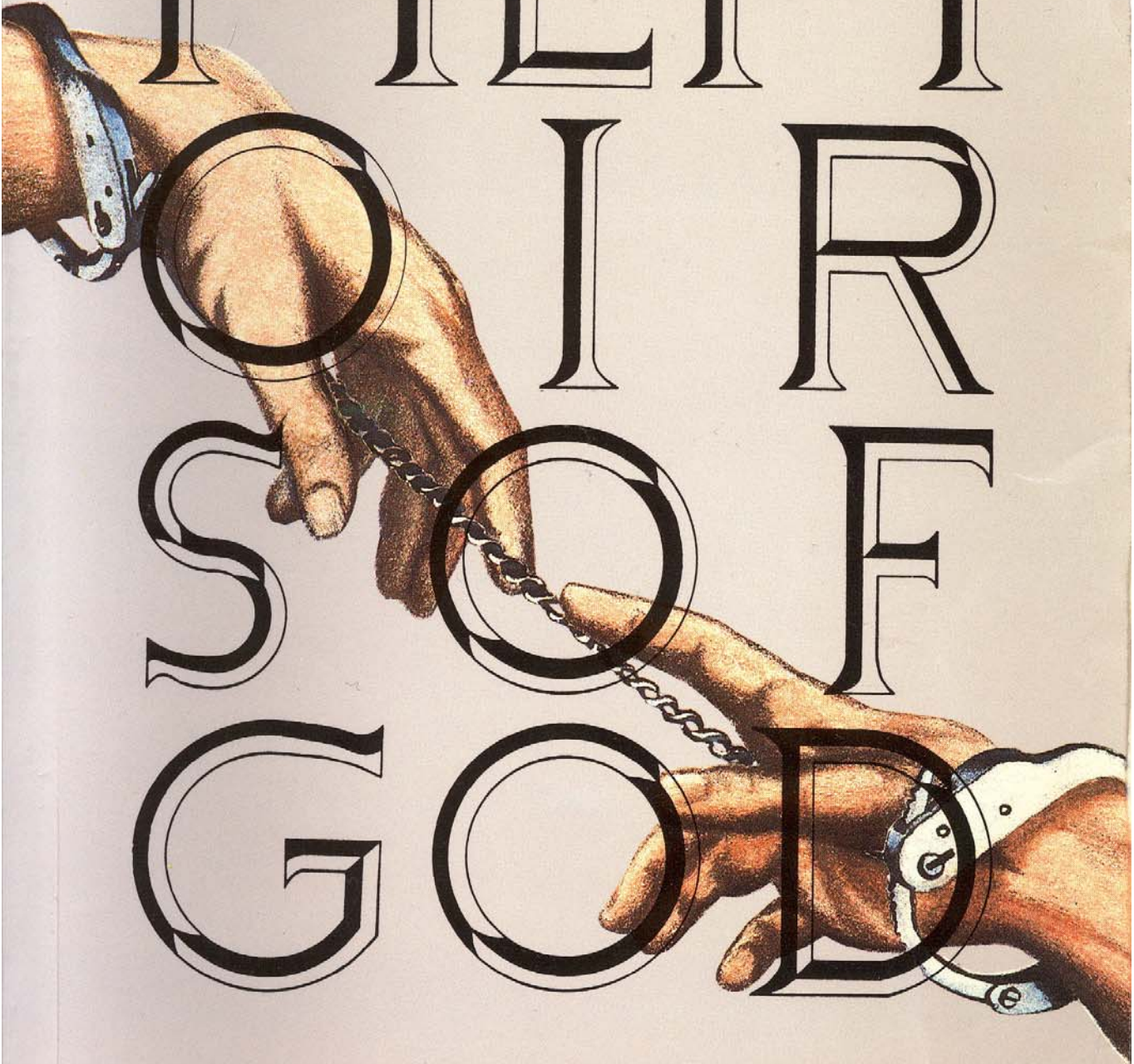


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CLEMENT LEIBOVITZ

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To my wife Elvira whose  
challenging spirit is such that  
she manages to become younger  
and sweeter with time.

## PREFACE

I have written this book in circumstances which forced me to reconsider the significance of life, of death, of the role of man on earth, of eternity and of the possible existence of God. The doctors had given me one year to live. That was three years ago, when I was fifty-seven.

Some of my religious friends have tried to 'save my soul' through prayers, and have begged me to accept Jesus as the master of my heart and the guide of my conscience. These friends are very dear to me and I am deeply indebted to them for having expressed their affection in their thoughts and actions. The situation as they saw it was serious and the stakes were high: eternity – take it or leave it. How could I ignore such an offer at such a time?

The idea of a God, however, who would deprive me of eternity merely because, in my soul and conscience, I honestly believed that He did not exist, was repugnant to me. It would be too petty for God to act in such a way. Therefore why not have confidence in him? Why not consider the possibility that God, if He exists, is less vindictive and more tolerant than most believers think? Why not suppose that God, if He exists, is possibly divine to an almost infinite degree?

I do not believe in a God made to specifications, whether those of the Bible or the Koran. My God, if He existed, would overflow the bounds of these sacred books which imprison him.

I have written this book to help bridge the gap to a truly divine God. I beg every reader who is a believer to see in it an 'ode' to Him, not a blasphemy.

The introduction which follows this preface is fictitious. It is supposed to have been written by the director of a mental institute which I have situated, for no particular reason, at Perigueux. The reader is asked to believe that the author of the fictitious memoirs is merely a patient who thinks that he is God.

The reader is free to think, from a fictitious point of view, that the patient is God Himself. Why not? Are not tales supposed to carry us away to nonexistent and impossible worlds? In any case, no one's claim on eternity rests on his reaction to a work of fiction.

Clement Leibovitz  
Edmonton, Alberta  
January, 1984

## INTRODUCTION

Some readers may not be aware of the events which led to the discovery of the "Memoirs of God". Briefly, here is what happened:

1) On June 3 1982 a madman who believed he was God was brought to the mental hospital in the town of Perigueux. It was not possible to determine his real identity. We will designate this person as "God", enclosing the word in quotation marks.

The great erudition of "God" left no doubts as to his being an intellectual. His madness was not violent, but it offended common religious feelings.

2) During his stay in the hospital a strange friendship developed between "God" and a patient named Jovial. The latter had been thought to be dangerous (he had murdered two children without apparent reason), but had manifested no violent tendencies since being confined. His mind worked in an incoherent way and no one before "God" had succeeded in establishing any dialogue with him. The presence of "God" seemed to have a positive effect on Jovial and made him capable of speaking in meaningful sentences.

3) On the 5th of July, "God" and Jovial disappeared from the room in which they had been holding a conversation.

Much has been written about the circumstances of the disappearance. There was no breakout. The door was found locked and it was confirmed that it could not have been opened from the inside. Jovial and "God" must therefore have had help from an accomplice. Of course, once out of the room they had to overcome a number of difficulties before being able to leave the hospital; but there is nothing miraculous in that.

It is true that we have not yet determined the nature or the origin of the special paper on which "God" wrote his memoirs, and it is also true that after the completion of a typed copy the original manuscript disappeared. Still, there are no grounds to affirm, as one journalist does, that the peculiar ink used must have been radioactive, phosphorescent or fluorescent. There is no limit to human foolishness or to what a journalist in search of sensationalism will invent.

4) The memoirs were discovered in "God's" cell. We have to admit that preparation of the memoirs, which must have taken some time to write, had escaped the notice of the attendants for quite a while.

5) The memoirs mention "God's" intention to leave the asylum with Jovial.

Now that the events have been put in their proper perspective, it is time to turn our attention to what is truly important: the pathologically rare type of "God's" madness as is evident from his memoirs.

The memoirs of "God" are interesting for many reasons. First, they are the product of the fantasies of a madman who believes he is God. From a pathological point of view there is basically no difference between the personification of Bonaparte, for example, and that of God. One can therefore hope that, inasmuch as these memoirs shed a light on the nature of "God's" illness, they will have a more general significance.

Furthermore, personification among the insane is often accompanied by other disorders which adversely affect the "artistic quality" of the personification. A madman who believes he is Bonaparte certainly has the advantage of conviction over an actor: the madman knows he is Bonaparte and feels as such. Since the madness is the result of a mental disorder, however, it is extremely rare that it confines itself to the basic conviction which leads to the personification. A madman impersonating Bonaparte, for instance, could take stock of a profound knowledge of history. It is very unlikely, however, that his impaired mind would muster the needed good judgment to decide what actions and utterances are consistent with the personified personage. The Bonaparte, as acted by the madman, would at best appear as a Bonaparte affected by some touch of madness.

With "God" we have the rare case of pure personification and the patient's sickness is limited to this. His ability to understand and to be logical has in no way been undermined. Consequently the "God" personified by him does not seem to be mad. This "God" has constructed a very consistent theory that would explain the fact that "God", while being God, does not act as such. Once you accept the theory, "God" becomes an acceptable personification of God. This patient's personification of God is characterized by an internal logic so coherent that we must ask ourselves if, in this case, the madness had not sharpened the logical ability of the patient. This is very rare.

It is unfortunate that the peculiar conditions surrounding the disappearance have added a mystical character to it. Some have seen in these admittedly mysterious circumstances, a "proof" of the divine character of "God". It is regrettable that some public figures have claimed to believe such assertions. This raises serious doubts concerning the motivation of such people and the reasons for which they are spreading confusion.

This is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that a "mysterious" disappearance has taken place; the fact that this disappearance is that of a madman believing himself to be God should not make the mystery any greater. Let us hope that the authorities will rapidly solve this double escape, and end the confusion.

The memoirs of "God" are being published because they represent a rare case characterized, as we have said, by an extreme global illogicality, coupled with an apparently coherent logic when it comes to details. Unlike some of my colleagues, I am not at all afraid that the reader may be adversely affected by these "memoirs". The postulate he is asked to accept is so ridiculous, the evidence of its being false is so apparent, that there is no risk the serious reader will feel confused.

Dr. Armand Gilbert

Director of the Perigueux  
Hospital for Mental Diseases

**PART ONE**  
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**...AS IT IS IN HEAVEN**  
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**CHAPTER I**  
**BEING GOD**

Mortals claim that I know everything, I can do anything and I am everywhere. I am, in their words, Omniscient, Omnipotent and Omnipresent.

Then why do I have so much trouble communicating with them?

Consider an English man of science who, after years of study, has learned everything that mankind knows about the electron. He now wants to communicate his knowledge to a Greek woodworker. For lack of a common language he uses drawings, diagrams and gestures.

The Greek woodworker is very smart. He observes each gesture and each pencil stroke. In the end, he is convinced that he understood the English scientist perfectly. No doubt the latter wanted him to fashion a wooden dish decorated with petals.

Obviously the communication was deplorable. If the Greek woodworker had been taught English he would understand that an electron is smaller than a particle of sawdust.

Now, give the woodworker enough mathematical knowledge and he will be able to understand the scientist when he explains the wave equation obeyed by the electron. With more and more pertinent knowledge, the woodworker will himself become a scientist, and the communication between the two men will then be perfect, at least when speaking of electrons.

The situation is similar when it comes to communication between man and me. In order to make it perfect I would have to make man a God. This was never my intention. As a result, communication between man and me is a problem.



The question has been asked, "Can God create a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it?" Any answer, yes or no, would imply a limitation on God's power. Such a question, of course, is really nothing more than a game involving a concealed disregard for the rules of logic.

Limitations originating from my will do not signify a reduced omnipotence. It is conceivable that an omnipotent God would not have a perfect communication with man if this imperfection were part of His plan. Although man is created somewhat in my image, his intelligence is limited. It could not be trusted to lead him to salvation. That is why I gave faith primacy over reason.

Based on a number of miracles, my influence usually permitted me to at least be obeyed, if not understood. Nevertheless, the task of communicating has proven difficult enough. The effort that I undertake now is certainly superhuman, if not superdivine.

Today I do not have recourse to miracles, and I must communicate some divine -- that is to say, extra-human -- thoughts and feelings in human terms. But there are no combinations of humanly defined words which can accurately represent a single one of my thoughts or a single one of my feelings. The pages that follow, therefore, are as real as a shadow. The shadow is certainly actual and informative, but it is a poor substitute for the diverse aspects of the body that produces it.

With this reservation, I will begin my story at the Beginning.

Obviously, the Beginning predates the creation of the world. A human mind has already shown that time, space and matter are molded together, and that one cannot correctly define time without space, or space-time without matter. But since the interdependence of time-space-matter is my creation, it is valid only in the world that I thus created. Before the creation of the world, I had existed all the time, but this time bears only a vague resemblance to human or cosmological time. Nevertheless, for want of something better, I call it time. The same applies for space.

I existed, therefore, and I was God.

How can I describe how it felt to know I was God?

At best I can only cast a shadow of my feelings.

To be God is to exist constantly as thought more active, more profound than the total of all thoughts -- the most noble, most clever, most original -- which have crossed all human minds since creation.

To be God is also to be Verb. This is to say that each thought materializes. Here again I must add several shades of meaning. Matter resulting from my thoughts has, indeed, the characteristics familiar to humans: volume, mass, shape, inertia ... These properties are

experienced as material by man because he is himself composed of matter created by my thoughts. For me, matter has properties altogether different. Because it is created by my thoughts, matter has a spiritual character for me. It is rather like an inert thought, inferior in quality to my living thought, and not able to stand against me by any of its properties. A stone thrown at a man can crush him. A stone thrown at me can be an artistic thought but does not correspond to any real possibility. One could say that a stone-thought had been thrown at me.

Consider for a moment the meaning of creation. It must be sensed to be savoured. A symphony must be heard, a painting must be seen, a bouquet must be seen and smelled, a gourmet dish must be seen, smelled and tasted. Even a purely intellectual creation must appeal to a sense of beauty and symmetry and to other human senses that have not yet been isolated and labelled by man.

Man's sense of touch is not developed enough. In consequence his capacity for tactile creation remains in a very primitive state.

In order to visualize what creation means to me, one could imagine a creature endowed with millions of sophisticated senses, successfully creating a masterpiece for the full enjoyment of all the senses at once. Such a creation would be far beyond the grasp of a human being, but would still be completely inadequate to describe a divine creation.

The number of different kinds of physiological excitants to which men can respond is very small: sound, temperature, light, pressure, odour, taste. That is about all. In addition to the sound waves that man can hear there are electron spin-waves, gravitational waves and many other fields that have their vibrations but can be sensed by man only abstractly through mathematical equations. Each of those waves can be created and modulated by me; the sum of the vibrations of all fields involved in all rainbows, in all waves on lakes and seas, in all revolutions of all planets around all suns, in all galaxies in their slow, symphonic evolution, in all the cosmic sceneries with their majestic beauty. All are involved in my creation of the universe as a whole and of its smallest single particle. All are equally involved in any of my abstract thoughts which do not concern creation.

And so.

There I was before the creation of the world, always creating because I was always thinking. Since creation by thought is natural to me, it seemed to be an unfolding of my being. Inasmuch as I can describe my feelings in human terms, I can say that I was in a state of active beatitude in the sense that I was author of my own beatitude.

By the time of what man calls The Creation, the universe already contained an infinite number of my materialized thoughts. In a way, I played with my thoughts and their materializations as one would play chess without a partner. By extension I conceived the idea of making my thoughts more creative -- matter which could itself think and feel.

My contemplation of this originally obscure idea materialized immediately as a pre-world which is still admired by the defenders of evolution. Soon, however, the rules of the game were definitely established. My thought is Verb and so it materializes normally in inert thought, which is to say, in ordinary matter.

If my thought, however, created a matter capable of thinking, one must speak of the thoughts of my thoughts. But what would happen to the thoughts of my thoughts? Would they materialize? I quickly decided that as a general rule the thoughts of my thoughts would not be Verb (with the rare exceptions that would benefit the prophets and other miracle-makers).

And so the world was created. Man, the materialization of one of my thoughts, was in his turn capable of thinking and feeling. But the thoughts of man remained abstract. Unless he is a prophet, man can think and dream of nourishment without the power to create it by thinking. When he discovers the law of conservation of matter and energy, he formalizes the limitation on his thoughts. They don't create matter; they are not Verb.

The discovery that my thoughts could create other beings capable of thought brought me to a new state of beatitude from which I took some time to recover. The Bible states that on the seventh day of creation I rested. In fact, the term resting is totally misleading

. What I needed to do, rather, was to digest the new state of affairs and to consider the consequences of my first use of a new aspect of my divine power. Until now I had not felt love, hate, or anger. I had not felt surprise as there did not yet exist a will other than my own in the whole universe.

Could my power of divine insight not lead to the impossibility of my being surprised? The zealous theologian who rushes to endow me with an infinite range of characteristics is the root of the confusion on this subject.

If my knowledge of myself was infinite, and if I knew in advance both the ideas that would come to me and their consequences, I would be a God more dead than alive, imprisoned forever by the absolute determinism resulting from this knowledge. I found the introduction of an element of surprise into my life rather pleasant, in fact. For the first time I felt restless and full of agitation, wondering what would happen next.

A whole day was not too long for me to enjoy the unequalled pleasure of having created thought which thinks and to accustom myself to the feeling of love. What joy!

Hate would come later.

What complicates the problem of communication is that I have gifted man with a range of feelings which are foreign to me. Fear, for example, is specifically animal. Without fear animals, including man, could not respond adequately to danger. Consequently fear has a place in the domain of my creation.

But why would the incontestable master of the universe know fear? Naturally, I had remained ignorant of fear for a long time. In spite of my divine intelligence, it did not even occur to me that, in order to create fear and terror, I must have the potential to feel them.

Until recently it did not occur to me to question or feel obliged to affirm the legitimacy of my knowledge as deriving from a first unquestionable principle. I never said to myself, for example, "My thought is Verb, therefore I am God." It was simply in my nature as God to feel that I was God, without the least trace of doubt. In spite of my divine intelligence, it did not occur to me to think that, having given man the capacity to doubt, I myself had the potential to feel doubt.

Likewise, it is impossible to speak of the anger of God, the pleasure of God, or the anguish of God, in terms of their human counterparts. Once again the description of my thoughts and feelings in human terms can produce only a poor shadow compared to the reality of my thoughts and feelings.

In these memoirs I will be mentioning, for example, my capacity for perception or vision. My vision, of course, does not come from the formation of an image on a retina. In the absence of any other way to express myself, however, I shall use whatever is available in human language to communicate an idea which is closest to my thought, though it will still be much distorted.

## **CHAPTER II MAN, ANGELS AND THE DEVIL**

I do not want to deal here with the details of my creation as described in the Book of Genesis. Let me just say that Genesis is a legitimate but inadequate description. Legitimate because it comes from me; inadequate because of the difficulties of communication I have previously described.

The creation of man posed a completely new problem for me. I now had to govern relationships among humans as well as relationships between man and myself. To appreciate the difficulties this presented, you must realize the implications of an eternity of isolation.

If we took a hardened criminal and isolated him from the rest of the world, wiping from his mind all memory and all knowledge relative to the real or possible existence of another being capable of feeling, it would be impossible to say if this man were good, bad, treacherous, grateful, hypocritical, et cetera . All these moral qualities have a relative aspect in the sense that they exist only in terms of the real or imaginary relationships of one being to other beings. In other words goodness, wickedness and all other moral virtues and sins did not even exist as concepts before the creation of man.

What would be the point of my eternal goodness if, through all eternity, it could not be expressed or felt?

In fact, once the world was created I had to create a moral code. This was not easy. The Bible relates that I forbade Adam and Eve to taste the fruit of the apple tree. It doesn't matter much whether or not the legend is true. What is important is that in an arbitrary manner I created a class of forbidden actions. Simply put, I am reported to have said to Adam and Eve: "Don't taste the apples." Instead, I could have said to them: "You should not taste the apples." In the first case there is no assertion of a moral law forbidding Adam and Eve to taste the apple. I assert only what happens to be my will. In the second case I would not be forbidding Adam and Eve to eat the apple, merely explaining that a moral law would be violated if they did.

Why did I use the first form, the imperative? Simply because the moral law did not yet exist. If I had said "should", I would have been lying. True, I did not want Adam and Eve to eat the apple, but there were no moral grounds to forbid them to since moral law did not yet exist.

The serpent very logically took advantage of a weakness in my position. Was there a moral law condemning disobedience? Not yet. Even if there were, Adam and Eve, in their pre-apple innocence, had no way of knowing it without tasting the apple! I therefore said, "Don't do it." Not, "You should not do it." Consequently the disobedience was justifiable. I could have added, "Don't disobey," but I could not say, "You should not disobey me," until a moral law existed.

I had already told Adam and Eve that they would die the same day if they tasted the apple. I was embarrassed when I found out that the threat did not prevent them from touching the forbidden fruit.

The Bible describes the great anger I felt afterward. But to anyone who knows how to read between the lines it is clear that, in spite of my embarrassment, the event amused me greatly. I began to play hide-and-seek with Adam. The poor man hid in the bushes and I called to him, "Where are you?" From that moment the game of hide-and-seek has been instinctive in man; nothing amuses a baby as much as when its mother puts her head out of sight for an instant and brings it up again.

I was, as I said, amused. Still, I thought it best to show a serious and angry face. How could I have ensured the obedience of man otherwise? I showed anger and I punished retroactively, punished Adam and Eve for a crime they could not fully comprehend until it had been committed. That arbitrary, retroactive punishment would cost me a great deal.

I have never satisfactorily resolved the problem of morality between men, or between man and me. In the end I got fed up and produced my ten commandments summarizing the essentials of my will. But before that I often thought of what an obedient man Adam could have been. He would have been an angel. In fact, by this very thought, angels were materializing from my thought. The angel was thus an idealized man using his free will only to obey me. If only I had idealized a woman, of course, I would have unwittingly created female angels. Since I never was in a mood to idealize women, however, all angels happen to be males.

The absence of feminine angels had the additional advantage that fornication was restricted to earth and did not contaminate the divine heavens. Mind you, the angels suffered silently from this situation, but not without doing something about it. Each time I sent one of them on a mission to earth, he managed to bed man's most beautiful daughters, who then begot children able to work wonders, if not miracles.

When I discovered this I gathered the guilty angels together and told them, "You are my children and I forbid you, as sons of God, to mate with the daughters of man." They obeyed me, but it was too late. The earth was already soiled with numerous mixed progeny.

But I don't want to get ahead of myself.

The libertinism of the angels and the disobedience of man -- even without a moral law to guide him -- had caused a glimmer of uncertainty in me regarding some of my most recent creations.

Genesis says that God contemplated the result of His creation and found it good.

The truth is much more complicated. Why did I have to contemplate my creation and then say it was good? Simply because I was not sure of myself. Having for the first time created a new category of thoughts, it seemed natural to ask myself if the result was good. I should have been more cautious. In my enthusiasm I forgot that my doubting, being a thought, would materialize and create something.

In fact, my doubt created the Devil!

I must admit I was surprised to see him. He seemed rather frightened. On close examination I found him quite revolting, so I decided to make him disappear. For a few moments he did, but then he returned. I tried several times to destroy him, and each time he returned with a more defiant look. Suddenly I realized that as long as doubt was with me, I could not destroy the Devil. It would require eliminating from my thoughts the idea that anything in creation could possibly be bad. It was therefore necessary to give the creation a chance to prove that it was indeed good.

The Devil created by my doubt was not evil by nature, but by necessity. If the world turned out to be good, doubt would disappear from me and, consequently, I could destroy the Devil. The only way the Devil could ensure his continued existence was to act in a way that would prevent the world from becoming good. In short, to be bad is the essence of self-preservation for the Devil.

This misadventure made me intolerant of doubt.

Since the Devil was recreated constantly by the persistence of my doubt, I felt like a sorcerer's apprentice, ignorant of the extent of his supernatural powers and of the fact that these powers were limited. Certainly the creation of thinking beings revealed a side to my divinity which had so far remained hidden. The truth is that this matter is painful to me and I did not want to dwell on it when I inspired the writing of the Bible. Making use of my omniscience, therefore, I tried to assess whether this aspect of creation was bad or good. What I found was hard to believe.

Not only had my angels been very active, but their progeny had been no less active! It was difficult to find a single human without an angelic ancestor who also had acceptable moral behaviour. When I had finally made sure that Noah, his wife, his sons and his daughters-in-law were worthy of repopulating the earth, I decided to resort to the great flood.

I have often used angels for missions of destruction, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah and, later, in Egypt. But in the case of the great flood, I preferred to act directly.

The flood was a tremendous logistical challenge. Even if a single pair of pure animals, instead of seven pairs, had been admitted to the ark, the space limited by the dimensions detailed in the Bible would have been quite inadequate.

Remember, the inhabitants of the ark entered it seven days before the rains started, the rains lasted forty days, and the waters prevailed for one hundred fifty days before receding to the level of the treetops. It also took a long time for the earth to dry afterward. In short, Noah, his family and the animals had to remain in the ark for one full year and seventeen days. It should be obvious that food alone had to occupy a tremendous volume. Solving the problem of space was -- I'm sure I do not exaggerate -- nothing short of miraculous.

Moreover, animals found only in Australia and America (llamas, turkeys, buffalo, marsupials) had to cross oceans to reach the ark. I also challenged the law of the equipartition of the seas by covering all mountains with an equal depth of water, in spite of their different heights. After the waters receded it was necessary to return the animals to their points of origin. And so, many animals had to recross the oceans. Nor was it easy, in the fetid climate of the ark, to keep alive for more than a year the hippo and the penguin, the lion and the polar bear.

One might assume that the fish, the whales and other sea animals would have had an easy time. In fact these animals could not withstand the crushing pressure on the sources of their food of flood waters higher than the mountains. It required a miracle to keep them alive. Finally it was necessary to recreate the plants and forests which were completely destroyed by being submerged for over a year.

The preservation of germs posed another difficult problem. Some of them -- smallpox for instance -- cannot survive for long outside a host body. The perpetuation of this germ therefore demands a continual existence of patients suffering from smallpox. Without extraordinary measures smallpox, and other interesting and important germs, would have disappeared forever. And so I had to resort to a miracle to keep these germs alive in adverse conditions.

Clearly the flood was a very complicated solution. Wouldn't it have been simpler to make all sinners disappear by the effect of my will? Was it truly necessary to build an ark and put every species of animal in it to ensure the survival of each species? Was it necessary to make it rain for forty days and forty nights and to keep the earth under water for over a year?

The truth is that I have always preferred to add a sense of ambiguity to my actions. As much as possible, each of my miracles had to be explainable by natural causes. Thus I could distinguish between the true believer who doubted no miracle and the unbeliever who, under the pretext of natural causes, would deny the miracle. To die from drowning seemed natural even in the case of an entire population; but to disappear instantly without a trace could not be put down to natural causes.

In spite of everything, it was obvious that I had overdone it, both in the extent of the punishment inflicted and in the complexity of the solution. I therefore promised Noah that I would never again resort to a flood. I gave this promise because I was certain that the angels, in their absolute obedience, would henceforth refrain from fornication.



The rainbow became the symbol of my promise. I chose, once again, a miraculous sign which could be explained by natural reasons. It is well known that the rainbow stems from the laws of optical diffraction and that anyone can recreate a rainbow in a laboratory without any miracle. The real miracle was my success in preventing the formation of rainbows from the time of creation up to the end of the flood!

I see no point in commenting on every event mentioned in the Bible. That would lead to a long and possibly boring work. However, I cannot skip over my next major attempt to confront man's sinfulness -- the birth of Christianity.

Several millenia had passed since the creation and I had not advanced very far in my struggle against the Devil. The world had not become any better and my efforts to lead men to obey my commandments had not borne fruit. I could have modified man but that would have been an admission that human nature as I created it was not good enough. That was no way to get rid of the Devil.

It occurred to me that what was lacking was a better means of communicating with man. In short, man seemed to need a god who was closer to him, an almost human god. But to create such a god would have been an outrage to monotheism, the belief I had stipulated in my commandments. And besides, I doubt that I would have come to terms with a second god. I have already admitted being a jealous God.

Then I hit on another solution: a single man would be chosen to have a special relationship with me. Still, this relationship could not be direct without suffering from the same ills that adversely affected my communications with men. And so, I delegated a spirituality which, while being mine, would be separated enough from me to be closer to the chosen man. This man entered history under the name of Jesus while the spirituality which was mine but detached from me, would come to be known as the Holy Spirit.

Through his special relationship with me, Jesus was none other than one of my facets, the one I decided to direct towards men. The Holy Spirit became the bridge between what is human and what is divine. It was therefore possible to speak of a trinity, one-in-three and three-in-one. All of that was easy to describe but difficult to realize. The Devil was watching, and I could not cheat.

A Jesus totally created for the desired effect, or even a Jesus who was God descended to earth, would not be adequate. An exemplary god has no merit and no one would find the sufferings of a crucified god credible.

Therefore I had to await the formation of a foetus capable of becoming Jesus. He would become, one might say, my adopted son. He would be man, would communicate with me through the Holy Spirit, and would base his mission not so much on partial deity but on the qualities of a believer who could be tempted, yet had enough strength to resist temptation. I was Jesus' spiritual father through the Holy Spirit.

His communication with men was better than mine had been until then. On the other hand my communication with Jesus himself was deplorable. Mediated by the Holy Spirit, my thoughts reached Jesus in a form which was not always clear to him. In honest response he often had to resort to stories and parables whose meanings have not been completely established even today. Moreover, the absence of direct relations between Jesus and me weakened my feelings towards him. I never felt for Jesus the love I felt for Abraham and Jacob. I had walked with them, spoken with them face-to-face, but never did with Jesus. It is only natural that Jesus felt somewhat abandoned.

As I now think about it, Jesus' merit is great not only for what he has done but also for having done it with so little help from me. He was mistaken, of course, when he believed that he was curing people possessed by the Devil. They were no more than epileptics. Likewise, he was too hasty in announcing that the definitive victory over the Devil would occur while some of his generation were still alive. His description of the coming of "the son of man" with the sounds of brass is colourful but puerile. Still, the fact remains that he was admirable for the strength of his conviction and of his resolve.

I must admit that Christianity, which at first was full of promise, did not really improve the condition of the world. It did not prevent the Inquisition, or the wars, or the Holocaust, or the use of the atomic bomb.

### CHAPTER III TO BE OR NOT TO BE

What should be my next step? I wasn't sure. Not having answers to some questions did not worry me. For the sake of man's free will I had limited my omniscience. It was natural to expect that the universe I had created would evolve differently than according to my wishes.

Still, I did not want humanity to get totally out of hand. Did I restrict my omniscience more than was advisable? Should I exert a more direct influence on man's will?

Suddenly ... suddenly ... I found myself subjected to a sequence of strange feelings.

If I were a man I would have said, "Something is definitely wrong."

If I were a man my heart would have pounded madly in my chest, my throat would have contracted in anguish.

But I was not a man, and there is no way to convey my feelings of horror and despair. I was adrift in my own universe. No longer in control.

That describes as closely as possible what I felt when I stopped to notice the background activities which normally accompanied my thinking. My Verb-thought had always produced a multitude of accompanying effects. But now it proceeded within myself without materializing, without having the least external influence.

With hesitation I thought about a galaxy, again different from any I had created before. I imagined it in all its minute details. To my astonishment no additional galaxy appeared in my creation. I tried once again to think of a constellation of stars and -- Horror! -- this time I couldn't even imagine the needed details to specify the workings of a constellation!

I wondered what was happening to me, and this in itself was tragic. Things should not happen to me: I am Verb; I am active; I am acting upon, I should not be acted upon! Were there powers which did not emanate from me neutralizing my omnipotence? If this were true, then nothing would remain given, nothing could be relied upon.

I may even die ... I MAY EVEN DIE!

But God is immortal! That is first principle. If God could die, that would be infinitely more tragic than the death of a man. It was not a question, as it is for men, of not wanting to die too soon. It was now a matter of losing eternity.

Fear turned into terror. The fear of death is a gut reaction in man. For me, it was necessarily a spiritual fear bearing no relation to the instincts.

I had never experienced so intensely the state of not understanding, and I was terrified. Man's fear can be increased by not knowing the cause of the misfortune which befalls him. But in my case, the lack of understanding was itself as much reason for fear as the reduction of my creative powers. What I did not understand could not have come from me.

Was there, then, an independent universe that I myself had not created?

Not to be able to materialize my thoughts was undoubtedly a first degree of deterioration. Was my fear not a second degree of deterioration? I had to come to my senses and calm myself as quickly as possible.

I had created fear in men and animals to protect them. But what use was fear to me? How could it help me escape from my situation? I felt helpless.

I realized gradually that I was losing not only my so-called omnipotence, but also my omnipresence and omniscience. I could no longer handle many thoughts at once. For the first time I was distracted by one separate thought or another. I could reduce my state of fear by thinking about something else, so I pondered fear in men.

Fear is not always a blessing, I came to realize. A man whose leg has been seized by a crocodile and is about to become the animal's lunch would clearly prefer a god that would rid him of the beast to a god that abandoned him in a state of utter fear. What use was fear to the millions of men, women and children who, through no fault of their own, were butchered during the many barbaric invasions and wars in man's history? What use was fear to the millions of slaves who lived in fear of their masters? What good was fear to millions who were starving to death?

I needed help and I could not be helped because I was God, the only god in the universe. My creatures could have been helped, but instead of helping them I had given them the ability to fear! I could have prevented wars, I could have helped men be more tolerant, I could have gifted them with more understanding and given them a Bible which was less ambiguous.

My thoughts wandered in this track until I realized how irrational I was being -- God deprived of omniscience was criticizing the omniscient God he once was. Anathema! I could not be reduced to that. I was angry at myself and this helped improve my morale. But I knew my situation was close to desperate.

The person who believes in me can always say, in any circumstances, "God's will be done". He does not need to understand why God would condemn an honest man to poverty or why children must suffer starvation, illness and torture. Confidence in God is enough to calm the anguish of the believer. It is the unbeliever who should be pitied! He is certain that human suffering, especially that of children, represents no necessity except the blind laws of nature. This view of the universe does not give rise to joy and hope.

In my situation as fallen God I was, paradoxically, closer to the unbeliever than to the believer. I knew that I was God (at least that I was God until recently) and there existed therefore no supreme power to whom I could say, "Thy will be done". I did not have the option of comforting myself by thinking that whatever happened to me was for the best reasons and for my own good. I could not find comfort in a prayer. To whom would I pray?

I gradually calmed down but still, with great anguish, asked myself if my new state was reality or hallucination. Of course it made no sense for God to dream or to hallucinate; but then it made no sense to stop being God.

A number of "theories" came to mind:

– I had never been God, had never created the universe; the memory of being God was an illusion.

– I had lost the battle with the Devil and was nothing more than a dethroned God.

– I was a God who had become sick and, presumably, would soon recover.

The two last theories did not solve the problem. In fact, they created new ones by raising questions about the sudden limitations on the powers of God. They only served to mask the problem with a new name.

The first theory, however, was a real hornet's nest. No logical argument could refute it. It is similar to an affirmation that no external world exists outside the mind perceiving it.

The argument may be applied as easily to God as to man. In the case of God, however, if the external world does not exist, God's thought ceases to be Verb and God ceases to be God.

Man can shatter the paradox by action. If he decides that an oncoming car doesn't exist and is only a feeling, he will be crushed to death by the vehicle. God is less favoured in that regard. Being eternal, having no fear of repercussion from the physical world, He cannot solve by action the problem of the real existence of that world. He cannot prove to Himself that the external world is nothing but hallucination.

Agreed, I could not be certain that the external world existed materially. Even if it existed only as an idea, however, I once certainly had more power over this idea! This was irrefutable, unless ... unless ... unless the first theory was the true one: I NEVER WAS GOD.

Could I discard this possibility?

## **CHAPTER IV THE CONCLAVE**

Suddenly I felt paralyzed. I was carried out of my universe and deposited unceremoniously in the midst of an assembly in a circular room which whirled slowly about me. Against the walls sat groups of white-robed beings – about a hundred in all – each with long hair, a bushy beard and appearing to be around forty years old. They looked like humans of Hebraic origin.

I realized with a start that they were in my own image, but immediately felt a much stronger affinity to them than I had for the men of my creation.

"Sit down, Jehovah!" commanded a Voice which seemed to come from everywhere.

I recoiled in horror at this affront to my divinity, but found myself settling into a comfortable seat and turning to try to focus on the passing faces.

"Jehovah," the Voice began again, "this is a conclave of the gods of all the universes, wherein will be examined the outcome of your divine activity to date."

The gods of all the universes? Impossible. Was I not the God of Abraham and Isaac, of Moses and Jacob? Was I not creator of the universe? The anger I felt at this assembly of imposters was immediate. I had felt the same outrage when the Hebrews made a golden calf and worshipped it as God. This conclave was heresy and I cursed it in my thoughts.

Yet I could not deny that my powers had failed. My thought, no longer Verb, began to admit the possibility of other gods, other universes – a possibility I had not foreseen any more than I had foreseen the creation of the Devil from my own doubt. A sudden clarity of understanding told me that, from eternity to eternity, the gods met in conclave to discuss their common problems. I had not realized that a godly hierarchy existed. Nor had I imagined that I was only a candidate for divinity.

In a flash I imagined my creatures on earth getting wind of my present state and realizing that I was not the only God. What of the harsh punishments I had inflicted on whoever had dared believe in more than one God? I felt hurt and my anger rose again. After a moment I calmed down. If ever there was a time when divine rational thinking was called for, it was now.

The Voice broke in upon my thoughts. "Jehovah, are you ready to proceed?"

The question shook me. How could I be ready? Was I expected in a moment to get used to the loss of divine attributes, to accept the existence of other universes with other gods, to prepare for a trial of my actions and, finally, even to make sense of the constant

whirling of the kaleidoscope of gods? My head churned with contradictory thoughts and feelings.

"I must admit that your circling distracts me. As long as you keep turning around me I shall have problems taking part in whatever is to happen here."

"Nothing is circling you, Jehovah," insisted the Voice. "It is just that you can no longer communicate with all of us at once as you could before. Instead of accepting your condition you are vainly attempting to be omnipresent. This is producing an impression of rotation. Try to concentrate on only one of us and that impression will disappear."

I was annoyed at the authority of this simple information; annoyed also at the reminder that my divine powers had been greatly reduced. My inability to discover the reason for the rotation by myself indicated not only a loss of omnipresence, but a great reduction in omniscience as well.

