the sense of man’s disobedience—Adam’s fall—is, even in the most indirect sense imaginable, responsible for these catastrophic movements before ever there emerged a moral being capable of sin. I am only asking whether it may not be that, on occasions when man is cruelly hurt and destroyed by calamities which are contrary, as we feel sure, to the purpose and will of God, it may not be ultimately part of an almost infinitely long and subtle chain of cause and effect into which man’s disobedience has entered.

Of course, it must not be assumed that premature, sudden, or large-scale death is always and necessarily evil. The obliteration of organic life on a vast scale is a recognized part of the moment-by-moment metabolism of the entire animal world. I have been arguing in the first part of this lecture that the taking and using up of life by man is not only legitimate but a part of his positive duty. There is nothing, so far as I can see, to suggest that there is necessarily anything intrinsically evil in the overwhelming of

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living creatures by death sooner and more catastrophically than would be the case in the process of ageing and wearing out. Ageing and wearing out is not intrinsically better or even preferable. And it is possible that there may be circumstances in which the removal even of human beings

thus drastically and prematurely cannot be deemed evil. Is that Malthusian? Perhaps; but Christian faith, in any case, does not see suffering and death as ultimate evils, nor believe that they set a term to the human personality. But where such catastrophic events are manifestly and unquestionably fraught with appalling distress and grievous results contrary to God's will, there, I suggest, it may be possible to say: This disaster—though we describe it as 'natural', or, paradoxically, as 'an act of God'—may after all be, in some exceedingly obscure and subtle way, an act of sinful man. That is as far as I can go towards formulating this problem of theodicy and inquiring whether we dare treat these catastrophes as less blindly mechanical than is generally imagined.

III

Be that as it may, we must leave these perhaps vain speculations and return to our basic convictions. It is a basic conviction of Christian faith that there is a way of rescue from the curse of Adam. In his fall, man has pulled down nature with him: he has at one stroke lost control of nature and lost also his unique ability to bring nature to its appointed goal. But in the ultimate Adam, Jesus Christ, and in his absolute obedience to the will of God, God has reasserted the creative principle of harmony and life. And man need not be like Sisyphus, condemned to the eternal frustration of futile labour; he can be rescued into purposeful living in the total environment of God's purposes. His labour, his spending of energy, his using up of his natural

[p.22]

resources are not in vain in the Lord. I end with some moving words from the English version of Gerhard Gloege's striking book *Aller Tage Tag*:

Sisyphus lives in us all—as a constant threat to our existence. He survives in every heroic attempt to master life in our own strength. He lives in the remarkably resilient mistake of men who will rely on nothing but themselves. Sisyphus will not consider it true that to be human means first of all to receive. He does not believe that man can only act after having received. Consequently he runs the constant risk of betraying humanity into the hands of a barbarism of higher pedigree in the name of man! This barbarism consists in man's selfreliance and self-involvement, man's total surrender to himself so that he is constantly sunk in himself. Sisyphus is, ultimately, this self-imprisoned, self-centred man. He is his own God and his own Satan: at war with heaven, embittered with earth, and contemptuous of hell. That is the peak of modern, demonic insanity. It is also the peak of absurdity. Absurdity can no longer see through itself in actual life and in its own activity. It is condemned to denying its humanity in the name of man!

Sisyphus must be rescued from himself—from his misunderstanding and his abuse of his humanity. He must be delivered from the dark delusion of the 'greater loyalty which rejects the gods and rolls the stone'.

C.F.D. Moule, *Man and Nature in the New Testament: Some Reflections on Biblical Ecology*. The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 9 March 1964. London: The Athlone Press, 1964. pp.22.

The Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth declares that Sisyphus has already been rescued from himself. It happened at Easter. (*Aller Tage Tag*, trans. as *The Day of His Coming* (S.C.M., 1963), 292 f.)

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