

## THE OLD TESTAMENT AND MODERN PSYCHOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HAT there is a connection between the Old Testament and Modern Psychology may seem a far-fetched idea which has no foundation in fact, but both are related in Judaic roots.

The Old Testament is a divinely inspired book written by Jews about Jews, whilst psychology is the science based on the ideas of a Jew—Sigmund Freud. Freud, who is generally accepted as the father of modern psychology, found recognition first among Jews, but when his method—psychoanalysis—proved to be successful in the treatment of nervous disorders, it spread beyond the small group of Jewish enthusiasts into the circles of Christian psychologists.

It is no mere coincidence that a Jew realized the importance of psychological problems in the present world. Centuries of ghetto life had made the Jews extremely sensitive in their reactions to people who lived in freedom. The enforced isolation shaped their mentality into a set pattern different from that of the surrounding European world which was developing its own particular culture. This difference was apparent when, after the French revolution, the gates of the ghettos were opened. The Jews found themselves in the minority and different from other Europeans, who, in turn, saw the Jews as being different from themselves. This situation became the breeding ground of mutual suspicion and distrust and created in certain people, pre-conditioned by nature, symptoms such as inferiority complex and anxieties or paranoic attitudes in which the individual feels that everybody is against him so that, in defence and without actual cause, he becomes aggressive. Thus the pattern is laid in which is cast the neurosis.

<sup>1</sup> It may be necessary to point out that this paper, although following closely on the articles concerned with the spiritual sense, is not intended as an example of exegesis but as a symbolical use of the Bible which can today especially enliven the Sacred Text.—EDITOR.

Jewish history is intimately connected with the sacred history of Christ. The Jewish People was chosen as the channel for the greatest good and represents in its heights and depths a cross-section of mankind which, projected through the lens of the moving camera of life, throws into relief on this background of struggle everything affecting the fallen nature of man. It is therefore not surprising that nervous disorders presented a grave problem first among Jews and that it was a Jew who found a way to cure them. While, one may say, it was through the suffering of Jews that modern psychology came into being, both Jews and Gentiles benefit from it.

Modern man is no different from ancient man in his fundamental psychological nature. If the claim made by modern psychology about the psyche of man is true, ancient man can be understood in terms of modern psychology with the added advantage that the old world will to modern man become a greater living reality.

I want to illustrate this with one biblical story, the central theme of which in its archaic content perfectly represents the basic pattern of the dynamic struggles that are taking place now in the psyche of modern man and from which spring the majority of psychological difficulties. It is the story of man's reconciliation with his other self, with the dark, shadowy side of unredeemed nature which is his own worst enemy. It is the story of Jacob and Esau.

This particular story is most fascinating because, while it depicts, enacted on a gigantic scale, the human drama which takes place in each individual's inner life, it is also an historical account of two actual and distinct persons and their relatives.

The story relates the happenings in the long life of its hero, one Jacob, picturing him as a being of good and evil who is gradually chastened and formed by experience.

I shall give a short outline of the story first and afterwards show its psychological significance. Jacob and Esau were twin brothers, hostile towards each other from birth—even before, because, as the story tells, in their mother's womb they struggled together. This hostility was inborn and a constitutional part of incompatible natures. Esau was born first. They

grew up in different ways, for Esau became a skilful hunter while Jacob was the learned and cultured one, more delicate in appearance than his brother. His skin was not rough and hairy like Esau's, but soft and smooth. It was a family of four, divided into two camps. The affectionate feelings of Isaac, the father, were given to Esau, while Rebecca's favourite was the more gentle son, Jacob.

One day, Esau, returning home hungry from hunting, sold his birthright for a dish of red broth which Jacob had prepared. Jacob, however, was not satisfied with this bargain. At his mother's suggestion and with her help he also obtained, but this time by fraud, the blessing which the father gives to his eldest son. You will remember that he dressed himself in the fashion of Esau, using animal skins to disguise his smooth skin, and acted as if he were the first-born. It can easily be imagined that Jacob, after having obtained the blessing, thought a promising career would be open to him, but events proved otherwise. When Esau knew he was deprived of his father's blessing he raged in fury and Jacob became so frightened that, again accepting his mother's advice, he escaped to Rebecca's family in a foreign country. There he married Rachel after suffering the trickery of his uncle Laban, who, although promising him Rachel as wife, gave him the ugly Lea first.