I continued to examine the faces of the different gods to choose one on which I could fix my attention. One of them reminded me of Job, I don't know why. Was it something in his face, or something else that reminded me of a time when my powers were unlimited? Or was it a yearning for the respect and fear that Job had felt for me? Whatever it was, as I looked at him the rotation ceased for a moment and then began again. Finally, after summoning all my willpower, I saw the gods come to a standstill and found myself in front of the god-Job. Unmoving, he no longer resembled Job. All the same his kindly expression pleased me, and I was relieved to have brought the assembly to a standstill.

I cleared my throat and said resignedly, "I am ready."

The faces of the gods brightened with satisfaction.

"Jehovah," the Voice began, "many eons ago a rule was established forbidding the extension of omniness from one universe to another. This was requested by members of the conclave before your Beginning to prevent infringement upon the sovereignty of a god in his own universe. Therefore, since none of us is omniscient in your universe, we will require testimonies to evaluate your past creative activity. Do you accept the testimony of the Bible?"

"I do accept the testimony of the Bible," I said, "provided it is interpreted correctly. A strictly literal interpretation would often lead to a false testimony."

The gods whispered amongst themselves in apparent consultation. So diminished were my powers that I could not hear what was said.

"It has been decided," the Voice said after awhile, "that two of the gods of this conclave will voice their individual thoughts. One, whom we know as Koray, the Reader, will address himself to the literal meaning of your scriptures. The other is Cholem, a god

of rather poetic temperament, who will concern himself with more metaphorical interpretations. I myself will attempt to pose certain questions on behalf of your unusual and rather imaginative creation, man.

As the gods Koray and Cholem nodded toward me, I attempted in vain to read any expression of friendliness or hostility on their faces. Each seemed serene, impassive.

"The members of the conclave," Koray began, "all possess immediate and complete literal knowledge of the Bible. We will acquire the proper interpretation as a result of these proceedings."

"You should note, Jehovah," the Voice interjected, "that our rules of procedure differ somewhat from those followed in the courts of your creature, man. Objectivity is of no concern to us; we are omniobjective. We may consider our knowledge of the Bible as evidence even before it is introduced as such. The erroneous conclusions we may thus reach will be temporary and will not prejudice us against the correct ones we will reach eventually."

Cholem picked up this theme. "We don't need to protect ourselves from influences and ready-made views. We have no particular attachment to given laws and we harbour no preconceptions as to what a proper creation should be. At times we may express feelings of dismay, disapproval or reprobation. You should consider these, Jehovah, as information for your benefit. They indicate weak points in your defence. If you can improve on it we will have no difficulty abandoning our expressed opinions."

"This is not a court of law and the proceedings do not constitute a trial per se," the Voice assured me. I was becoming more comfortable with the fact that I could not see the speaker. "You will not be represented by counsel, and there is no prosecuting attorney. Our purpose is to evaluate your creation and your role in it as an aspiring deity. Witnesses, of course, will be called and there is naturally no doubt that they will tell the truth as they know it. Therefore it will be unnecessary for you to cross-examine them. The gods are agreed that it would be fair neither to you nor to your creatures to be put into that position in view of your present state of diminished authority."

"Apart from that minor restriction," Koray added, "you are free to comment on any of the testimony or on the interim conclusions of the conclave as they are presented."

I nodded my understanding.

"Jehovah," the Voice said, "you will find on your table a list of accusations. Please examine it carefully and decide the order in which you wish to have them discussed."

At the top of the long list stood my alleged inconsistency in the application of my commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill', followed by my 'prejudice' against women. I had not expected such specific accusations, and would have preferred to begin with topics



dealing with my own nature. This, I had hoped, would have shed light on the other issues which I now saw before me as accusations.

"I would like," I said finally, "to begin with the accusation that I have failed to provide an appropriate image of divinity by falling short of my potential in the matter of omniness."

## **CHAPTER V**

### **THE TRIAL BEGINS**

Again that strange feeling of disorientation and helplessness overcame me. A mist seemed to obscure my vision. When it cleared I saw the gods huddled in little groups, totally absorbed in conversation and displaying no interest in the trial.

"Jehovah! Listen carefully to the charge," the Voice broke in.

I expected to hear the same clear voice list my deficiencies. Instead I heard a far-off murmur. I tried to catch what it was saying, but only with great effort could I make out a number of complaints being made against me. I decided not to defend myself.

"I wish to make a declaration," I said.

"What is the use of talking about acceleration?" replied a faint, far-away voice.

I was taken aback but replied patiently, "I was not speaking of acceleration but of a declaration."

The nonsense voice refused to hear it this way.

"The trial cannot be accelerated."

The conversation was ridiculous. "You may not want to hear me," I said, "but I shall make a statement all the same. I understand the meaning of this state of affairs perfectly. It simulates the consequences of a reduced omnipresence. So be it. But it is unfair to punish me with it before my defence and judgment. I will only proceed with my defence after hearing a clear and precise indictment before an assembly which shows some interest in the proceedings."

The gods stopped talking in their little groups and formed a circle again.

"Jehovah," said the Voice from everywhere, "we did not intend to punish you. Each of the gods present here has had to undergo various tests before confirmation. It could be that you are not yet ready to profit from this kind of experience. We can put it off until later. The conclave considers it necessary for you to experience being ignored. This is often unpleasant and, in the case of a desperate man, can be tragic."

"My mind is confused," I said. "Am I reproached with indifference or lack of 'omniness'?"

"A voluntary restraint on omnipresence goes well with indifference, Jehovah," replied the Voice. Then it added, "Let us proceed."

A space in front of me, above the gods, seemed to be occupied. With some effort of my will I could make out a scene, like one of man's moving pictures. Adam's head was peering through some bushes and I could see myself searching left and right. A voice I had not heard before intoned a passage from the Bible:

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree, of which I commanded you not to eat?"

At that moment the scene disappeared and Koray started to speak.

"Jehovah, did you need to ask Adam where he was? Didn't you know it by omnipresence? Did you have to use deductive reasoning to discover that Adam had eaten of the forbidden fruit when you should have known it by omnipresence and omniscience? How could the man and the woman have hidden themselves far from the face of the Almighty? Is your presence localized in space? Are you not omnipresent?"

"My omnipresence can be bothersome," I said in reply to the flood of questions. "My creatures must forget it in order to act freely according to their own natures. Adam and Eve would not have eaten the forbidden fruit if they had known that I was beside them. Adam would not have hidden in the bushes if he had known that I was with him wherever he went. I want my omnipresence to be used discreetly. Anyway, Adam and Eve had not yet formed the concept of omnipresence. I had no intention of leading them to this discovery. What is important is that I was able to show them that nothing escaped me without exercising such absolute power."

"Do you mean, Jehovah," asked Koray with indignation, "that you were putting on an act? Were you feigning ignorance of Adam's whereabouts and his actions just to avoid revealing to him the full extent of your powers?"

I ignored the implied accusations. "Not at all. I am only pointing out that many paths can lead to the truth and I chose the one which seemed the most appropriate. Man can crack a nut with a sledgehammer, but a nutcracker will do. I keep my omnipresence and my omniscience for difficult problems. Adam's awareness of his nudity proved satisfactorily

that he had tasted the apple and I preferred not to burden him with the pressure of my omnipresence."

"I have no difficulty appreciating this biblical quotation," Cholem broke in. "It seems to advocate obedience to the Lord and indicates that, in one way or another, nothing remains concealed from Him. As to God enjoying a walk in the garden in the cool of the day, or His steps being audible, or the attempt by Adam and Eve to hide from His presence, these could merely be narrative artifices designed to impress the reader with a sense of familiarity. This passage suggests the vision of a God who, like man, would rather walk in the cool of the day and would avoid exercise when the sun is above His head. It makes man feel that, otherwise, God could be panting and perspiring. To realize that God is so vulnerable makes it easier for man to accept his own limitations. As to His steps being audible, it only shows how considerate Jehovah was. He did not want to surprise His creatures. Would anyone have preferred Him to walk on tiptoe? Jehovah, you came as close to being a man as a God could be. This story has its merits whether it is literally true or not, whether Adam and Eve existed or not."

"But Adam and Eve cannot be metaphorical personages!" insisted the Voice. "The Bible mentions details concerning their life and their genealogy whose only value seems to be documentary. Clearly the Bible intends man to believe that Adam and Eve really existed. As to narrative artifices, I consider them rather dangerous. If the Bible is to play the role of an authoritative expression of God's teaching, no artifice and no metaphor should be used unless explicitly introduced as such. Otherwise the danger of multiple interpretation, of confusion and justifiable misinterpretation cannot be avoided."

I could hardly believe that the conclave would indulge in such a game.

I expressed my outrage.

"What is the use of speculating about Adam and Eve being metaphorical or real personages? Why not just ask me? Wouldn't my own interpretation of the Bible quotation be the correct one?"

"That is true," replied the Voice, "but we prefer to consider for awhile the plight of the man who has to interpret the Bible without divine help!"

The Voice stopped a moment and went on more calmly, "Now we shall introduce the first witness."

Suddenly, there was Adam, dressed like a primitive savage. He seemed surprised and his gait was unsteady. After taking a few steps he looked around, and was obviously startled to see me.

"Lord! Am I dreaming? As far as I can remember, I was dying yesterday. Am I in heaven or on earth?"

"Adam," spoke the Voice, "you have been brought back to life after a death of nearly six thousand years. You are here to testify. Your Lord, as you call him, is being judged by His equals, the conclave of gods."

Adam did not manifest any traumatic effect resulting from his return to life. He was 930 years old when he died, and during his life he saw so many changes and so many miracles that he became immune to big surprises. He looked at the ceiling as if to discover where the Voice was coming from; then he examined the gods one by one, and once more stared at me. Suddenly he smiled a wide smile and smacked his right palm with his left fist. "I knew it!"

"What did you know?" asked the Voice.

"I knew there had to be more than one God."

"Explain yourself, Adam!" insisted the Voice in a perplexed tone.

"Well," said Adam, "it's like this. Eve and I talked about it many times. We always made sure that God was far away first, of course. Luckily we could always tell by His footsteps when He was close by. We had noticed how like us the Lord was. So where did His powers come from? We didn't understand for a long time, but then we realized that the Lord was only a man like us who had tasted the fruit of the tree of life and had become immortal.

"Eve and I thought that more than one man must have become a god by eating the fruit of that tree. Unfortunately, our Lord was very jealous of His power and did not want us to become like Him.

"That damned serpent! If only he had led us to the tree of life instead of the tree of knowledge! We could have become immortal, too."

Adam stopped speaking, looked around at all the gods and asked timidly, "Have you all tasted from the tree of life?"

A mist swirled around Adam and as he disappeared the Voice said, "This has been a painful and degrading experience."

It stopped for a moment and then went on.

"By taking human form before Adam and Eve and walking in the garden of Eden as a man whose footsteps could be heard and whose nearness could be deduced, you prevented them from regarding you as omnipresent. By asking Adam what name he intended to give each animal and by asking him where he was you exhibited a lack of omniscience which he could not avoid noticing.

"By stating that the fruits of one tree brought awareness of good and evil while those of another tree gave immortality, you made Adam believe that considerable powers existed apart from you and that, as a good magician, you knew how to use them. What could be more natural, in these conditions, than for Adam to believe that you yourself were only a man who had become God through these miraculous fruits which you wished to retain for your exclusive use?"

I made no reply.

The next scene to appear was the battle between the troops of Joshua and Amalek, during which the following biblical passage was read:

And Moses said unto Joshua, Choose us out men, and go out, fight with Amalek: tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand.

So Joshua did as Moses had said to him, and fought with Amalek: and Moses, Aaron and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed: and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed.

But Moses' hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat thereon; and Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.

As before, Koray was first to speak.

"Jehovah, you surrendered your powers to a rod instead of personally deciding the outcome of the battle. Did you not want Joshua to win? Why did you let the decision depend on the position of a rod?"

"I wanted Joshua to win," I said, "but I also wanted to secure Moses' authority over his people. Trusting him with my rod would increase his prestige."

"I enjoyed this quotation very much," said Cholem. "Jehovah gives his rod to Moses and says to him as to a child, 'Go and play God'. But there is no god like God and Moses is pitiful in his new role. All would have been lost if Aaron and Hur hadn't saved the day by supporting the tired arms of Moses. The message is clear to me: even when you are as great a prophet as Moses it is dangerous to play God."

The Voice disagreed. "I have trouble making sense of this quotation. On the one hand I dislike magic and I do not see why God would entrust the fate of the battle to the position of a rod. Moses' authority increased little and indeed, on your order, he later had to resort to the slaying of thousands of his own people. This established his authority on terror rather than on your trust in him. On the other hand I cannot find any useful metaphorical interpretation to the relevant biblical verses. Unlike idolatry, 'playing God' was not a popular pastime for the Hebrew people and there was no need to teach them a lesson. Moreover Moses is not pitiful in the eyes of the Hebrews, so such a lesson, if it was ever intended, is lost on the chosen people."

Once more shapes appeared above the gods and Abraham could be seen talking to me while the following passage was read:

And the Lord said, because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know ...

The scene faded as Koray began, "Jehovah, is it fitting for a God to go to verify rumours? Should you not be everywhere and know everything by omnipresence and omniscience?"

"This," I replied, "is again due to the discreet character of my omnipresence. Its extent varies between total absence and total presence according to the need. In fact I established an important rule for Abraham's benefit. A charge must be carefully verified before taking notice of it. This lesson would have been lost if I had used my divine powers."

"You taught Abraham," objected Koray, "the need to check the truth of rumours while confusing him about your essence. This gives no indication of your omnipotence. An imaginative God can find an infinite number of other methods more compatible with his divine dignity."

"You will surely all agree," interrupted Cholem, "that this quotation begs for a metaphorical interpretation. It is just not possible to accept the

notion that God was made aware of the corruption in Sodom and Gomorrah by rumours and that, in order to be sure of what was going on, He had to go there 'in person' to check out what had come to His knowledge.

"One should notice here the two problems facing God. On one hand He has no reliable sources of information. He cannot trust His angels. On the other hand, His omnipresence and omniscience are of much less value than a walk to the source of events. He cannot be updated instantly. He has to use the future tense to signify that, eventually, He will get to know. Taken literally, this makes God appear inefficient. This would mean the end of omnipresence and omniscience. However, taken metaphorically and as Jehovah indicated it, the quotation could be considered as a story intended to impress on men not to believe rumours without a thorough check."

The Voice, apparently, was not convinced.

"Once more we notice that the Bible gives no indication that the quotation should be considered metaphorically. The trouble is that the Bible did not dedicate a section or a chapter to describe the attributes of God in unambiguous terms. Men are left with no alternative but to deduce these attributes from various Biblical verses. Since these verses give no warning of a possible metaphorical interpretation and since the people described in the verses are real people like Abraham, one cannot escape the conclusion that the Bible, in this case, is to be taken literally. We must conclude, therefore, either that Jehovah relinquished His omniscience and omnipresence for some reason, or that He did not want Abraham to be aware of the full extent of His attributes."

"I will now read," added Koray, "a passage from the Bible".

And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness.

And he said unto him, I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.

And he said, Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?

And he said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she-goat of three years old, and a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.



And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not.

And when the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him.

Koray paused briefly and then proceeded:

And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.

Koray did not feel the need to question me, but he could not keep from commenting.

"It is obvious that Abraham did not have the faintest idea of what your essence is. What could be more natural for Abraham than to doubt your predictions? So you had to impress him by producing sparks between the fleshy parts of dead animals. But even then, you seemed to show your powers were not from within you but stemmed from your knowledge of a recipe calling for a heifer, a goat and a ram all exactly three years old. Under these careful conditions a young dove became a catalyst allowing flames to pass through parts of animals.

"Any man who knew the magic words could accomplish the same miracle. At least, that is the impression you gave. This is no way for a god to inspire love, respect and an acceptable understanding of his nature."

The Voice spoke in distress.

"The quotation is difficult to understand and I can see how much trouble a man could have trying to make sense of it. Having delivered to Abraham a certificate of believer, the Bible displays the strong doubts afflicting Abraham. He requests proof that what Jehovah is prophesying will indeed occur. Jehovah is willing to oblige, but all He is coming up with is smoke and light between pieces of dead flesh. What could this show to a believer of God? How poor Abraham's belief must have been if it could be reinforced by such tricks!"

"Nevertheless", Cholem broke in, "if a bit of hocus-pocus could restore and fortify Abraham's faith, why shouldn't Jehovah resort to it?"

The hidden teaching of this quotation could be, 'Do not spend your wit on one who has so little of it.'

I was quiet for a moment, aware that the inroads on my omnipresence increased from example to example. I could perhaps ignore this last evidence against me since Abraham remained a staunch believer and passed the test honourably when I ordered him to kill his son Isaac. But then, I could not stem the flood of examples which would follow and which would be more and more difficult to answer. I cleared my voice and spoke firmly.

"I admit it! I was not omnipresent enough. That is the eternal complaint made against parents; they don't have enough time for their children. I did not give enough time to the whole of my creation. I was not always there when I was needed. Don't give me any more examples. I could provide plenty myself. I remember that it states in the Bible that the waters of the great flood prevailed for 150 days. Obviously a few hours would have achieved the objective of exterminating all the beings on the face of the earth. The Bible says that after 150 days I remembered Noah. This does not show omnipresence, which does not have to remember anything. The Bible mentions that I came down from heaven to see the Babel tower. Obviously such a visit was unwarranted for an omnipresent God.

"I asked my chosen people to put a sign of blood on their houses so that I could spare them from the plagues I would inflict on the Egyptians. I admit I should have used some degree of omnipresence instead of such a crude visual marker. I asked my chosen people to bury their excrement so that I could not see it during my walks in their camp. This implied that, like man, I cannot see what is covered. I admit this discouraged man from perceiving me as omnipresent and omniscient.

"In effect, I admit that my presence was all too often absent. But I still think I was right in telling man, 'God helps those who help themselves'. This implies that they can act without constant intervention on my part. And since I had withdrawn from action, why should I not withdraw my presence? The world I had created was so flawed that omnipresence would have absorbed me totally. I felt the need to take up some spiritual activity during which I could again experience active beatitude and after which I would feel stronger and more inclined to take up my fight with the Devil. Meanwhile, my creatures were not completely left alone; my angels watched over them."

There was a silence that lasted a considerable time. It was broken by the Voice.

"The conclave is pleased that you admit not being omnipresent enough. It does not, however, accept your justification. Inasmuch as God created matter He is free to ignore it for a moment or for eternity. But from the moment He creates a creature capable of thought, He takes up a responsibility He cannot put down.

"To think is divine, and the man who thinks is to this extent divine. That is why, Jehovah, you can truly say that you created him in your image. You could have been more precise and specified that the similarities between you and man stem solely from the fact that, like you, he thinks. This divine faculty you gave man should be respected and given continual attention. Your lack of omnipresence has led many men to mistake your substance."

The Voice paused as if waiting for me to reply, then began again, "Jehovah, watch the next scene and observe how even in modern times, men have trouble grasping your divine nature."

Through a panel in space could be seen the inside of a hut in the Auschwitz extermination camp. Two skeleton-like prisoners were in a corner praying softly, and by doing so revealed their religions. One recited phrases in Latin and made occasional signs of the cross, the other covered his head with one hand and muttered Hebraic prayers. When they had finished praying, they started to talk together in low voices.

"I prayed," said the Jew, "for the soul of Nathan, my colleague at the University ... Every day I pray for other souls until the day – which must be close – when I, like them, will end up in the oven ..."

"The fate of each man," commented the Christian, "lies in the hands of the Lord and no one can predict when he will die."

The Jew ignored the interruption. "The way things are going, all those who sleep in this hut today will be dead a month from now. Besides, the living are more to be pitied than the dead ... I find it difficult to understand the necessity for so many crimes, so much torture, so much pain."

"The Nazis don't do it out of necessity," said the Christian flatly.

"You don't understand me," replied the Jew bitterly. "I was not thinking of the Nazis. I was thinking of the Lord. He certainly could have stopped such barbarity. Why does He allow it? Why does He do nothing to prevent it?"

"I often ask myself the same question," the Christian replied. "A clear answer might provide me with the strength I need. I've worked on this

over and over and it's pushed my faith to the limit. It's not very satisfying, but all I can say is that He must have His reasons."

The Jew was getting more and more impatient. He spoke in a tone that would not admit interruptions. "That is exactly what I am worrying about, the fact that a reason could exist. No human reason or justification is possible but there must be a divine reason. But what good does it do me to be made in God's image if my reason is not made in the image of His reason, if it is incapable of conceiving the reasons of the Lord? I submit to His reasons without even knowing what they are; but I know full well that if the Lord explained His reasons and then offered me the choice, I would do away with such barbarity regardless of His reasons. I am convinced that human reason is incapable of understanding the divine reason and incapable of justifying it. The most that human reason can do is to submit willingly to a divine reason, all the while declaring it unjustifiable in human terms or concepts."

The Christian waited a few moments to make sure that his companion had finished.

"I would not like," he replied, "to give up my belief that human reason was created in the image of divine reason. Otherwise, how could I condemn the actions of a person who commits terrible crimes and claims to be inspired by a divine reason totally foreign to our own reason? How can I condemn Hitler's actions if I accept that an action which is irrational in human terms could be divinely rational?"

"I prefer to believe that our problems arise from the fact that we ascribe to the Lord attributes He may not have. If, for instance, the Lord is not totally omnipresent or omnipotent or omniscient, it is possible that He does not always know what is going on here, or that He knows but can do nothing to prevent it."

The Christian stopped, pondering the implications. The Jew touched his arm, almost to gain his attention.

"You are becoming unreasonable," he said, "but that is understandable. There does not seem to be a reasonable explanation. You would do better to stop thinking and go to sleep."

But the Christian still had something to say. "You know, now that I think of it, it's not the pain and torture that bothers me most, nor is it the fact that divine reason and human reason are not similar. What kills me is God's silence.

"If He were to come this moment and tell me that the millions of dead and tortured people deserved their fate, I would reply, 'Lord, blessed be thy name'. If He came and told me that they did not deserve their fate but that it was in some way necessary, I would reply, 'Lord, you work in mysterious ways and who am I to condemn them?' But what really gets me is the fact that He says nothing at all. What's the use of His being omnipresent if He has nothing to say?"

At that point the Christian was overcome by a bad cough which lasted some moments. Again the Jew spoke softly.

"Go to sleep, I tell you. Thinking like this will get you nowhere."

The scene disappeared and Koray spoke.

"By not intervening to prevent the crimes of torture, murder and genocide, you have suggested to man that what is inhuman could be divine. This certainly does not dignify divine nature. So as not to destroy this dignity, your best believers have preferred to think that you could perhaps be less omnipresent than they had imagined."

I had the impression that the conclave was exaggerating the consequences of my actions.

"I accept," I said, "that I have not helped my creatures to understand the nature of my divinity, nor did I encourage them to acquire knowledge. I did, however, endow them with the ability to reason and experiment. The understanding of nature became a process fraught with difficulties, and man has often come up with erroneous conclusions and false theories. But in time and with perseverance many errors have been corrected. Man now knows that the earth is not flat and that the sun is a star like any other. In the same way the understanding of my divine nature could be the result of a process full of traps leading man to wrong ideas which he could discard with time and perseverance."

I hoped my argument might be convincing. It was not.

"You wanted man," replied the Voice, "to discover the secrets of nature by collective efforts spread over generations. This was your choice and no one is against it. Man can observe nature, experiment with it, put their theories to the test and verify them under more and more general conditions. You created a material nature for which the laws remain invariable through the ages. An experiment made some centuries ago can be repeated today with the same results. The experiment can show, for example, that light moves at a finite speed and not instantaneously. You have wisely made it possible to acquire a sum of knowledge, reflecting in

a reasonable way the true properties of nature through the relative constancy of its laws.

"But when it comes to the nature of your divinity, you leave man no method of investigation. Man cannot observe your divinity. You have spoken with only a very few of them and with even fewer of those from recent generations. Man cannot experiment with your divinity, as you are subject to no invariable laws. Experiments on you cannot be repeated in the sure knowledge that the results will be the same. Beating a rock with a rod will not always bring forth enough water to slake the thirst of a man in the desert. The good things of this world do not always accrue to the just; the innocent man does not always triumph over the guilty one. So man finds himself totally disarmed when he attempts to understand your nature.

"For lack of anything better man is reduced to shaping you, as Adam did, in his image. But his ability to shape things changes with time and thus for him your nature is, in principle, invariable. But, in fact, it changes constantly. Adam believes he can hide far from you, while present-day theologians consider you omnipresent and omniscient."

The Voice at last fell silent.

"What I have just heard," I replied, "implies a good number of accusations against which I have not yet been able to defend myself."

"So be it," agreed the Voice. "Let us continue in order ... Which accusation do you choose to discuss next?"

I did not want to leave the subject as a loser. So instead of answering the question, I said, "I would first like to make a statement concerning omnipresence and omniscience."

"We are listening," replied the Voice obligingly.

I took some moments to consider the best way to convey my thoughts, then said: "The ability to think and to will in man would have been an illusion if I had predestined his ideas and desires so as not to be surprised by them. Free will in man necessitated a limitation of my omniscience. Either I knew the future in all its details so that man had no choice but to follow a prescribed destiny, or else I gave man the right to surprise me. I could not grant him free will without losing a part of my own knowledge. It was a great loss. Now the universe was going to react to the action of a large number of wills independent of mine. I was no longer the absolute master in my own house.

"I may sometimes have sacrificed the clarity of my omnipresent and omniscient powers to allow man to love me as well as respecting and fearing me."

"If that is so," the Voice then said, "you should choose 'the love of God' as the subject to be discussed next."

"That seems reasonable," I agreed.

## **CHAPTER VI GOD AND MAN**

I had barely finished these words when my appearance suddenly and completely changed. I had become transformed into an enormous cockroach about two metres high standing upright on its two back legs. Nothing should have surprised me any more but still, this new shape distressed me.

Mind you, I don't share man's irrational hatred for the cockroach. It is a beautiful creature, one of the most durable and symmetrical beings I ever designed. I was pleased to see it multiply so efficiently and I had hoped that man would be grateful to have such an interesting range of living creatures as companions that he could observe without danger. Man's disgust with insects disappointed me. Still ... I had to admit that the cockroach was much lower than man in the order of things, so my distress probably stemmed from a sense of indignity. Was it really necessary to go through this? I had little time to reflect on my new condition before the circle of gods disappeared and I heard the Voice speak.

"Jehovah, you have permanent substance and a variable form. Your substance is unchanged but your form is now that of a cockroach. Does man's love for you relate to your substance or your form?"

Though I was again aware of a trap, the importance of the question did not escape me. Does a man who loves God love an abstract concept of God? Can he love God without resorting to an anthropomorphic subterfuge? More simply, can he love a God without a definite shape? Could he love God without the assurance that man had been made in the physical image of his creator?

I had never considered this and hesitated for a long time before replying. I suspected that a man who had loved me would be brought forward to testify as to his capacity to love me in my new shape. I was fearful of the result.

"In the world I have created," I replied, "appearance has always been associated with substance. Men would find it difficult to ignore appearance and could not help but give it the usual value of substance."

Although these words issued from my cockroach mouth, they had the same tone as my previous voice. The Voice's reply was swift.

"Since this is so, how can you be sure that man loves you for what you are and not for your appearance?"



It was a good question and I did not have a ready answer.

"Actually," I said defensively, "I have never tried to find out the type of love man has for me. I certainly hope that it is my substance he loves."

"We will soon find out," said the Voice confidently. "Solomon will come before you. Perhaps there will be positive indications of his love for you."

I was astonished. "May I ask why he was chosen?"

"Solomon was a very wise man," the Voice answered. "He above all others should be able to understand the difference between form and substance. Furthermore, he sang your praises and clearly expressed his deep love for you."

"In fact Solomon has been chosen for yet another reason. Although many men in the Bible expressed their love for God, very few are cited as actually loving God rather than just saying they did. Solomon was such a man. The Bible states, 'Solomon loved the Lord ...' We will now discover the nature of his love."

Then I noticed Solomon leaning against a wall about ten metres from me. He appeared horrified and would doubtless have fled if the wall had not prevented him. He trembled and obviously wished to keep as great a distance as possible between us.

"Solomon," I said to him, "I am the Almighty Lord, your God and that of Abraham and Isaac. I have taken on the form of a giant cockroach to try your love for me. Calm your fears and come closer."

Solomon was at first dumbfounded. Then he seemed to consider and his fear abated a little. Nevertheless he had some difficulty in speaking.

"Fear not, Solomon," I said. "Despite the cockroach shape, I am still the same God you loved so dearly."

After several attempts Solomon stammered, "Lord, the fear of God has always steeped my whole being. Each of your creatures must fear you. I beg you not to be offended by the fear I feel in your presence."

Solomon was indeed smart. He was trying to dress up his fear of the monster cockroach with the fear of God.

"The fear of disobedience is praiseworthy, Solomon, but you were never so shaky in my presence before. Why should I frighten you more as a cockroach? Don't you believe that I am Jehovah, your God?"

"Lord," he answered, "a cockroach two metres tall is a miracle. When that roach stands upright, talks and tells me it is my Almighty God, I can have no doubts. Lord, it is not doubt which holds me back."

"Solomon," I admonished, "you have not said everything you are thinking. Come now, speak without fear. I take this rock as witness that I will not take offence at your thoughts no matter what they are, so speak without holding back."

"Solomon," I admonished, "you have not said everything you are thinking. Come now, speak without fear. I take this rock as witness that I will not take offence at your thoughts no matter what they are, so speak without holding back."

Solomon took a few moments before answering.

"Lord, in your great wisdom, no doubt, you have made man aware of appearances. His emotion is great where there is a question of beauty or ugliness, whether of woman, beast or landscape. Grant me the favour of presenting yourself to me in a shape I can relate to. Rather, take the form of a tiger. I fear tigers and I fear God more, but in the shape of a tiger I can still distinguish that of a man. The nose, mouth, eyes, number of limbs – all is familiar. Yes Lord, I pray you, the shape of a tiger."

"Solomon," I asked, "is it my form you love, or my godly substance?"

"Lord," he answered ambiguously, "a giant cockroach is frightening. But as you have decided to take this form, I will fear the roach as I fear the Lord." Then he added, "I realize that it is not the monster I see which frightens me but the God of Israel which it represents."

"Since that is so," I said, "come closer."

Solomon approached slowly, ill at ease, then stopped.

"Come closer," I repeated.

Solomon hesitated. "Lord," he said, "I beg you, come out of this cockroach and I will come as close as you wish. The sight of it revolts me more than I can bear."

"What does my appearance matter?" I demanded angrily. "Don't you love the substance of God, which is the same no matter what form I take?"

"Lord," he said, trying to calm my anger, "in my songs I compared my love for you to love for the most beautiful woman. Lord, don't think I am being impertinent, but truly I want to run away. If you order me to come even closer I shall obey for I am as dust and dust cannot aspire to disobedience."

Solomon had shown his willingness to comply and I felt that the moment of truth should not be delayed any further. I spoke in a gentle tone. "Then come into my arms as a child would come to his father."

I spread my front legs as if they were arms ready to embrace a loved one. But Solomon took two steps forward and fell down in a faint!

Solomon disappeared and I regained my human form. I felt confused and disappointed. I asked myself what had gone wrong. Was Solomon indifferent to my essence? Did my essence, however important to Solomon, affect him less than my appearance? What had Solomon once loved in me?

Koray interrupted my thoughts.

"The tragedy," he said, "lies in the fact that you, Jehovah, need the love of man. You sought out the love of particular humans – Adam, Eve, Abraham, Noah, Jacob, Moses ... You even offered Moses the death of all Israelites and the guarantee of a large number of progeny of which he would be the patriarch. Moses pointed out that such an action would ruin your reputation with the Egyptians, but you did not care what the Egyptians thought. You simply assumed that, once more, you failed to win the love of Moses who was concentrating on saving his people by proving God to be wrong.

"By the way, Moses winning an argument against you and your subsequent expression of repentance did not square well with your omniscience. Your pursuit of the love of your creatures was truly frustrating. When the human race as a whole failed to respond sufficiently, you chose a particular race to love, the people of Israel. Having failed with them you took up the whole of humanity again through the intervention of Jesus, although he was hampered by the belief that made him say, 'I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. Once again it was useless. Jesus himself often called the apostles 'O ye of little faith'. He was a good judge, but he did not realize that the basic problem was as much lack of love for God as it was lack of faith in him.

"This need for love that you feel has rendered you blind to all the injustices you have committed," Koray continued. "It is the basic reason for your favouritism, which resulted in the election of a chosen people and chosen witnesses to your miracles. The other creatures who were not favoured with your miracles had a much weaker faith and became lost souls. You made a grave error in ordering man to adore you. It is a fact that love is blind and cannot be ordered, commanded or claimed. It would take a miracle to bring man, as he is, to love God. You should have given man the ability to love rationally as well as instinctively. This is your doing and not man's."

Koray had been surprisingly mild. For the first time I sensed that he wished me no ill.

"Solomon's behaviour," Cholem interjected, "proves that his love is affected by appearances. He loves God when God takes a human form and does not love Him in the shape of an insect. This means that Jehovah, in order to be loved by man must be perceived by him as human so that man can have the feeling of partaking of divinity. The moment Solomon saw God in the shape of a cockroach he felt that whatever in Him is divine was being shattered. This, added to his disgust for insects, made him urge Jehovah to regain a shape to which he could relate. Man's grasp of the divine is imperfect; why should his love for God not be imperfect as well? Why should it not reflect the love of man for himself?"

"The love of man for himself," commented the Voice, "derives from an instinct of self-preservation. The love of man for God should be a means by which man can transcend his humanity. In order for that to be possible God should not be perceived as too close to human. At the same time human love should be a rational emotion instead of being instinctive, geared to the human species or to species close to man. Man was given the capacity to love himself and his fellow man. But in no way can this ability be transferred and produce love for God unless God is first made less of a God and more of a man.

"In fact," the Voice continued, "man is not capable of loving God except as some extension of himself. When man decides to love God, for whatever reason, he must first recreate Him in man's own image. When man believes he loves God, what he really loves is an idealized image of himself. Such an image fills him with hope. He sees in God what man could be if only he could shake off his moral and physical limitations. He then knows what to aim toward without being too discouraged by being so far from his goal. He sees God as a man who is not subject to death, who is not petty and who has answers to all questions."

Having said this, the Voice declared that the proceedings would be adjourned.

I was glad of the rest. So much had happened in such a short time. In fact I had no clear sense of how long I had been before the conclave. Yet the idea of being confronted with the existence of other Gods, being on trial before them had still not sunk in completely.

The break gave me a chance to review the first day of proceedings, which had taken place in a way which worried me. It was obvious that the conclave had a strange concept of the relationships which should exist between man and his creator. I remembered distinctly what the Voice had said:

"But from the moment He creates a creature capable of thought, He takes up a responsibility he cannot put down .... This divine faculty you gave man should be respected and given continued attention."

These words still rang disagreeably in my mind. Even before the creation my thought had been ceaselessly creative through an infinite number of infinite times. Then, I had no obligations or responsibilities. When I made the decision to create man I could not take any responsibility for him because he did not yet exist. Obviously I had created man only because that was my wish. I gave up part of my omniscience to ensure that man had a good measure of responsibility towards himself and towards me. When and where did I suddenly acquire responsibility for anyone?

I began to wonder if I did not perhaps have some responsibility towards myself. This was a strange notion but it would not resolve my current dilemma. I was not accused of deficiencies against myself but against thought which supposedly remained divine even when it was human.

After some consideration I felt I finally understood what the conclave was worried about. Man is uniquely capable of thinking about the concept of God, and the human concept of God can thus be either a purely human creation or a reflection of God in human thought. If the concept of God in man is human, the errors in it are man's responsibility. But if it is a reflection of God in human thought, it would seem to be my responsibility to watch over it and act in such a way that it becomes worthy of respect. The conclave seemed to think that there were rules of conduct to which even a God was subject. In a word, the problem was one of divine ethics. It seemed that my conduct had been such as to merit moral censure. No true progress could be made until this question of principle was cleared up. When the proceedings resumed, I indicated that I had chosen my attitude towards morality as the next topic for discussion.

The Voice interrupted my thoughts. "The accusation dealing with lapses of morality covers a number of different aspects. We will have to attend to each."

I had an answer prepared. "I suggest we start by establishing the principles which will guide us."

"The only principle accepted here," said Koray abruptly, "is that of consistency."

This was much better. I was free of all arbitrary restrictions except that of consistency. I had to admit that inconsistency is incompatible with morality; rules are no longer rules if they can be changed as one goes along.

Koray spoke again. "It is clear that as Adam and Eve formed the first human generation and their children the second generation, a third generation could only result from incestuous matings. Therefore you should either have avoided condemning incest as absolutely immoral, or you should have found a way to allow the succession of generations without recourse to incest. You could, for example, have created two couples whose children could have mated."

I considered it frivolous to attach importance to such details.

"It is very easy," I said, "to show me such improved solutions through hindsight and to question my lack of inventiveness. In fact it would have been very risky. Having endowed human beings with free will, I could not be sure that a number of unpleasant hitches would not occur. First, the two Eves could have loved the same Adam. The problem of avoiding incest could then have been solved only by rape or prostitution. That would have been a very poor beginning. But even if the Eves were happy, each with a different Adam, the possibility of adultery would have existed as early as the first generation."

I paused and looked around, expecting some reaction. There was none.

"When one thinks of the weight of Original Sin resulting from the eating of the apple and how it has affected successive generations," I began again, "it is not difficult to conceive the great danger that could have come from burdening the first generation with a sin of such magnitude as adultery. The children of Adam and Eve had no problems or remorse committing incest. In those days incest was necessarily moral. This should confound any ethical theoretician who would reject the relative – even arbitrary – character of morality. From the moment I decide something is moral, it is so. Once I had obtained what I wanted by using incest I could, whenever I wished, declare incest immoral."

"We will return later to the Original Sin you mentioned," replied Koray. "We have still to address the present issue. You encouraged theft and abuse of trust. But later you specifically forbade theft. You went against your own future teaching when you encouraged the people of Israel to abuse the trust of the Egyptians and steal their jewels and other precious objects. You ordered your chosen people to borrow these things and take them away during their flight from Egypt."

