

Reflection Inspired by a Supershovel

by Augustine Di Noia, O.P.

Somewhere in the hills of Kentucky fifty-two separate motors beat away in the heart of a twenty-story high supershovel that gorges 350,000 pounds of earth and stone every two or three minutes. In Illinois there is one with an even more staggering appetite—a half a million pounds per bite. A supershovel that will take two-million pound gulps exists now only in the infinitely creative imaginations of strip mining engineers.¹

The earth, trees and stones that filled the ritual world of primitive man fill the ravenous mouths of contemporary man's electric supershovels. The earth, trees and stones that for primitive man pointed to awesome cosmic powers have become objects of exploration, investigation and control for contemporary man. The remotest star, the deepest ocean floor, the primal elements of cellular structure—contemporary man's vision stretches to all of these and beyond. What he cannot see and do now, he confidently expects to see and do sometime in the future.

The stupendous technological achievement which has so radically altered man's relationship to the universe makes it difficult for him to hear God speaking through this universe. This is as true of the unbeliever who sees God as the no longer necessary explanation, as it is of the Christian who calls for the secularization of his doctrinal, moral and liturgical life. Is this situation to be deplored? Should some attempt be made to restore man's sense of the sacredness of his cosmic environment?

I do not believe that any final solution lies in the direction implied by these questions. It is not helpful so to romanticize the experience

of premodern man that modern man's outlook is made to seem grasping godlessness. Christian man is not called to ungrateful regrets or to nostalgic spirit-conjuring. He is called to see in his universe the loving gift of the Triune God, a gift committed to his responsible use.² I would like to suggest here that the means to develop this vision of the universe lie deep in the inherited experience of Christian man's ancestors in faith, the ancient Hebrews.

For the Hebrew, cosmic reality was not the medium of the only, much less the primary, revelation of God to men. The heart and center of Old Testament religion is situated in its belief that God freely entered into history and spoke to man. This intervention is thought of as an encounter between persons: God speaks to man, and man listens and responds in faith and obedience. The religious man of the Old Testament views the universe as one already committed in faith to a God who has personally revealed himself to man. In the order and regularity of the universe, he sees the manifestation of the creative will of Yahweh, that Yahweh who has above all spoken to Abraham and to Moses, who has led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, who has made them a people especially his own.³

This conception is in marked contrast to the primitive polytheism of ancient peoples generally. In the religions of Israel's neighbors in the ancient Near East, for example, the deity is seen principally as a force operative in the universe. The cosmogony is the supreme divine manifestation. There is no question of an actual verbal communication, of a personal, historical manifestation of the divine being. In comparison, the religion of the ancient Hebrews is absolutely unique. The Hebrew knows God primarily not through his creative activity in the universe, but through the communication of the prophetic word.⁴

We are now in a position to perceive the fundamental aspect of cosmic revelation—the manifestation of God through natural phenomena—in the religion of the Hebrews. The God who is seen in the universe is the God of the covenant. In the light of the Sinai-event a projection backward is made to the God of creation. "God the Creator appears in the same light as the God of the exodus: the miracles of creation, just like those of the exodus, reveal Yahweh in His power and His Love."⁵ The primary valence in Old Testament religion's regard for nature is contemplative. The Old Testament man beholds in nature the presence and activity of the loving savior-God. "Creatures recount God's mystery, His wisdom, His power, His love, like the voice on Sinai and the prophets" (Ps 192).⁶

It is important to underscore the unity and simplicity of cosmic or natural revelation and supernatural revelation. Really it is a two-faceted revelation whose unity lies in the creative Word of Yahweh. In Genesis 1, the later of the two creation accounts, the emphasis is on the Word of Yahweh as actually creative. And creation is revelatory because it is something said by God. Since the word runs through all of nature, nature discloses something of the personality of Yahweh. The word gives meaning to nature *and* to history; both speak as one revelation of the one Yahweh.⁷ The priority of the supernatural revelation, the actual speaking of Yahweh, lies in the very fact that it is a genuine speaking, an absolutely personal revelation. When Yahweh speaks directly, he is actually present to the man of faith. In cosmic revelation it is creatures who speak to man of their maker and it is creatures who are actually present.

With this Old Testament conception of cosmic revelation clearly in mind, we can proceed to give it some concrete exemplification. What, in particular, do the Hebrews characteristically see of Yahweh's personality in natural phenomena?

I have been speaking of creation, interchangeably and without distinction, both as the initial and continuing activity of Yahweh, *and* as the cumulative product—nature or the universe—of that activity. Although closely interrelated in the reality of cosmic revelation, they separately deserve far more attention than the limits of this article allow. The essential point, which I hope to show with reference to the Psalms, is that in both cases the historical dimension is present, the dimension of Yahweh's personal intervention in the history of his people.