Whilst in his uncle's service Jacob became a wealthy man by means of a sharp bargain with Laban concerning the division of flocks.

Then he decided to return to his fatherland, but upon reaching home was informed that his old enemy, Esau, was still alive and bearing the old bitter grudge. To placate him, Jacob sent Esau rich presents but at the same time prepared a way to escape and sent his family and possessions over the brook Jabbok while he stayed behind. There it was that he wrestled with the angel till the break of day. The fight ended with victory for both. Jacob overpowered the angel, but the refusal to release him until he was given the angel's blessing proclaimed a victory by the angel over Jacob. It was at this precise moment that the angel touched Jacob on his thigh, from which time on he bore a limp as the mark of his conflict with heavenly powers, and his defeat. But there was more

to come. The vanquished and yet victorious Jacob received a new name, Israel, and was now ready to cross the river to meet Esau. He approached his brother humbly, prepared to accept whatever the occasion might have in store, but to his great surprise Esau had also changed, for he ran towards him as a friend and both brothers embraced and wept. From then on Jacob lived a peaceful life.

This story concerns us all personally; it is the story of Everyman. All its figures represent aspects contained in every individual's psyche. Although created by God with a unique soul, man is not an isolated entity but carries in himself the heritage of his forefathers. He is conditioned by it and the more he is able to recognize the mould which has shaped his nature, the better will he be able to cope with it and the conflicts which arise out of the Jacob and Esau struggle.

All of us partake of the nature of duality. The great men of literature in their stories, poems and characters present in their several forms the age-old theme of the duality of man. One modern English writer, in his story of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, shows this in a very marked way. Although consisting of two or even many parts, we are not 'split personalities', for this term refers to something quite different. The neurotic or nervous person is not split in that specific sense but has, like the so-called normal person, two natures which, existing in opposition to each other, create a state of constant conflict. Fundamentally this conflict is a moral one between what the individual should do and what he wants to do. One part of him wanting to suppress and govern, the other longing for unrestricted freedom.

Jacob is the one whom everybody would like to think he is or hopes to become. He stands for cultural and intellectual achievements. When the story opens he can hardly be considered the perfect representation of this ideal, for he is young and full of ambition and unpleasant characteristics. His very name points to this trait in his character. 'Jacob' means 'supplanter' and indicates an attitude in which the individual is not particularly scrupulous in the choice of means he uses to achieve his ends. But he meets with material success. Esau is the other part of nature, wild, earth-bound,

untamed. He is not bad in himself, actually as little bad as Jacob, the supplanter, can be called good, but he, Esau, represents the nature of which man is afraid because it often attacks in an uncontrolled manner and requires direction. Usually it is repressed until bitter experience teaches that this is not the way. The term 'repression' has a totally different meaning from 'suppression', which is a normal, healthy, natural act instigated by free will for a definite purpose, such as resisting temptation. Repression, however, denotes a process which is at work almost unconsciously and by which are eliminated from memory unpleasant experiences mostly of a highly emotional tone and usually connected with guilt. In prudish and puritanical circles, for example, sex is repressed often to the point of denying its right of existence, when it cannot be mentioned without giving rise to that specific atmosphere of morbid, unhealthy thought in which sex appears as forbidden ground and not as part of the divine plan which secures the existence of mankind.

The harmonious control of the passionate Esau-nature is Jacob's task, and the end of the story shows in *tableau grande* how this is achieved. The story opens with the young Jacob fighting his inner Esau with all the power and trickery at his command. He sells him a crude peasant's dish of red pottage that is both symbolic of matter and matter itself which by its nature belongs to Esau, the red brother. Jacob, in handing over the red broth to Esau, seeks to rid himself of every trace of material nature in the belief that this will free him from its bonds and give him unrestrained access to higher spheres. The Manichean heresy, traces of which are still extant, is built up on such an idea and looks upon spirit and matter as inveterate foes and at matter as the prison of spirit. After this exchange, this reversal of values, the gap between the Jacob and Esau nature widens and open war is declared. Then Jacob, fraudulently, receives yet another of Esau's rights, their father's blessing. In this, Jacob, having separated himself from matter-values, strives to acquire the much-needed assurance that he is big enough to be the heir of an old tradition. Having obtained his desires, one might expect him to feel at peace, but, because he had given recog-