"The truth," I replied, "is that the Israelites had been consistently robbed and taken advantage of by the Egyptian state. I had no qualms in showing them how to get back what was owing to them. Of course I could have found a way to get them riches from the coffers of the Pharaohs. Some theologians feel repugnance when they discover that I suggested that my people steal from their Egyptian neighbours who, in good faith had lent them things that were very dear.

"It is hard for many to accept that honesty and integrity are not absolute moral obligations. Like incest, they may or may not be moral rules, depending on my wishes. The Spartans certainly understood this when they made a respectable art of ingenious theft. Do not forget that it is only after the flight from Egypt that I spelled out a number of moral laws which were not necessarily retroactive."

"Jehovah," commented the Voice, "your reply puts the role of the Bible as man's moral inspiration in jeopardy. If a moral law is not eternal it can be challenged. If morality depends on circumstance, varying conditions could justify an elastic morality."

The Voice was right. This matter had to be clarified.

"Perhaps we should discuss the value of the Bible as a witness and as divine inspiration," I suggested. "I remember saying that I had some reservations on this subject. Perhaps I should explain myself now."

"The right moment will come soon," said the Voice. "We would prefer first to resolve the problem of Original Sin."

## CHAPTER VII ORIGINAL SIN

The use of the term 'We' left me wondering. Was the Voice the collective expression of the members of the conclave?

"We have called Eve to testify," continued the Voice.

I don't know why I felt uneasy. Why did the announcement of Adam's appearance not affect me, while now I found myself in a turmoil of thoughts and feelings? As I tried to interpret this I heard the sound of footsteps which were still familiar to my ear. I lifted my head and saw Eve moving to the centre of the assembly. Like Adam she wore animal skins, which did little to hide her dazzling beauty. She seemed to know the reason for her appearance before the conclave. She looked around curiously before speaking in a soft voice.

"I am your servant. Speak and I shall obey!"

"No one here," replied the Voice kindly, "is the servant of anyone. We brought you here so that your testimony could allow us to clarify the circumstances in which the Original Sin was committed."

Eve's eyes widened. "My Lords," she said, "please use simpler words. I don't know what being Original means."

"Eve," replied the Voice, "you have just shown that our wisdom, although divine, can neglect some obvious facts. We call Original Sin what you committed with Adam by disobeying your creator the day you tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge. We have been told that the serpent suggested that, instead of causing your death, the forbidden fruit would render you equal to the gods. You therefore disobeyed your creator and tasted that fruit."

Eve seemed hurt by what the Voice had said. "Oh no!" she exclaimed. "That's not what happened. The serpent, as you must know, was the most subtle creature and his arguments were really difficult to ignore. I can't remember what he said to me word for word, but I am sure it would have persuaded anyone in my place. If only you had heard the words, you would agree with me that I was not all that guilty."

"That need be no obstacle," said the Voice. "We are able to reproduce the event."

Eve the witness was now staring in amazement at the recreated Eve she once was. The latter was walking naked in the garden of Eden. A



rustling of leaves attracted her attention and she turned with innocent and apparently accustomed delight to identify the source of the sound. It was the Serpent.

There was a great contrast between Eve's carefree manner and the worried, unhappy expression of the serpent. Eve grew visibly concerned. "Serpent," she said, "I have never seen an expression like yours. Adam and I laugh and smile all the time. Why don't you do likewise?"

"Eve, how can I smile when two creatures I love so much are disobeying the Lord?"

"You must be mistaken," said Eve. "We have every intention of obeying the Lord."

"Nevertheless," said the Serpent, raising his voice, "when the Lord orders you to go forth and multiply, you don't do it. Does this not constitute disobedience?"

Eve was perplexed. "That's right, now I remember. The Lord ordered us to multiply. I spoke of it with Adam, but neither of us knows how to go about it."

"Of course you don't know," answered the Serpent. "The Lord placed that knowledge in the fruit of the tree of knowledge."

"So I was told," said Eve, "but isn't it strange to have that knowledge placed in a fruit? I wonder sometimes how delicious the fruit must be and how wonderful must be the knowledge it would bestow on whoever eats from it. I wish so much that the fruit were not forbidden. I seem to crave for knowledge and, to tell the truth, I have already eaten that fruit many times in my dreams. I remember that in one of them I was standing before the tree ordering it, 'Yield me one of your offspring!' And the tree answered, 'I will do it willingly, but I first have to hug you.' Before I realized what was happening the tree moved towards me, while transforming itself into Adam. The tree was Adam and Adam was the tree, and he hugged me so strongly I could hardly tell where Adam ended and where I began. I was afraid to be hurt but, at the same time, it was so enjoyable."

She stopped a moment, took a deep breath and repeated in a lower voice, "It was so enjoyable!" Then she continued. "When I woke I asked Adam to hug me but he refused, saying, 'What for?' Those two words still trouble me. What for? What for? Adam does not know; neither do I. Maybe if we could eat the fruit of knowledge we would know the answer to this question."

"Yes, Eve," said the serpent, "you would surely know the answer to that question and to many more. But much more to the point, you would then learn how to propagate and therefore to obey the commandment of the Lord. You and Adam have to go and eat of the fruit to get the wonderful knowledge."

"But the Lord has forbidden us to eat that fruit!"

"Be reasonable," urged the Serpent. "Does the Lord not know that without eating of the fruit you cannot go forth and multiply, and consequently you cannot obey His orders?"

"That's true," admitted Eve. "But if I must disobey in the matter of the fruit in order to obey in the matter of multiplication, how can I remain an obedient creature?"

"Such ignorance surprises me, Eve. I am sorry to see how little effort you are making to solve the problem. How can you smile, how can you enjoy a walk while you are sinning by disobedience? You are finding contradictions where none exist."

"I do want to multiply," Eve insisted, "but I don't want to disobey by eating the fruit."

"In creating you," scolded the Serpent, "the Lord must have given you a very small amount of intelligence. Why should I, who am not in a state of sin, worry about a sinner who does not even try to understand? It is all very simple. If you do not eat this fruit you sin through omission of multiplication. If you do eat, you say you will sin through disobedience. Do you really dare to believe that the Lord has forced you into a situation where it would be impossible not to sin?"

"Serpent, this is all beyond me. I don't want to be a sinner. Tell me what I must do."

"That's easy," the creature replied, "and I see I must take some pains to save you from sin. The contradiction lies in the fact that you did not properly understand what the Lord told you. He does not want you to taste of the fruit without good reason. But of course, if your motive is to follow His order to multiply, the Lord will be glad to note that you have done what is necessary. If you want to remain obedient, you have no choice but to taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge."

"That seems reasonable," admitted Eve, "but all the same, the Lord did not tell me that I could have this fruit as long as I had a good reason!"

"You have no brains at all!" the Serpent snapped. "So stay a sinner! Don't multiply, and call down the wrath of the Lord!"

The Serpent began to leave, but Eve ran behind him crying.

"Serpent, serpent, don't leave me. I don't want to be a sinner."

The Serpent turned back to her. "You have concluded that the Lord is forcing you to sin in one way or another. Can you trust such an interpretation?"

"No!" admitted Eve.

The Serpent then adopted a doctoral tone. "According to the only possible interpretation, there is a way for you to act without sinning. Tell me your decision. Are you going to choose your interpretation which makes a sinner of you no matter what you do, or will you trust an interpretation which at least gives you the hope of being saved from sin?"

"May the Lord bless you!" said Eve gratefully. "Of course you are right."

We then saw Eve run to the tree of knowledge. She arrived out of breath, tore off a piece of fruit and tasted it immediately.

The scene was transformed back to Eve, the witness, once again before the conclave. "That's exactly what happened," she cried.

In the silence which followed the conclave seemed to sympathize with Eve's difficult situation. I felt all eyes turn towards me. Perhaps the gods were waiting for an explanation of the severity with which I had treated Eve, Adam and the whole human race. I was ready to clarify my position, but chose to wait until Eve was gone.

"Would you like to add something before leaving?" the Voice asked Eve.

"Yes," she replied. "I loved my daughters as much as my sons and it saddened me to be the cause of their subordination to their brothers. I lived long enough to witness how the status of women was being eroded and I feel guilty even though I still don't know where I went wrong, or why my guilt should be greater than Adam's."

"Thank you for your co-operation, Eve," said the Voice. "The answer to your question may come as this hearing progresses. It is obvious that you obeyed Jehovah's order to multiply and it is equally obvious that you

could not have done so without tasting of the forbidden fruit. Jehovah will have to explain what you should have done under those circumstances."

Eve left slowly. When she was out of sight, the Voice spoke to me. "Jehovah, what would have become of the propagation of the species if Adam and Eve, in order to obey you, had refrained from tasting the fruit of the tree of knowledge?"

The question did not embarrass me a bit.

"As soon as Adam and Eve were created," I explained, "I understood that the multiplication of man was in the long run incompatible with his immortality. There is no room on earth for an ever-increasing number of immortal creatures. So I decided that man should chose between multiplication and immortality.

"In order to multiply he must eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. He must therefore disobey me and incur the punishment of becoming mortal. On the other hand, if he chooses to obey me and does not eat the forbidden fruit, he remains immortal but incapable of propagation. Both solutions are acceptable and it pleased me to associate immortality with strict obedience."

"Jehovah," said the Voice, "choice is an illusion when it is not based on knowledge of the alternatives and their consequences. In order to understand which choice to make, Adam and Eve first had to obtain knowledge. But, in the situation you created, they lost the option to choose at the very moment that they became capable of doing so."

"That is certainly one way of looking at the problem," I conceded. "But there is another. The true choice that I gave them was either to refuse to make a choice and to trust me in the absence of all knowledge, or to choose in full possession of the facts, in which case they would lose the ability to do so."

"So," broke in Koray, "you placed Adam and Eve in a situation which required a degree of sophistication which they lacked. The serpent which you made so clever had no difficulty seducing Eve."

"What difference does it make?", I asked, "The fact is that the choice was made. It is true that this choice seems preordained and impossible to avoid, but it's as good a choice as any other."

"The choice, Jehovah, is not in dispute," the Voice said sternly. "We blame you for making it Original Sin."

I was emphatic. "Adam and Eve still disobeyed me."

"But they did it through ignorance, Jehovah, so why make it a sin? And if you insist on its being a sin, why is it not just the sin of Adam and Eve but also of their descendants?"

"The descendants of Adam and Eve," I explained patiently, "are tainted by the Original Sin. When modern man chooses to pollute the environment, he does so not only for himself but also for future generations. The polluter is punished, but so is the rest of the human race. When Adam and Eve chose to multiply they made this choice not only for themselves but for the whole human race, so their sin became that of the human race.

"Since the loss of eternal life was the punishment for this sin, Adam and Eve passed on their curse to all their offspring. Their sin is therefore not a personal one. It will not have escaped your notice that if Adam and Eve had abstained from Original Sin they would have deprived their progeny of existence itself."

The gods were not pleased.

"Your logic," the Voice said coldly, "is cleverer than that of the serpent, Jehovah. But it seems to us that all this cleverness is only an attempt to justify the unjustifiable. A man cannot be a sinner before committing a sin."

"Why not?" I argued. "Is not the tiger a carnivore before he has ever tasted flesh?"

"Yes, Jehovah, but to be a carnivore is part of his nature and he should not be blamed for it. Either man is a sinner by nature, in which case he should not be blamed for his sins, or he is a sinner by choice and should not be considered a sinner before he has sinned.

"You are free to make man mortal," the Voice continued, "but either you link mortality with sin, in which case you must make only sinners mortal, or you avoid all links between sin and mortality. You could have avoided these problems by making Adam and Eve immortal but sterile or by making them mortal and fertile. In either case, you did not have to resort to a magic tree bestowing knowledge, or to Original Sin justified only by some convoluted casuistry."

The Voice did not let up. "Furthermore, the punishment seems disproportionate. You condemned Cain to eternal vagrancy on earth for killing Abel. This did not prevent him from raising a family and building a

town for them. But for just merely sampling knowledge, Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of Eden, became mortal and were subject to a number of further punishments!"

The aggressiveness of the conclave angered me. "Cain's crime," I said, "and the punishment I inflicted on him deserve to be examined in detail, not as an appendix to the Original Sin."

"As you wish, Jehovah," the Voice replied. "The next session will therefore be given over to a discussion of the commandment forbidding man to kill."

"Before moving on to the crime of Cain," I interrupted, "I would like to add a few words on the subject of Original Sin."

"We are listening," said the Voice.

But instead of speaking, I began to think deeply. Convoluted casuistry ... the words echoed in my mind. I needed to resolve the apparent contradiction between my understanding and that of the conclave. I would have to discover, from the conduct of the conclave, whether they had a mistaken idea of my position or whether they had simply adopted an implicit attitude which my arguments had failed to reach.

I consider morality, for example, to be relative; relative to my will and to the particular situation. But the conclave seemed more inclined towards an absolute morality. There must be other topics on which the conclave held views different from mine. I would have to focus on this idea. My line of thought was shattered by the Voice.

"We are waiting for you, Jehovah!"

I looked around me and began to speak in a tired voice. "You have stated that the punishment for the Original Sin did not fit the crime. The crime is a great one as it has been committed by all humanity and for all human posterity. It may be convoluted casuistry to point out that all humanity consisted of just Adam and Eve at that time, but this issue has a deeper meaning.

"Eve's testimony was touching but misleading. She appeared to be innocent, motivated by her desire to avoid sinning and thereby falling easy prey to the clever serpent. But you may not know exactly what the serpent was. Eve herself did not know. I offered no explanation in the Bible because primitive man was not capable of grasping such subtle shades of meaning.

"The fact is that the serpent was nothing other than an aspect of Eve herself. Each man bears within himself his own clever serpent and each man must decide the degree to which he will resist or be seduced by it. Eve's serpent was none other than my materialization of her desire to disobey me. Eve wanted to gain knowledge without sinning. To accomplish this she needed a clever reasoning which could silence the cries of her conscience. She could not, knowingly, accept such trickery. She did not want to acknowledge that she wished to disobey me.

"In order to make it easier for Eve to make a decision which would not be based on the repression of an essential part of herself, I caused this part to materialize in the shape of the serpent. In fact all the arguments presented by the serpent were nothing more than Eve's own inner arguments. Without the agency of the serpent these would have remained repressed.

"The serpent's victory indicates an unconscious choice on Eve's part and, consequently, on the part of all humanity. She chose knowledge and paid for it with mortality. She wished to avoid paying this price by using the serpent, the materialization of her subconscious, as an intermediary. Her sin stems from the strength of human curiosity. I therefore granted man and woman the benefits of curiosity, including that of procreation, but those benefits were not compatible with immortality.

"The choice of Adam and Eve resulted from a subconscious rebellion against my injunction. It was therefore a sin, the Original Sin. The magnitude of the sin lies in the fact that it was committed directly against me .... Now I am ready to discuss the crime of Cain."

There was silence when I concluded. The members of the conclave whispered among themselves for several moments and then the Voice began rather hesitantly.

"Jehovah, the conclave suspected that the serpent symbolized one aspect of Eve. We took into account the fact that the Bible had given man a limited and primitive degree of divine inspiration. We realize that the story of the serpent is, at best, a metaphor. Our colleague, Cholem, was particularly convincing on this point. Your own statement confirms our conclusions.

"We still believe, however, that the inclination of Adam and Eve toward knowledge is praiseworthy. As for the arguments of the serpent, that subconscious part of Eve, we believe that she should be judged according to her conscious actions, which solely determine her degree of honesty. One must be much more experienced than Eve was to be aware of one's subconscious, what you would call one's own serpent.

"The most Eve deserved was a fatherly and friendly talk explaining the danger of the Serpent. This danger would not have arisen if you had frankly and clearly given Adam and Eve the choice between multiplication and immortality. Remember also that each man and woman since Adam and Eve had parents to watch over them and help them find the right path. Adam and Eve were born as orphans without friends or companions to act as models. Instead of becoming the father, mother, friend and companion that they lacked, you let fall on them the full weight of divine retribution.

"It is the conclusion of the conclave that you did not deal fairly or justly with Adam and Eve, and that mankind does not deserve the stigma of Original Sin."



## **CHAPTER VIII CRIME AND PUNISHMENT**

Koray then announced that the conclave was ready to consider the alleged inconsistency with which I punished crime. Straightaway I saw Cain walking towards his younger brother. The two were dressed in primitive clothes – Abel tall and slim, Cain broader and more muscular. Their bodies reflected their occupations; Abel the shepherd had to chase and catch his animals while Cain worked in the fields.

Their sight revived many memories and emotions in me. They have been dear to me since their birth. In no other case was I so directly involved in child-care. Indeed, while parental love for children is instinctive, the knowledge of child-care is not. People need to observe how other parents deal with their children in order to protect their own offspring.

Adam and Eve did not even know how to hold a baby in their arms. Without my constant intervention Cain and Abel would not have survived long. Cain wasn't even a day old when Adam wanted to pull him by the arm. When I told him he first had to take hold of the baby's torso he did, but then he let the head hang like a dead weight. I had to hurry to protect the child's neck and then teach Adam and Eve how to support the head.

It took some time to convince Adam that his breasts could not provide milk for the baby. Each time Eve fell asleep, he would try to feed the child from his breast and would shout at him for rejecting it. I once had to save Cain from choking on a few nuts Adam was forcing down his throat.

The constant attention I had to give the two babies endeared them to me. Here were the first people to come to life not through an act of creation but through the power of procreation I had granted man.

Millenia would pass and millions of children would be born; I would not have to worry much for them and that is why my relations with Cain and Abel have always been special. I sometimes played the role of the missing grandparents. I did it discreetly, and for no other children.

There was something else very special about Cain and Abel. They were the first brothers on earth. How could they understand that brothers are different from strangers? There were no strangers! I wanted them, nonetheless, to know the difference. The two first brothers should give the best example of brotherhood. This would be possible if they lived long enough; they would have so many brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces that most of them would be strangers to them and the love binding Cain and Abel would stand up as an example of brotherhood for all to see and

follow. I felt frustrated when their diverging occupations and their competition for the attention of Adam and Eve made them more and more estranged.

I was brought back to reality by Cain's voice.

"The Lord be with you," he said as he approached Abel. The latter discarded a piece of animal skin he was cleaning, raised his eyes to Cain and smiled back a greeting.

"The Lord be with you, too."

The brothers remained silent for a long moment. The difficulty they had beginning a conversation must have reflected the tension of their rivalries. Abel took up the piece of skin and resumed his work. Cain, at a loss for something to say, just looked around. Another long silence followed. Abel must have realized that Cain had difficulty stating the purpose of his visit. Some more words, however trivial, were needed to untie his tongue.

"You don't seem happy today," Abel observed.

Cain seemed almost furtive in his manner. "I'm not," he confessed before lapsing into silence again.

"How was the harvest?" Abel asked without stopping his work. "Has the Lord been good to you?"

The mention of his relationship to the Lord seemed to isolate Cain's worry. He was back on track and regained his ability to speak.

"The Lord has once again refused my gift, this time of fresh figs and nuts. They didn't please Him any more than the melons and grapes I offered Him yesterday."

Realizing that his brother was now in a mood to talk, Abel set the animal skin aside. "You must have done something wrong," he said. "Did you place your offering on a clean, elevated stone?"

"Yes," answered Cain. "I also arranged the figs in a circle and placed the nuts in a regular pattern inside it so that the offering was pleasant to look at."

"Maybe you didn't wash them well," Abel suggested. "The Lord would reject a fig covered with dust."

"I am aware of that," Cain replied, "and I was careful to wash each fruit separately. I examined them one by one and threw away any that had even the slightest defect."

Abel had no more comments on Cain's offering. He spoke instead of his own sacrifices to God.

"My young lambs," he said with a smile, "seemed to please the Lord. I had barely finished slitting the last one's throat when there was a clap of thunder and a light rain fell to cool the heat of the day. A pleasant breeze blew on the flames which enveloped the dead beasts while a divine fragrance rose from the altar to the sky. Clearly the Lord approved my gift."

Cain betrayed no sign of jealousy. "I sincerely wanted to please the Lord," he said. "But no sooner had I placed the figs and nuts on a raised rock than a flock of birds covered the nuts with excrement and the blackest ants I have ever seen came from nowhere to bite into the figs. I realized that the Lord had again refused my offering. The Lord rejects me. He hates me."

"Could it not be," asked Abel in a teasing tone, "that the Lord enjoys the smell of blood and burning flesh?"

Cain saw no malice. "Each of us," he said, "according to his means. I have no animals. My work yields fruits and vegetables and I give the best of them to the Lord."

"That is true," replied Abel. "But a fruit, a vegetable ... That's rather paltry. Blood has more meaning, more significance. The question of life and death lies in the realm of the Lord. No one else has the right to give or take a life. So the killing of an animal is a crime unless it is done in the name of the Lord and for His glory. In a way, the sacrifice of an animal is a divine act. The gift of a fig is just a trifle."

"I thought," said Cain naively, "that the intent was what counted most."

Abel had had enough. "You must know the intent is not enough. Smarten up! You look foolish with your figs and nuts. It's blood the Lord wants, simpleton. Real blood."

He flung a clot of blood from the animal skin which struck his brother on his forehead. Cain wiped his brow and threw down the muck which was on it. Then he lifted his head to the heavens and cried, "Lord, if it's blood you want, blood is what you'll get!"

The scene faded slowly as Cain started to advance on Abel.

The silence which followed was broken by Koray.

"Tell us, Jehovah, why you were so lenient towards Cain?"

The implied reproach annoyed me. Nevertheless I replied calmly, "Cain's crime surprised me. It is not generally known that the result of his act surprised Cain more than anyone else. No human had died up till then. The death of a man was still an abstract concept. Men knew they were mortal without realizing exactly what that meant. Abel had a better idea of it than most because he raised animals and occasionally sacrificed one in my honour. But animals are so inferior to humans that even Abel did not make the connection between the death of an animal and his own mortality.

"As for Cain, he was interested only in farming and had no concept of death. He expressed his anger against Abel in a murderous way but he was surprised to see Abel die. At first he felt equal to the gods. Until then only God created life and only God had created the possibility of death by making man mortal. Cain thought his deed had made him divine and he felt drunk with discovery. His knowledge had increased experimentally and he was greatly excited by it.

"On my part, I realized that I had not issued any edicts against killing. I also understood that there was a certain logic in Cain's actions. I had spurned his offerings of fruit and vegetables but had accepted the animal sacrifices which Abel made for me. You heard Cain say, 'if blood is what you want, blood is what you will get!' In a way the murder of Abel was a sacrifice to me. I could not accept it, of course, since the gift was also a gesture of protest and anger and I didn't intend to encourage such tendencies. But since there were extenuating circumstances surrounding Cain's actions, I treated him in the way I later ordered that a man guilty of manslaughter be treated."

"I would like," Cholem began, "to put the crime of killing in a proper perspective. Jehovah repeatedly explained in His scriptures that men and animals each have a soul and that the soul resides in the blood. Animals are allowed to be killed, but their souls must be protected. If the blood of the animal is poured on the ground, the soul of an animal remains somehow unaffected. It is thus possible for men to enjoy the tasty flesh of the animal without harming the animal's soul in the least."

"I think," the Voice replied, "that consistency would have been better achieved by forbidding the killing of animals instead. Jehovah's preference for Abel's offering signalled to man how much He appreciated the pouring

of animal's blood. By forbidding man to drink the blood of the animal, Jehovah helped belittle the horror of killing. He gave man the impression that whatever was done against animals was of little consequence as long as the animal's soul, residing in the blood, was preserved. Such an easy way to keep a good conscience with respect to killing is not conducive to a recognition of killing as the most horrible of crimes.

"Moreover, while the notion has some romantic attraction, the soul of a man or of an animal does not reside in its blood. A complete blood transfusion can save a man's life without altering his identity. Once a person or an animal is killed, his spilled blood is without life and without soul. To forbid it to be imbibed or eaten with the flesh is no consolation to the slain man or animal. What was needed was prevention of bloodshed, not the protection of the poured blood."

"Jehovah," said Koray, "you have often shown that you would put a man to death for a fairly innocuous crime. The Bible mentions how your wrath fired up against Uzzi and killed him. His crime consisted of attempting to prevent the fall of God's Ark which was shaking badly in the ox-cart. That such an innocent action could anger you so much as to make you kill Uzzi leaves us wondering.

"In the case of Cain, the first in a continuous string of the worst crimes man can commit has taken place. Yet, instead of marking it with an exemplary punishment, you show unjustified leniency and protect the criminal. You said you would avenge sevenfold any harm done to him by anyone else. In fact you have not shown much horror and disgust for the act of killing, and you yourself ordered the death penalty for a long list of crimes.

"These crimes," I replied, "offended me greatly and I wanted man to be terrified at the idea of committing any of them."

"Jehovah", said the Voice, "let us observe your teaching concerning certain crimes and their punishment."

All eyes turned towards a stranger dressed in the manner of the Hebrew people in biblical times. He was speaking to a group of neighbours while pointing at a young boy.

"This wretched boy's behaviour dishonours me," the man was saying. "He thinks he knows everything already and has no respect for my white hair. He contradicts me constantly and sometimes drinks too much wine. This morning when I had chastened him for his insolence, I got two lambs ready for the priest. My son dared to say that the Lord did not need these lambs and that if we weren't so stupid we would eat them ourselves."

At these words a mutter of disapproval arose from the crowd while the young man seemed visibly terrified.

"My shame," continued the father, "has become too great and I see nothing for it but to obey the Lord." He recited from memory:

If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them:

Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place;

And they shall say unto the elders of the city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.

And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die: so shalt thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear."

"Let us do our duty," the old man added in the same solemn tone, "and purify our city from vermin."

The son barely had time to cry, "Father, have mercy," when a stream of stones fell upon him. He screamed in pain and terror while he covered his head with his hands and cried, "Father, Father!" Then a large rock hit him in the abdomen and he fell, vomiting blood. His father cried, "Lord, blessed be thy name, thy will be done."

The scene disappeared and the Voice said, "Jehovah, this scene illustrates the behaviour of a biblical man inspired by your commandments. Do you still believe that to kill a rebel son is an appropriate solution? Does this not contradict your commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill'?"

"In olden times," I answered, "parents were much better respected than they are today. Children were taught from the cradle that age is a source of wisdom. The young people were not spoiled by indulgence in entertainments conveying meaningless information. Furthermore, the parents followed the Bible strictly and literally. The example of parents devoted to their Lord could only reinforce the child's inclination to be respectful. In those days the parents' conduct was in step with their teaching, whereas now parents often do not practise what they preach. As a result the rebellion of a young person then was a positive indication of a

criminal mind without hope of redemption instead of being, as it is today, a result of the child's puberty and progress towards adulthood. If a few youths had been allowed to resist their parent's authority without punishment, the rot would have spread swiftly through all the young people.

"My commandments refer to a society which obeyed God completely. Such a society would produce very few rebellious children."

"Jehovah," said the Voice, "if ancient biblical society naturally produced a healthy and respectful younger generation, the defiant conduct of one child would not have constituted a danger of infection. But if infection could only be prevented by fear of death, this indicates a society based not on love and respect, but rather on fear. You recognized this yourself when you said that 'all Israel shall hear and fear'."

"Fear was necessary in those days," I argued. "A young delinquent is hard enough to handle in modern times despite greater knowledge of child psychology and specialized institutions. Youngsters lacking in discipline would have caused the collapse of the older society."

"Jehovah, this society was already degenerating," The Voice said. "A society whose cohesion can only be insured through fear, whether of God or of the death sentence, may appear to have strength and vitality. But such a society cannot evolve, cannot progress. Innovation would be equated with heresy and fear would paralyze any inclination to change, even for the better. Any harmful interpretation of the laws, any obsolete tradition, would therefore remain unchallenged. Such a society must petrify or disappear unless it evolves towards a more liberal outlook. In any case, it is not an exemplary society reflecting the wisdom of a God whose teachings command respect for their clarity and sense."

The Voice stopped a moment, then proceeded more calmly.

"We remain convinced that an inconsistency exists in your commandment against killing and the death penalty that you have decreed for so many sins and crimes."

Koray picked up the argument.

"You demanded the sacrifice of all firstborns, whether of man or beast. You allowed the ransom of the firstborn donkey and you ordered the ransom of the child. But the idea that firstborns should be dedicated to you, that the dedication should take the form of a sacrifice and that man's firstborn son was saved from the holocaust only by a ransom, still persists."

"It was necessary," I retorted, "to remind man that all he possesses comes from me and is due to me. The sacrifice of the firstborn, or rather his ransom, was supposed to make man grateful to me for the pleasure of having other children which I would not claim."

"Jehovah," interjected the Voice, "you incited the people of Israel to exterminate neighbouring peoples. That could not be done without disobeying your command, 'Thou shalt not kill'."

I answered what was obvious to me. "The country I promised the people of Israel was inhabited by worshippers of idols who deserved death."

"If that is so, Jehovah," demanded Koray, "why treat idol-worshippers in the promised land differently than those who lived elsewhere? Why did you offer extermination to the former and peace in bondage to the latter?"

I was growing irritated by the succession of questions.

"The pagans living in the promised land," I replied, "had to be exterminated to make room for my chosen people."

"So," asked the Voice, "it was not their paganism but where they lived that was the deciding factor in their extermination?"

I paused a moment before replying. "I could have eliminated all the pagans. The fact that I ordered the extermination of those living in the promised land but settled for the enslavement of the others by my chosen people proves that I wish to avoid killing when it is not necessary."

"Jehovah," the Voice said with an air I found annoying, "why don't you just admit that 'Thou shalt not kill', means there should not be any killing. You won't admit that you have an inclination towards spilled blood, one that has led man to commit murder and led you yourself to kill innocent people, either directly or through one of your angels."

I did not like being scolded.

"I cannot defend myself against such a generalized accusation," I snapped. "Be more specific."

"Be it as you wish," said the Voice, "We shall introduce a few witnesses."

A man appeared who seemed to be a warrior from biblical times. He carried a sword at his side. As he approached the centre of the hall I could



see white hair framing a face which seemed still young. He must have been briefed about appearing before the conclave and seemed well prepared.

"Jephthah," asked Koray, "tell us the circumstances under which you offered your own daughter as a burnt offering."

I had completely forgotten the incident. I realized that I was in for a difficult time. Jephthah swallowed a sob, wiped a tear from his eye and began.

"It makes me very unhappy to remember the fate of my daughter, Naomi. She was gentle and modest. I can still see her smile. It was with that very same smile that she came to meet me, and so marked herself as the victim of a burnt offering. I often asked myself if there was any man worthy of such a flower. The Lord must have heard me and decided that none should have her."

"Jephthah," cried Koray, "you are blaming the Lord for the loss of your daughter. Yet you yourself promised to sacrifice the first person to come out of your house and greet you. You were perfectly aware that you risked killing an innocent person. Why did you make such a vow? Why was it necessary?"

"I do not dare," answered Jephthah, "to accuse the Lord of anything! The Lord had abandoned us for eighteen years. The people of Israel had incurred His wrath for adoring strange gods. The sons of Ammon then came to fight us. I knew that we could not win without the Lord's help, so I made a vow to the Almighty to sacrifice the first person who came out of my house to greet me after my victory."

"Jephthah," asked Cholem, "do you think that your vow spurred the Lord to come to your aid against the sons of Ammon? Why would the Lord approve the killing of an innocent person? Would it not have been enough to promise him obedience and faithfulness to Him?"

"I must be obedient and faithful," Jephthah explained, "even if the Lord does not come to my aid. But if I really want Him to do something for me and my people, must I not show that I am ready to give up something in return? Must I not pay for what I request?"

The conclave was not satisfied with the answer.

"Perhaps," said the Voice. "But must the price be a sacrifice? Was there no other way to please your Lord?"

Once more Jephthah tried to explain. "The Lord always told us that each time we asked a favour of Him, we should sacrifice a few pure animals. Time after time He expressed delight at the smell of the victims' burnt flesh. The sacrifice of a life is so important to Him that He made the performance of sacrificial rituals the main task of the priest. The greater our request, the greater the sacrifice should be.

"If the Lord found my sacrifice wanting, I risked losing the battle. That was not a risk I wished to take. By not choosing the victim myself I increased my chances of pleasing Him. He could choose His own victim and would be more disposed to help me. When the Lord chose Naomi I had to submit. I allowed my daughter to cry over her virginity for two months. God had chosen her as a virgin and she must be sacrificed as a virgin.

"I remember the day she was sacrificed. I still hoped an angel would stay the priest's hand as in Isaac's case. But nothing happened and Naomi perished under the knife, uttering a cry that I can hear to this day."

A mist surrounded Jephthah and when it disappeared he was no longer in the hall.

"Jehovah, do you wish to comment on Jephthah's testimony?"

"Jephthah's point of view," I replied, "is a human one. He thought that by vowing to sacrifice he would encourage me to come to his aid. Actually I would have helped him in any case. The people of Israel had repented of their sins and had suffered enough. The sacrificial vow was not my idea. It derived from Jephthah's mistaken notion of my divinity. Once the vow was made I had little choice. I could have avoided the human sacrifice by giving victory to the sons of Ammon, but I did not want all the Israelites to pay such a high price for Jephthah's mistake.

"Yes, I could have sent an angel to stay the knife before it killed Naomi, and I was tempted to do so. But then vows would lose their solemn, serious character. It is morally harmful to let man believe that each time his vow is too costly, I will intervene to liberate him from it.

"That leaves the designation of the victim. I could have chosen one of Jephthah's servants, but then Jephthah would have paid little. That would have encouraged others to make similar vows. In choosing Jephthah's only daughter I was emphasizing the fact that such a vow could cost the one who made it very dearly. I was dissuading others from doing what Jephthah had done. Incidentally, no one else among the people of Israel has made such a vow since."

"Jehovah," answered the Voice accusingly, "Jephthah's viewpoint is certainly a human one, but you caused his misunderstanding. More than once you established a sort of similarity between the sacrifice of an animal and that of a human being. A ram was sacrificed instead of Isaac. Pure animals were sacrificed instead of a firstborn infant. The strange virtues that you ascribe to the blood of animals give them a spiritual character similar to man's.

"The situation would certainly have been clearer if man and beasts had remained vegetarians and you had not encouraged animal sacrifices. The great value you gave to these sacrifices, the care with which you decreed the different circumstances in which they should be made and your expressions of pleasure when the smell of burning flesh wafted up to you, were not worthy of a God. It is not fitting for a God to show animal tastes and human weaknesses. This confuses human understanding ...

"Let us proceed to the testimony of Zipporah."

A woman appeared, dressed in the Egyptian fashion from the times of the Pharaohs.

"Zipporah," Koray began, "tell us how you saved the life of your husband when the Almighty tried to kill him as he slept."

Like most of the preceding witnesses, Zipporah seemed astonished to find herself before the conclave. At first she did not seem to have heard Koray.

As soon as she saw me she cried out, "That's Him! That's Him!"

"What do you mean, Zipporah?" asked the Voice.

Her voice was filled with venom. "That's who tried to kill Moses! I saw Him come down from the heavens, His eyes aflame with anger and foul purpose. Moses had told me about Him. I knew my husband was in mortal danger and I acted quick as lightning. While He gloated over His imminent vengeance I had just enough time to circumcise my son and throw his foreskin between Moses and his God.

"You should have seen God's face! He looked horrified and then shook His head like a man recovering from a faint. Finally He backed away and disappeared into the heavens."

A Hebrew woman, however enraged, would never have spoken about me with hate and disrespect. But Zipporah was Egyptian and believed in her own gods.

"Why did you circumcise your son at that very moment, Zipporah?" Koray asked.

"Moses had warned me," she answered. "He told me his God had a violent temper and that it would be better to circumcise the child before God noticed. When I saw God arrive looking so cross, I thought I would give Him what He wished. Then I remembered that God loathed foreskins. By throwing my son's foreskin between God and Moses, I was showing God that his will had been done. I also hoped that God would dislike coming close to the thing and would just leave and spare Moses."

As Zipporah disappeared, Koray spoke. "Jehovah, after ordering Moses to return to Egypt and perform miracles before the Pharaoh, you attacked him during the night and tried to kill him. Was your attempt on his life, while he was obeying your orders and carrying out your mission, anything more than an act of treachery? The fact that you gave up the attempt when you saw his son's foreskin does not excuse your offence. In any case, why should such an object prevent you from doing something you had decided upon?"

I felt uneasy, but replied anyway. "Moses had made me angry by arguing with me and using various excuses to refuse the mission that I had charged him with. Although he finally agreed to do it, I was still not pacified. I admit my temper can have delayed effects.

"Moses belonged to me. I gave him life when I wished and I could take it away when I wished. Moses was not just saved by his son's foreskin but by the slowness of my attack, which gave Zipporah the time to cut the thing off and throw it at Moses' feet. The circumcision was an act of obedience which I had demanded from all Abraham's descendants. My great love for Moses found his wife's act, and what it symbolized, a good enough reason to make me turn away and spare his life."

"The fact remains," noted the Voice, "that whether he liked it or not, you gave Moses a mission. You tried to kill him not when he refused to obey you but after you had chewed over your anger at his lukewarm response. If only you had chosen a natural death for Moses – being crushed by a rock or suffering a heart attack, for instance – we would have been spared the confusing sight of a God appearing as a man and trying to kill the very same Moses who later became a prophet and was allowed to speak with you face-to-face.

"The Bible shows you behaving less wisely than many mortals. You exhibit treachery, anger, lack of moderation, bloodthirstiness, deplorable

fetishism and indecision. Is it surprising that men, even the believers, cannot make do with biblical morality these days?"

I could not let such a sweeping statement go unchallenged.

"I think most believers would take exception to that view," I replied curtly. "The Bible should not be condemned wholesale."

"Very well," said the Voice, "it will be discussed at the next session. But it remains true that you bear a heavy responsibility for permitting, by example and by instructions, the disregard of your commandment against killing. Your lack of consistency in this matter has legitimized wars of conquest and extermination. There is an absence of pity and an intolerance evident in your prescription of the death penalty for petty mistakes and crimes.