With regard to Yahweh's creative activity, we have already seen that the Hebrews came to regard Yahweh as the creator of the universe after they had first known him as the Lord in their collective experience. Evidently then—and this is important to realize—we are confronted here with a developing awareness. "Integraton of the event in history was not perceived in the earliest stages of Mosaic religion . . . But, from the prophet Osee onwards, recollections of sacred history permeate all forms of religious thought and life of Israel."⁸ In its fullness this perception had immense significance for the Hebrews:

In . . . extending the theology of the covenant to the origins of the world, the Old Testament universalized the covenant; it is not only Israel, but the entire world which is the scene of Yahweh's activity. This theology of creation develops in the exilic era, in precisely those

surroundings in which Israel came to a clear awareness of her universal vocation. If Yahweh is the Yahweh of the nations, He is absolute Lord over the nations (Is 45:18-24; 51:5).⁹

Hence in the liturgical prayer of the Hebrews the act of creation was never celebrated in isolation from the saving acts of Yahweh. In the rituals of ancient polytheism, on the other hand, the reenactment of the initial divine act creation occupied the central place. The primordial deed was imitated.¹⁰ But Hebrew liturgical reminiscence recounted the acts of Yahweh, of which the first was creation.¹¹ There are two general motifs in the creation-allusions of the Psalms: [1] at the head of hymnic lists of Yahweh's achievements; [2] in relation to the needs of a concrete situation.

Psalm 136 gives an excellent view of the first motif. In the form of a great litany, it recounts all the reasons for giving thanks to Yahweh. At the head of these, in chronological order, are the deeds of creation (vv. 5-9). Then immediately the Psalmist takes up the events of the Exodus (10-16), next the defeat of the Amorrahite kings (17-20), and finally the occupation of the land of Canaan (21-22).

Many Psalms allude to the act of creation in a context of supplication for some definite need. Praying for strength, Psalms 146 reads:

Happy the man who has the God of Jacob to help him,
whose hope is fixed on Yahweh his God,
maker of heaven and earth,
and the sea and all that these hold.

Or, as in Psalm 134, there is merely a reference to "he who made heaven and earth."¹²

The point to grasp in both cases is that reference to creation finds its place in the wider historical reality of Yahweh's action, whether in the collective experience of the whole people or in the individual experience of the man of prayerful faith. Will this also prove true of the Hebrews' regard for natural phenomena, the products of Yahweh's creative activity?

Again bypassing the question of development, we can characterize the Hebrews' attitude as a recognition that Yahweh manifests himself in natural phenomena as the creator, sustainer and Lord of nature. They see the creative will of Yahweh in the universe as wisdom. "Nature, in its regularity, its unity amid diversity, constantly demonstrates a superhuman intelligence and the constant and effective direction of a superhuman will."¹³ Yahweh is the King and Lord of all nature.

The Hebrews found certain cosmic realities especially appealing as

divine manifestations: the rock, rain, thunder, clouds.¹⁴ A very common theme throughout the Old Testament is that Yahweh is the dispenser of fertility.¹⁵ Another favorite image, lord of the storm, is extremely revealing for my purpose.

Psalm 29, for instance, is almost entirely devoted to the theme of Yahweh as lord of the storm. In Psalm 77 the image is as powerful:

When the waters saw it was you, God,
when the waters saw it was you, they recoiled,
shuddering to their depths.

The clouds poured down water,
the sky thundered,
your arrows darted out.

Your thunder crashed as it rolled,
your lightning lit up the world,
the earth shuddered and quaked.

You strode across the sea,
you marched across the ocean,
but your steps could not be seen.

You guided your people like a flock
by the hands of Moses.

In the final couplet explicit reference is made to the service rendered by the lord of the storm. Other clear examples are Psalms 18 and 68.

It is not difficult to appreciate the considerable appeal of this image when we recall that a great storm-theophany is recorded in the account of the Sinai-event (Ex 19).

The classical model of the (storm-) theophany appears to be the theophany of Sinai, as it was related in Hebrew tradition. It is certainly the oldest form of theophany, and no other reason suggests itself why Yahweh should by preference be seen as present and active in the storm except the traditional association on the storm-theophany and the covenant. It would be only natural for the Hebrew to think of Yahweh manifesting himself in the form and circumstances of the event which was of such historic significance for his people.¹⁶

We are again forced to recognize the foremost element in the Old Testament regard for cosmic revelation. In the eyes of the Hebrew the Lord of nature is above all the Lord of history, the Lord of the covenant, who acts in all things for the salvation of his people.

But what has all this to do with the contemporary Christian? What possible point of contact could there be between two experiences of the universe so radically divergent as those of today's Christian and yesterday's Hebrew?

Admittedly valid questions, but are these experiences all that radically divergent? Yes, if it's a question of cosmological viewpoints. But on another level they share a profound commonality.