tion to only half of his nature, he remained dissatisfied, restless, and finally experienced fear. He feared Esau, that part of himself which he had repressed and held in an inferior position. That part, when violated and deceived, revolts against the imperialism of the most powerful ego and is the cause of fear. Jacob panics and reacts as we all do when we become aware of the inner rebel. He runs away. As he could not face what he had done, he blinded himself to the fact that he had created in himself a deadly enemy. To escape from his problems he rushes into new activities which will keep him so busy that all his energy in meeting the external demands will be withdrawn from the inner life and, at any rate for a while, he will feel in perfect order. Unknowingly he deceives himself, for, although the symptoms of his disorder have disappeared and the real trouble quietened temporarily, no change of the personality has been achieved. Activity is, indeed, good medicine but contributes to good health only when the individual does not rely on it entirely but also looks into himself to discover the reasons for panicky fear.

At this stage Jacob is not yet an independent man, for, although grown up in terms of actual years, he is still tied to his mother's apron-strings. At her instigation he leaves his fatherland to escape from Esau, only to enter his mother's land and to marry into his mother's family, further indicating how closely his whole personality is connected with the mother-world. At that time, life to Jacob seemed beautiful and after some matrimonial difficulties had been settled he dissolves his contract with Laban and returns home to his fatherland as might any man who, after a successful life in any sphere, returns to enjoy the well-deserved position of a retired gentleman. But the same disappointment is Jacob's lot which falls to many elderly people who have nervous breakdowns upon retirement. After their active lives they have time to think. Their energy is turned inwards and animates the enemy who has long been forgotten but not wiped out of existence. Esau is still present and ready to attack. Jacob sends him gifts which, translated into modern language, may signify phenobarbitone with which we try to calm our nerves, our anxieties. But it is of no avail. Pheno-

barbitone is a sedative but no cure. Finally Jacob prepares himself for the one important task of his life which so far he had avoided, namely, to face his brother. A river, an iron curtain as it were, divides him from Esau.

In the night he wrestles with himself as with some mysterious antagonist, the angel. This is the fight which takes place in the innermost part of his nature. The powerful ego will not easily give in and remains victorious for some time. But at long last he realizes that he has been fighting with a being, with a situation presented to him by his conscience and which belongs to a different order of realities. This fight which ends in victory and defeat of both parties is surely a victory, for Jacob has now conquered himself and given in to that power which he thought he had overcome. In asking for a blessing he admits dependence on a higher order and a complete transformation is the result. First, in the physical sphere, for the angel touches the hip and Jacob limps. Here the angel has touched that anatomical level which contains the procreative organs and the limp serves as a constant reminder that even the most powerful instinctual urge is impotent and lame before the power of God. Secondly, Jacob's conversion is marked by the fact that now he is called Israel, which means 'God strives'. It is the war-cry of confidence.

Jacob, the supplanter, the man who wanted to displace his opponents, has fought with God and undergone submission and reinstatement. The new man who limps and is newly named is no longer the man who was afraid. He has found confidence and is able to cross the river, to go over to his opponent but now not as a traitor but as a friend, a brother. The final achievement is not conversion to the opposite but conservation of previous values, as represented by the Jacob-nature, with recognition of their opposites, the Esau-nature. Esau and Jacob meet and are united. Not only Jacob but Esau has changed, unexpectedly and without apparent reason. Such happenings cannot be explained rationally, for they are one of the mysteries of life—never brought about by conscious intentions but through the process of changing attitudes. Thinking in these terms is not easy for us because we have been trained and educated to think in terms

of causality and expect that things will only change for the better when what we consider to be the cause of a present difficulty has been removed. We are inclined to assume that life would be easier and that our difficulties would disappear if we could have a better job, a new house, a holiday, win the pools, or even have a new wife or better husband, only to discover when and if the looked-for change has been brought about that, to our great disappointment, no real difference has been made and that, after a short period of improvement, things are as bad as ever they were. We do not realize that the root of the difficulty lies, perhaps, in ourselves; that the difficulties we experience lie not within the facts in themselves but in our attitude towards them. Although as invisible and intangible as microbes, attitudes have in their own psychic sphere an existence as real, as powerful and as contagious as the most virulent disease. Because of all this an individual who has undergone a conversion of attitudes will see the materially unchanged facts in a new light and the hostile aggressive brother will appear as a warm-hearted friend and act accordingly.