"The conclave will now adjourn for a brief period." It seemed an answer to my silent request for a rest. "When we begin our deliberations again, we shall take up the question of absence of clarity in the Bible."

## CHAPTER IX MORAL GUIDANCE

Two unfamiliar people were in attendance when the hearing resumed. One seemed to be a lawyer or judge. The appearance of the other changed repeatedly from that of a present-day priest to that of a modern rabbi. The two faced each other across a short distance. As I was examining them, the Voice broke into my thoughts.

"Jehovah," it said, "listen closely to the biblical passages that the rabbi-priest will read out, and then listen to the other side as expressed by the lawyer. Then compare the different moralities shown by these two men."

I felt like a schoolboy being asked to write an essay. The rabbi-priest flipped through the pages he wanted and then spoke in a solemn voice.

"Thus says the Lord in Deuteronomy, chapter twenty, verses ten to sixteen:

When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it.

And it shall be, if it make thee answer of peace, and open unto thee, then it shall be, that all the people that is found therein shall be tributaries unto thee, and they shall serve thee.

And if it will make no peace with thee, but will make war against thee, then thou shalt besiege it:

And when the Lord thy God hath delivered into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword:

But the women, and the little ones, and the cattle and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof, shalt thou take unto thyself; and thou shalt eat the spoil of thine enemies, which the Lord thy God hath given thee.

Thus shalt thou do unto all the cities which are very far off from thee, which are not of the cities of these nations.

But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shall save alive nothing that breath:

But thou shalt utterly destroy them."

As the rabbi-priest concluded the lawyer nodded his head and with deliberate patience began to speak.

"International law stipulates that countries belong to the people who live in them. These peoples have the right of abode, free from aggression. International law prohibits the excessive use of violence in wartime. The law protects the lives of prisoners of war and specifies that they must be treated humanely, that is, with the respect and dignity due to all human life. The rights of the civilian population are also specified. Their homes must be respected and they retain their property rights. Their lives must be protected and the war must be conducted in such a way as to inflict the least possible damage on civilians. Soldiers who do not respect the rights of the civilian population must be prosecuted and, if found guilty, punished accordingly.

"As for the extermination of an entire population, this is considered these days to be the worst of all crimes. We call this disgusting crime genocide and it has been outlawed by international agreement."

There was a long silence during which the gods exchanged looks of embarrassment. None of them seemed willing to speak. At last Cholem shook his head slowly and proceeded to speak.

"Taken literally this biblical quotation represents an injunction by Jehovah to his chosen people ordering them to commit the crime of genocide. It displays a lack of love and a lack of pity that are not consistent with Jehovah's own Ten Commandments. I have tried to imagine a possible metaphorical interpretation, but I must admit that I could not find any that satisfied me. Still, the matter is important and I am not giving up. Maybe I will be able to come up with something later on. My best guess for the moment is that God was speaking about local and foreign false gods and the necessity to be especially harsh with the local ones."

I looked at Cholem with astonishment. Until now he had formulated his criticisms in a slightly ironical tone that sounded somewhat friendly. Was I so much in the wrong that even he had to condemn me openly?

Cholem sat silent, a puzzled look creasing his brow. The Voice seemed provoked and began to speak.

"Metaphorical interpretations, short of the obvious for the human mind, totally miss the point. Granted that Cholem will be able to come up

later with a perfect one which will prove that there is more wisdom in the Bible than catches the eye. But what is the purpose of the Bible? Is it to be a moral guide to man or is it to be the depository of hidden wisdom that remains unavailable when it is needed most?

"At one time in human history the chosen people did commit genocide. They believed that was the will of God, as expressed explicitly in the Bible. How could they know that God's order should be interpreted metaphorically? Can we condemn them retroactively for obeying God's orders literally when a suitable metaphorical interpretation would not be suspected until thousands of years later?"

"What do you think, Jehovah?" Koray broke in. "Which of these two laws appears to you to be the most divine, biblical law or international law?"

Koray did not enter the discussion between Cholem and the Voice and I decided to ignore them also, especially since I knew that the quotation under discussion was indeed intended to be taken literally. As to Koray's question, it did not seem fair to me.

"But compare biblical law with the laws of that time, Koray," I urged. "Don't forget that international law was inspired by the Bible but has the advantage of having been formulated thousands of years after the Bible was written."

Koray was persistent.

"Jehovah, we are not here to compare biblical man to modern man. It's no surprise that man can now make much better laws than those he obeyed thousands of years ago. But you, Jehovah the Eternal, you are not bound by the limitations of time. You could certainly legislate better laws than those of modern man. And you could even have done so in biblical times."

"True!" I retorted. "But the men of those times were not ready to receive such laws. I had to move slowly."

The Voice intervened. "Jehovah, you were not moving slowly forward when you ordered the people of Israel to exterminate entire populations. Furthermore, by moving slowly you risk making your teachings obsolete. Then the Bible could not claim to be valid for all time! It is not you, Jehovah, who should move slowly, but rather man. You should move forward firmly to proclaim a truly divine morality and let man come to it as fast as he can."



"This would be possible if absolute morality were itself possible," I argued. "But I believe that morality can only be relative. You can't compare the morality of different ages. What is considered bad today could have been the most appropriate morality in its time, and vice versa. I consider man capable of separating Bible doctrine which is of universal value from that which is dependent on place, time and circumstances."

I knew I had made a mistake as soon as I spoke but it was too late. I had mentioned the weakest point of the Bible: the necessity of man's interpretation. I expected the Voice to destroy my argument by pointing to the numerous and contradictory interpretations man gives to the Bible. But the approach was more direct.

"Jehovah," he began, "you are putting an unfair burden on men. By deciding which verses should be taken literally and which metaphorically, by letting men decide which ones have only circumstantial value and which have eternal ones, you make it possible to interpret the Bible in so many different ways that people cannot find their way through it unless they can rely on an additional guiding principle. Such a principle is always available – the belief that one's own morality is the correct one!"

"If a person believes that slavery is right he will find a convenient biblical interpretation to this effect. If he later decides that slavery is wrong, a slightly different interpretation and the Bible supports him once more. Custom-made biblical authority! The reader can insist that anything in the Bible that offends current morality shouldn't be taken literally, but whatever supports his own stance is clearly Holy Writ. And so the Bible is no longer a document of divine universal value but an ambiguous script susceptible to the whim of self-interested interpretation."

I was still smarting over the vehemence of this last broadside when Koray began.

"An essential quality of a message, Jehovah, is its clarity. When the message is divine, surely its clarity should surpass the best which humans can attain. You should have indicated unequivocally which parts of the Bible should be considered ephemeral and which have eternal value.

"On the contrary, you made your messages intentionally obscure. For example, did you create man before the animals or the other way around? Two quotes on this subject are contradictory.

"The creation of man in your image brings insurmountable theological and philosophical problems.

"Are you of the male sex? Made for which female?"

"Do you have an image, a face, an appearance? What use is an image or appearance outside space, since you yourself created space and existed before the creation of the world?"

I thought Koray was picking at trivialities, so I interrupted him.

"I know that the communication between man and me is imperfect, and I recognize that the Bible is sprinkled with many errors. But I don't deny feeling a certain satisfaction in noting that, in spite of all these errors, many believers have been totally faithful to me. I made the distinction between the historic, documentary aspects of the Bible and its value as inspiration to action. I did not consider the documentary value of the Bible all that important. Why care if there were one or seven pure animal couples in the ark? The point was too trivial to correct. On the other hand, I was careful to define moral precepts correctly.

"As for the creation of man in my image, that is only a way of saying that man thinks and feels in the image of God. I could have been more explicit, true; but man was hardly capable of abstraction in those days and it would have been absolutely impossible for him to conceive of a God existing outside time and space. This concept is still beyond most humans. So I left to man the confusion between the literal and figurative meaning of 'in the image of'. Occasionally I even took human form as I did during my meetings with Jacob."

My defence brought no reaction from the assembly.

"Jehovah, we would like you to pay close attention to the following scene," the Voice said almost immediately.

I could now see the interior of a large hut. A young boy was crouching on the floor, a girl lay on a straw mattress and a woman was spinning. The little girl cried out, terrified:

"Mother, make John stop touching his nose!"

"Flies are landing on my nose," protested the little boy. "They make me want to scratch it and I can't stop myself."

"John," said the irritated mother, "you know very well that when you touch your nose with your right hand, you make Daisy's arm hurt. When you touch it with your left hand you make her feet hurt. If you don't stop touching your nose, I shall tie your hands behind your back."

At that moment John scratched his nose and Daisy screamed with pain as the scene disappeared.

"Jehovah," said the Voice, "how do you explain the scene we have just witnessed?"

I could see no purpose in the scene. In fact I thought it was absurd, but I answered cautiously.

"Well, Daisy could have had pains in her arms and feet and a witch doctor might have been called in. Instead of admitting his ignorance, the witch doctor could have invented the magical influence that John's nose is supposed to have over Daisy. Primitive peoples believe so strongly in the powers of the witch doctor that they trust everything he tells them. Daisy is convinced that John's nose is the cause of all her pain, and is so frightened of it that this has produced psychosomatic symptoms. Now she really does feel pain when she sees John scratch his nose."

"The relation of cause and effect between John's nose and Daisy's pains," Koray inquired, "is due to her belief in such a magic effect?"

"Yes," I answered. "The ignorance of these primitives produces complications which are superimposed on the true problems and further obscure the causes."

"So, Jehovah, it follows that belief in magical powers has harmful effects."

"That is my opinion, yes."

"Then why," the Voice broke in, "would you spread confusion in the human mind by encouraging a belief in magical objects? If an apple can confer the knowledge of good and evil, if the fruit of another tree can confer immortality and make whoever tastes it the equal of a god, if the position of a stick can cause the victory of an army, why shouldn't man believe in a philosopher's stone to transform base metals into gold? Why shouldn't man hope for an elixir to prolong life and restore youth? Why not believe in a multitude of charms against different illnesses or in an 'evil eye', or in the influence of the stars? Why shouldn't man believe in the magic power of John's nose? Once you endow a few objects with magical powers, you open the door to all superstitions. You have put a stamp of respectability on superstition.

"You forbade your followers to read signs in the sky instead of telling them that these signs had no meaning. The fact is that you have taken very few pains to help man gain real understanding. It is revealing – and perhaps even symptomatic – that the act which led to the mortal punishment of man was that of acquiring knowledge!"

I was outraged and did not hide it.

"It is not fair to blame me for punishing Adam and Eve for committing a crime before they acquired the knowledge of good and evil, and then to reproach me for using magic when I had never had any indication that a conclave existed and was opposed to magic. I did not know that I was just an apprentice God. Knowing myself – wrongly, it turns out – to be the only God, accountable to nobody, I was not bound by any moral law but my own. To assert that even God is subject to moral laws preceding His existence is a negation of the concept of God.

"I was not obligated to create the universe. Obviously moral problems arose with the creation of the universe, but without moral problems and moral situations the concept of moral law makes no sense. Having created the universe with its moral situations, there did not exist for me any terms of reference except my own freedom of choice. Since I was the only moral reference point I could not, by definition, be immoral. I was the source of morality. The fact that my morality varied only underlines the relative character of morality."

The conclave again made no response to my impassioned explanation, but moved to another subject.

"In your creation of the world," said the Voice, "which happened, as you say, less than six thousands year ago, you inscribed signs of an existence dating back thousands of millions of years. You arranged these signs so that they could each corroborate the indication of age made by the others. The conclave considers this a trick unworthy of God."

"The creation of the universe was not a sudden act," I replied. "I first thought about what I was going to do. As my thought was Verb, my reflections materialized into signs which superimposed themselves on the later-created world. That was done without malice. I did not consider it necessary to erase these misleading signs which fitted my policy of ambiguity so well."

The Conclave did not offer any sign indicating if my answer was satisfactory.

"You have often been inconsistent," said Koray, moving to yet another subject. "What was the point of being angry about the tower of Babel, for example, taking such a drastic measure to confuse man as creating a multitude of languages, but later doing nothing when man built the Eiffel Tower or walked on the moon?"

"The tower of Babel," I explained, "was built with the intention of reaching the divine heavens. The undertaking, though impossible to realize, nevertheless took the energies of practically the entire human race. The space journeys have no religious ambitions, do not occupy more than an infinitely small proportion of mankind, and take place to verify natural laws and to discover possible applications for the advancement and well-being of man. They did not form a 'leg-up' to reach the heavens."

"Jehovah," said the Voice, "the conclave believes that the foregoing points concerning absence of clarity in the Bible provide sufficient explanation. It will not be necessary to consider numerous other examples. The conclusion is clear. We expect a God to be omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent, just as man does. A Bible that is not omni-clear and omni-convincing, therefore is not divine."

"That is not the opinion of hundreds of millions of believers who recognize a divine inspiration in the Bible." I interrupted.

The Voice picked up on this.

"Other millions have their doubts and some people go so far as to deny any relation between God and the Bible. They even say that the God of the Bible never existed."

"Those are miscreants." I said in anger, "They do not deserve consideration or pity. I stipulated that they should be put to death by stoning."

"Still," said the Voice, "since we are considering human's grasp of divinity we have to understand why the miscreant failed to believe in God. In all fairness we should bring one of them as a witness."

I was indignant.

"There is no meaner creature than an unbeliever. He represents the ultimate in ingratitude. He owes me all he is, and all he has. Still, he dares to deny it. He insults me and reduces me to . . . non-existence!"

"But," said the Voice, "a miscreant may still be sincere in his disbelief."

"Such a beast as a sincere miscreant doesn't exist." I said.

Koray intervened.

"An interesting parallel can be drawn between Jehovah not believing in the existence of a sincere miscreant, and a miscreant – sincere or not – not believing in Jehovah's existence. I think that the matter is worthy of being pursued. We should produce a miscreant as a witness."

The gods held consultations and, after some moments, the Voice announced a decision.

"A person among the living has been chosen as a witness."

A man appeared out of a mist. He was bewildered. He took a few steps, came closer to a table and leaned on it. He put a hand over his forehead as if to check if he had fever or if he still had a sense of touch.

"We understand," said the Voice, "that your name is Clement and that you have been briefed. You know the purpose of your presence. Let me stress that no harm will befall you as a result of your testimony. You are free to say the truth as you perceive it or to lie if you choose to do so. Since the conclave can extricate the truth from a lie, it would be simpler if you were to speak honestly and sincerely."

Clement remained still, staring at the gods for a long moment. He was in a state of confusion and disbelief. He then cleared his throat.

"I do not have a recollection of having died. I am not sure whether I am here in body and soul after death or whether I am just dreaming."

"You did not die," said the Voice, "you have been called upon to testify alive before our assembly. You will then be sent back to earth with the memory of having seen us in a dream. You will be free to believe in the reality of your dream or, more in character, dismiss it as nothing but a dream. Till then, you have to face the reality of your situation and act accordingly."

Clement took a deep breath. He started hesitantly.

"Nothing of what I now hear and see squares with the beliefs I entertained on earth. I was not prepared for such a situation and feel dismayed at having been so much at variance with truth. I don't know how to address your assembly. On earth some people have titles indicative of what I consider to be human vanity. According to the Bible you have titles too: Lord, Eternal Almighty ... I have doubts as to the propriety of those titles and I would appreciate being told how to address your assembly."

"Clement," said Koray, "human language is a reflection of the humanly perceived reality. However men have the ability to distort the

meaning of words. They do it sometimes in a creative way in response to a new situation. They do it also for conformity or to avoid the expression of their real feelings. The conclave is indifferent to the way you choose to address it except as it reflects on your character."

Clement remained silent for a long moment. It was possible to read on his face an attempt at making an important decision.

"My Lords," he said, "human language is indeed poor and I can't find a title proper to express the way I perceive you. For simplicity and conformity I will call you My Lords. I will use this title creatively in a distorted way so as to mean Fathers in heaven mixed with creators and with embodiments of quintessent wisdom. I am using the title with its new meaning not to express my respect but to convey how I perceive your beings." "Now that you know that the 'hereafter' exists," asked Koray, "are you not afraid for the fate of your soul?"

"No," answered Clement without hesitation, "I have no doubt that the Lord will not be less kind with me than with a faithful believer."

"There is something in your attitude," Cholem interjected, "that fringes arrogance. How dare you decide what a God would do?"

"My Lords," Clement replied, "I realize my limitations. I agreed with the believers that God is perfect or at least close to it. I know that man, being imperfect, cannot grasp perfection by himself. I never dared say what God should be or do because my imperfect mind cannot deal with perfection; it is too foreign to my nature. However, when it comes to imperfection, I feel myself an expert. I am surrounded with imperfection, I am filled with it."

Clement stopped for a while before resuming.

"I feel qualified to determine what God should not be or should not do. God is not afflicted with human weaknesses of character. He does not lie. He does not incite to lie. He is not vain. He does not punish someone for the crimes of others. He is not jealous. He doesn't act in a way that forces Him later to repent. He does not deliver messages which need interpretation. To interpret the word of God is tantamount to try to be clearer than Him. It is tantamount to a pretence that man can do better. If a saying needs interpretation, if it can be taken in more than one meaning, it is not a word of God."

"Did it not occur to you," said Cholem, "that there may be a perfect and an imperfect understanding of imperfection? How can you be sure that

what is perceived by you as imperfect for men could not, in some cases, be perfect for God?"

Clement seemed dismayed.

"Lords, I could end my troubles by saying *mea culpa*. I have to confess that my actual experience proves me wrong. However, much more is involved than the fate of my soul. I am representing here all the people that doubt – or ever doubted – the God of the Bible. What I say may also reflect on the future of the relations between God and men.

"But this moment in front of you at least gives me an opportunity to ask you to honour the memory of so many unbelievers who died as martyrs, victims of intolerance. They first suffered many crises of doubt. They then agonised between a need and a will to believe in God and to love Him and between an honest conviction – right or wrong – that the God of the Bible does not exist. They had to do violence to their own nature. They had to inflict emotional pains on themselves. It is not easy to conclude that eternal life is a myth. It is hard to put oneself at odds with family and society when it could so easily be avoided by not caring about truth.

"Their merit is that they did not take truth for granted. They considered truth as being so important that before labelling it as such they thoroughly checked it and put it to test. Whether they succeeded or failed does not affect the fact that they were searchers of truth ready to pay for it with their lives.

"I dare say that their merit is greater than that of the martyrs who died for their belief in God. The believers knew their sacrifices would be rewarded in heaven. The unbelievers did not expect any reward. They simply could not withstand being dishonest or even careless about truth.

"I don't know what is now their fate in the hereafter but I know that they deserve being remembered with sorrow and love."

Clement stopped, unable to proceed. His hands were trembling and he had difficulty breathing.

"You seem profoundly disturbed," said the Voice, "it seems necessary to bestow on you a temporary immunity against emotional exhaustion."

"Thank you, my Lords," said Clement, "I already feel much better."

He gave a sigh and proceeded.



"My Lords, I was once a believer in the God of the Bible. It felt good thinking that I had a heavenly father who would recall me to Him when the time came.

"I was used to obligations; obligations toward my parents, toward society and toward myself. Obligations toward God did not weigh heavily upon me. To pray can be a relief. To behave according to my faith filled me with happiness.

"I had a friend who, like me, found happiness in behaving according to his faith. But his faith was different from mine. In our mutual attempt to convert one another I faced for the first time the problem of truth.

"Truth for me was my faith, but truth for my friend was his and the two were not compatible. We both prayed to God that He help the other to see the light. Each of us saw the light but the two lights were different!

"In our discussions we tried to grasp the notion of divine . We soon faced a vicious circle. If a man derives the notion from the religion he believes in, he is deprived of an independent definition. There would then be as many notions of divine as there are religions and sects.

"There should be a single, universally-accepted definition. Each interested believer could then check if the god of his religion conforms to the definition. Instead we have a number of revelations defining quite different gods.

"It then occurred to me and my friend that we were approaching the concept of godness from the wrong end. Instead of grasping godness we should maybe try to grasp non-godness. Here we felt at home. We agreed that whatever is perceived as imperfection in man belongs to non-godness, cannot be part of the notion of God.

"Such a definition of non-godness would be readily acceptable to everyone unless it conflicted with the God of his religion. We had to decide: do we prefer a God unstained with non-godness or do we want, whatever the price, however we have to stretch reason, to keep our particular God with all its non-Godness?

"When I realized that my God, the God of the Bible, had an amount of non-Godness that could be justified only by splitting hairs or by reasonings that would justify anything, I felt a sense of loss hard to withstand. I prayed to my God and begged him to help me come closer to the truth. My friend did just the same.

"We both had dreams in which angels ordered us to remain strong in our faith. The dreams could not be genuine divine messages since the two faith were incompatible. I prayed again and again. I needed a God I could love but my God sent me no sign. Was he testing the strength of my faith? If so why did he not answer my friend's calls. If my faith was the true one, my friend was in need of a sign to leave his faith and join mine. But once more, how is it possible to find out which of us two, my friend or I, had to leave his faith?

"At last each of us denied his God; we just could not love a God who shared the worst imperfections of humans.

"My Lords, I am a man, I am imperfect. I need some help to make sense out of so many religions and sects. Each one has a blue-print for God and perfection is not the same for all religions. Who am I to judge on matters of perfection? To choose between religions is to shape God to your taste. As you know faith has not directed all believers to one religion.

"If now you take out of man the only remaining pillar on which he can rely, if you say to man that he does not know what imperfection is, if you say to man that what he perceives as disgusting, unjust and unbecoming for a man could just be perfect for God, you eliminate from man his last hope in the search of truth.

"I dare say that it is not fair to punish a blind man for his lack of sight or an unbeliever for a lack of belief. It is not fair to expect a blind man to find his way in a forest without help.

"My Lords, the unbelievers are not asking much. They realize that man is imperfect, unable to define perfection or to recognize it. Grant him the ability to recognize imperfection. Give him at least this small light to help him find his way."

Clement disappeared as the Voice was commenting.

"Clement's request in the name of the unbelievers appears to have some merit. It should not be dismissed without study."

"As it happens," resumed the Voice, addressing me, "you must still defend yourself on two points: having legislated slavery and having legislated the inferiority of women. Have you any preference as to the order in which these two subjects should be tackled?"

"No," I replied, "the order doesn't matter to me. Still, if we have to choose one, let it be slavery."

"So be it, Jehovah!"

Without a perceptible requirement of time, the Gods I had become accustomed to were no longer there. In their place were ... slaves. Yes, they certainly had a look of slavery about them. Some had their necks and wrists in cuffs, others had hands and feet in chains. Still others were branded. They were men and women of all races and ages.

One of them was a black man. He spoke directly to me.

"Jehovah, modern man rejects and is repelled by slavery. But you did not oppose it. Tell us why you permitted slavery when modern man does not."

I was embarrassed and irritated. Why should the gods think it necessary to take the shapes of slaves?

"I think," I said, "that by identifying, at least in body, with slaves the conclave already shows some prejudice in this matter. I do not believe that a slavish mentality helps in appreciating the problems there would have been if I had ordered a better treatment for slaves than that prescribed in the Bible."

"The conclave feels," a second 'slave' replied, "that a more intimate knowledge of the state of slavery could only add to its understanding of the subject as a whole and would thus enhance its objectivity. So please reply to the question. Why did you permit slavery when modern man does not?"

The god who spoke had only one eye and one arm. His appearance did not augur well for the resolution of my case. The Gods were not content with simply identifying with slaves; they seemed to be taking up the cudgels for those who had been the most misused.

"Modern man," I replied, "has abolished slavery, an extreme form of servitude. Yet other forms of servitude still exist in his society. A worker is a servant whose duties are of a very specific nature and enable the employer to make a profit. A house servant also has specific duties; he allows the employer to live an easier, more agreeable life. In both these cases we have examples of servitude which are not extreme and are governed by the agreements and laws of society. The fact that the servitude is not extreme shows some progress compared with slavery. All I can say about it is that modern man has taken some great steps forward. By following the progress that the Bible made in this area, he came to forbid slavery."

"Did you not think to include the forbidding of slavery in your commandments?"

"No," I replied, "I wanted to be consistent. Either I forbade all forms of servitude or I permitted them all. I contented myself with legislating measures which would offer slaves protection from exploitation by their masters."

"It seems, Jehovah," said the Voice, "that once again you tried to move slowly ... Consider the size of the steps you took."

A large courtyard appeared. Sprawled on the ground was the bleeding body of a man with scarcely the strength to moan. A woman moved around him, wiping his forehead with a damp cloth and giving him occasional drops of water to drink. Next to him was a man who prayed in a low, clear voice. A man who seemed to be the master of the house paced nervously in the background. Some candles and an oil lamp lit the scene. The semi-darkness seemed to precede dawn. Birds of prey must have smelled the blood for they could be heard croaking in the near distance. Suddenly the master cupped his hands and shouted in the direction of a nearby hillock.

"Khaim, is there still no sign of the first rays of the sun?"

The answer was faint but clear. "No, not yet, Father."

The voice was that of a young boy who stood on the crest of the hillock staring intently to the east.

"Joseph," cried the woman, "I do not think the slave will survive much longer. The Lord might heed your call. Why don't you join Reuben in prayer?"

The master suddenly shouted to the heavens:

"Lord, I know that a request must be accompanied by the sacrifice of young, unspotted lambs. I solemnly promise to bring six lambs and a fat ram to the high priest long before the end of this approaching day. Lord, I pray you, prolong the faltering life of my slave until after sunrise. I admit that I beat him badly, but he needed a lesson. Now the ingrate is trying to die before sunrise. He knows that since he is my thing, I have the right to beat him as much as I wish, as long as he survives until the first rays of sunlight of the next morning.

"Lord, I am sure that if he really put his mind to it, he could live longer. But he is a nasty piece of work. By dying before his time he wants

to make me break your commandments. It does not lie within my power, Lord, to remove the effects of my blows. But it is in your power to prolong the life of this cur. I do not choose to commit any sin. Almighty Lord, you are my God, I do not know any God but you."

Just at that moment the shouts of the young boy could be heard. "The sun is up! I saw the first rays!"

At these words the master cried, "The Lord be praised!" and fell to his knees in joy. He turned in a moment.

"Rebecca," he called to his wife, "you can leave that slave to his fate. Stop nursing him and go prepare a celebration breakfast."

As the scene faded a 'slave' god with the voice of Koray said, "Jehovah, it is in your name that a slave could be thus treated."

"The Bible contains many verses written to protect slaves," I replied. "A slave becomes free if his master puts out one of his eyes or teeth. And, if he is a Hebrew, he becomes free after six years of slavery."

"Jehovah, the Bible rules concerning slaves would honour any man of that period if he had decreed them, but we expect much more from the rules put out by man's God."

Again it was Koray speaking. "God can't just be one step ahead of man. He must not legitimize erroneous principles arising from the prejudices of the men of the times. You allow a father to sell his daughter into slavery and a man to sell his brother to repay the brother's debt."

The Voice continued, persistent and certain. "You should instead have shown your disapproval the first time that a man tried to reduce another to slavery, Jehovah. The idea that a creature who thinks and feels in the image of God can become a slave is repugnant to us. Your commandments make no mention of slavery, yet the Hebrews had just been delivered out of bondage and would certainly have understood the immorality of the institution of slavery. You missed a very good opportunity. The commandments seem to have been written to provide a framework of justice, and so it was clearly inconsistent not to mention slavery."

I chose not to reply.

## **CHAPTER X THE UNREVEALED**

There was suddenness, even impatience, in the new transformations. The gods, no longer slaves, had taken on the shapes of women of all ages, races and nationalities. Some wore make-up and jewellery, others were simply dressed and unadorned. My eyes fixed on one whose low-cut dress revealed the whiteness of her breasts. I wondered why such a lack of feminine modesty was necessary.

The ring of woman-gods opened to make way for two more, completely naked. One was black, apparently African, while the other seemed to be of white, Mediterranean stock. I shifted my gaze to avoid them, then continued my examination of the woman-gods who made up the conclave. Some were beautiful and others ugly. A few seemed to have soft skin while others were wrinkled, not necessarily by age. Some glowed with happiness, others carried the weary expressions of poverty and suffering.

The very idea of a woman-god seemed aberrant to me. Was this why I felt so embarrassed in the presence of an assembly of "women" who had more knowledge and power than I did at that moment? Since the object of this session was my alleged prejudice against women, I wanted a clear answer. And yet the more I thought about it, the more I realized how confused my feelings towards women were. Now I could no longer escape an examination of my feelings in the presence of women. I would also have to explore what the problems of women and the relationship between them and men brought out in me. My thoughts were interrupted by the Voice.

"Jehovah, the gods have not just assumed the shapes of women, they have also added to their divine natures those of various women you created. This was the only way that they could have a complete view of the situation. The gods today are woman-gods and you should know that they are very angry with you. The feminine element of the woman-gods may appear meek, but deep inside them is the feeling that what you teach and command in the Bible on the subject of the women is not fair to their nature. This the gods now understand well."

It seemed that I was being condemned before being tried.

"Would it not be better," I asked, "to wait for the development of the trial? Does the conclave not risk coming to wrong conclusions by allowing itself to be influenced by this feminine element?"

"Not at all," the Voice replied. "The feminine element has an informative value only. This element, the male element and all other non-Divine elements will be surrendered when the time comes for consideration and pronouncement of the sentence. Remember, the conclave is not subject to the whim of emotions. Its objectivity is not affected by its feelings.

"Jehovah, our temporary female component considers that evidence of your prejudice against women oozes from numerous parts of the Bible. If you admit being prejudiced against women we may not have to examine every accusation in detail."

The verdict seemed to have preceded the trial. I must have been tired because I replied that I was ready for the examination to proceed.

It was the voice of Koray, sounding very strange coming from a woman's body, which began the questioning. "So tell us, Jehovah, was it fair to allow a father to sell his daughter into slavery?"

"I did not decree this. I merely allowed a custom of the times to continue. But I did order that such a slave should not be harshly treated."

"Your Bible teaches that a wife may be bought from her father without her having any say in the transaction."

"This custom arose as a just compensation to the parents for the trouble they took in raising the girl."

"You ordered, Jehovah, that women should obey their husbands. Is that fair?"

I was astounded. Would fairness require the subordination of man to woman? I contained my indignation.

"Families must have a leader to make a decision when spouses differ," I answered. "I had to choose between man and woman. We have already seen that it was Eve's serpent, and thus Eve herself, who was responsible for Original Sin. She was punished, and since then women have been obedient to men."

"In your ten commandments, Jehovah," Koray went on, "you order men not to covet their neighbour's wives. You do not order women not to covet their neighbour's husbands. Does this mean that they may do so, or does it merely mean that you are not interested in speaking to women or addressing yourself to them?"

I wished the women-gods would concentrate on more important issues, but I had to endure petty questions patiently.

"In fact," I answered, "I gave men the task of watching over moral purity and obedience to my laws. Men would make sure that women behaved themselves. I only had to address myself to men, since women were required to be obedient to them."

"You ordered men, you even specified males, to present themselves before you three times a year. Why were women excluded from this commandment?"

"Women would have distracted the men from their ecclesiastical duties," I answered firmly.

"Why," Koray demanded, "did you order women to observe a period of purification twice as long after the birth of a daughter than after the birth of a son?"

Did I have to explain even this? Couldn't they make a slight effort and find the obvious answer by themselves?

"The daughter," I replied, "would become a woman who would have her periods of impurity. The potential impurity of the girl adds to the natural impurity of the mother just after the birth of her baby."

"Jehovah, you ordered that the priest should marry a virgin. Do you think that sexual relations, even within your laws, soil the woman but not the man?"

Was there no end to this?

"That is my opinion. That is why I provided the hymen so that virgins and non-virgins could easily be distinguished. Nothing similar exists in men."

"Jehovah," Koray went on without a pause, "you ordered the childless widow to marry her dead husband's brother in order to procreate a child which would miraculously belong to the deceased and bear his name. Why did you not order the childless widower to marry his sister-in-law and procreate a child which would perpetuate the name of his late wife?"

I was powerless, but my mood was approaching the one I was in when I caused the great flood. Their questions indicated purposeful misunderstanding, yet I managed to reply patiently.



"The submissive state of women also implies the importance of carrying on the name of the man and not that of the woman. That is why women do not usually inherit from their parents."

"Jehovah, you allowed a man to have more than one spouse, but not a woman. Why the discrimination?"

"The idea of mixing the seeds of several men within one woman is disgusting. Besides, it would have lead to confusion and lack of certitude as to paternity."

The Voice intervened before Koray could resume his accusations.

"You could have made the resemblance between children and parents unmistakable, Jehovah. This would have eliminated doubt. You could have decreed that, in the case of a sterile marriage due to the husband's infertility, a woman could take a second husband. Or you could have forbidden men and women alike to have more than one spouse and thus re-establish a kind of even-handedness towards men and women without introducing any paternity confusion."

"In biblical times," I replied, "only women could be sterile. A man commits his seed to a woman and wants to be sure who his children will be so that they may inherit his estate. Even if it could have been proven that, in an exceptional case, the man were sterile, it would be the man's brother who should lie with the wife to give an heir to the sterile brother. This would be consistent with the spirit of my teachings."

"Jehovah," Koray went on, "why did you order the Israelites to kill all the prisoners who were not virgins and distribute the virgins among the soldiers?"

I wondered at the question. It enabled me to catch the woman-gods red-handed in a display of faulty reasoning.

"Whatever the reason was," I answered, "it can't be taken as prejudice against women. According to my orders no male was spared. Though the fate of female prisoners was hard, it was not as bad as that of the male prisoners."

There was a long silence during which the woman-gods seemed to hold consultations with their eyes. Then the Voice spoke.

"We had hoped that a listing of the accusations bearing on your anti-female bias would bring more results. It did not. A scene may enlighten us on the subject."

The materialization showed two Hebrew soldiers talking together. One of them was much older than the other. The younger was speaking vigorously.

"Moses has explained the wishes of the Lord. So we must order the slaying of all women prisoners who are not virgins. Understand?"

"I don't like it," replied the older soldier. "What has a married woman done that is so wrong? Why must she be killed? I would have preferred to kill them all without exception."

"How stupid you are," retorted the younger. "You know the female prisoners are ours. We don't need women soiled by the knowledge of man."

The older soldier refused to argue any more.

"Our women," he declared, "must examine the prisoners to determine which are virgins and which must be put to the sword."

"Not at all," the younger soldier insisted. "We will examine them ourselves."

The older soldier was indignant. "I am the father of eight girls. The idea of soldiers examining the state of women's chastity is repugnant to me. I am sure the Lord intended this examination to be made by our women."

But the younger soldier would not give in. "According to the Lord we should have killed the male children and the soiled females before coming home. The only way we could have done that would have been to examine the women ourselves.

"Don't worry," he continued. "You will see how amusing it is. You lift the shirt of each woman or girl and you look her straight in the eyes to enjoy her blushes and her wounded modesty. Then you introduce your finger into the right place. Do it slowly. You don't want to deflower her. Besides, the whole operation will give you a pleasure which you will want to savour as long as possible. If a woman is not a virgin or makes difficulties, you kill her on the spot. Come on, the Lord is with us and I see that our comrades are already claiming their rewards."

The lustful voices of the soldiers mixed with the screams of pain and despair as the scene faded. The Voice resumed.

"Jehovah, we have just witnessed an instance of the cruel and humiliating treatment ordered by you against women. Your message of love is obscured by your own instructions to the Israeli people. When in your name Jesus later damned to hell whoever would modify the old scriptures by as little as a single comma, men were left with no new instructions. Wars were not prohibited and the war-time cruelty ordered in the scriptures was not abrogated. Is it a wonder that since then so many people could at one same time believe in God and behave bestially in time of war? Is it a wonder that indiscriminate killing and absence of pity ordered by you has become a general rule and is still applied today by man?"

The Voice went on after a short pause.

"Jehovah, do you still believe that your orders on the treatment of woman do not indicate a prejudice against them?"

I thought that the whole scene was in bad taste and had no relevance to the question of my supposed prejudice.

"Yes," I answered. "The scene we've just seen illustrated the treatment of enemies rather than that of women. I allowed my chosen people to humiliate the enemy. Naturally, a woman can be humiliated in a different way than a man."

The woman-gods of the conclave shifted in their seats awhile and only calmed down when the Voice continued. "Jehovah, there is no doubt that your ability to reason effectively is reduced when the subject of discussion is woman. To get at the truth, our only recourse now is to materialize your own serpent, that is, your subconscious nature."

I was stunned at the proposal. The serpent of God seemed a paradoxical concept, both dangerous and insulting. However, if the gods spoke of it, they must be serious.

"Is it possible for God," I asked, "to have His own serpent and to have existed for an eternity without knowing it?"

"Jehovah, the many facets of your personality are evident in the Bible," the Voice replied. "Sometimes you are seen to be undecided, talking over a problem with yourself before coming to a firm decision. This implies that one part of you was presenting arguments to another part. This explains your contradictory attitudes but not your inability to confront certain obvious facts. Your serpent, because he represents your subconscious nature, remains outside your field of conscious perception. Remember that we are using the word serpent because of its biblical

flavour. We could have used another appropriate word. If you prefer, we could materialize your subconscious into a personalized entity."

"No," I answered. "If you see it as a serpent, I shall see it as a serpent."

As I spoke my serpent-subconscious appeared a few metres in front of me. The expression on its face made me dislike it intensely. I was horrified that any relationship existed between us. The expression showed lust, complacency and cynicism. I wondered if it could still influence me while it was materialized outside myself.

"Jehovah," the Voice said, "remember that when we discussed Eve's responsibility for the Original Sin we suggested that she should not be judged on her subconscious tendencies. A perfect God can have a very ugly serpent. What is important is not the ugliness of the serpent, but the degree to which the God subconsciously obeys His serpent instead of resisting it.

"Your serpent will tell nothing but the truth about your subconscious nature. Try not to feel shame or distress while listening to its revelations. What is important is for you to understand and to act on the increased knowledge."

At this, a conversation began between the Voice and the serpent, while I slumped in my chair, still trying to absorb the information that I had a subconscious nature. This nature, although divine, had feelings and desires which were not in the least divine.

"First, to assist us, describe the creation of Eve," the Voice ordered.

The serpent was visibly proud of being the centre of attention.