"At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets" (Heb 1:1). The Hebrews saw the universe as something that came from the hands of their loving Yahweh, the Yahweh who spoke to them and cared for them. "But in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son, the Son he has appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything there is" (Heb 1:2-3). As Christians we are the recipients of a spoken communication so totally personal and intimate, so utterly revealing, that a greater or more final Word than Jesus Christ is inconceivable. And if he is the unfathomably rich self-revelation of God, he is also the absolutely perfect intervention. God entered the experience of the ancient Hebrews in words and deeds. Now he has entered into human experience not only in words and deeds, but in flesh and consciousness. He is a man. He has accomplished the ultimately salvific deed and abides in resurrected glory among us. Saint Paul chooses these striking words to speak of Christ the Lord of the universe:

He is the image of the unseen God
and the first born of all creation,
for in him were created
all things in heaven and on earth . . .

Before anything was created, he existed,
and he holds all things in unity.
Now the Church is his body,
he is its head.

As he is the Beginning,
he was first to be born from the dead,
so that he should be first in every way;
because God wanted all perfection
to be found in him
and all things to be reconciled through him and for him,
everything in heaven and everything on earth,
when he made peace
by his death on the cross. (Col 1:15-20)

The pattern in this liturgical hymn is remarkably similar to that of Psalm 77 quoted above. Just as the Hebrew associated the Lord of creation with the Lord of his covenantal experience, so must the Christian; only now, it is the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

But we have only reached a partial resolution of the problem posed at the beginning of this article. The primitive cosmology and limited scientific knowledge available to the ancient Hebrews predisposed them to see and hear God in their universe. The rock, rain, thunder, clouds, the storm—these realities *spoke* to them of their savior-God. We can pulverize rock, make rain, define thunder, plot the course of clouds, and predict the coming of storms. What do such realities have to say to us?

Built into the primitive Hebrews' regard for the revelatory character of nature was a tendency to see gods everywhere in the cosmic forces, a tendency to which the prophets' vigorous counter-exhortation bears witness. Yahweh wanted to tell the Hebrews that he was not legion, but one, all powerful, always present and always saving. He did not ask them to abandon what they were psychologically, socially and culturally, but came to them in and through every level of their experience as human beings living in the world.

In the same way, there is no divine injunction upon us to surrender our electric supershovels, our microscopes and telescopes, our bathyspheres and nuclear-powered rockets, in order to be better able to worship the Lord of the universe. To operate in the throes of so completely specious a dilemma would be literally to cease to hear. God is simply not asking this of us. He is asking us to recognize that he has given us fellowship with him in Jesus Christ and a sharing in the kingship over the universe which is properly his by his death and resurrection. We may not be in imminent danger of seeing gods in earth, tree and stone, but we certainly are in danger of not wanting to see God anywhere. When we ask him to surrender his kingship, he'll send his prophets to rail against us:

Man then is considered the steward or guardian of Being. . . . He does not have the world at his absolute disposal but is made responsible for it. The terrible danger of the technological age . . . is that it may become dominated by the subjective will-to-power. But man, who is creaturely as well as self-transcending, must learn to understand himself as freely cooperating in an enterprise much bigger than he knows about. He has to handle the creation and make use of its resources with responsibility—not only toward other men, of his own generation and of generations to come, but a responsibility toward the cosmos as a whole, and a responsibility toward the mysterious creative source whom we call God.¹⁷

Man, he is telling us, build bigger and better supershovels, but after you've got the coal please reseed the ground you've torn up.

If our contemporary experience is saying anything at all to us about God, it is certainly saying that he is a God who regards us so highly that he has given us the capacity to know and to create indefinitely. From his explicit revelation to us in Jesus Christ we know further that we are called to everlasting lordship in union with him.

FOOTNOTES

¹ See *Life Magazine*, January 12, 1968.

² For a development of this theme with reference to the genesis creation accounts see John Macquarrie, "The Doctrine of Creation and Human Responsibility" in *Knowledge and the Future of Man: An International Symposium*, edited by Walter J. Ong, S.J. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) pp. 125-138.

³ John L. McKenzie, S.J., "God and Nature in the Old Testament", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 14 (1952) p. 30.

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961) pp. 80, 110-111.

⁵ René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1966) p. 331.

⁶ Translations of biblical passages quoted in this article are from *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966).

⁷ John L. McKenzie, S.J., "The Word of God in the Old Testament", *Theological Studies*, 21 (1960) pp. 201-202.

⁸ Evode Beaucamp, *The Bible and the Universe* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1963) p. 67.

⁹ Latourelle, p. 331.

¹⁰ Eliade, p. 85 ff.

¹¹ Jean Daniélou, *God and the Ways of Knowing* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1957) p. 35.

¹² Beaucamp, pp. 67-71.

¹³ McKenzie, "God and Nature", p. 31.

¹⁴ Daniélou, pp. 25-27; Beaucamp, pp. 92, 97.

¹⁵ McKenzie, "God and Nature", p. 126.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁷ Macquarrie, p. 137.

"*The possibility of pure human love in this life is impossible. Why Hope is nothing else than divine concupiscence.*"

THOMAS GILBY, O.P.