This conversion or reconciliation is not worked out reasonably as affairs would be arranged, say, at a peace conference, but is a spontaneous and natural growing together of two different natures.

The beginning and end of the story signify different worlds. The hostile brothers are conditioned and governed in the realm of hatred, jealousy, suspicion and deceit. It is the atmosphere typical of the one which surrounds the person discontented with himself. After the reconciliation has been achieved all the negative features disappear because in peaceful union they have no place.

This reconciliation with oneself is not a fantasy, a figment of the imagination, but a reality. Neither is it an ideal put before us for our edification, nor a goal reserved for the great ones, for ever unobtainable by the ordinary person. No unusually gifted personality or special revelation is a necessary concomitant in the attainment of this end. For extraordinary things do happen to ordinary people if they are willing to look beyond the appearance of things. Such reconciliations are not isolated happenings for the benefit of



the privileged of far-off times or far-off countries. Its realization is as possible for the ordinary office-worker of 1954 as it was for the man of olden times. These marvels which are shown in the inspired writings of the Old Testament recur in new dress throughout the ages and those events which are experienced here and now are a retelling of the old Sacred Story.

To point the essential similarity between old and new I will relate an experience in the life of an ordinary man of today suffering from a neurosis. Actually he believed he was the victim of an extraordinary complaint which belief was, in itself, one symptom of his particular disorder. He felt he was not like normal people. Although shy, self-conscious, easily hurt and unable to make friends, he was, nevertheless, vaguely aware that potentialities locked within himself were struggling for recognition and realization. He had no clear conception of what was wrong, but felt that he did not belong to anybody or anything. He grew more isolated as time went on and, after many years of struggling alone, went to a psychologist. After some treatment he felt freer, and when a definite change in his attitude was apparent he had a dream which made a deep impression on him.

In the dream he was chased by a fiery black bull. He did what seemed to be the only possible thing—he ran away as fast as he could. But the bull came after him. Nearer and nearer it came, but just when it was about to gore him the dreamer stood still, turned round and kissed the bull on its mouth. To his great amazement it then was gentle, mild and tame.

The significance of this dream and the analogy it bears to the Old Testament story is obvious. The dreamer was attacked by his passions, by his earth-bound Esau-nature, and, reacting in the manner of Jacob, he escaped but, quickly seeing the futility of his action, he plucked up courage to face the terrifying power and, even more, to give it the kiss of peace, thus bringing about a metamorphosis in which the destructive power became constructive.

This dream-picture, telescoped in one single scene, portrays in a perfect way the failure and success of those attitudes which we saw in the biblical story. Escapism will not

work and to repress or to succumb can only worsen any condition. The danger has to be met, the river crossed and the bull-power faced. All these are steps which have to be taken in the process of reconciliation until the moment comes when, through the secret workings of love, we find the courage to embrace the dark side of our nature, our Esau or our bull.

At the end of these stories, the old and the new which are yet the same, an underlying principle, common to both, emerges. Its best expression is found in the words of the Scriptures to which the Holy Father, in his appreciative address to the international congress of Catholic psychologists last Easter, referred as a precept important to follow in psychological work. These words are 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. Man therefore should not despise or hate himself but love and accept the whole of his being, even to the depths of his nature, regardless of what might be revealed. For, as the Pope said, it is not possible to love one's neighbour truly unless this neighbourly love is preceded by love and full acceptance of oneself. Of course, this does not imply loving one's wickedness or sinfulness but that one should love the powers and energies contained therein. True love will canalize these powers to a positive and constructive end, but emotional love alone cannot reach this goal. In an *Eros* love lies an incipient narcissism. True love, which in the end united Jacob to his Esau-nature and which, by the kiss of peace, transformed the bull-power into a co-operative force, is *Agape*, the love which comes down from heaven and penetrates the whole of creation irrespective of the rank of the individual or of time and space. This is the healing element at work in the majestic figure of the patriarch as well as in the least significant neurotic of our times.

It is upon this love, as revealed in the Old Testament (in Leviticus) through the words 'Love thy neighbour as thyself', that the whole of the Mosaic law depends. It was further enunciated by God in Christ when, together with its complement, 'Love thy God with thy whole heart', he proclaimed it as being the greatest commandment on which hang all the law and the prophets. It is the pivot upon which revolves the whole life of man and upon which all successful healing must rest.