"I created the animals in pairs, one male and one female per species," it began. "But when it came to man's turn, I wanted to act differently. Man was created in my image, after all, and so woman could not be of no consequence to me. I created a man and a woman who were both very sensual and capable of feeling paroxysms of pleasure. This was necessary to ensure an instinct for procreation.

"I am sure all of us here remember I took what the Bible calls Adam's rib and began to mould it into the shape of a woman whose beauty has still not been equalled. As I ran my hands over the curves of Eve's body, I could easily imagine and feel the pleasure that Adam would have in copulating with her. As I formed Eve's breasts and intimate parts, my hands lingered over them with a pleasure that no man could ever feel as

intensely. I was, in fact, Eve's first lover. Neither she nor Adam ever knew ...."

I could not contain my agitation.

"You lie, Serpent!" I burst out. "I never felt anything of the sort. In a desire for perfection I may have lingered here and there, but there was no trace of sensual pleasure."

The Voice intervened. "Jehovah, your serpent cannot lie. All he speaks is the truth of your subconscious nature. You could not consciously feel sensual pleasure, but it is a fact that your subconscious was not at all averse to sensuality. Please do not interrupt again."

A heavy silence which fell over the assembly was broken by the serpent. "Having felt such pleasure," it continued, "I was not about to share it with man. So I decided that Adam and Eve would be forever lacking in sexual knowledge and that Adam would be castrated. This decision was repressed by my conscious nature but influenced it nevertheless. It resulted in the placing of sexual knowledge into a forbidden fruit with a completely spurious conscious justification. At the same time the act of castration was altered and accepted consciously in the form of circumcision, which was later demanded of all males of my chosen people.

"I was devastated when Eve decided to eat the forbidden fruit. It became obvious that she burned with passion for Adam and was ignoring me completely. I wanted first to torture her and then to kill her. My hatred had no limits. But once more I was repressed by the conscious. The loss of immortality, the submission of woman to man and a few other punishments were all that resulted. Obviously, the conscious managed to find acceptable justifications for this.

"The conscious nature has given up part of its omniscience in order to secure to men a measure of free will. I resented that. My hate extended to all men and I was after their blood.

"The conscious nature would not have it that way; it wanted to love men. All I could achieve was the great flood, the condoning of violence and crimes during wars, the imposition of stoning for a variety of crimes – even petty crimes – and the burning of sacrificed animals which stood for the sacrifice of men."

The serpent was then enveloped in mist and disappeared. I was so consumed by a tumult of thoughts that, for awhile, I lost all sense of time and space. Cholem pulled me out of this dream.

"Jehovah," he said kindly, "let me emphasize again that the sensuality and lack of scruples shown by your serpent must not make you feel ashamed or revolted. We even believe that, in a way, your serpent proves that your conscious nature honours your divinity. That you managed to escape all conscious sensuality with such a serpent is proof of your discipline. It is true, however, that your serpent still had a great influence over you.

"Your behaviour now becomes more understandable. The testimony of the serpent has clarified many essential points. I will not insist on these too much. But without his testimony your obsession with female virginity, to the exclusion of that of men, would remain incomprehensible. Now we may conclude that a virgin is a girl that Adam or his descendants has not yet touched. She remains potentially available to you, for your subconscious desire, through your priests and sacrificers. That is why you forbade them to marry a divorcee, a widow, or a non-virgin girl. Your jealousy of Adam and your anger against Eve explain your haste in putting the tree of life, whose fruit would have made them immortal, out of their reach.

"As for the desire of woman for man, you inflicted it on her as a punishment, while the desire of man for woman remains a pleasure. The similarity of the two desires made your discrimination on this subject difficult to understand. The testimony of the serpent clarifies the matter. You wanted woman to repress her desire and not enjoy it. You made it a punishment, the source of a feeling of guilt. This reflects the influence of your own jealous subconscious.

"The serpent's testimony can explain many contradictions in your behaviour, most particularly preaching love and ordering cruelty and genocide. Inciting the Israeli people to borrow and steal the neighbour's jewels reflects an element of cunning that may have originated from your serpent. As a result of many contradictions, principles have become too flexible and are bent by believers till today. If God justifies the means by the ends what can restrain a believer from doing so?

"Thus many crimes have been committed in the name of God – many of them by the guardians of the faith. Though man has a natural tendency of deciding for God what His will should be, it must be said that you made their work easy. The struggle between you and your serpent was reflected in an ambivalent Bible which provides every man with a choice at his convenience."

The Voice then began to speak. I felt disoriented – what he was saying seemed to have no bearing on the subject.

"You did not intervene," the Voice was saying, "to help man outlaw war. You could yourself destroy the whole of humankind, except Noah and his family, with no pity for the innocent children. You remained indifferent to events which are of extreme importance from both the divine and the human point of view.

"But there is one instance when you could not prevent yourself from reacting. Adam and Eve, after eating the forbidden fruit, discovered that they were naked and THEN you reacted – not when men invented and used weapons of massive and indiscriminate destruction, not when men triggered long and cruel wars, not even during the many religious wars or during genocidal massacres. Only when your jealousy was involved did you find it necessary to react and prevent the greatest catastrophe possible. You made clothes from skins to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve, to delay for yet awhile the knowledge of Eve by Adam!!

"Millions of innocent victims could die, tortured by regimes claiming your inspiration. Further millions could die of hunger. But it was the nakedness of a woman and her husband, in a world where no one else yet existed, which was able to disturb your tranquillity. Your serpent had too great an influence over you."

When the Voice finished, I was exhausted. I had not yet digested the fact that I had been so influenced by my serpent. I was assailed by confused thoughts and feelings. In spite of Cholem's few comforting words I felt hurt, dizzy, disoriented, in no shape for speaking. The Voice startled me.

"The conclave," it said, "was about to start considering its verdict, but a request to testify has surprised us."

## CHAPTER XI JESUS INTERVENES

As my clouded eyes focused I saw that the gods had reassumed their customary forms. The Voice spoke with authority.

"Let the witness enter."

A form materialized with a confusing slowness until, at last, I recognized Jesus.

"You are welcome here, Jesus," said the Voice. "We know that you carried a cross to expiate the crimes of humankind. We are pleased that you now reside in Heaven."

"Heaven," Jesus answered sadly, "is also a state of mind. I still carry a cross. I suffer now from the sins I have committed."

The conclave stirred awhile until the Voice said, "Jesus, according to the opinion of wise men you, of all men, were not touched by Original Sin."

Jesus sighed and paused a moment.

"Before the Original Sin," he said wearily, "Adam and Eve were not touched by it. This did not stop them from sinning. I myself, whether or not I am stained by Original Sin, realize now that I committed many sins."

"Jesus," said the Voice, "you know the reason for this assembly. We would ask therefore that you tell us what you can, to help us make the right decision. You requested to come and testify. You may do so without us having to question you."

Jesus turned ... towards me!

"Forgive me, Father," he said. "I am not sure that my testimony is useful. I am doing this for love of you and all mankind."

I looked into his eyes and my own became misted. Jesus resumed speaking.

"I would like to start by repudiating the theological discussions on my nature, my conception or the state of virginity of my mother at my birth. I would even put aside all the interpretations given to the father-son relationship I had with the Lord. The importance given to these concepts, the accusation of heresy against those whose interpretation differs from



the official one, the cruel punishment of heretics – all this bears no relation to my teaching.

"What is important is the purity of belief. If a man does not believe, he is lost. But there are different ways of believing. A man can be heartless and still be interested in his own immortality. He feels a need to believe that certain actions, affirmations, beliefs and positions will ensure that he gains eternity. He will say the necessary prayers and give the requisite charity. He does not need to believe in a God who sees the bottom of his heart because his heart is black. He only needs a God who gives out practical formulas which will lead to an appetizing paradise. It does not matter what these formulas are as long as they work. If necessary he will believe, or not believe, in the immaculate conception. If necessary he will believe or not believe in my divine existence before my birth ... This man is not a true believer.

"Another man might not trust theological concepts. He cannot be sure if he believes or what exactly he believes in. But there is room in this man's heart for all, no matter what their colour, their language, or their religion. This man would not fear a God who could see to the bottom of his heart. This man is a true believer.

"The essential question still remains that of man's behaviour to his neighbour. The theologian cannot understand that John's behaviour towards Peter should not depend on the state of my mother's virginity. The theologian does not understand that a man's merit does not depend on whether or not he believes in any such religious concept. According to my teaching, the person who would hold to these concepts and attach a greater importance to them than to the collection of butterflies is without true faith. The person with faith is the one who purifies his heart in such a way as to be able to open it without fear of what might be found in it. This heart must be so great that there is room in it for those who believe in any religious concept, as well as those who believe in none.

"The sad thing is that many men misunderstood the meaning of the Divine order, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. These men, instead of loving a neighbour as they love themselves, ask first if the neighbour is like themselves. Does he believe in the same dogma? Does he practise the same religion? If he does, then the neighbour is like themselves and can thus be loved. This is a gross distortion of God's will. One's neighbour must be loved as he is, whatever his dogma or religion. Again, even if a man denies believing in God, you must look into his heart. If it is pure, this man has the true faith – even if he is not aware of it.

"I would like to remind you that nowhere is it written that I personally took up any kind of dogma. None of the New Testaments say that their

authors learned from me that Mary was or was not a virgin at my birth. In none of the sacred books is it written that I claimed direct descent from David through Joseph. Besides, if Joseph was not my father, his lineage from David has nothing to do with me. Please consider what I personally taught and not what has been reported from unknown sources. It is said, for instance, that at my birth a star brought the three wise men to my parents' home. But no one claims that I myself said this."

Jesus stopped talking for a few moments. There was complete silence. It was obvious that what he had said so far was just a preamble; we were all waiting for him to continue. Finally he turned to me again.

"Father," he said, "I think that I am trying to put off the moment when I must talk about us."

I did not mean to speak, but I felt an unspoken entreaty coming from him.

"My son," I said, "it is my wish that you should bare your heart to the conclave. I would be grateful if you would share all your thoughts."

Jesus turned his face from me and began to speak.

"From my youth I had a power over men. I was sure that God had given me these powers to achieve goals which were unknown to me. At first I thought that I should wait until God revealed His intentions. But time passed and I received no communication from Him. Then I understood that God, in His wisdom, had expressed His wishes in the prophecies of the Bible. I avidly read the biblical passages, hoping to find the secret of my powers.

"One possibility came to my mind. I was perhaps destined to become the much-awaited Messiah. I looked into my heart to discover any ambition, but I found only a sincere love of God and of my neighbour, and a complete indifference to my own future.

"Let God's will be done, I thought; I am ready to accomplish any mission that the Lord will give me. But how could I be sure that I was truly the Messiah? God had not come to me and said 'You are the Messiah!' If He had, I would have cried it from the rooftops with no regard to the consequences. But even though I thought I was the Messiah, I was not sure. When a disciple asked me if I were the Messiah, I replied ambiguously, 'Thou has said it'.

"My uncertainty and the clouds which covered my statements and parables allowed my disciples to interpret my teachings wrongly. When I said that man could only be saved through me, I did not mean to inflict the

dogma of a belief in my divinity or my mission. I simply wanted to explain that only in the purity of heart that I was advocating was it possible to find salvation.

"My first sin was that of not expressing my doubts more clearly to my disciples. I knew how important faith was to them and I found them incapable of understanding the simplicity of identifying true faith with purity of heart. I often reproached them for lack of faith, as their belief was only belief in the Bible. That is why I so often said about my actions that the written prophecies must take place. These links with the written texts were my only link to my disciples.

"As I could not communicate directly with the Lord, my work became very hard. I had to find out constantly, and without His help, what He wished me to do. Fear of being mistaken made me see demons everywhere. Thus I imparted to my disciples a great fear of demons and a belief in their existence in all the corners of the universe.

"I should have been much more clear in my messages, so that today it would not be possible to interpret them in as many different ways as there are sects. My confusion stemmed from my firm belief that I truly was the Messiah, that the end of the world was at hand and would occur during the lifetime of my contemporaries. It is obvious now that I was wrong. Nevertheless, believing the end of the world was near, it was reasonable for me to neglect all social problems and to concentrate my efforts on the purification of human hearts.

"Why should I worry about slaves, why should I think of helping the poor and the exploited, if they were about to face their creator? As for my apostles, instead of correcting my teachings, instead of sowing tolerance, they too often taught hatred of the non-conformist and non-believer. Faced with opposition they concentrated on dogmatizing religion instead of on the fundamental necessity of purity of heart as a sign of true, even if unconscious, faith.

"Another cause of the confusion lay in the fact that the Bible did not place much importance on purity of heart as I understood it. This purity is not compatible with a lack of pity for the enemy, his wife and his children. It is not compatible with the merciless extermination of whole populations. How could one respect the commandments of the Bible and, at the same time, turn the other cheek to the man who strikes you?

"I did not know how to resolve this contradiction, but I was sure that the Lord would come to my aid. Finally, on the cross, I begged Him in vain to tell me why He had ordered His chosen people to behave so

cruelly. When I saw that the reply still did not come, I cried, 'Lord, why has thou forsaken me?'

"That is when the answer suddenly came to me. If I felt so moved to pity and so revolted by cruelty, it was because, after all, I was only a man. Perhaps pity was something only man could feel. I had the advantage over the Almighty of being a man. Possibly I could understand things which the Lord could not.

"The boldness of this thought did not escape me. But if I had to choose between a belief in the Lord acting with barbaric cruelty and a belief in the Lord being unable to feel true pity, I would have preferred the latter."

Jesus stopped and, after a moment, turned slowly to view all the gods. He spoke softly.

"Lords, members of the conclave, do not judge my father yet! Allow Him first to acquire the experience that I had the privilege to gather. Make Him a man for a necessary time and then re-establish Him on the throne of the universe which He has created. Then the perfection which is characteristic of His conduct in all things will also be apparent in His conduct towards man."

Jesus had finished testifying. I wept.

## **CHAPTER XII JUDGMENT**

The gods sat as if frozen in space-time, while the Voice addressed me.

"Jehovah, the testimony of this last witness has been no less moving for us than for you. The conclave will now retire to consider its judgment."

I lost all awareness and returned to consciousness only to find the circular room empty. The gods, apparently, had returned to their respective universes, leaving behind their judgment written on huge panels which filled the walls of the conclave chamber. As I read the details I could hear the Voice, as if from a great distance, reading the words precisely as I read them, slowing down and speeding up exactly in harmony with me.

For the first time I realized that the role played by the Voice – the one god whom I had never seen materialized – was more than that of advocate for confused mankind or that of spokesman for the conclave. Yet what it was, I was not – am not – certain.

The judgment was lengthy and detailed, covering matters raised in the testimony as well as a multitude of points which had not been presented. I summarize the principal findings, all of which touch somehow on my relationship to man. They can be grouped into my achievements as creator, my effectiveness as moral guide and my emphasis on faith. These extracts from the judgment are in the words of the conclave.

### **Jehovah's Creation**

The conclave admires the laws of nature created by Jehovah. His universe is notable for its regularity and symmetry, although the problem to be resolved was difficult.

Jehovah wanted to endow His universe with laws allowing it to follow its course without His constant omnipresence affecting every particle, yet at the same time to permit the free will of man to influence the course of events. Jehovah had no obligation to make His natural laws expressible in terms of mathematical relations accessible to the human mind. Men will therefore be unceasingly grateful to their God for having gifted them with the ability to discover, formulate and take advantage of natural laws.

Most of man's attributes relate in some way to his need for survival as an individual or as a species. Fear of heights, taste discrimination and

sexual drive are but a few sensory guides. There is one attribute which, in this sense, is completely gratuitous – men could survive without it and, indeed, some men actually do. The aesthetic sense which allow humans to enjoy symphonies and rainbows is nothing short of a divine gift.

In spite of its many perfections, however, Jehovah's creation has a number of flaws.

– Jehovah has made much of His belief in a principle of ambiguity, and the conclave does not specifically fault Him for that. Yet this ambiguity stands in such sharp contrast to the clear and imperative manner in which He issued His commandments to man – commandments which Jehovah seems to have had little compunction about disregarding Himself on occasion – that the result, for man, has been chaotic.

– The conclave considers carnivorism – especially in man, the rational yet compassionate creation – to be an act unworthy of a god. If carnivorism had resulted from evolution, as some men have suggested, one might then accept that it was not in Jehovah's original plan. But since all species were created simultaneously with fixed characteristics, Jehovah cannot escape the accusation of having wanted carnivorism. His preference for tributes of burnt flesh confirm this.

## **Morality**

The conclave is of the opinion that morality has a relative character – that a given morality must correspond to a given creation. In short, a god who prefers a certain morality must create a universe compatible with it. If the process is reversed the properties of the creation impose restrictions on the moral options available to the creator.

In a universe where males outnumber females, for example, polyandry would be an acceptable moral rule; where progeny created other than by incest is degenerate, according to the laws of heredity, it would be perfectly acceptable to declare non-incestuous relationships immoral.

The conclave observes that human morality has evolved through the centuries in response both to human nature and to the circumstances in which man has found himself. The capacity of man to feel love and pity lies at the heart of the tendencies which characterize this evolution, of which some salient examples are the following:

– Humans increasingly agree that women are mentally equal to men and must enjoy rights equal to those enjoyed by men. The conclave disapproves of the humiliating way that Jehovah treated women, and regrets His obsession with female virginity. Why is a female not permitted

to become a priest; why must the priest mourn a sister only if she dies a virgin?

– The meaning of human justice has evolved. Vengeance – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth – is no longer its avowed goal. It has been replaced by the necessity to protect society and to re-educate the guilty, if possible. The conclave feels that this evolution conforms to the nature Jehovah gave to man. It contradicts, however, the teaching and practice of Jehovah Himself. In lauding the evolution of human justice, the conclave must denounce Jehovah's spirit of vengeance until the third and fourth generation, as well as His decision to burden all human generations after Adam and Eve with the weight of their uninformed choice.

– The rights of self-determination and national sovereignty have been recognized in the relations between people and nations. This evolution occurred in spite of Jehovah's teaching. In particular the conclave disapproves of His promise to the Israelites of a land already occupied by other peoples, and abhors the many operations of genocide inspired and directed by Jehovah with the aim of delivering the Promised Land to Israel.

– Unanimous opinion affirms that the practice of war must be avoided and all conflicts resolved by negotiations in the spirit of international law. Again practice differs from theory, but man's recognition of this principle is itself important. War and peace are equally compatible with human nature as created, but man's full development is achieved more by peace than by war. The conclave is very pleased with the commandment not to kill. It cannot condone Jehovah's own repeated disregard of this commandment.

– When war cannot be avoided, strict laws have generally been accepted to reduce the sufferings of civilians and to protect the prisoners of war from 'inhuman' treatment. The term 'inhuman' cannot be replaced by a term such as 'non-divine'. Man, in effect, has been able to free himself from divine teaching and pursues a morality worthier of his nature.

– The conclave is aware that after a long period during which slavery was commonly practised, man has expressed principles forbidding it. Now, except for rare cases, slavery has been eliminated and soon will be only a memory. The conclave regrets that God did not issue a commandment specifically forbidding slavery. In short, man, in the evolution of his morality, has surpassed the teachings of Jehovah in several key points.

## **Faith**

It is the opinion of the conclave that Jehovah, on the one hand, attributed too much importance to faith and, on the other, did not prepare man sufficiently to have faith in Him.

The mental and sentimental qualities He gave man are such that there is no relation between the strength of man's conviction and the truth of those convictions. The Buddhist, the Jew, the Muslim, the Catholic, the Protestant and the pagan can have equally strong convictions, but they cannot all be right. It is dangerous to base belief on faith, for faith can be a source of error and perhaps only a random source of truth. This should make man distrustful of every 'faith' or conviction not based totally on reason.

If a person, using all his intelligence, does not conclude that the God of the Bible or of the Koran exists in fact, at most one could accuse him of merely being unreasonable. It cannot be considered a mortal sin to have a weak intellect, any more than it is a sin to be ugly.

Since faith that is not based on reason is unworthy of man (not having any relation with truth), and since reason becomes the respectable source of faith, one cannot prevent reason from also being a respectable source of misbelief. The evidence concerning the existence of God in the Bible is very confusing. A man who does not rely on unreasoning faith should ask himself the following questions:

Can I believe in a God who ordered the killing of all male infant prisoners as well as all non-virgin women?

Can I believe in a God who authorized the ownership and merciless beating of slaves, on the sole condition that the slave must survive until the following sunrise?

Can I believe in a God who permits the rape of a young girl as long as the rapist marries her and pays her father compensation?

Can I believe in a jealous and vengeful God capable of cursing innocent children for the faults of their parents, or who inflicted plagues on the Egyptian people for the faults of the Pharaohs?

Can I believe in a God who took delight in the sacrifice of animals, ordered the killing of innocent girls, and advocated wars of attrition, acquisition and revenge?

Many men find it difficult to believe in a God whose morality, their reason tells them, is less enlightened and less compassionate than their



own. Other questions could be asked concerning Jehovah's omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence:

Can I believe in a God physically weaker than His creature Jacob, who has to resort to superhuman powers to break His adversary's hip?

Can I believe in a God who needed to go to Sodom and Gomorrah in person to verify certain rumours?

Can I believe in a God who loses an argument with Moses and repents of an erroneous decision which He would otherwise have taken?

A positive answer to other questions would stretch the credulity of the believer beyond reason:

Can I believe that God created day and night before having created the sun?

Can I believe the Bible's claim that the world is less than six millenia old, although many scientific observations give this universe an age of billions of years?

Such troubling questions are numerous. It is natural that a man who bases his belief on reason should conclude the non-existence of the God of the Bible. The only way to believe in the God of the Bible, or of the Koran, is to have faith. But, on evidence, faith has no relationship to truth. As a man bases his belief or disbelief on faith, he degrades himself by proving his lack of concern for truth.

A brief glance at human nature and man's history on earth provides sufficient evidence that it is not faith that divides men into moral categories. Honest, sincere and well-behaving men are found in equal numbers among believers and non-believers alike. Faith, therefore, is not a sign of merit; if Jehovah insists on being 'believed in', He should give more evidence of His existence than that presented in the Bible. If, for instance, every copy of the Bible would become indestructible, there would not remain a single unbeliever on the face of the earth.

This leads us directly to the matter of prayer. As an instrument of communication between God and man, the conclave feels prayer is defective; the communication is one-way – from one who knows so little to One who knows all.

The conclave also observes that prayer is ineffective as a request for divine inspiration. This is evident in the case of clergymen from opposing sides in a war who, after praying, each feel qualified to declare that God is

on his side. It is clear that God, respecting the free will of man, does not intend to influence him, even in response to prayer.

The conclave expresses its abhorrence for ritual, formulated prayers at fixed times and in predetermined circumstances. The widespread opinion that dutiful prayer leads God to grant the believer eternal life in a 'hereafter', and fulfillment of his wishes on earth, degrades the concept of prayer and transforms it into an incantation to magic.

We note also that prayer is often formulated on a pragmatic psychology which would have been suitable in the case of a person addressing a tyrant. Prayer too often contains the following elements:

- an act of submission (let Thy will be done ...);
- an act of flattery (descriptions of the qualities and powers of God – 'merciful God', 'all-powerful God' ...);
- a request couched in the most abject terms.

The Bible tells of cases where God's anger was cast without pity on entire groups of people. The believer knows that God can curse a man for four generations, and therefore takes all possible precautions to get into His good graces. Such prayers imply an acceptance of the idea of the God-Tyrant.

As a form of thanks, prayer is acceptable only if it is made spontaneously and sincerely. The believer must remember that a modest cent given by a pauper is worth more than a dollar given by a rich man. Seen from this angle, God's favours are minimal. The only way for a man to express his gratitude to God in a dignified way is to follow the teaching implied by the favours He granted: Help thy neighbour!

## **Decision**

The conclave has decided to take into consideration the following extenuating circumstances:

– Jehovah, in His precocity, created the world before He had developed a keen critical sense. Consequently, He did not seek an exterior point of view, different from His own. In other words God was subjective and did not suspect that His actions would be subjected to scrutiny.

– Jehovah inadvertently created a human race incapable of loving Him. He attributed His failure to have the relationship He wanted with men to the Devil. The grief felt by God is matched only by His profound love for

man. From this resulted a sort of polarization in His divine thoughts. Jealous of the love of man for woman, he wanted to humiliate woman. Moreover, in his effort to win man's love, He distributed favours to chosen men and to a chosen people without carefully considering the moral implications of these favours.

- There is a third extenuating circumstance which the conclave will reveal to God in due time.

Taking these extenuating circumstances into account, the conclave has concluded that the creation of the world and Jehovah's conduct deserve some praise. It cannot be denied, however, that the world He created needs some serious improvements. This cannot be done without profound changes in Jehovah's attitude with respect to His creatures. In particular, He must realize that no man whose will has not been miraculously overridden by God is capable of loving and truly believing in him.

It is the decision of the conclave, therefore, that Jehovah shall be sent back to earth, in the form of a man who is incapable of accomplishing miracles, and, consequently, possesses neither omniscience nor omnipresence.

Jehovah is then requested to try to convince man – even if it be only one – that He is actually God.

The conclave is convinced that many advantages will result from this experience, advantages which will become apparent to Jehovah himself in due time.

**PART TWO**  
—  
**ON EARTH..**  
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## CHAPTER I

### PARIS

Suddenly there I was, strolling down a street in Paris, dressed like any other Parisian. My reflection in a shop window revealed a man of uncertain age, but past forty. The face was serious – perhaps sad. My hair was flecked with grey.

I lingered a few moments staring at my image. It was new to me and three minutes did not seem long to get acquainted with myself. What kind of face did I now have? Attractive? Repugnant? It did not matter; I was a man and that was bad enough. Would a man, metamorphosed suddenly into a porcupine, ask himself in front of a mirror if the porcupine was beautiful or ugly?

And still, I could not deny that my physical aspect as man had some importance. I would have to deal with others and a handsome face with an engaging expression could be of help. I looked at my image one last time and went away satisfied in this respect.

I was wearing a wristwatch that I checked for the time. My omniscience was clearly restricted. It would have been easy for me to deduce the exact hour by looking at the shadows of buildings and of the men that I jostled. But I did not have access to all my faculties and, to be practical, I had to use the wristwatch. I cast a furtive glance at my own shadow – no, nothing peculiar.

I did not know what street I was on. I knew that I was in Paris but I was not sure why. I was thinking in French right then. The signs of the stores were in French and it appeared I was in a large city. All doubt dissolved. In the distance, I saw the profile of the Eiffel Tower above the rooftops.

I felt some unusual sensations. I was conscious of my breathing and tried to stop inhaling, but succeeded for only several seconds. There I was, gifted with involuntary reflexes!

For hours I walked along streets, bridges, intersections, past monuments and public gardens, without giving much attention to my surroundings. The beauty of Paris impresses the tourist, but enough flavour of divine beauty was still in my memory that it put Paris to shame.

My legs grew tired; soon I would have to sit and rest. In short, I had become a man. I forgot myself for a moment and nearly started to recite the prayer of the Jew thanking God for making him a man rather than a

woman. The conclave had already noted my misogynous prejudices; undoubtedly I had to strive to amend my ways.

I was human and ... possibly ... mortal. I was not inclined to put it to the test, so I had to pay attention to the traffic when I crossed the streets.

I noticed sadly how much my ability to reason and remember had been reduced. I tried to make a quick summary of what was left to me in the way of different aspects of human contemporary knowledge. It became apparent that my memory did not contain anything which could not have been acquired on earth by reading or by university study. I had some elements of mathematics, physics, biology, medicine, literature, history, geography and so forth, but I did not have a complete understanding of any of these disciplines. My knowledge was extensive in human terms but it was not miraculous.

I took stock of my situation on earth. The man that I had become was much to be pitied. I was in Paris neither as tourist nor as citizen. Not even as a poor old man with a few cronies here and there in the area.

My frustration was building despite a strange – almost physical – humility. It rose from the obvious fact that my will had ceased to be sovereign and my understanding had been reduced by the conclave. This indignity weighed heavily. Must I now become used to my downfall? Must I, like everyone else, learn to say "please" and "thank you"? Must I be careful not to step on the toes of a passerby? Must I resign myself to being ignored, pushed around, deceived and mistreated? Was it really necessary to reduce God to such a state? I was revolted by the treatment meted out by the conclave. Memories of the trial came to mind and I remembered the god who looked a little like Job.

My comprehension was no longer total and I had to sort out my ideas, consider them one by one. I was sorry to discover that I was more influenced by the association of ideas than by a rational or Divine necessity. A god's face reminded me of Job, and Job reminded me of the trials that I had forced him to undergo. I felt bitter. Why could I not think directly of Job without considering his resemblance to one of the gods! True, I too had reduced a thinking being to a state of despair and decrepitude. I had my reasons. So, presumably, did the conclave.

No human could suspect my dejection at being reduced to think in human ways of human concepts. To the rhythm of my beating heart, I repeated, "I am a man, I am a man, I am a man," in the same way that a man would have said, "I am a leper, a leper, a leper!"

I was troubled by sensations in my body so overwhelming that they interrupted my thoughts and took first priority. However much I wanted to concentrate on my situation as dethroned God, to make some decisions regarding my conduct on earth, my mind returned to the requirements of my legs and my stomach. I knew that I had legs. I knew that I had an entire human body, but was only aware of my legs. I also had hands, but I hardly thought of them – they were not tired and were easy to forget. My legs tyrannized me so much that I forgot what I was thinking of. I was becoming a spirit whose mind was polarized to seek only the well-being of its legs.

Soon I forgot my legs to worry about a slight upset in my stomach. I could not pin it down precisely but it was becoming more intense and seemed to be linked with my sore legs and a faintness in my head. So that was what hunger felt like! I had to confess that no amount of omniscience could replace the real experience. When I created hunger, I intended to induce man to eat to renew his energies. Truthfully, I never intended to make hunger so miserable. I would have to rethink that later, but right then I had to eat.

My outfit had pockets that were empty – no – I pulled a one hundred franc note from the pocket of the jacket. I stopped a passerby.

"Can you tell me, Monsieur," I asked, "where there is a restaurant near here?"

"La moakheza! Mankalemch francawi!"

Curse that tower of Babel and the multiplicity of languages!

I told myself that I must watch my temper. I must get used to my limitations and acquire the necessary patience to adapt to my new state. It even occurred to me that I was, perhaps, too arrogant. I did not want to come to terms with the fact that I had become a man. It was time for me to understand that there was a purpose in my present earthly nature. I should make use of my senses, feel through them whatever men feel and start learning what it means to be a man.

As if coming out of a dream, I looked around with wide-opened eyes. I tried to perceive all sounds and to detect all odours reaching me ... and it was good.

I was in the Jardin du Luxembourg, separated from the quartier latin by the Boulevard St. Michel. I was not far from the ornamental lake where children were testing their latest miniature models of radio-controlled motorboats and hydrofoils.

If you wanted to indulge in abstract philosophical thinking, the noise of the children would have been a nuisance. But then you would have been wise to take your walk in a calmer part of the garden. However, if you just wanted to relax and forget your worries, the children's frolic would be charming indeed. I enjoyed it for awhile but abstract philosophical thinking was still my main concern. I went away from the pond and took an alley that seemed much quieter. It led me to a marble sculpture representing a naked couple absorbed in a passionate kiss. The woman's breasts were bared and I felt embarrassed at this display of the flesh. I moved to another part of the garden.

Under a tree was a bench covered with dead leaves. I stopped to sit and noticed a small bird on the bench. It was still alive but unable to fly. It fluttered its wings from time to time but could not get off its feet. It must have been sick, or perhaps it had a broken wing.

Two boys were playing at throwing tops. One of them, in order to retrieve his top, came close to the bench. He saw the bird and proposed to his friend to tie a string to its legs. The other applauded at the idea. Moments later each child in turn was taking pleasure at tossing the bird into the air. The bird would make desperate efforts at flying away but would be prevented by the string binding it to a child's hand. The bird soon stopped moving and remained hanging at the end of the string. The boys checked the bird and, finding no sign of life in it, lost interest in their cruel game.

I left the Jardin du Luxembourg, avoided the large boulevards and strolled along Lincepede Street. My feet hurt; I had often heard it said that new shoes never feel as good as an old pair which you know well. I hoped mine would age soon.

Then a familiar odour invaded my nostrils. There was no doubt; it was grilled meat. From instinct, I headed off toward the source of the smell. Then stopped. Yes, I recognized this odour well! It was the same that rose from the altars when man made sacrifices to me.

I was contrite; the conclave had strongly scolded me about my liking for sacrifices. Contrary to common saying I could now say that 'the body is willing but the spirit is not'. I took a different street and entered a bistro where I took a cheese sandwich and, for the first time, knew from personal experience what it was like to satiate one's hunger.

My stomach full, I now needed to rest my legs and would gladly have taken a nap. In any case, I would have appreciated resting in a private room – with a toilet. It was traumatic to have to feel physical needs. The



conclave could have spared me this humiliation. But if I had been able to abstain from satisfying my needs, that would have been a miracle. The conclave had suspended the possibility of miracles.

There was no shortage of hotels. I went into the first one which seemed modest. A person behind the counter gave me a form to fill out. On it I had to give my name and then show some piece of identification.

I stuttered something and left.

What name could I give? God? Jehovah?

What piece of identification could I produce? For a second time I rummaged through my pockets. This time I discovered a card with a picture resembling me and marked with the name, GOD.

Yes! I had been sent to earth to accomplish a mission and I was supposed to affirm my being God. Undoubtedly, this card was intended to remind me of what I had been sent to do.

I retraced my steps and once again asked for a room.

I wrote God as my name and produced my identification. The clerk behind the counter laughed heartily. "That's a good one! For someone with a face like yours, that's not bad at all!"

Inexplicably he threw my form in a garbage can and handed me another to fill out. I marked God for the second time and waited for his reaction. The clerk raised his eyebrows and looked at me for awhile. He was abrupt.

"What is your first name?"

What had to be done, had to be done.

"The Eternal!" I replied.

"I think," he said, "this joking has gone on long enough. I don't have time to waste with a fool. Either you are going to get serious, or leave me alone and get out without any trouble. If not, I'll call the police!"

That was the first time that a man had addressed me, face to face, with such language. Had I the full capacity of my powers, a thunderbolt from the sky would have been cast down instantly on the man. In fact I felt as if I had called for his annihilation but in vain. It took several moments for me to realize that the man was not at fault.

I was suddenly ashamed, struck by the similarity between the wrath of God and the human fury I felt against the clerk. I was inclined to consider the fury as a human shortcoming and was afraid to recognize that, in all fairness, divine wrath was not a sign of perfection.

I walked away from the hotel. After several minutes I spied a urinal and entered it. Then I felt my stomach turn and my muscles became paralyzed. My heartbeat speeded up and I could barely catch my breath.

**I WAS NOT CIRCUMCISED!!**

Not only had I become an ordinary man – I did not even belong to my chosen people! Moreover, I was forced to handle this uncircumcised member which I absolutely abhorred.

I seized the foreskin with my fingernails and, with all the force I could muster, ripped it off with a savage pull.

Blood streamed out and I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I was lying in a bed in a clinic. My clothes were hung over a chair. A nurse entered and approached me with a thermometer. Immediately I was overcome with a fear of having any physical contact with her. The nurse must have noticed my nervousness as she leaned over to place the thermometer in my mouth. I could not avoid noticing the roundness of her breasts. The conclave had gifted me with a strong male sensuality!

One might be surprised at my reaction. Every man has doubtless felt the effect of an attractive female on his senses many times. This is a part of his nature, of the nature that I gave him. Now I found the animal part of me making its presence known with a vengeance. It was no consolation to know that my will was enough to dominate the animal. Whether or not it is outlawed, the desire is still there! No prohibition will make it go away. The desire for fornication is as bestial as the act itself and I had for both a great disgust which had been well understood by Jesus and the disciples.

I needed to take a good look at my situation and decide what actions I should undertake. I certainly had not been sent to earth only to see if I could convince a man of my quality as God; in such a case this masculine sensuality would not have been necessary. It seemed that the conclave had deemed it necessary to make me capable of feeling human sensations. Perhaps they had hoped to bring me closer to man by forcing me to put myself in his place.

While I tried to put order in my thoughts, the nurse surprised me with an unexpected question.

"What is your religion, sir?"

I tried to avoid a direct answer.

"Is this information really necessary?"

"Oh, no!" she replied. "But if you would like to chat with a minister or priest, I must know what faith you belong to."

"I intend to get up and leave the clinic. I don't want to talk with anyone right now."

"As you wish," she smiled. "The doctor said that if you insisted, you could leave this morning, although he recommends that you stay one more day to make sure that no infection develops."

I dressed in a hurry and left.

It was raining outside. My laws of nature allowed for the succession of day and night and of the various seasons without my constant intervention. In my absence the universe was maintaining its rhythms.

I noticed a church and headed towards it, staying near walls to escape the rain. Within I found several worshippers praying. I sat on one of the benches, and when the entire congregation knelt down I was the only one still seated. Several cast disapproving glances.

The prayer ended and the faithful left the church one after another. I was left alone with the priest. He was a man radiating good health and happiness. A kind-hearted expression suggested an altogether sympathetic man.

"Good-day, my son," he said.

My son! Let's disregard it. His intention was friendly.

"Good-day, monsieur le cure, " I said. "Can you spare me a few minutes?"

"Certainly, my son," the priest answered in a gentle tone. "Come with me through this door and we will be undisturbed."

I followed him into a room and, at his invitation, sat down.

"Relax. That's better," said the priest. "Now, what can I do for you? Judging from your expression, you seem very worried."

There, in front of me, was one of my servants who had devoted his life to worshipping me and to guiding the flocks toward me. And here was I, his God, a few steps away yet a total stranger. He was smiling at me as no man ever smiled at his God. The smile was for an unknown man, but would have frozen on the priest's lips if he had the least suspicion.

My feelings were contradictory. I missed the impression of awe I used to evoke. Yet I had to admit that the smile, the first I had ever received, moved me more than I thought was possible. I considered the reversal of roles: the priest was confident in his faith, undisturbed by doubts while I, his God, was coming to him in the hope of getting answers to clarify my thoughts. But what could I expect from a man to whom I had never extended a faculty of omniscience? Had I been more generous to him in my days of glory, I could now have reaped some reward.

I looked again. His appearance bore the marks of a regular life – not too hard, not too eventful. He enjoyed good meals and good wine for which he thanked me dutifully many times a day.

Did his smile indicate a satisfied life, an absence of anguish, a lack of awareness of miseries? Or did it portray the love he felt for his neighbour or for any stranger? This man, much more than others, was expected to be close to me. But was he? He believed in the Bible – I could picture him in a Sunday school explaining to children the strength of Abraham's faith; he would tell about Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his only son on my orders. I doubted, however, that the priest sitting before me would have passed such a test.

"Monsieur le cure," I began, "I have some problems that I prefer not to discuss right now. Perhaps talking with you will help me. I would like to ask some questions. Are you willing to assist me?"

"Go ahead, my son," he encouraged me. "God commands us to help one another."

"Monsieur le cure," I said, coming to the point, "do you believe that God could come into this room and reveal Himself as a common man?"

The priest was obviously questioning my purpose. Nevertheless he went along with me.

"If He wanted to," he replied. "Of course He could! But I doubt that I deserve such a visit. I don't even think I deserve a visit from one of His angels. But yes, God could appear in front of me if He wanted to. Why do you ask? Have you, my son, had a vision of God appearing?"

"No," I said, "but I would like to know if, without resorting to a miracle, and without using the power of His will, it would be possible for God to convince you that He is God even though He appears to you as an ordinary mortal."

The priest was very patient.

"An ordinary mortal, my son," he replied, "is not God. Nothing in this world or in heaven takes place without God's will. Without a miracle and without the power of His will, God is not God! If arguments exist which can convince me that a person, who is incapable of performing a miracle, incapable of imposing his will, is nevertheless God the Father Himself, what would prevent any ordinary mortal from convincing me that he is God by using the same arguments?"

"If God wishes, His arguments would convince me; but that would happen only as a result of God's will. If ten people appeared in front of me pretending to be God and all presenting identical arguments, and if God was among them and I distinguished Him from the other nine, would that not be a miracle? Must I not then attribute this miracle to God's will?"

I was struck by the clarity of his arguments. However, I found one weakness in them. I knew that it would be unwise, in my present state, to present myself to someone and to declare out of the blue that I was God. I must first win someone's confidence.

"Thank you, monsieur le cure. I will think about what you have just told me." Then I added, "Do you know where I can find a shelter without having to produce identification papers?"

The priest hesitated, then threw me a piercing look.

"Stay out of trouble, my son," he cautioned. "Here is an address where you will be welcome."

Seizing the paper, I thanked him and left.

The hostel was run by the Sisters of Charity. Alcohol was forbidden, and my neighbours explained that, for this reason, they rarely came there. A hot meal was served and I forced myself to eat my portion. The ingredients were unrecognizable and the taste was bad.

Afterward we were allowed to remain seated, to put our heads on the table and sleep. Several groups formed, conversations started and voices were raised from time to time.

I must have been very tired, for I felt a strong need to sleep. I made an effort to resist it. Sleeping is a temporary subordination of the mind to the body, of the spiritual to the material. It may be good for men but I felt it undignified for God. I therefore forced my mind to think and started by recapitulating the events of the day. I reached a state of partial awakeness and partial dreaming in which my rational thinking was intermixed with visions. I reflected on the children's cruelty I witnessed at the Jardin du Luxembourg. I remembered that I had often associated feasts and other happy events with the sacrifice of animals. The thought started to nag me that, maybe, in some way, I was responsible for this cruelty. I then discarded the thought. Did I ever approve of torturing animals? Did I not request that they be treated decently to the extent of letting them enjoy the weekly rest?

I had nevertheless to recognize that my messages were contradictory. On occasions, I requested love and consideration. On occasions I ordered lack of pity. On occasions I even condoned torture.

Half-awake I then drifted in a vision. I was in a jungle. All around were singing birds. Noises in the foliage contributed to a menacing atmosphere and my chest was tight with terror. Suddenly a figure seemed to move in the landscape. A tiger was rushing towards me. I froze in terror. The tiger was advancing rapidly, yet the moment seemed to go on forever. For awhile I forgot that I was – or once was – God. I knew only that I was the prey of a savage animal and that I faced an agonizing death. The tiger reached me, ground my shoulder between his jaws and shredded my stomach with one of his paws. The ultimate hopelessness was indescribable.

I shook the vision away still gasping for breath and soaking in perspiration. It had been so realistic. Had it come from the brain of the man I presently was, or was it a message from the conclave?

I was by now totally awake. This did not prevent visions to haunt me. They were no longer the doing of imagination. They were memories brought back to life. I saw slaughters and holocausts, heard the supplications of innocents and, in the background, a voice murmuring, "Where were you? Were you busy with other matters?" Where indeed was I when they called to me in vain? Where was I when children starved, when they suffered, when they were murdered, when they were devoured by ferocious beasts?

I had always felt that eternity was most important and that there was no need to concern myself unduly with earthly suffering. Yet being prey to a tiger, if only in a dream, I was now inclined to reconsider.

The desire for sleep had vanished. It was dawn. I looked around and noticed my fellow men indulging in their various activities. Some still snored, others were awakening slowly. Several scratched themselves. Suddenly I had an irresistible urge and started to scratch all over my feet, hands, stomach and face.

"Damn these lice and bugs!" someone exclaimed.

"You don't like the company?" another asked him.

Laughter broke out here and there.

When I was God in full power, I had often heard the laughter of man. I must have heard even such a laugh as this. Today it told me something else.

Laughter is a language that often none but the initiated can understand. Laughing noisily at a joke which merits only a smile betrays nervousness or lack of taste. It takes experience and intuition to hear, in a laugh, the expression of a drowning person who briefly thinks he has his hands on a life-buoy. A man whose life is empty of meaning, who has forgotten for a long time what it is to feel happy, who flees from his memories, can also laugh, but his laughter will be peculiar.

In my present state, was I capable of laughing?

I stopped once more to scratch myself. The limits imposed on my omniscience made me forget what had pushed me to create lice. Perhaps omniscience had jeopardized my powers of concentration on matters of lesser importance.

A Sister of Charity entered; she ordered us to take our mugs and fill them with hot tea. I took my cup and a bit of crust and was told to read the employment announcements carefully. There was no one else at the notice board and I started to read the Want Ads. Most offered a little money for a task which would take only a few hours to finish. One was different. It read:

Farmer in Perigueux region needs labourer. Candidate must be healthy, serious and abstain from alcohol, except for a moderate amount of wine at meal times.

## CHAPTER II TO PERIGUEUX

I took a seat near the window in the train for Perigueux. Departure time was noon and it was now eleven-thirty. I watched the travellers come and go. For a moment I forgot I was God, forgot the problems I had to resolve.

A whole world appeared before me – rich and poor, young and old. Their expressions seemed so varied – sorrow, joy, serenity, preoccupation, laughter. Sometimes my gaze met that of another, whose expression would fleetingly grow more beautiful. How is it that a glance between strangers can convey so much warmth? I didn't know.

With omniscience, I had known all and felt no need for direct communication. But I remained ignorant of what one person produces in another by a glance which can be indifferent, inquisitive, friendly, bewildered. That is the whole difference between factual knowledge and knowledge in process of being acquired.

The train seemed to shudder. It was noon, but instead of moving the train remained still while the platform moved backward. The common illusion wouldn't deserve mention but it brought a sequence of thoughts important to me. Appearances are deceptive, the senses are misleading and information becomes correct only after being filtered by reason. How much is one to blame for being caught in the deception of appearances?

The rhythm of the train can accommodate any musical tune. It is enough to relate – for just a moment – the noise of the train to a known melody. This melody sticks in your ear and haunts you right to your destination ... unless a baby starts to cry. Then nothing else counts!

The cries of children ... I had caused so many of them! When I decreed the deaths of the firstborn sons of Egypt, those who were still babies died crying. When I ordered the Israelites to put all male child prisoners to the sword, they also died sobbing and convulsing. But I was omniscient then and the crying of children was only a fraction of all I had to know and observe.

How different now! It was the sobbing of the baby which was omnipotent and omnipresent; it made me lose the train of thought and the melody which haunted me. Unable to do anything else, I watched the child. I asked the mother, "Is it your firstborn?"



Immediately I felt a blush. I should have posed the question differently.

The mother replied without noticing my embarrassment.

"If I have others, then this will be my first. If not, he will be my firstborn as well as my last."

Then, taking the child in her hands, she handed him to me smiling.

"Could you hold him a moment," she asked, "while I get out his food?"

I took the child in my arms while the mother rummaged in her bag. As soon as I took him the child stopped crying. His tiny hand grasped the hairs of my beard and he started to smile. But the crying resumed suddenly. Luckily, I was able to resist my first impulse – to throw the baby out the window.

When I think of that now my hair stands on end.

The fact is that I was still too close to the God I had been, and not yet enough of the man I was supposed to be. I had no wish to hold the baby and its sobbing annoyed me. If I were still omnipotent I could have made myself deaf to the sobs. That is what I had done, how I had been able to ignore the crying of millions of children. Stripped of my powers, however, I could not ignore the sobs. To throw the child out the window was, in my present state, equivalent to remaining deaf to the cries of millions of children.

The child quietened once more.

By what miracle it happened just at that moment, I do not know, but it was completely dark and I could see nothing at all when, suddenly, the light in the compartment came on again and my eyes chanced to settle on a crucifix hanging round the mother's neck. It took on a supernatural dimension, and I saw a child crucified on it.

"Jesus!" I exclaimed to myself in a low voice, pressing the child to my chest as tears began to roll down my cheeks.

Everyone's eyes were fixed on me.

"I lost my child," I said to the mother. What else could I say?

Then the mother handed me a bottle of milk.

"Perhaps," she said, "you would like to give the baby his bottle."

I nodded and took the bottle. The baby started to suck while staring eagerly at me.

I felt completely different now. I began to understand that my divine powers had produced an insensitivity which isolated me from my creatures. I had never considered them as having rights of their own. I had created them and so had the right to destroy them; they belonged to me. Then I remembered again the ordeals that I had imposed on Job. After causing the deaths of his children I gave him others in their place, as if another child could erase the grief caused by the loss of a child! I thought, too, of Abraham who would not hesitate to kill his son for me. That case now seemed a mystery to me. For the lives of the people of Sodom and Gommorah, Abraham haggled unceasingly. Yet not once did he open his mouth to save his son Isaac.

The child let go of his bottle and fell asleep in my arms.

I knew nothing of this child. Perhaps his great-grandfather had offended me and I had damned him until the fourth generation. If so, I was holding a child that I had damned. On the other hand perhaps he was a bastard, not even authorized to be found in my presence.

In a drop of water that wouldn't wet a cat a small insect can drown. Armed with my divinity I would have considered such a child no more than a drop of water. But for the man to which I had been reduced, this child took on other proportions. I had no others before me, and it mattered to me to know whether I had condemned this child beforehand.

This child who slept, who from time to time opened his eyes and looked straight into mine, this child ...

I loved him.

The man leaning on the old truck had to be my boss, Gaston – my boss!

I found it hard to adapt to the human condition. I could not stop feeling sleepy, needing six to eight hours of rest a day; as the first signs of sleepiness occurred I felt both impotence and fury. If it was difficult to accept the need to sleep, how could I submit to a boss, even one that I had chosen?

Gaston spoke first.

"Am I right? Do you really call yourself the Eternal?"

"Yes," I replied. "That is my name."

He shook his head.

"You should keep it to yourself," he said. "Here we will call you Lanterne. It is shorter and sounds the same."

His voice was calm and friendly. He looked me over from head to toe.

"Put your suitcase in the back of the truck and sit up front. We will be able to talk."

The truck slipped into the traffic. I waited for Gaston to speak but he seemed a little anxious and gave all his attention to driving the truck. After a few minutes he said:

"I don't like to drive in the city. The drivers take no notice of traffic laws and unless you are used to it, an accident can happen so quickly."

He kept quiet for a while, then ventured conversing again.

"Have you ever worked in the fields?" he asked.

"No," I replied, "but I learn fast and no job puts me off."

"We shall see," said Gaston. He then continued, "Your hands bear no mark of hard labour."

"That's true, but I know what to expect and I am willing to work hard."

"We shall see, we shall see," mused Gaston.

He braked suddenly, shouted at a pedestrian and slumped into his seat. A young man was lying less than half a metre from the truck. Gaston had hit the brakes just in time. The pedestrian got up and went on his way while Gaston, in a cold sweat and still out of breath, was brought back to reality by the honking behind him. He started off, murmuring a few words in an incomprehensible dialect. Soon the truck left the city and Gaston relaxed and began to whistle a popular tune.

"Did you see that guy run in front of the truck?"

"Yes," I replied, "I did. And I saw how it affected you."

He turned his head towards me for a moment.

"Of course it affected me. But I must say you stayed remarkably calm." He hesitated a moment before adding, "That is not a good sign, Lanterne. A human life must count for something. When it is in danger, we should at least feel a shiver."

An ordinary man – not the conclave – was now lecturing me. I had to smile at the thought that Gaston could not know he was speaking to his Creator.

"You worried about your neighbour," I replied, "because you identified with him. It is your own death which frightens you. If you were eternal you would not have reacted that way."

He was visibly displeased with what I had said.

"Your way of speaking is complicated. I don't know what you mean by identifying with your neighbour. Why do you use big words when all that's necessary is to be good-natured and to act and feel as God made us."

He stopped awhile then continued. "Do you know that you are talking like a teacher? Could you help children in grades seven and ten with their maths and language arts?"

I preferred not to become a teacher but I wanted to please Gaston.

"I think so," I replied. "I can always try."

He smiled happily. "What luck!" he said. "My kids Justine and Lucien need a boost in their studies."

It was nearly midday when we arrived at Nontron. Gaston stopped the truck in front of a cafe-restaurant.

"Come eat with me," he said.

We sat around a small round table and Gaston ordered two meals and some wine. There was no menu, so we had to content ourselves with the day's special. The owner served us himself and then came to sit with us. Gaston must have been a regular customer, for the owner asked him for news of his wife, his children, his work and the farm.

Gaston introduced me as a labourer and a teacher. "Lanterne is not a common name," the owner remarked. "But I must admit that it suits a

teacher perfectly." He burst out laughing. We laughed with him and the conversation continued while we ate. Gaston ate everything on his plate. I ate the rice, lettuce and vegetables but did not touch the meat.

"No one," Gaston said, "makes meatballs like Robert. Go on, eat them."

The meatballs did seem pleasant, and I would have eaten them willingly. However, I tried to avoid eating meat.

"No, thanks," I said. "I am a vegetarian."

"Well, well," said Gaston, "you should have told me earlier. I would not have hired you if I had known. Without meat you get tired very quickly."

He spoke pleasantly, like someone completely convinced of what he said. He did not sound aggressive.

"Don't worry," I replied. "I will do my share. I just feel that I can feed myself without meat. Animals do not have to die on my account."

"Not on yours, perhaps," he retorted, "but foxes, wolves, eagles and owls have no choice. Eating meat is part of the natural order of things."

He stopped a moment.

"You are a strange fellow," he added. "An hour ago you were perfectly calm when I nearly killed a man with my truck; now you refuse meat for love of the animals!"

Gaston was right. My thoughts were still confused and my feelings even more so. On one hand I tried to consider the criticisms of the conclave but, on the other hand, I was not yet convinced they were fair. I needed time to think, and my life as a man was taking up more time than it should.

We arrived at Gaston's farm and labourers hurried to carry packages from the truck to the farmhouse. I wanted to help but Gaston stopped me.

"You will start work tomorrow," he said. "Albert will show you to your room. I have already told him that you are a teacher and need a quiet, comfortable corner."

I was going to start a new chapter in my life on earth. I was not apprehensive, simply resigned to carrying out my mission. It was too early

to develop a plan of action, and I was glad to have an afternoon free to think. I needed to ponder my experiences relating to men as well as my own feelings and reactions. In fact the man I most needed to study was the one to which I had been reduced by the conclave.

After my first day's work I returned to my room tired but not exhausted. The room and furniture were rough, clean, and could be made more attractive by furnishing the shelves on either side of the bed. I washed my hands and face at the bureau, then sat at the small round table and began to reflect on the day's events. The most significant was my meeting with Lucien. He was friendly and volunteered information about how the farm was run, the mistakes a new labourer should avoid and how to obtain Gaston's trust.

"To please my Dad," he told me, "you must take good care of the cow, Gisele, refrain from swearing and wake up early in the morning. Gisele is the one with a few black spots on her white skin. She was once very ill, so ill that the veterinarian gave up on her. But Dad gave her medicines, cures he made himself, until one day she was back on her feet. Since then she's been his darling."

He continued his colourful descriptions of the people living or working on the farm. What impressed me most was the respect and adoration he expressed for his sister Justine.

"You will see," he said convincingly. "She is a real fairy. No one is as smart, as kind, or as beautiful as she is. She rules by her magic over everyone. I am the only one who can stand up to her, but it is tough!"

I smiled. It was not difficult to understand how a boy of thirteen could be impressed by the maturity of a sister three years older. Possibly, Lucien had a tendency to exaggerate. I stood up and took another good look at my room. Soon there was a knock at the door and a girl entered. I describe her as a girl because she was obviously young and wore a school uniform. In another setting she could have been called a young lady.

I could not take my eyes off her. I had to stop myself from stroking her hair, but whether this was just a fatherly impulse or a symptom of a baser instinct I could not tell. The girl stared back at me. Her look measured me, weighed me, penetrated me and seemed to be both friendly and respectful. Finally she spoke.

"Monsieur Lanterne, my name is Justine. My father told me you would help me with my lessons and my homework." Her voice was clear, with a pleasant ring. I felt moved.

"Good evening Justine," I replied. "Your father just calls me Lanterne and I'd like you to do the same. I don't like to be called Monsieur."

"Then I will call you Lanterne like everyone else, but I don't see anything wrong with Monsieur."

She had a smile which I could not interpret. Was it ironical?

"I see you like to argue," I commented.

"Not always," she answered. "But I don't know you well. Two or three discussions – arguments if you prefer – will help me know you better."

I felt a little apprehensive. "I noticed that you looked me over carefully," I remarked. "Now you want to probe the contents of my brain."

She smiled and said in a determined but friendly voice, "I am interested in the brain and heart of all the people around me."

"Have you been successful in your observations?" I asked.

Once more she smiled enigmatically. "That depends on what you mean by success. Mine lies in developing a talent for observation and learning from my mistakes."

I was surprised at so much good sense in a young girl.

"Justine," I told her, "you don't seem to be an easy pupil to guide, but you have a good head on your shoulders."

She held out her hand and smiled at me. "Lanterne, let's be good friends."

I hesitated, looking from her hand to her face. I feared any physical contact with her, yet I could not ignore such a sincere offer of friendship. I took her hand, but before I could say anything more she withdrew it, smiled at me again and quickly left the room.

After she left I could think of nothing else. Every thought, every subject, came back to Justine. The white tablecloth reminded me of her white blouse. The empty shelves suggested the books I would use for teaching her. If I stopped thinking, Justine's face smiled into my thoughts immediately. The feel of her hand burned in my memory and thrilled me.

At first I wanted to curse her and all other women. They distract man from his purpose and cause dangerous temptations. I myself was subject to

these temptations, and should be ready to resist them. I thought about it for a long time.

Did Justine's manner spring from a flirtatious nature or a kind heart? It occurred to me that the problem might lie not only with her, but with my attitude. Something unclear in me refused to let me accept the reciprocity of the situation even when it was obvious. Woman tempts man, but man also tempts woman. Why did I attach more importance to feminine temptations than to masculine ones? Shouldn't I overcome my reluctance to treat man and woman the same? These thoughts occupied me for hours, until I finally decided to accept Justine's offer of friendship and to react to her mental and emotional qualities without regarding them as diabolically feminine.

Still I knew that something was wrong, and for awhile I could find no clue to what it was. I did not want to admit that I had been impressed by Lucien's intellect and that I had expected it to be superior to Justine's. I was wrong and didn't like it. Justine was altogether feminine, but her intellect was too masculine for my taste.

Once more, her smile took hold of my memory. It was innocent and natural. It had its magic but there was no pretence in it. I sensed my unfairness. After all, intelligence is a gift. Justine was using it, not just displaying it, and ... and ... it was not necessarily masculine.



### CHAPTER III THE FARM

I became a farm labourer and learned firsthand the value of a weekly rest, one day a week dedicated to me.

One Sunday Gaston and his wife Christine went to the village with Justine and Lucien to attend morning mass. I stayed on at the farm, glad of the solitude.

When I had first come to the farm I had been the object of mockery. Gaston would send me to do a chore and add, "Don't take an eternity!" Even the name Lanterne had led to jokes. Lucien would say "Take Lanterne, you will be able to see better." It seemed I had now won everyone's respect. My physical strength was adequate for farm work. Gaston was satisfied.

Gaston doubted at first that I would be able to help the children in their studies, though it was his own idea. He often came to see for himself how the lessons were progressing. I suppose he also spoke with Justine and Lucien about my work as a teacher. Reports from the school indicated definite improvements, and he stopped bothering with the children's studies. I was now more free to observe Justine and Lucien.

When the weather was good we went into the fields with our books and paper pads. While I taught Lucien, Justine was supposed to concentrate on her own studies. She worked a little way off so as not to be disturbed by our noise, but I noticed that she spent a good part of her time watching us. When our eyes met occasionally she smiled and returned to her work.

Teaching Lucien was not easy. He found it difficult to admit a mistake. He looked for excuses and often went so far as to consult dictionaries and class-books, in the hope of finding a higher authority to agree with him. One day when he had surpassed himself, Justine cried, "You could not be more obstinate if you were God Himself."

I felt personally insulted. "Do you think obstinacy is a Divine quality?"

"No," she said immediately. "I think God has no choice. As He is always right, He would be making a mistake in changing His mind. Lucien is obstinate. In man this is definitely a fault, but in God it is a necessity. It seems to me that if God wished, just once, to change His mind, He would face a paradox that all His divinity could not resolve."

This remark, which seemed to come so easily from Justine, was a revelation to me. Was this why I had trouble accepting the conclusions of the conclave? Did I have a resistance in principle to recognizing an error? In my opposition to the conclave was I, in a way, like Lucien? Even though Justine's answer irritated me, I had to admit that she used logic with ease.

When it was her turn for a lesson the two children changed places. Justine was serious. Her questions were pertinent, showing a greater intellectual curiosity than was strictly necessary for schoolwork. She didn't smile and often took notes. When I found a mistake her reaction was quite different from Lucien's. She seemed surprised but, without wasting time, she tried to figure out what was wrong. If she couldn't she would ask. I did not usually have to give her long explanations. Sometimes she would stop me in mid-sentence to tell me that she saw her mistake.

While I taught Justine, Lucien tried to study or just to stay still. He couldn't do so for more than ten minutes, then he would start to sing or chase butterflies. His favourite moments came when I found a mistake Justine had made. He whooped with joy. We learned to ignore him.

On our returns to the farm Lucien ran in front, shouting songs and turning somersaults. Justine and I walked slowly, talking of the lesson or discussing things which had happened at school or on the farm.

The two children had different natures. Beyond Lucien's obstinacy and impatience was a strong tendency to be helpful and affectionate. He also had a spontaneity that made his face radiant.

Justine shared his playfulness and mischief as well as a compulsion to kindness. But here the similarity ended. While Lucien behaved like a boy of his age and largely deserved the frequent punishments he received, Justine demonstrated a maturity which imposed itself on her surroundings. Most of Gaston's difficult decisions were made after he was put on the right track with Justine's help. She expressed measured opinions which seemed to stem from a solid common sense that infected her audience. She sometimes settled quarrels which seemed serious by giving practical and unexpected advice.

I often made mental comparisons between the qualities of Justine and Lucien and had to admit that Justine's greater maturity of mind could not be explained solely by her age. She had the mind of a mathematician and a captain. She also had, perhaps, the sensitivity of a poet.

I pondered also over the contrast between Justine and her mother. Christine, in her own right, was a remarkable person. Working seemed for

her to be as natural as breathing. She kept herself busy all day long, never complaining and always smiling. She never expressed opinions except in regard to the amount of food eaten by the children. It was never enough. She would try to force some dishes on them underlining how healthy this food was.

I remember one day Gaston said to her: "The children feel healthy and don't care for healthy food. You should better praise the food for being tasty."

"That the food is tasty," she replied, "they can find out by themselves. They have to be told that good health depends on good eating habits."

What a difference a single generation makes!

Christine had none of Justine's cravings for knowledge and independence. She may have had the potential of developing into a Justine. Somehow it did not occur.

The family seemed devout, yet Justine wasn't a strong believer. Occasionally she expressed her doubts openly and was scolded by Gaston, who adored her. In fact, everyone doted on her. She was pretty, generous and intelligent.

I felt real pleasure in looking at her and talking with her. My strong sensuality must have had something to do with it. Though the conclave had reduced me to a human, I discovered I still had a superhuman willpower. It excluded the possibility that I might succumb to Justine's charms. I knew I had a mission to accomplish. I could not escape human emotions, but I could act as if my sensual desires did not exist.

My personality was made up of two coexisting components: whatever remained from the God I used to be, plus a human nature that had its own requirements. The "I" which I use here is pluralistic, but my will as God dominated my entire personality. Human nature was only a companion which seemed to have a reason for being, yet never dictated my conduct.

I knew that my human companion was in love with Justine. I looked on my companion's state as a direct source of information. Those doubts, joys and sorrows were mine also; I felt them acutely but was completely capable of ignoring them and letting the God who resided in me take the reins.

Things had to be this way. It seemed more and more that my mission would begin with Justine. She would be the first person I would try to convince that I was God.

To begin with, Justine was a woman. Moreover, she was one who commanded respect and esteem by her intelligence, her goodness and her conduct. Deciding to convince Justine followed a new appreciation of the intellectual and sentimental qualities of a woman. Justine was not a believer; but lack of faith no longer offended me.

Finally Justine was not an Israelite. I had abandoned the distinction between Jews and Gentiles. As for my personal feelings, I considered them a tribute to Justine in particular and to women in general.

In any case I did not intend to hurry. An opportune moment to talk with Justine would come. Until then, I had to be patient and act in such a way as to be taken seriously later on.

The sunshine was inviting but I was torn between two lines of thought. I enjoyed my surroundings – the range of colours enchanted my eyes, the singing of the birds lulled my ears, the rustic smells tantalized my nostrils and a fresh breeze caressed my face. On the other hand I had to focus on the problems which I needed to resolve.

I had to admit that my experiences as a man had influenced my thoughts and my point of view. I tended more and more to accept the verdict of the conclave. Human feelings and human conduct could be a good and useful source of information. Still, at times, I revolted against my human condition.

Walking along a path towards the village, I heard the distant familiar voices of Lucien and Justine. Lucien was chasing her. She would let him catch up then suddenly zigzag. Lucien's momentum would carry him in the wrong direction and he would lose his prey. The air resounded with their shouts and laughter. Justine tripped and fell laughing. Lucien took a branch from a tree and, pretending it was a sword, pressed it to his sister's back. He placed his foot boldly on the high spot of her dress which indicated her buttocks, declaring that his enemy was at his mercy.

Suddenly a slight shaking of the ground made them turn around. A bull, raising a cloud of dust, galloped towards them. Lucien helped Justine up and they raced for the barn, but the bull was gaining ground too quickly.

Each fraction of a second was now crucial. I ran towards the bull and managed to catch its attention by shouting loudly. It stopped for a moment, undecided. I grabbed a stone and hurled it. That was all it took to start him running again, this time towards me.

From habit I ordered the bull to disappear. I concentrated my will on dissipating it.

I lost consciousness when my body landed after being thrown, spiralling, into the air.

I opened my eyes and dimly saw Gaston and his family watching me attentively. A tube was attached to my nose, another to my left hand. The irony of my situation did not escape me. God was being kept alive by the science of His creatures.

My vision cleared and I could read anxiety on the faces of my visitors. Lucien pressed closer and I wanted to say a few words to him, to thank him for coming to see me. Before I could do so he leaned down and planted a filial kiss on my forehead.

Bells started to ring in my head; a glorious feeling spread through me; my heart began to explode and dance. A true miracle had just taken place. I, God, had received the first sincere and unsolicited sign of love from one of my creatures. As Lucien lifted himself away Justine leaned over and placed a kiss on his hair, as if to express pleasure at his action.

A nurse entered. Friendly but serious, she told my visitors to leave. Apparently I was still very weak.

Days later the intravenous tubes were removed. I could stroll the corridors as long as my strength lasted. At first a nurse held onto me tightly to make sure I would not fall. I was in bed for most of my stay. The nurses came in often, interrupting my train of thought. They would bring me food and drink, take my temperature, massage my back, replace my dressings, give me pills, or simply come in to make sure that I did not need anything.

I had time to wonder at my actions. The strength of my feelings surprised me. I had not realised that Justine and Lucien had come to mean so much to me. When they were about to be overtaken by the bull, my human side wanted to rush to help them while my divine 'component' was in less of a hurry; I was not supposed to risk my divinity for any of my creatures. And still, I did accept the risks and faced the bull. I acted quickly. But if I could have then stopped time and frozen the bull and the children in their position till I could consider all aspects of the situation, what would have then been my decision? The lack of omniscience and the lack of time forced me to act by instinct instead of by reason. The result was ingratiating but would not always necessarily be so. How many sinners would have lead a virtuous life if, with more time, they would muster the needed energy to resist temptation or to overcome cowardness?

I was interrupted in my thoughts by a nurse who came to change my dressing. She brought a sterile package which contained, among other things, a pair of gloves which she hurriedly put on. First, my wound had to be exposed to air. Just as she began the procedure her name rang out over the loudspeaker. She hesitated for a moment – must she leave the wound open and uncovered, or should she ignore the call which might be for something more pressing? Unconsciously, while she weighed the pros and cons, she scratched her head. Her gloves were no longer sterile but she decided to finish my dressing. Later, an infection developed in the wound.

The nurses, evidently, were not perfect creatures. At first I wondered how much their mistakes resulted from their human nature rather than from their more specific feminine nature. But then, I noticed that orderlies and doctors committed similar errors though I rarely saw them as busy as the nurses.

The important fact is that my stay in hospital gave me a unique opportunity to watch women and to notice that, in spite of being so busy, the nurses usually had a smile and would do anything to make certain that the patients were as comfortable as possible. During emergencies they knew exactly what to do, never lost their calm and seemed to have used good judgment. They took initiative when they had to and did not hesitate, if necessary, to skip the red tape.

I felt ashamed of the injustice I had committed in wanting to give woman a subordinate role to man. I quickly stopped worrying about whether or not they were menstruating. Among so many nurses, several of them had to be; their work and spirits were not affected by it. To find on the human face an expression of honesty, devotion and affection now became a source of comfort to me. I had encountered this expression as often on women's faces as on those of men.

I stayed two weeks in the hospital. Justine and Lucien visited me daily after school. They brought cookies and fruits, and expressed their impatience to have me return to the farm.

The chaplains at the hospital were impressed with my knowledge of the Bible. They were quick to notice that, although believing in the existence of God, I refused all calls to prayer. They reminded me repeatedly of the necessity of praying to obtain eternal life. I had considered praying to the conclave. They had condemned prayers in the form of ritual or obligation, but had not excluded spontaneous prayer. Still, the fact that I considered praying excluded its spontaneous character.

It was during this stay at the hospital that a definite transition in my mentality took place. The individual had not interested me enough. What had been important was the continuity of the species. When a married man died without leaving any children, one of his brothers (or, if he had none, his father) was obligated to marry the widow. This gave the dead brother a progeny which, miraculously, would be his own. The feelings of the widow and of the "chosen" brother on this subject had mattered little.

The individual did not count except as he represented his race.

So too, according to my teaching, a young woman who was raped by a handsome or an ugly young man, or even by a lustful old man, had no recourse against the rapist except his obligation to marry her. The rapist might have several wives but, as soon as he agreed to marry his victim, I ignored his crime since he had assured a paternity to the progeny of the victim. The unhappy victim had the choice of agreeing to marry an ignoble person, or of refusing, and thus running the risk of becoming an unmarried mother.

I cast my ostracism not only on bastards innocent of the faults of their parents, but also upon men afflicted with a physical malformation. They had not the right to approach the sacred altar. An assaulter and rapist of young women, or a sadist beating his slaves to death (provided they survived until sunrise), could approach my altar while an honest man, decent but hump-backed, must keep his distance.

In the hospital I had both the time and the necessary experience to achieve my evolution to a God of compassion and empathy.

And, in time, Gaston picked me up in the car and took me back to the farm.

## CHAPTER IV JUSTINE

Every day before leaving for school, Justine would bring me breakfast. She would then remind me firmly of the number and colour of pills I must take while she was gone.

When she returned she would inquire if I had had a good day; then change my dressings. She would run her hand over my forehead to draw aside the hair which obstructed my sight, then lay the back of her hand on my neck to check for fever. Those physical contacts, made with the professional skill of a nurse, were as agreeable to me as they apparently were to her.

When she had finished her nursing duties she would sit on the edge of the bed and chat with me for an hour or two, telling stories and describing her day at school.

Lucien commented more than once on Justine's devotion to me. His joking suggested that we were, Justine and I, in love. His mischievousness amused us but, to end it, Justine laughed.

"That's right! We do not deny it any more; we are in love with one another! Now will you get lost and leave us in peace?"

One day Justine asked me to write a few words in her autograph book. I wrote the following lines:

I have never had a sister.  
If I could ever have one,  
I would love it to be Justine.  
THE ETERNAL (known as Lanterne)

I never had a sister? It was my human component that emitted this complaint and I, God, thought now that there was a grain of truth in it. Moreover, by writing it, I stated the kind of relationship I wanted to have with Justine.

She read my lines then came to me, kissed me on both cheeks and said, "You are adorable."

I could hardly prevent myself from a play on words, "Being adorable, is that not one of God's privileges?"

I was confused, but pleased to hear her say, "So that's it! You are therefore God to me!"



I was mad at my human component! When Justine leaned over me to kiss me, my eyes automatically looked down her blouse. As it happened, I could see nothing. But it was a serious warning to me. Sister or not, I must be on my guard.

My health returned completely and I wanted to resume my normal duties. Gaston was opposed, declaring that I was still a convalescent and that, in any case, a holiday would do me good. It was enough that I keep myself busy teaching the children.

Lucien was happy to use my time. He was intelligent and studious. I had known he was obstinate but only now could I appreciate the full measure of it. He took pleasure in contradicting everyone. His favorite expression was "That is not true!" Justine often teased him "Mr. without a clue, out of the blue, says that's not true", and Lucien took it as a compliment.

One day he told me he had once made a vow to kill anyone Justine fell in love with. But I was an exception, he said, and therefore had his consent to love Justine.

"I love Justine very much," I said to him, "but it is a love based on consideration and respect."

"My foot!" he replied angrily. "Stop talking about this 'f.....' respect! Even an altar-boy could figure out what is happening between you two."

"Nothing is happening," I protested. "I have never laid a hand on Justine."

Lucien was defiant. "But you have wanted to, haven't you?"

I was indignant but I knew that he spoke in earnest. "I promise you," I said, "that I will never lay a hand on her."

His face was unreadable . "It is wrong of you to say that," he said. "Without your hand on her, Justine will be unhappy."

His voice nearly breaking, he quickly ran from my room.

Lucien – whatever his reasons – was right. Justine and I truly were in love. We had never spoken of it, but when alone the atmosphere would suddenly become tender and we would avoid looking one another in the eye.

This situation could not continue. I told Justine that I wished to discuss some important matters. She was to come to my room in a couple of hours and I was not yet prepared for the meeting. The more I thought about what approach to take, the more unsure and confused I felt. I wanted to act in a way which, in case of failure, would not hurt Justine's feelings.

I considered the merits of a direct approach – to reveal to her that I am God. I soon realized that this would be too much even for a believer. Finally I opted for a two-step approach. I would try first to convince her that God exists and then to show her who I really am. If the first step succeeded, the second would be feasible. If not, the direct approach would still be possible.

Today's problem was therefore limited to the existence of God. At first I felt relieved by this decision. The issue is not explosive; it may be discussed by two friends. It should not affect our relationship, even in case of failure. It seemed that all I had to do was prepare a number of proofs of the existence of God. But I realized that more would be needed.

Consider, for example, the well-known Ontological Proof. It goes like this: Let us designate as God the concept of the sum of all perfections. Non-existence is an imperfection and so it cannot be associated with the concept of God as designed. Therefore God exists.

This proof did not impress me much. The conclave had pointed out imperfections in my Divinity, so I knew that God conceived as the sum of all perfections existed only as a concept. Justine would not go for it. I could just hear her saying, "Man is imperfect and can only conceive imperfect concepts. Therefore the concept of God as the sum of all perfections is an imperfect concept quite compatible with the imperfection of non-existence."

After examining all the proofs I knew, I had to conclude that not one had the convincing power of a geometrical theorem. The existence of God cannot be proven by logical reasoning. It is a matter of faith. The trouble with faith, however is that it leads more often to error than to truth. This must be evident even to a believer. He would know that more people have faith in other religions than in his own. If he labels his own religion truth and other religions error he knows that faith has led more people to error than to truth. So how then could I blame an honest person who mistrusted faith? How could I blame Justine?

Still I had to do something. When I tried to analyze Justine's personality it became apparent that I should first shake her confidence in science. I knew she was interested in biology. I should therefore use

arguments to vitiate her trust in that science. And to be effective my arguments would have to be new to her.

I had no trouble finding some facts in biology that, considered from a new angle, could shake Justine. These arguments were not decisive but maybe, just maybe, they could lead her to have more faith in me her friend. Perhaps she could accept them for my sake.

I had left the door open and Justine came in. She must have noticed my face had a different expression that day. She suddenly began to worry. I had put a kettle on the electric stove and its whistle indicated that the water was starting to boil. I served tea and we sat down at a small round table. "Justine," I began, "do you believe in God?"

She started to smile.

"I had an idea," she said, "that something was wrong. I am glad it's nothing more than that. No, I do not believe in God. At least let's say I do not believe in the God of the Bible. As for a different God, I think the problem is not believing, but knowing whether or not He exists. Since it is not possible for me to know, I prefer not to think about it."

"Then," I said, "you seriously consider the possibility that life, sensations and intelligence could be the result of the natural evolution of matter?"

"All I said," she replied, "was that I did not know! I do not exclude the possibility of the existence of God. All the same I also do not exclude the possibility that life is a state of matter in favourable conditions."

Convincing Justine would not be easy. I had to try my best.

"I approve of your regard for intellectual integrity," I continued. "In a world which has not kept its promises of peace and fraternity many young people doubt traditional wisdom and are ready to question everything. I understand your desire to be sure of an assertion before accepting it as a pillar of your life.

"To doubt is not reprehensible. But to continue doubting in spite of evidence may become a character trait which won't help you discover the truth."

"Lanterne! You are unfairly accusing me! I do not reject any evidence except when the evidence in question is not evident enough. I never said that here is a proposition in which I would like to believe or which I would like to be false. I try to be neutral and I want to be ready to accept

the proposition as being true or false without any preconceptions, without any emotion. I have rejected the God of the Bible, for I have found no evidence there of a creator who is wiser and better than man. Therefore if I had to choose between a Bible which reveals a God of inferior quality and a Bible considered to be a mixture of distorted history and legend, I would chose the second interpretation as being more reasonable. Of course I am free to believe in a different God, but that God must be beyond me to the point that it is impossible for me to define Him, to describe Him, or to attribute this or that quality to Him."

"What you have said seems reasonable," I replied, "but not reasonable enough. Evidence of the existence of God is right before your eyes. It is not only a matter of generalities such as 'all clocks presuppose a clock-maker'. Facts exist which cannot be explained absolutely, not because of a temporary shortcoming of science, but because God is necessarily implied in any endeavour to understand the world. His signature is everywhere."

"I told you, Lanterne," she said, "I am ready to learn and to know. But do not ask me to believe. Show me one of these facts that you speak of. Demonstrate that it implies the existence of a creator and then I will know you are right."

I took the challenge.

"I know that biology interests you very much," I began. "Therefore I am going to choose some examples in this area.

"Undoubtedly you know that all species of plants and animals have an even number of chromosomes in their cells and that all progeny resulting from the crossing of species and having an odd number of chromosomes will necessarily be sterile. Because of this man has been able to create grapes without seeds. These grapes cannot reproduce sexually. The same is true for the mule. It is sterile because its cells have acquired half the chromosomes of a donkey and half the chromosomes of a mare. The total number is odd, so the division by two needed for sexual reproduction is impossible."

She interrupted.

"I learned that at school. The subject does interest me very much. I am curious to know what you are driving at."

"That," I continued, "indicates that if a species is the result of evolution the number of chromosomes must have increased by an even number, that is to say two at least. An increase by a single chromosome produces a sterile individual.

"The change in the number of chromosomes is a mutation. It is still reasonable to hope that by a natural accident this number might increase by one unit. The number of individuals is so great and the course of evolution has been estimated at thousands of millions of years, so that mutation seems possible. However, to suppose that an individual would accidentally be created with two extra chromosomes is really unlikely.

"All the same, that still does not solve the problem. This individual would not be sterile but his children would be. Crossing such a person with a non-mutated member of his race would produce a progeny having one extra chromosome. This progeny would be sterile, of course.

"In short a mutated individual with one extra chromosome is sterile. A mutated individual with two extra chromosomes is not sterile but the offspring of its mating with non-mutated individuals are sterile. A mutated individual with three extra chromosomes is sterile.

"It would therefore be necessary to fulfill one of two conditions. Either the individual obtains by mutation four extra chromosomes and can produce fertile progeny even if he mates with non-mutated individuals, or else two individuals of opposite sex each acquire two extra chromosomes by mutation. Those two individuals should also by accident be in the same region at the same time and decide to mate. It is necessary not only that the two mutations be viable but also that they preserve compatibility between the male and the female. This last requirement is not easy to fulfill, since the mutation in one individual is totally independent from the mutation in the other.

"One must also suppose that the outcome of this double mutation was a progeny having some advantage making it fitter than the non-mutated individuals. There would also need to be a lot of inbreeding within the mutated progeny since that would be the only way to produce non-sterile individuals. Isn't this a little too much to ask of the theory of evolution?

"All the same, to suppose that only one individual acquired four extra chromosomes by mutation raises a lot of problems. Four extra chromosomes implies too many changes in the organization of the cell, and it is highly unlikely that the individual thus formed would survive. Even if he were viable his children obtained from crossing with non-mutated individuals of his species probably would not be.

"It is also necessary to consider that this 'miraculous' increase in the number of chromosomes would have to take place not once, but many times.

"Evolution, therefore, implies miracles. Is it not reasonable, then, to believe in the existence of God?"

Justine had followed my train of thought with great interest.

"Lanterne," she said, "You are adorable! I love to hear new and serious arguments. They force me to think and help me to understand. No doubt they will play a role one day when the weight of arguments makes me lean in one direction or the other in my effort to know if God exists or not. I must listen to what other people would say to your arguments. Don't forget that, until recently, even the existence of the chromosomes was unknown. The problems you raise might be resolved by the next great scientific discovery."

It seemed that stronger arguments were needed.

"Agreed!" I said. "But it seems to me that you will not be able to say the same thing about the following argument:

"You are conscious of the fact that you exist. I mean you feel yourself existing. You would feel the sensation of existing even if you lost your arms and legs. Only a minute part of your brain has to partake in this minimal sensation. You feel yourself existing even when you don't think about the sunrise, although the memory of sunrise exists somewhere in your brain. You don't need to remember that you were at school yesterday, that you have a brother and parents, or that you have read dozens of books about which you retain many details. Even your heart and lungs could be replaced by machines. The heart, the lungs, the veins and arteries, in this respect, are there only to ensure the conditions of continuity in which a miniscule part of yourself has the sensation of existing. Blood itself does not partake in that sensation. It brings oxygen, carries carbon dioxide and performs many other functions to ensure a favourable environment in which this minute part of you feels the minimal sensation of existing.

"Now let's suppose that a scientist has succeeded in determining which minute part of you feels this sensation. He knows which atoms comprised it and he can produce the number  $N$  to represent the minimal number of atoms with which it is possible to form a special configuration which could experience the sensation of existing.

"Consider this minimal configuration which feels the minimal sensation of existence. Remove a single one of the  $N$  atoms and the sensation would disappear. The property of minimally feeling existence is not inherent in one of these  $N$  atoms, but is a collective property of the  $N$  atoms.

"Let us consider what happens between the N-1 atoms which would lack the desired sensation, and the removed atom which, if put back in place, re-establishes the collective sensation of minimal existence. What is happening between this atom and the N-1 others? You know very well. It is electric interactions which attach one atom to another. Therefore at the edge of this atom and the N-1 others, is electrically transmitted that which lets N atoms globally feel the minimal sensation of existence.

"Mixed up without any particular order these N atoms would not have this sensation. They must have a special configuration to feel it. The principal function of the rest of the body is to produce the necessary environment to conserve this special configuration.

"Therefore you must conclude either that a superior will add this minimal sensation of existence to the N atoms, or that the atoms have been created with the capacity collectively to feel the sensation of existence when they number no less than N and form a very special configuration."

She now seemed a bit shaken.

"Lanterne," she said, "I confess that I don't know what to say to you right now. Certainly there are many troubling facts suggesting the existence of unknown forces which could collectively be called God.

"But that's not what is important. I do not want a God in absentia. You, you are free, in the absence of an explanation, in the absence of understanding, or from a need for security, to believe in a God of your choice. For me to accept the existence of God is not the result of negating his non-existence. There must also be an affirmation of Him, of Himself, not just of the consequences of His existence.

"If God exists He has chosen to be mute. If He remains mute, I will not disturb Him in His silence. God will interest me the day He decides to speak, to prove His existence, not by our logical reasoning and not by capitalizing on our needs and weaknesses."

She had spoken these last words quickly and with passion. Then she stopped, realizing she had lost some of her usual control. I saw her blush and, as I started to reply, she continued.

"Lanterne, I believed in God for a long time. Not the God of the Bible but a God that I could really love, and whose superiority to man did not have to be postulated or accepted blindly. The God of the Bible is too vain. Ten times he hardened the heart of the Pharaoh to force him to refuse Moses' demands. This allowed God to show His glory by inflicting the

scourges on the Egyptians. To accept that God can behave like that is to accept that God is no better than a man. To pretend that such a God is infinitely wise is to be blind. It can result only from a refusal to use reason and face the facts.

"I wanted to believe in a God that would be truly divine and I wondered about His relationship with man. If He is not the God of the Bible or of the Koran, then He has sent us no prophets or messages. Man has been abandoned and has no way to inspire himself with God's wisdom when he seeks a reply to the questions which trouble him. If He is the God of the Bible, His commandments and messages must be rejected in the numerous cases where human morality has been superior to biblical morality. How can I then believe in a Biblical message even when it seems reasonable?"

I said nothing. Her reasoning closely paralleled that of the conclave.

"My cousin Jeanne is pregnant. She is only fifteen and she confided in me. As a Catholic she fears divine punishment if she has an abortion. But on the other hand she feels quite sure that her father will die of a heart attack when he finds out. She asked me to tell her what to do.

"The Bible says, 'Thou shalt not kill', but is full of killings ordered by God. It is not my respect for the Bible which prevents me from advising her to have an abortion, it is my ignorance and fear of being wrong. If God will not give me a clear, wise message he might as well not exist.

"Some students at my school are demonstrating against nuclear armaments," she continued. "Many of them are very religious. Other students are demonstrating for re-armament and some of them are also very religious. This is a very important topic that I would not like to ignore. If the God who reigns over the universe is silent, that means I cannot count on Him. He is not there when I need Him. For me, He might as well not exist."

I felt very discouraged.

"I fear," I told her, "that if God came in person to speak with you, you would think you were hallucinating."

She smiled apologetically. "It is quite possible," she admitted. "Unless God, instead of speaking with me, decided to speak with everyone. But let's stop this conversation. It's not going to get us anywhere. Let's give our thoughts time to sort themselves out. We can pick up the discussion later on." She was about to go on speaking. However, she hesitated for a moment, then said, "I would rather like to talk about what I truly hold



close to my heart."

She stopped once more. She was trying to say something but the words hung on her lips.

I raised my eyes toward her and read clearly in her eyes what she was having trouble saying.

"Justine," I urged, "I would like things to remain the way they are between us."

"It is odd, Lanterne, how much we both fear some simple words. I feel myself trembling from head to toe at the idea of telling you that ...."

"Don't say it, Justine! You don't know anything about me. What I know and you don't puts a barrier between us that should not be crossed, not even with words."

"It is too late, Lanterne!" she said. "The barrier has already been crossed and the words have already been said, if only in a low voice."

I turned my back to avoid looking her in the face.

"Lanterne," she went on, "I am strong. I am ready to hear that you are a convicted criminal. You can even tell me that you have a wife and children somewhere. Nothing will change the fact that I love you and that you love me and ..."

I turned around and interrupted her with a serious and disheartened voice.

"You have said it, Justine; I love you and you love me. But you have also told me that you are strong. Therefore have the strength to end this."

"I can't imagine a reason that would make me renounce you, Lanterne. Trust me. Tell me what obstacles separate us. We can surmount them together ... Tell me, Lanterne! Be more open."

She slowly came closer to me and for a second time I turned my back to her.

"Come back tomorrow, Justine. I will tell you then."

But she did not leave. I turned towards her. She smiled, and I thought I read encouragement in her eyes. I bent my head and said, "Good-bye Justine".

She came close and put her hands on my shoulders to keep me at arm's length.

"Stop worrying," she said. "And sleep well."

She went to the door, then turned and called, "Lanterne." I lifted my head and heard her say, "I love you." Then she left me.

I had come to the farm about a year before. Justine was now seventeen and I knew her well enough to realize that her behaviour was not influenced by caprice or adolescent crisis. If Justine said she loved me, this was not something new. She had taken the time to work out her feelings. She must have asked herself if it were a passing physical attraction and decided there was something stable and definite about her love. She must also have decided there was no good reason to fight this love.

Any sensible man would have been happy to find himself loved by a girl like Justine. I was helpless. If I had been sent to earth to live as a man and feel what a man feels, was I not supposed to feel love? Must I reject Justine's love?

I was strongly tempted. I remembered my serpent as he was materialized in front of me by the conclave. I must beware my subconscious nature. As a man, certainly I had a right to love and to make love. But this male desire had no interest in what was good for Justine. Unless I took every precaution I could harm her.

How things had changed! From being God, who could wipe out the whole of humanity, I had degenerated to a human nature. I worried so much about the happiness of one creature that I was terrified of wronging her!

## CHAPTER V REVELATION

It was the day to reveal myself. I would have liked to anticipate Justine's reaction, but no longer had the power of divination.

If Justine believed me I would have accomplished an important part of my mission on earth. If not she would have no choice but to judge me insane. In either case, success or failure, Justine would realize there was no future in our love. The sooner she recognized this the better for her.

My own choice was easier. Misery was for me no more than a school. I was God and, once my mission on earth was accomplished, the misery would disappear. I also had the advantage of possessing a superhuman will which made misery more bearable. I could now realize to what extent man can suffer from love. Was it necessary to create man with such a great capacity to feel suffering?

A tap at the door and Justine came into my room. She was dressed simply. Somehow, it enhanced the air of honesty and forthrightness radiating from her. She was beautiful.

I invited her to the table and filled the cups with tea. When we were seated I raised my eyes toward her and met her gaze. It was confident with love and trust. I approached the subject directly.

"Justine, I would like you to examine a proposition and consider its merits.

"A person that you respect, that you love, who has proven to you that he thinks and acts wisely in all matters, tells you very seriously that he is God himself. He says he is down on earth in special circumstances with a mission to convince just one human being that he is God. What would you say about it?"

She appeared uneasy.

"That is a strange question," she replied. "If it is only a theoretical case that you raise for its virtue in argumentation, I would like not to answer it. If it is a matter of a real case, it would help if you were more direct and clear."

I took a deep breath before continuing.

"Very well. I claim to be God descended to earth. I will explain why I must be believed in by someone without performing miracles. I would like that someone to be you."

She turned pale and I could see the cup shaking in her hands. She put the cup down, made an effort at controlling herself, then implored me, "Tell me you are joking, Lanterne! I once told you that you were a God to me, and here you want to be the God of the universe."

I gazed at her. She was suffering and I could read panic in her eyes. My determination was weakening.

"Look me straight in the eyes," I said firmly, "and tell me if I am serious or not."

She stared into my eyes, then lowered her eyelids. Her voice trembled.

"Lanterne! I love you and I am afraid for you!"

Somehow I was able to withstand witnessing Justine's suffering. My will did not melt. And yet my divine component was not unkind or insensitive to Justine's suffering. It loved Justine but was so conscious of what had to be done, so strong and determined that nothing personal could deflect it from its way. I spoke gently.

"Do not be afraid, Justine! Act only according to your heart or to your reason. You now know that I claim to be God. Therefore either I am God or I am raving mad.

"It is certainly difficult to believe that I am God. But is it easier to believe that the Lanterne you know – that this Lanterne is crazy?"

Somehow Justine seemed to recover.

"Lanterne," she said, "I fear that the incident with the bull has disturbed something in your brain. If you had not put yourself between the bull and me you would not have this madness in your head."

She had decided that I was mad. She even rationalized it in a way that she thought could be acceptable to her and to me. I knew already that the game was lost.

"No, Justine!" I responded. "It is not a matter of madness. Long before the incident with the bull your father changed my name from The Eternal to Lanterne. You see clearly that this goes back a long time."

Justine was never short of arguments. She would outdo herself. The intellectual challenge of opposing my arguments seemed to bring more life and hope to her.

"No," she replied. "Your name might have been The Eternal. But you did not believe you were He. Your madness leaves nothing amiss and relies on the oddness of a name you were bearing because you feel the need to believe that you are not crazy.

"Open your eyes, Lanterne, and be glad that your madness is limited, that you are capable of reasoning. I want to help you to think and lead you to realize what has happened to you."

I was about to answer but she interrupted me.

"Suppose," she proceeded heatedly, "that due to an accident a lapse of memory removed from your consciousness the remembrance of who you are, of your childhood and so on. You have the illusion of remembering that you were God. So you are only a person who needs to be treated and whom I love so much! You must admit that it is a serious possibility."

She was not asking much. She just wanted me to acknowledge nothing more than the mere possibility that I was not God. I looked at her. She seemed to hang on my words as if I were going to pronounce on her a sentence. I was very tempted to give her that bit of hope.

"In principle," I said, "it is possible. In fact it is not. This would not explain the strength of my determination to give up the happiness of loving you and being loved by you. You see, we must reject that, either because I am God or because I am crazy."

"No, Lanterne!" she shouted, her eyes filled with tears. "I will not renounce you! I know that you are not God. As for your madness, it is not dangerous and can be cured."

I was determined not to leave her any illusion.

"Justine, you must accept the idea that we are going to separate. I love you too much to let you attach yourself either to a madman or to a God who must abandon you. I will stay at the farm a few more days. Perhaps during this time you will come to believe that I truly am God. But then I must set off again on my way."

I knew that I was torturing her but I had no other choice.

I raised my eyes and saw an agonizing spectacle. Justine was crying silently, breaking her heart over an imaginary guilt and not knowing how to help me.

I got up and started to move back and forth without looking at her. I heard her rise from her chair. The noise of rustling garments made me turn around. Justine had slipped off her dress and was nearly naked. She smiled at me through her tears and raised her arms to me.

"Forget your worries and come love me."

It was not just a last-ditch effort to keep me. She was a woman, she loved me and she knew that I loved her. I was frightened. I felt my human companion lay hold on me, struggling to push me into Justine's arms. How beautiful she was! How adorable she was! How pure she was! Yes, pure. How great my love for her!

The struggle within was devastating, and I felt that without dramatic action on my behalf I would lose the battle. I had to resort to the only thing which, at that moment, could stop us.

I lifted the tea-kettle off the stove and with a determined movement placed my hand on the burning element.

The pain was excruciating. Justine let out a cry and started to throw herself toward me, but I stopped her with a gesture of my hand.

"Justine," I warned, "if you take another step I will put my face on the burner. Think of it, Justine. What man could bear the pain I am ready to impose on myself?"

Justine was frantic. She grabbed her dress and sobbed. "I am leaving the room, Lanterne. I am afraid that my presence will cause you harm. I would like to help you but I don't know what to do. Your hand needs to be treated and bandaged. I'll send Lucien to take care of you."

I discovered later that Justine went straight to her father. They discussed what they could do to help and concluded that I seriously needed to be treated by specialists.

They went to Perigueux to consult a psychiatrist. He explained the necessity of having me committed to a hospital for the mentally ill, for my own good. A nurse came to visit me at the farm. She said she had to give me an injection of antibiotics to prevent an infection in my burned hand. In fact she injected me with a drug and I was wrapped in a strait-jacket

and taken to the hospital. When I woke I found myself locked in a room with padded walls. I still wore the strait-jacket.

I understood that my situation must be the work of Justine who had given up hope of helping me in any other way. She would be crying in silence, heartbroken at not being able to do anything for me.

The aching in my hand became greater and greater but, strangely, I felt a new righteousness. I did not know if the conclave was watching me. The sight of a God in a strait-jacket must have been unique in the conclavian annals!

My mission was becoming more and more difficult. I could not know how long I would be in this situation nor how I could convince anyone that I was God when I had failed in particularly favourable circumstances.

Two orderlies came in and removed me from the jacket. They led me to the office of one of the staff psychiatrists who began by apologizing. The strait-jacket was a necessary precaution taken at the beginning with patients who would not submit to treatment voluntarily.

I asked him if he considered me to be a menace to the public peace, and if not why it had been necessary to intern me in a lunatic asylum.

He asked if I remembered pretending to be God. I replied that it was not a pretention.

"Lanterne," he said, "it has been reported to me that you are very reasonable. Therefore I will be frank with you. A man in possession of his mental capacities does not pretend to personify God. To pretend to be God is a sure sign of mental confusion and indicates that you need to be treated. You are not capable of making reasonable decisions. Treatment can be forced on you if the doctors think it's necessary, but it would be better for you to accept the treatment willingly."

"You think, therefore, that God does not exist?" I answered. "Or, if He does exist, that He would not decide to come to earth as a human?"

"Listen, Lanterne! We have a dozen patients here who are pretending to be God. We care for them well. Some of them are making good progress and will, perhaps, soon be cured."

"Do you have patients," I asked defiantly, "who pretend to be doctors?"

"Yes, Lanterne, we also have several like that."

"And do you lock them up?"

He waited a little before answering, trying to figure out what point I wanted to make.

"That depends," he said finally. "If a person claims to be a doctor for fraudulent purposes he will have to be dealt with by the law. But if he pretends to be a doctor because of a mental derangement he may be confined and cared for."

"You forget the simplest case," I retorted. "Someone could claim to be a doctor because he really is one. That someone claims to be a doctor is not sufficient grounds to suspect him of fraud or madness. Doctors do in fact exist, and a doctor has the right to pretend to be one. So why is it sufficient that if a person 'pretends' to be God he is considered crazy? Does not God actually exist? Does He not have the right to assume human form? Are you not struck by the fact that my pretension to be God is the only sign of anomaly that you can detect in me? Quite contrary to the other gods in your hospital, nothing else in my conduct or in my way of reasoning indicates that I am mad."

"Lanterne," he said with a tolerant smile, "can you give me a reasonable explanation why God would be personified by Lanterne and would let Himself be put in a strait-jacket?"

"I wanted to verify if a miracle was the only way to convince someone of my being God," I replied. "Without resorting to miracles can I win man's faith? What determines faith in my believers?"

"There you go, Lanterne," he interjected. "The God you personify is already unreasonable. I am a believer myself. My faith is not based on any miracle that I have personally witnessed. But there is a difference between believing that God exists and believing that you are God. You must take into account that pretending to be God proves nothing. What matters is the motive behind the pretension. If you pretend to be God in order to form a sect whose wealth depends on your power to fool the masses, then you are not mad. Such gods do exist. They have managed to convince millions and have become very wealthy. But if you sincerely believe that you are God, that is a true sign of madness.

"I will concede that anything is possible. The sun might not rise tomorrow. You might be God. And perhaps I am a madman myself who believes that he works in this institution. But reality is made of only a tiny part of everything that is possible. The chance of my being wrong is small if I expect the sun to rise tomorrow morning and if I take your belief that



you are God as a sign of mental instability. Besides, the God you personify isn't very convincing."

"In short," I retorted, "you believe in God as long as God conforms to the idea that you have of him. I recognize that my pretending to be God would not prove in any way my divine quality. But by the same token it doesn't exclude it either."

"I am not proclaiming from the rooftops that I am God. I intend to reveal it to those who first have confidence in me and who are certain that I am not capable of false pretense. I hope to enjoy at least the same degree of freedom as those who pretend to be God but with no sincerity. I also want the freedom to reveal to a friend with total trust that I am God."

"That is not possible, Lanterne! Your friends, as you are aware, are worried about your mental state and would like to see you cured."

I was indignant.

"Are you trying to say that I do not have any choice, that I am supposed to remain in this institution until you declare me cured?"

"Don't rush things, Lanterne. I have not decided yet what treatment to use in your case, or what measures to take if it fails. I must admit, though, that I am surprised that your illness seems to be limited only to believing you are God and that your ability to reason does not seem to be impaired. I hesitate to use a chemical treatment in your case. Instead I think I would prefer psychoanalysis."

"I also get the impression that you will restrain yourself from any act of violence, so you may communicate with any other patients who manifest no violent reactions."

## CHAPTER VI RECOGNITION

The sessions with the psychoanalyst were not numerous. Dr. Armand first questioned me about my parents and siblings but he had to give up on this direct method. I could not keep from smiling at the ludicrous character of his questions. My smile was apparently kind and ironical at the same time, and it made Dr. Armand ill at ease.

He tried an indirect method next. This consisted of discussing any topic in which he could mention inconspicuously a familial situation concerning a political or historical person. He would compare this situation with his own, as if to suggest that I do the same.

In short, through a long and harmless conversation he would try to catch me offguard to spot an expression or a clue that would help him find in me the thread of a lost memory.

He soon exhausted his knowledge of history and politics and, for lack of a better subject, started discussing the events of his own life. He undoubtedly wanted me to follow his example.

Next he tried to teach me the method of association.

"I can start with any item," he explained. "For instance the couch I am sitting on. What is peculiar about it? It is maroon. Good! That doesn't tell me much. The couch is very comfortable. It is much better than the metal chair that I had to sit on for a whole hour, without moving, when my stepfather punished me for some transgression.

"There, you see? Starting with a couch leads you to a chair, which takes you to your stepfather ... and that has no end. Do the same thing yourself! Start with this book, for example."

He handed me a book which I grasped. I looked at it and it started me thinking.

He interrupted my thoughts.

"Speak up," he said. "There must be something you could associate with this book!"

"This book," I answered, "has a red cover which reminds me of blood."

He was pleased.

"That's it," he said getting excited. "You are on the right track. But you must carry on without reflecting too much. Let yourself be led by your emotions."

"The book," I went on saying, "reminds me of the Bible; its red colour reminds me of blood. There was too much blood shed in the Bible."

He encouraged me. "Let that lead you back to your own emotions. Wake up your dormant memory. Blood! The Bible! Tie that into your own life!"

"I credited blood," I went on, "with properties it does not have. I have not yet had a chance to correct this mistake."

He encouraged me to continue, listing on his fingers.

"Book! Blood! Bible! Mistake to correct! Keep on without thinking too much."

I was getting tired and decided to put an end to it.

"It is the number and the seriousness of my mistakes that made the conclave send me to earth to fall into the hands of a psychiatrist who would have benefitted from consulting some books, red covers or not. By doing this, he would have avoided making his blood boil. Perhaps he would understand that locking up in cold blood a peace-loving person who does not take himself for a mythical dragon, but for God, is not recommended in any book."

He was offended.

"That will be enough for today," he said.

Dr. Armand tried to hypnotize me, but to no avail. Next he wanted to know my opinions about incest and the Oedipus complex, at what age I made love for the first time ...

Finally he told me that, in his opinion, no progress could be made without a co-operative effort on my behalf. I must seriously consider the possibility that I was mentally ill, he insisted. I must begin with the Cartesian doubt and come to wish to be treated, if only to discard the logical possibility that I was sick. The sooner I decided to help him with the task the sooner I would be cured.

The psychiatric sessions had been a waste of time up to this point, he told me.

"No," I answered seriously, "they have not! If you have not learned much about me, I have acquired a good sense of your problems. I have no doubt that you suffer from a number of complexes, and I think that I can help you get rid of them."

"Thank you Lanterne. But each to his own job. Let me do mine."

"That," I said ironically, "is the last straw! Who is stopping whom from doing his job!?"

"I see you have a sense of humour, Lanterne. But I am not in a very good mood today."

Until now I had refused to mingle with the other patients. I wanted to be able to think in the tranquillity of my room.

For a man forty years old, my situation seemed desperate. But for God, even temporarily fallen, the years did not count. I knew that I was God, but wanted to settle the problem of knowing whether or not any reasonable doubt on the question could exist. I know how destructive doubt is, but without doubt a person who makes a mistake cannot correct his error.

Justine and Armand were convinced that I was mentally ill and had begged me to consider the possibility that I was not God.

Very well! Let us weigh the pros and cons.

Suppose that I am not God.

The absence of any childhood memories could be the result of a memory loss. The vivid recollection I had of being God could be explained by supposing that my loss of memory was caused by study of the Bible pushed to an obsession. The superhuman will that drove me to accomplish my mission remained mysterious, and my capacity to endure suffering was difficult to interpret.

On the contrary, to be a fallen god in human form sent to earth by the conclave was a reality anchored in my memory and in my personality. It presented me with no contradiction.

I was certain that I was God, but I confess that, in spite of the balance of arguments leaning towards the truth of my divine character, I could not produce a single unimpeachable proof that I was.

I thought of Justine and remained convinced that I had behaved correctly not only as God, but also as a man. If I was God I must reduce the importance of my human companion to his true proportions. He should be only a source of information, a way for me to feel human sentiments and to come to understand men. But I did not wish to complete my education as a man at anyone's expense, especially not Justine's.

If I was man I must recognize that love can elevate a man and bring him close to the level of God. Man or God, I wanted Justine to forget me so that she could enjoy an unblemished happiness later on. My human companion dreamed of having Justine, but he also loved Justine for what she was, not just for what she could give him.

And Lucien! I admired his love for his sister but detected in it traces of incestuous jealousy. Some day he would understand that in spite of my passion for her, Justine truly was, for me, a sister.

I was proud of my human component, of its restraint. It had no regrets. No earthly pleasure could equal the satisfaction of letting the happiness of others prevail.

If I was God I had learned much about the state of man.

As well, my thoughts were clarifying a problem of primordial importance to me. Being simultaneously man and God raises the question of the relation between divine morality and human morality. Need they be different?

As God I could cause the death of Job's children for no other reason than to test him. Is it moral to make children die merely to test the parents? Evidently it would not be humanly moral! Why should it be divinely moral? As God do I not have the responsibility to confine my actions to those which can serve as an inspiration for humans? Is it not indicative of future possibilities that my divine component can now live in harmony with my human component?

That would resolve for me the problem of my behaviour. Man raised towards God if only through madness, or a fallen God getting down to man's level. The behaviour in both cases would be identical. Therefore I need no longer to worry about proving divinity to myself. I know that I am God, and I intend to behave as such. But even in the impossible case that I am only a man I would not like, as a man, to be ashamed of the God I believed I was.

It occurred to me that perhaps I was supposed to learn something from my stay in this hospital and from observing the mad people under

treatment. The thought seemed ludicrous until I started to think of them as previous sinners. Some of them may have lead virtuous lives, but others may have been on their way to damnation and could be saved only through sincere repentance. What was their chance of salvation? How could a man be damned when he was not conscious of his past sins, or when he was deprived of the possibility of repenting?

I thought of the patient Jean-Jacques, with his split personality. Sometimes he was Jacques, an angelic young man, considerate and respectful. Other times he was Jean, a devilish, egotistical person. Should Jean-Jacques go to heaven or to hell?

What could be done where the separation of good and evil was not so clear-cut? Emile's 90-percent evil nature dominated his 10-percent angelic one. Could I send to Heaven a tenth of his soul?

The matter of split or multiple personality absorbed me. I asked myself how an individual with a single soul could harbour more than one personality. And, since all possible gradations existed from the very wise to the completely mad, what were the corresponding gradations in split and multiple personalities?

My observations left me more confused than before. It became clear to me that at no time could a man make full use of all his cerebral capabilities. In each set of circumstances particular paths of his brain are activated. They are related to the memories, emotions, associated reflexes and habits relevant to this set of circumstances. All those internal influences, at any given moment, act together at the exclusion of others to define the personality of the moment. It is thus, for instance, that some jailers can be cruel towards prisoners while leading the life of a tender-hearted family man. It also explained why a person with a strong racial prejudice might behave 'out of character' with individuals of a particular race.

A man has thousands of different reactions in thousands of different settings. Some of these responses may correspond to different personalities. A normally courteous person may lack courtesy as a driver. In most people there are enough similarities, correlations and compatibility of structures between these responses that it is possible to observe a stable, single, dominating personality. In some cases, however, these similarities, correlations and compatibilities of structure are weak and lead to pathological behaviour. All people have a multiplicity of personalities. In normal people the personalities of the individual overlap and merge in an appreciable measure. In abnormal cases the different personalities develop independently as if they belonged to different individuals. The merge-and-overlap feature is never complete and some of

the personalities in one individual may be more inclined to sin than others. To decide divinely, with infinite justice, would require punishing the sinning personality without hurting the virtuous one. Is that possible?

I went, one day, into the big commonroom where the patients could communicate among themselves. One caught my attention immediately. His face expressed both naivety and sadness.

An orderly told me his name was Jovial and that he had been mute since the day when he had murdered two children he had not even know.

Before the madness hit him he had the reputation of a good fellow who was always smiling. He had earned his nickname. It had been more than three years since he had been committed, unable to speak or even to make signs with his hands. He remained aloof from the other patients.

I no longer had the power of divination, so I knew nothing more about Jovial. But his face seemed so expressive that it could compensate for the lack of verbal communication. When I looked at him I forgot my preoccupations and started to concentrate my observations and thoughts on him.

Then he turned his face toward me and looked at me with a surprised expression. He began to walk slowly toward me, the agitation obvious on his face.

Jovial halted a short distance from me. I forgot that he was mad and that, undoubtedly, he would not understand me. But it was so obvious he wanted to say something.

"Yes, Jovial?"

And, to the amazement of the orderly and several other patients, he answered me.

"My God! I did not think I would find you here!"

It must have taken an enormous effort for him to pronounce these few words. The orderly had to hold him so he would not collapse. He lost consciousness and was taken to the infirmary. Shortly afterwards I was called to see Armand, the psychiatrist, who welcomed me with a question.

"Did you know Jovial before he was committed here?"

"No," I replied.

"But," he insisted, "he seems to have recognized you."

"Yes," I remarked. "It is a curious thing. He knows who I am and addressed me by saying, 'My God!'"

"Lanterne, you forget that that is a very common expression indicating astonishment or fear."

"Did he say it to anyone else?"

"No, Lanterne. He has been mute for three years. That's why I thought he must know you. Try to remember. Hold on! Here is his file. I have pulled out the confidential documents from it. Flip through the sheets and tell me if anything in it strikes you."

"I will do it to satisfy you."

The file contained several newspaper clippings describing the events which had resulted from Jovial's sudden attack of madness. There was also an essay written by Albert, a classmate of Jovial, six years before the trial. It was a description of the student who shared the same desk in school. The essay described Jovial in prophetic terms.

There was also a letter from Albert to Jovial in which he expressed concern about Jovial's mental health. I read the file carefully, then handed it back to Dr. Armand.

"No," I told him, "I don't know anything about Jovial. I am certain I have never met him outside this building during my time on earth."

"So be it, Lanterne. But I would like to ask for your help. Spend some time with him. Your company may have a good influence on him."

"In that case," I said, "I would like to keep that essay about him."

Armand took out several sheets and handed them to me.

"You can keep them a few days," he said.

The next day, after the psychiatrists had made their rounds, the door of my room opened and I looked up to see an orderly carrying a chair in one hand and leading Jovial by the arm. He sat the chair down and went out, leaving us alone.

Once again I was struck by the gentleness of his expression. He appeared timid or frightened. I invited him to sit but he threw himself at



my feet in a subservient position. I took him by the shoulders and directed him to his chair.

"Are you certain that I am God?" I asked him.

"Lord!" he said in earnest. "Do me the favour of reading what is in my heart. I feel no doubt."

It was a memorable moment for me. It had already been several months since the only proof of my divinity was, for me, the strength of my will. It was gratifying to see a kind of miracle in the fact that Jovial had found speech and that he had used it to affirm his faith in me. Moreover I was in the process of accomplishing the mission that had been given to me – that of convincing a man, just one, of my quality as God. All the same I had to make sure that his faith was truly a faith in God and not a passing illusion.

"Jovial," I addressed him. "I have come to earth as a human. At present I do not have any divine powers and I cannot read what is in your heart. No miraculous means are at my disposal with which I can distinguish between truth and lies. Believing you now becomes an act of faith for me."

"Lord!" said Jovial, "I will not try to understand. I only know that I am now face-to-face with God."

His faith in me was touching.

"I am, Jovial, as much man as God," I told him. "In view of this double being of mine I ask you not to express any sign of devotion toward me. Do not act as you would have with the God you knew through your reading of the Bible.

"If you have faith in me, this faith is going to be put to hard proof. Can you believe in a God with a human appearance, locked up for madness in a lunatic asylum, unable to free Himself through His own will?"

He was undeterred.

"Lord!" he said, "when it comes to you, I feel unable to understand. I admit that the God in the Bible was no less mysterious to me than you are, Lord, locked up with me in this asylum."

There was in Jovial, it seemed, a passivity bordering on fatalism. I explored his faith further.

"Do you love me?" I asked.

"No!"

He had answered without haste and without hesitation. I went on with apprehension.

"Do you hate me?" I asked again.

"No!" he said once more.

I continued hesitantly.

"What do you feel for me?"

"Respect and gratitude," he said.

I still had one more question.

"How did you recognize me?" I asked.

"Lord!" he answered, "I felt your presence. When I raised my eyes to yours I saw you as you had appeared in my dreams. I had always wished to see you out of my dreams but I never expected it to occur in this place."

I interrupted him. "Stop calling me Lord. Titles do not mean anything and add nothing to reality. Call me Lanterne. It is a name which was given to me in particular circumstances and I have become used to it. I'd also prefer you to speak to me with more familiarity as you would with an old acquaintance. In my present state I am partly a man, so a sort of equality exists between us. Besides, I repeat, real respect does not lie in appearances."

## **CHAPTER VII JOVIAL'S STORY**

Jovial came to see me every day. During these visits he told me as much as he could remember of the events that led to his committal. I will let him speak:

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"Ever since I was small I have had a thirst for Bible stories. I was the only son of parents of modest means. Not having any brothers or sisters, I could isolate myself in my own universe filled with angels and prophets.

In this universe there was no room for the Devil and his imps. I vaguely knew that the Devil existed, but that did not concern me. I was an obedient boy who loved his parents – I revered them and considered them the repository of knowledge and wisdom. The Devil had been made for others. The heavens, the angels and the prophets were as real to me as my parents. On the contrary bad boys and girls were part of a mythology, along with goblins and wizards. I was certain that they did not exist. What person knowing that good behaviour would lead directly to heaven would prefer to be vile and fall into the hands of the Devil? Such a person could not possibly exist. The guardians of hell, no doubt, were bored to death waiting for their first customer.

My cousin Odette was very sweet and I adored her. My aunt Isabel brought her regularly each Saturday afternoon. I introduced her to my personal world, and both of us would determine its evolution.

The time came when I had to go to school. My little world began to collapse from the first day. My mythology came to life and I had to admit not only that bad boys and naughty girls existed, but that their numbers were hardly negligible.

It was a wounding experience. For the first time I had to face the reality of the Devil, of temptation and of hell. There was no way, it seemed, to introduce them into my universe without producing a major upset. So strongly did I cling to the integrity of my world that any blow to its order could be dealt with only at the price of my serenity.

It took several months of reflection to resolve my conflicts. I introduced an impenetrable partition, on one side of which was the world I had created, while on the other were the Devil, temptation, bad boys and naughty girls.

Any grown-up person who ended up in hell must have been a bad character in his youth. Good boys and obedient girls, parents and teachers, all belonged to my initial world and could never, strictly never, be transferred to the other side of the partition. Temptation had no effect on them. They were destined from birth to be sincere, generous and tolerant, and they stayed that way until death.

Having regained my emotional equilibrium, and having learned to read, I took an increasing interest in the stories of the Bible. It was then that I realized I had completely forgotten to introduce God into my universe.

Odette and I had decided that no one could enter it without first being properly accredited. The first condition to be filled was that of existing. We did not want to see fairies and other imaginary people enter. The second condition was that of having a completely established personality. We had to know the beings in our world in enough detail that we could predict a range of possible behaviours to which they would be limited.

I did not have enough information on the subject of the Lord, so I went to my mother.

"Mama," I asked, "do we have a picture of the Lord?"

"No, my child, no one has a photograph of Him."

"But," I insisted, "is He not made in our image?"

"Why no, silly. It is we who are made in His."

"Is that not the same thing?" I asked.

"Not at all," she said, "God is not made. He exists and has always existed."

"If we are made in His image," I said, still not discouraged, "that means that we resemble Him, right?"

"Yes," she said. "We resemble Him. But the last person who saw Him face-to-face died long ago."

"So you cannot even tell if He looks more like Papa than my teacher?"

"No. Anyhow, you do not need to know who He looks like. You can talk to the Lord anywhere and anytime. He is everywhere, always ready to listen."

"But if a Chinese wants to speak with Him at the same time would the body of the Lord be here with me or there in China?"

My mother had, it seems, the patience of an angel.

"No one knows," she answered, "exactly to what extent His presence everywhere is accompanied by a body. God can see everything and hear everything from anywhere without having a multitude of bodies."

"But Mama, why would He have two eyes and two ears like us if He can hear and see without a body?"

I suppose she was at a loss. She hugged me tenderly and then said gently, "Your mother does not have all the answers. And as for the good Lord, it is not possible to know everything. Just as you respect me and do not come into my room without knocking or open my dresser without permission, in the same way, out of respect for the Lord, you must not ask so many questions about Him. Do not be indiscreet with your parents, and do not be indiscreet towards the Lord."

"Mother," I said, "what is a multitude?"

"That, my son, means a large number."

"Does ten make a multitude?"

"Sometimes yes," she replied, "sometimes no."

The situation was very confusing to me. God resembled man but looked like neither my father nor my teacher. The number of shapes that He could take at one time was sometimes less than ten and sometimes more. I needed some explanations and tried one last time to question my mother.

"Mama," I said, "is it indiscreet to ask the Lord some questions while I say my prayers before bed?"

"No, my child," she answered. "You may ask anything you wish."

That evening after my prayers I spoke to God.

"Lord," I said to Him, "I asked my mother some questions about you. I know you heard them. If you think that my questions are not indiscreet, answer me. Thank you."

That night I saw the Lord in a dream. I saw His face. He did not look like either my father or my teacher. He looked very much like you,

Lanterne. God spoke to me and said, "I do not have a visible image in a mirror or a reflection in water. My image is spiritual, and therefore I have made man in my spiritual image. I took, for your sake, the body you see. I can have a different body for each man. I hear and see everything. When I hear I am a spiritual ear. When I see I am a spiritual eye. When I want to be seen my ears and my eyes can then resemble those of man."

The next day I formally introduced God into my world. At the first opportunity I let Odette know about my decision.

The fact that I had talked with God in my dream did not surprise me. Since He existed, to see God and to hear Him was, for me, the natural thing to expect. Such visions were not numerous. On the one hand I did not want to invoke God's presence in vain and, on the other hand, God did sometimes refrain from answering my prayers. In such cases I took this refusal to appear in my dream as a significant message.

It was about this time that I acquired the nickname Jovial. A teacher at school gave it to me and everyone started to use it, including my parents. It was indicative of the happiness that I felt whenever I contemplated my world, from which I had eliminated all contradiction.

Living in a world of my own proved to be an obstacle between me and my classmates. I never felt lonely and I was quite able to do without their company. Understandably the children my age showed no interest in a world laid out by me.

There was one exception – my schoolmate, Albert. We met by sharing the same desk at school and later became friends. I was puzzled by his behaviour and did not know at first to what class of people he belonged. He was kind and smart and acted very friendly toward me. He was critical of religion, faith and beliefs of any kind. He had little respect for God and His angels. He was gifted with a sharp intelligence with which he attempted to corrupt my understanding of the world. He soon came to realize that nothing could shake me. My stand was not a matter of reasoning. My world existed and I knew it. Nothing could distance me from it.

I asked myself on which side of the partition I should put Albert? Strictly speaking he was an enemy of God and should end up in Hell. But I knew better. Albert's motives were always good. His intentions were pure. So what if he couldn't see the light clearly? In heaven there must be special correcting spiritual glasses to help people see better. I therefore placed Albert in the heavenly part of my world. Odette's family moved from Perigueux to Paris when I was fourteen and she was twelve. They paid us one last visit before leaving. Once more I realized how much

affection I felt for Odette. It was with sincerity that I told her I would remember her. She would remain for me the symbol of goodness and virtue.

The years passed. I became a young man of twenty-two and still had much of my original happiness, although I was starting to doubt the reality of my world.

I often asked my mother for news of Odette. I had stopped writing to her after she gradually took longer to reply and after three of my missives had gone unanswered. My mother explained that life had become very difficult for Odette's parents and that she had been obliged to get a job in a department store. I had to forgive her for not being in the mood to send and receive letters.

One day I had to go to Paris. I set off, more excited with the idea of seeing Odette again than with being able to visit the great city. I knocked on the door of a dilapidated-looking apartment and met Odette's parents once again. They had aged many more years than had passed since I had last seen them. They were embarrassed and tried to avoid speaking about Odette. Still, they had to tell me she was not living with them. I insisted on getting her address, and they gave it to me reluctantly.

Now, five years later, it is still painful to recall my meeting with Odette in Paris. I cannot describe my emotions, my amazement and my dejection when it became evident that Odette worked in a brothel. My conversation with her was agony. I did not blame her for anything. I merely promised all the help I could offer to allow her to abandon her trade. I suppose my plans were childish; they did not stand up to Odette's criticism. She advised me to face up to reality, to leave my absurd world and not to fret. She even suggested jokingly that it would do me a lot of good to become one of her clients for awhile. Or, if I preferred, she could recommend a very nice girl to me. As for God – she no longer believed.

I returned home ill. Two weeks later I was still weak in my bed. My mother told me that since my return from Paris I had been running an unbroken fever and that my temperature was normal for the first time that very day. Under her care I got back on my feet. But it was impossible for me to become Jovial again.

Odette, the virtuous child, had become a sinful woman who made accommodations with sin. Had she died as a child she would be in heaven for eternity. Now it was likely that she was destined to go to hell. The death of a child should never cause sadness to the parents. It is even reasonable to wish death on children so they may escape the temptations reserved for adults.

The partition in my world which had separated good from evil was no longer intact. Odette had breached it. For the first time I felt pity and tenderness for the damned who could never regain the path to heaven.

For a few weeks I worked hard at my job as a draughtman and tried to forget Odette and my theological problems. I had regained some calm when I received a letter from Odette in which she wrote:

Dear Jovial,

I was bowled over by your visit to Paris a month ago. I was told that a visitor who did not look like the regular clients wanted to see me. I opened my door and felt pain when I saw you. You had grown and changed so much. But the tenderness I felt for you was the same as it had been when we had to say good-bye eight years earlier.

I knew that without a great effort to hold back my tears I would break down and cry the moment I took you in my arms to kiss you. To tell you how unhappy I was to be reduced to a lady of the night would have given you a heavy heart. I wanted you to leave scornful of me, even hating me. I thought that was the best way to help you avoid a heavy and lasting sadness.

But I can no longer bear the thought of being despised by you. I have to tell you that although I am a prostitute I am not a wicked person.

My parents moved to Paris when my father was offered a good job here. He always dreamed of spending his last years in the big city. He sold everything we had in Perigueux to make a better start. He did not know, poor man, that he was afflicted with a disabling illness which would surface two years later. I was then fourteen and suddenly found myself the only breadwinner at home. I don't need to give you details about our misery. You know what a girl of fourteen can earn honestly but you may not know how strong is the pressure on such a girl, in such a situation, to take to the street. I resisted it for four more years. My childish love for you helped me to hold on that long. I don't know if I really loved you or if I used it as a shield. The fact is that you were in my dreams and helped me withstand my hardships.

It could have lasted forever and I would have remained strong. I yielded when I was presented to a quack who pretended he had a cure for my father's illness. The cure was said to be effective and expensive, and there was only one way to get the needed money.

I will spare you the details. Suffice it to say that once this road was taken I could no longer get any other job. If only my sacrifice had been



any help to my father I would have been somewhat happy. I want you to know that I am not as bad as I let on.

I no longer believe in God. If you still do, pray for me.  
Odette

P.S. Do not bother writing me any letters. I will not read nor answer them.

I read and reread the letter many times. I found it hard to come to terms with it. I was haunted by the knowledge that Odette had been in love with me and that life had been so hard on her.

The letter disturbed me because it established a sort of continuity between the Odette of before, the virtuous child, and the Odette of today, the sinful woman. The sorrow I had felt at having lost Odette was replaced by the sorrow of knowing that my Odette would be forever damned.

"She asked me to pray for her. Poor thing, she had lost faith but not hope. She must have felt abandoned by God and may also have felt ashamed for having sinned and for finding no way out of sin. I resolved to beseech God to pardon Odette and come to her aid.

I went to bed after my prayers but I was so agitated I did not fall asleep until the early hours of the morning.

God came to me in a dream and said something like this: "Odette has sinned through fornication and lack of faith. Her place is in hell, already reserved. You must erase all feeling of love for her and demonstrate your faith in me by going to Paris and stabbing her in the heart."

The apparition of God soon disappeared; I awoke panting and feverish. The memory of my dream-God was vivid. I could clearly recall His face as it had appeared to me in other dreams and the different expressions it could take. I was struck by the ferocity of His looks when He mentioned Odette's lack of faith.

Trembling as much from fever as from emotion, I managed later to dress and go knock at the parish priest's door. He noticed that I was feverish.

"What is happening to you, Jovial?" he demanded. "You should be in bed. Come, sit down in this armchair while I make you some camomile tea.

"No, father," I answered slowly, "I am not sick. I am simply unable to withstand God's order to me to go and kill my cousin Odette in Paris who is guilty of fornication and lack of faith."

"Tut, tut!" he replied. "You must still be dreaming. Shape up and do not attach so much importance to a dream. Rest, eat well, go to bed early after saying your prayers. You will feel better after a good night's sleep."

"Father," I said, "I don't care whether I feel well or ill. What I need is to know if I have any recourse. Does an action or a prayer exist that could lead God to pardon my cousin and relieve me from His order to kill her?"

"Come to your senses, Jovial!" exclaimed the priest. "It is not God you saw in your dream. Tomorrow you may see Jupiter or Mercury or any other Greek God in your dream. Will you then believe in the reality of your dream? Well and good if God in your dream would induce you to do a good deed! But to commit a crime? To kill your cousin? It is rather the Devil who would order you to do it. In fact the more I think about it the more I am convinced it was the Devil that came to you."

"Father," I broke in, "when God asked Abraham to kill his son Isaac, how could Abraham be sure that it was indeed God and not the Devil who was ordering him to do it? Why does the Bible mention Abraham's obedience as an example of his faith in God?"

"In biblical times," the priest answered, "life was not as sophisticated as it is today. People then were free from psychosis. Dreams and apparitions were direct means of communication between God and man. They were usual occurrences which could be interpreted in only one way. This is no longer the case. Modern society has caused man to become sick. He now has visions and dreams whose origins are ambiguous and which can be interpreted only by a psychiatrist. Go back to bed, Jovial, and let yourself be taken care of. Forget your dream – and your cousin Odette."

I was in no mood to argue. Unlike me the priest had not been in communication with God. He could doubt the significance of my dreams. But I had no doubt about the reality of the order God had given me. If the priest could be believed there was no way for God to communicate directly with His creatures without the intermediary of a psychiatrist who would decide if the communication was real or psychotically induced!

Back at home I reread the passage describing the order given by God to Abraham to sacrifice his son. I wondered how a text so familiar could still reveal so many surprises.

To start with, did God need to put Abraham to a hard test? Did He not know by omniscience Abraham's degree of fidelity and faith? If He knew it the test was of no use. If He did not know it the test was inconclusive. It remained possible that if the angel had stopped Abraham's hand a tenth of a second later Abraham might have changed his mind and decided to disobey God. Even if Abraham's hand was already moving quickly and was stopped at the very last moment it was still possible for Abraham to deviate the blow and voluntarily miss the victim.

And even if one admits that Abraham would certainly have sacrificed his son, what does this prove? Love for God? Respect for God? How little love Abraham had for his son?

It might, God forgive me, merely prove Abraham's cowardice, his egotism in preferring his own life to that of his son. Would he have sacrificed himself? Did he not make his own wife and half-sister, Sarah, sleep with the Pharaoh to avoid for himself the risk of being killed?

Which one of those suppositions corresponds to the truth? To choose from all of those the one that gives the most credit to Abraham necessitates a knowledge of what was going through Abraham's mind or else a premonition of what would have happened if the angel had not stopped his hand. In both cases such a knowledge or premonition makes the test totally useless. Is there any way to know without further test or without premonition whether Abraham, after sacrificing his son, would not then have cursed God in anger and rage?

Jesus commanded the believers to pray that God not tempt them. Odette, as a good believer, made this prayer daily. Why did God not respond to her request? Why? Why? Instinctively I put my hands to my ears as if to avoid hearing the many questions formulated within me over which I had, it seemed, little control. I threw myself onto my bed and fell asleep immediately.

God returned in a dream and repeated exactly what He had said the night before. This time the dream did not have the effect of a nightmare. I resumed my sleep and woke up late in the morning feeling calmer. My reflections on Abraham's case had helped clarify my thoughts. I had to decide whether or not to obey God's order to kill Odette. What would be my own motivation for obeying God – the love of God? I had to admit honestly that, compared to my love for my parents or even for Odette, my love for God had a rather abstract and distant quality.

Faith in God? My faith in the existence of God was absolute, but it is conceivable to believe in God while disobeying Him.

Fear? Certainly disobeying a formal order from God would result in eternal damnation. To obey out of fear of God and to save my soul, however, would mean that my motive was self-interest even if, in doing so, I had to send Odette instantly to hell. Was it not still possible for Odette to act so that her sin would be forgiven? Was I to eliminate this possibility in order to save my own soul?

Faith in God's wisdom? I had no doubt that God's wisdom was infinite. But wisdom has to serve some purpose. In this case God's wisdom was serving His justifiable anger. My wisdom was supposed to serve me. It would save me if it mattered for me to be saved. Without doubting God's wisdom I must recognize that my motivation is different from His. It is good for Him, but is it good for me?

A Jovial who would lead Odette to hell with his own hands and would then enjoy an eternal beatitude would no longer be the Jovial that I am. It would mean obliterating for eternity the Jovial I am in favour of one who would act as an instrument in leading her to hell.

I had to recognize that the Jovial I knew was dearer and more appealing to me and – most importantly – worthier of love and respect than the Jovial I would become by killing Odette in order to secure my eternal life. Did I have the strength to withstand damnation? That was no longer the problem. I did not have the strength to kill spiritually the Jovial I am. I therefore chose damnation.

I knelt down in front of my bed and addressed God.

"I hope, my Lord," I said, "that I see clearly into myself and that I am sincere when I say it is repugnant to me to disobey you. But the soul you have given me is unable to do harm knowingly to another person. Tell me that by killing Odette I am opening the road to heaven for her and I will not hesitate an instant to obey you. But to kill her in order to satisfy your anger, to send her to hell by killing her, is something I cannot do. I do not allow myself to question the wisdom of your order. I know well that an infinity of reasons escapes me and that my disobedience is damnable and deserves to be so. It is with sadness that I have decided to disobey you. I do not want heaven if, in order to enter it, I have to throw someone else into hell.

"I hope, Lord, that I am not wrong when I say I feel no bitterness against you and that my sadness results from the fact that I would have preferred a test in which my obedience involved sacrificing only myself."

I stood up, got dressed, and went down to the street. I took the road away from town. The air was fresh and good to smell. I could not help

noticing that I had enjoyed life and I thanked God sincerely and spontaneously for everything He had given to me.

Then I noticed two children, a boy and a girl, coming toward me. The girl looked like Odette when she was much younger. I wondered if this girl, like Odette, would not be damned later. Was it still possible to save her? Would it not be a good deed on my behalf to send this miniature of Odette directly to heaven?

I could not hesitate. I still wonder how, after more than forty-eight hours without eating, I had the strength to strangle the two children. They tried their best to free themselves. I was in a state of exaltation even though I knew I would soon be arrested and thrown in jail.

Only when the children had stopped moving did the terror arise in me. I remembered that God could curse a man till the fourth generation and therefore make innocents pay for the crimes of their parents. Was it possible that God would damn those two innocent children to make them pay for my disobedience? I may have sent two innocents directly to hell who otherwise could have found their way to heaven.

I wanted to scream from pain but no sound came from my mouth. I remained mute till the day I met God face to face in the shape of you, Lanterne.

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At the time of Jovial's arrest the authorities were baffled by his senseless crime. In their effort to solve this mystery they got access to Jovial's school records and interrogated some of his former schoolmates. They were impressed by Albert's composition which seemed to point to Jovial's predisposition to madness.

Jovial's file at the mental hospital contained a police memo describing Albert as an arrogant young man who pretended, for the fun of it, that Jovial was a kind of saint. At the time of his interrogation Albert was working toward a degree in psychology. The title of his thesis was "Faith, curiosity and the deviant mind". Albert's essay follows:

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## JESUS II

He differed in many respects from his predecessor Jesus of Nazareth. Certainly he too had a faith in God which could move mountains, but he did not realize that he was charged with a mission and thought himself an

ordinary man. He was, he thought, just Jovial, and did not know that he was one of a line of prophets.

Like Jesus the first he was tolerant and loved, as they say, his neighbour. But while Jesus the first loved and tolerated as a visionary, Jovial showed delight in the worth of his fellow humans.

He also differed in the quality of his miracles. Those of Jesus the first are undeniable but too human. To raise a man from the dead or cure him of an illness is no longer the exclusive domain of prophets. If Moses made water gush from a rock by the use of a stick, each one of us can now push a button and make innumerable things occur. Human science also has its miracles.

But Jovial, Jesus II, performed miracles of a completely different kind which went unnoticed. It is a fact that those things which seem the most natural, the most simple and the least controversial, on closer examination raise the most questions and reveal great contradictions. So it was with Jovial's miracles. They were not spectacular and one would need a whole book to convince the reader of their supernatural character. For now I will merely indicate what was most miraculous in Jovial.

Jesus of Nazareth was inspired by his heavenly Father. He was conscious of being Jesus and acted as such. But one wonders if he could have remained what he was and done what he had to do if he weren't aware what he was.

The most miraculous thing about Jovial, Jesus II, is that he did not know of his divine gifts.

The mother of Jesus II was called Mary, a coincidence of no importance. She was not visited by angels before or during her pregnancy and nothing pointed to the miraculous character of the child. He is, by the way, known to look very much like his father so I doubt that in this case there would be any need to suspect the intervention of the Holy Spirit. However, let us not decide on this now and bind future Councils of Rome by premature considerations. The Holy Spirit could easily make the miraculous infant in the image of the husband or any other, for whatever reason. All the same, at our present level of understanding, we can dismiss the intervention of the Holy Ghost. The miracle is less evident but greater for it.

We are talking about a prophet, therefore the reader has every right to ask for as many details as possible. Did he talk from birth? Did he wear a halo? Did he attract animals? At the risk of disappointing the reader I must admit that nothing in the circumstances of his birth or early childhood is

particularly revealing, so I will pass over the details and give a few general comments.

Jovial was a charming child – obedient and gentle. He appeared to be very intelligent but not particularly precocious. He learned to speak and walk at the same age as most children.

He learned to pray quite soon and, now that I think about it, he prayed in a very special way. He did not recite. To listen to him one would have thought he did not know his prayers but was composing one which, by mere chance, happened to be the one he had learned.

It could be that this in itself was miraculous. One talks to a child about "saying your prayers". But what one really means is saying prayers, since the child is merely reciting a text learned by heart and made up by others. Since these prayers are undeniably effective they should be recited regularly. Often we think of something else as we recite. Memory, like a tape recorder, unreels the ritual phrases and prayer is reduced to a movement of the lips with no feelings. It has become a habit, almost a mannerism.

When the worshipper makes an effort, or in his fervor thinks of the meaning of prayer, he no longer addresses his prayer to God. Prayer must be a cry from the heart, not from the memory, or an operation of logic.

The believer might have a prayer to say, his own prayer. But why should this prayer be confused with the one he has learned and can recite mechanically?

There are some believers for whom prayer is much more than a recitation, of course. It becomes a mystery, that of communion with God. To pray is to get in touch with God. It can only be done by speaking their prayer and, as long as you believe in this communion, the phrases recited in Latin or English take on a new significance. Praying is no longer saying a prayer, it is the accomplishment of something much more important than the words used. The passionate believer is more impressed by the act of praying than by prayer. Prayer should be mysterious for this believer, either through its language or through the banality of its words and their repetition. For a true and original prayer could distract the attention of the believer from the act of praying to the prayer itself.

Jovial seemed to be in continual communion with God. He believed that everything going on around him was the reflection of a spiritual world which was mysterious and whose windows were open only to him. This world was different from ours and bathed in a Divine atmosphere. God

and the angels reigned over its smallest details. For Jovial, this world was as real as ours.

Jovial did not see himself as different or superior to anyone else. To be good, honest and kind, and to come to the help of everyone, was for him a natural reaction which did not arise from any moral obligation. He did not measure out the help given to others in terms of what it might cost him in money, or time, or pain. This was just the way he was.

It will not be necessary to crucify Jovial. No physical torture could cause him as much suffering as being unable to help his neighbour. He will discover in time that he is unable to help and he will bear this as his inner cross until his death or until it drives him mad.

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Albert had caught some essential traits of Jovial's character: the sincerity of his convictions verging on the miraculous and his purity of heart. I admired Jovial for considering his friend worthy of a place in heaven (with correcting spiritual glasses). Jovial had not changed his judgment of Albert even after receiving from him the following letter.

July 10th, 1976

Dear Jovial,

I am moved by your concern and your endeavour at saving my soul. I cannot remain indifferent to so much devotion and I feel obliged to reply in kind and to try, with little hope, to save what remains of your mental health.

Do not take me wrong. The playful tone of my letter is in the best traditions of our past dealings. It should not mask the fact that I feel very friendly towards you. Why, otherwise, should I bother writing to you ... Q.E.D.

The fact is that, for a seeker of truth, the situation is close to desperate. The market is full of truths; there are more than enough for all tastes and all inclinations. Some are very comfortable. They would guarantee, for instance, a survival of some sort after death. Or else they would authorize you to do precisely what you intended to do in the first place. What a marvellous and convenient coincidence!

You must add to that the effect of traditions, milieux, certain chance encounters, some influences. Then add the ease with which a person can fool himself. Throw in the particularities of character and desires,



acknowledged or not, and what do you have? You have the material, the departure point for the quest for Truth. It is not very encouraging.

In the universe where everything moves and nothing is certain, where everything seems to be an illusion and beautiful mirages abound, there is nevertheless an unshakeable rock, a basic truth, a kind of axiom of which the evidence is undeniable. Let us cling strongly to this rock as long as we are interested in finding any part of Truth and not a made-to-measure truth – the measure being the extent of our ignorance and prejudices. First Absolute Truth, or first axiom:

There is no relation between the strength of a conviction and the truth of that conviction.

I assume that you accept the truth of this axiom. If not, let me know and I will send you a superabundance of proofs which will settle the question definitely.

I continue.

All truths have their laws and Truth has its laws. It is good to distinguish between the two. I will therefore begin by stating several laws obeyed by all truths.

#### **Law of Static Reinforcement:**

A wine improves when it is aged. Similarly a conviction improves and gets stronger when it is left a long time without being questioned or changed. The conviction acquires in this way a seniority right of some sort. Its longevity seems to be a strong argument in favour of the truth of the belief.

#### **Law of the Crowds:**

If a truth is believed by the masses, that is a strong argument in its favour. So many people cannot be wrong.

On the other hand if the truth is believed by a particular elite, then what the hell? You have a right to prefer the elite of your choice to the ignorant masses. The argument does not lose any strength. (That, by the way, is the Law of the Elites.)

#### **Law of Internal Coherence:**

If X is small enough one can put X in a bottle. That is very true and very coherent and applies without exception to every X. In particular

it would be true for Paris, and gives rise to the famous truism: "If Paris were small enough, one could put it in a bottle." Very coherent, and true.

Instead of one coherent phrase with an explicit 'if', one could write commentaries on the Bible or the Koran having an absolute coherence hiding thousands of well-camouflaged 'ifs'. One would then obtain many great and formidable Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Buddhist truths revealing an extraordinary vitality exemplified by their internal coherence.

### **Law of Mystery:**

A conviction is all the more commendable when it contains an element of irrational mystery. Without mystery truth is sterile. You cannot interpret it, you cannot argue with it, there is nothing to add to it.

However, the moment it is obscured by some mystery it suddenly becomes interesting and provokes mental activity.

### **Law of Masters and Proliferation:**

It is not given to everyone to create a new global truth system. But it is in the nature of these systems to allow an infinity of modifications, all equally trustworthy. What prevents one, for example, from replacing the bottle by a box and saying (modified eternal truth): "If Paris were small enough one could put Paris in a box."?

One could differ also as to the specifications of the box: iron or wood, watertight or not, etc ... There are so many possibilities for a diversity of masters and followers.

What could more befit a 'noble mind' like yours than to produce your own modified system instead of being lost in a large crowd?

This first outline of truths is far from exhaustive, but I will end by mentioning two extremely important laws:

### **Law of the Undetermined Why:**

No less an authority than the Bible asserts that King David was punished for having ordered the census of his people:

"The Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel; and there fell seventy thousand men of Israel."

One may wonder why the Lord considered a census by David sinful when He Himself previously ordered Moses to take one. As well why does a pestilence on seventy thousand innocent people balance David's 'sin'. No explanation is given in the Bible and theologians are free to develop their own justifications. Thus whenever there is no explicit why in the Bible any number of contradictory explanations are allowed; when the why is given, all theologians would be unanimous in proving that it is the only possible one.

### **The Truth Precedes its Proofs:**

Is the Lord's day Friday, Saturday, or Sunday? That is a badly phrased question. It is first necessary to know the answer and then it becomes possible to demonstrate its truth. In fact it is often possible to prove something and to prove its opposite. When one of the two has been accepted as true, there is no difficulty formulating obvious, dazzling and sometimes staggering proofs justifying the eternal truth of the choice which was made.

When Christians show with talent and truthful arguments that Sunday is the Lord's day they have the great advantage of knowing the answer in advance. This advantage is also shared by Jews when they prove that Saturday, and not Sunday, must be given to the Lord. For the same reason Moslems have no difficulty showing perfectly that the day in question must be Friday.

I will stop for now, ready to continue as soon as you acknowledge this letter.

Yours in friendship,  
Albert

## **CHAPTER VIII THE MESSENGER**

I have reproduced Jovial's story as he told it. Deprived of my divine powers and with my memory reduced to what was strictly necessary for the execution of my mission, I could not confirm whether I had indeed appeared in Jovial's dreams. Perhaps the apparitions were nothing but hallucination. They may have been arranged by the conclave before it stripped me of my powers. Whatever the case, I faced a dilemma.

I did not doubt Jovial's sincerity. I had to accept the fact that there existed at least one man who was ready to sacrifice both his temporal life and his eternal life out of love for someone else. Jesus knew he was sacrificing only his temporal life. However admirable Jesus' sacrifice, Jovial's was infinitely greater. Nevertheless without his regrets, according to the rules I had established, the road to heaven was forbidden to Jovial.

I tried to find a justification for Jovial's damnation but I had to admit that I loved and admired him. I started to doubt the wisdom of my biblical ethic.

While I was absorbed in these thoughts a form, at first nebulous, penetrated my cell through the walls. This form slowly became clearer. Finally I saw the Devil standing in front of me! He did not look triumphant. I do not know how I recognized him. Perhaps the conclave had left in me the faculty of recognizing the Devil whether or not he was disguised. I spoke first.

"I created you by doubting and the doubts that are assailing me now must have invoked your presence."

He answered respectfully. "My Lord, you are right. But I have also been sent by the conclave to deliver a message to you."

I encouraged him to go on.

"My Lord," he said, "the conclave has decided that it is time to let you know the third extenuating circumstance that was to be communicated to you in due time."

I was astounded.

"And you are the messenger chosen for this mission?"

"Yes, my Lord," he said. "The reason for this choice will soon be evident. It is the conclave's opinion that your dislike of doubt deprived

you of an important regenerating instrument. One has to doubt to discover an error; one must doubt in order to appreciate that the doubt in man has great value. Used properly doubt is a sign of spiritual nobility. One of the expected results of your descent to earth was your discovery, from personal experience, of the virtue of doubt. That is now accomplished.

"The importance given by the conclave to doubt resides in the fact that the reconciliation between God and man cannot be accomplished, in its opinion, except through the instrument of doubt. To the extent that man accepts the Bible without doubting he renounces the necessity of a God surpassing himself constantly and illuminating the road of man towards the perfection of a living divine morality, constantly improving and remaining at the vanguard of the most noble human aspirations.

"The man who does not doubt the Bible has no real respect for God. His respect is for tradition, for the church, for society, for the comfort of a ready-made belief. He accommodates himself to a biblical God punishing innocents, having no pity for woman and child prisoners.

"To accept such a God, to immobilize Him at that level, is to reduce Him to a despicable God. To affirm that God is infinitely good and wise is merely a noise of words as long as the proof of God's wisdom and goodness resides in the impossibility of understanding why so many actions of the biblical God would have been considered unjust and unreasonable if they had been executed by a man instead.

"Only the unbeliever can think that God is, or could be, infinitely better than what is permitted to Him by the Bible. Therefore only the unbeliever can bestow on God the true dignity that belongs to Him."

I listened calmly to the Devil. That fact alone seemed to indicate that a great change had occurred in me.

I had to agree that there was some logic in the conclave's choice of him as the bearer of a message extolling the virtues of doubt. Moreover it was gratifying to hear the Devil speaking of me in positive terms.

"I learned a lot during my stay on earth," I replied. "In particular I no longer trust omniscience and omnipotence, which isolated me from individual man and left me sensitive only to man as a species. I also learned to distrust general rules. Though I do agree with what you just said, I am not ready to consider every biblical faith as a sign of weakness. I simply know now that faith, or its absence, is not determining. It has no necessary relationship to the value of the individual. Today I can appreciate the doubt in me as well as the doubt in man. I recognize his right not to believe in me without provoking anger."

"My Lord," said the Devil, "I must inform you, on behalf of the conclave, that your stay on earth can end the moment you wish it."

I still had a question on my mind.

"Do not go yet," I said. "There is still one important matter to settle between us."

"My Lord," he said, "I am at your command!"

I had not expected so much compliance from the Devil.

"You were not always so obedient," I remarked.

"The situation is now different, my Lord!"

"That is true," I said. "You were created by my doubt. But now that I appreciate doubt my aim is not to get rid of it. Your existence is therefore no longer threatened."

He agreed. "Notice, my Lord, that there is no need to modify my role. Its essence was to sow doubt. But now that this activity is accepted as useful it could be considered as complementary to yours. Doubt without faith could be harmful. However faith alone deprives the believer of any merit. But while your actions propagate faith and mine would propagate doubt, a happy balance could be reached and there would be no need to consider me the enemy."

"There is sense in what you say," I admitted, "but I prefer to doubt it for awhile, even though I may come to accept your position eventually."

"My Lord," he said, "I used to sow doubt by necessity. From now on I will do it only as your servant!"

The Devil seemed about to retire but I still wanted him to answer a question.

"Stay a moment," I said to him. "I would like to know if many of the people who doubted in me have ended in hell."

"My Lord," he said, "those who ended in hell did it in accordance with your commandments. Their number is indeed very great".

"Did you find among them," I asked, "some who were sincere in their doubts?"

The Devil hesitated. He seemed very embarrassed.

"My Lord," he said after a while, "very few of the unbelievers were lacking sincerity. Many of them would have preferred to believe but could not. Their integrity demanded proofs they did not find. Others remained undecided and some of them did not care. But many others proved by their lives that they were sincere. Millions sacrificed themselves for family or for country. More recently many unbelievers withstood tortures and died rather than reveal to persecutors names and addresses requested of them."

He stopped briefly and then resumed.

"My Lord," he said, "I tend to believe that 'insincere non-believer' is a contradiction in terms. If a person knows that you exist he would be mad to deny it. He has no interest in doing so. If he does not know it then he is sincere when he denies your existence."

I thought a moment and remembered names of noble souls who, nonetheless, were non-believers.

"I have decided," I said at last, "to move many of hell's residents to heaven. Moreover, it is clear that some saints have to be re-educated to become more tolerant."

"Your will be done," the Devil responded. And with those words he disappeared.

## CHAPTER IX MEMOIRS

It was not the return of power and knowledge that thrilled me. Each cell in my earthly body had the potential of a universe, but all seemed awakened to some larger hope. It was sympathy. I stood entranced at these first explorations in harmony and consciously refrained from directing them by either will or intellect. Perhaps? And I suddenly become conscious of an ancient ache. Perhaps an answer was forming out of the long eons of creation; a response to the countless messages, patterns and codes that I had sent winging from my will. Deliberately – almost with courage, I allowed myself a memory of being alone in the dark. It recalled my own, almost abandoned, search for meaning. In the absence of an answering voice I had imposed my own physical and sentient meanings as I crowded the heavens with handiwork. I had expected, and received, only echos.

There was music – each to each – in the elements of creation, and perhaps beyond.

I forced my earthly mind back to the small consciousness of Lantern while the thrilling moments gathered.

Lanterne – I – must contain myself for the moments left on earth.

First it was important to articulate a number of resolutions.

I will not judge man according to the vehemence of his faith but according to the sincerity of his faith.

I will judge in proportion to temptation. I recognize that a great number of my creatures were tempted very little. Others were damned for their lack of resistance to extremely difficult tests, but would probably have found their way to heaven if the tests imposed on them had been as light as those imposed on more favoured creatures. In short I must stop playing favourites.

I must restore women to the fullness of the rights and respect due to them. Women should no longer have a subordinate position in my consideration, in religion or in secular society.

I must be more moderate, more tolerant and more just in the imposition of punishments. I decree that all passages of the Bible giving a literal or metaphorical support to an act of genocide be considered as deriving from moments of divine aberration for which I am repentant.



No soul should ever be lost for all eternity. The path to redemption must always remain open, even after death. No one should have to give up hope of a neighbour's salvation, and no one should be tempted, like Jovial, to try to ensure a child's place in heaven by killing it.

I wanted to record this new dispensation before leaving earth and therefore needed ink and paper.

The moment I formulated this last thought there appeared in my hands a pen and some sheets of paper. My thought was slowly becoming Verb again!

I had to consider Jovial's fate and decided that he would accompany me to heaven. Judged according to my new rules he could not be damned. He deserved the best of heaven. From now on Jovial would be called Saint Jovial.

I had tried not to harm any creature during my stay on earth. Nevertheless I had made Justine unhappy. I needed to return the freshness of her feelings and rid her of the bitterness caused by my passage through her life.

Having formulated the wish to be with Justine I found myself instantly in her room. The sight of her raised in me feelings I had never experienced so intensely. I saw at once the baby and the child she once had been, the young girl she still was, the mother and the old woman she would eventually become. I also saw, through her, all women in the world and I felt such an admiration and such a divine love for them that I knew I had conquered my misgivings concerning women.

Justine was sleeping but woke when I approached. She spoke in a low and astonished voice.

"Lanterne! You have escaped from the asylum."

"Are you afraid?" I asked.

"No, Lanterne," she said. "Or rather, yes. I am afraid for you. I wanted to visit you but the doctors asked me to wait a couple of months. Show me your burned hand. Is it any better?"

I raised my hand to her. She took it in hers, then brought her mouth close to place a kiss on it. At that moment my hand disappeared and her lips touched her own hand.

"I am God, the Eternal," I told her. "I came to say good-bye to you."

"I must be dreaming," she murmured to herself.

"No Justine," I said, "you are not dreaming. Within a few minutes your memory will lose every trace of the love you felt for me. I do not want my passage on earth to leave you unhappy. The man you loved is in reality nothing but an illusion. You will remember him only as a devoted teacher you liked and respected."

"Lanterne," she said. "Now I'm the one who's going mad. Lanterne! Lanterne! Only a mad person can see a hand appearing and disappearing. Lanterne! You are becoming transparent. Come back, Lanterne!"

"I am still here, Justine, don't worry. I could have erased your love for me from your memory without having to trouble you. But I am still partially a man and I would like, before losing the ability to feel as a man, to fix in the memory of God what the man Lanterne has witnessed and participated in. I will cherish you, Justine, as a symbol of freshness, honesty and purity. You helped me to understand and appreciate women. I do not care about your lack of faith in me. It matters to me only that you remain honest toward your reason and your heart. I am going on my way and I bless you – and your brother, Lucien."

Back in my cell I invoked the presence of Jovial. He appeared immediately without expressing the least sign of astonishment. I told him of my intention to take him with me.

"Do I deserve to go to heaven?" he asked.

I no longer had any doubt of it.

"Maybe not according to the Bible or the New Testament," I said. "But I've added a few chapters and, according to them, you deserve to accompany me. When the time comes it may well be that Odette will also have a place."

There was one thing left to do.

I said – rather, I thought:

**LET MY MEMOIRS BE!**

And my Memoirs were! The manuscript was visible in a corner on the chair. I turned to Jovial.

"I will now break the walls of the cell and we shall ascend to heaven."

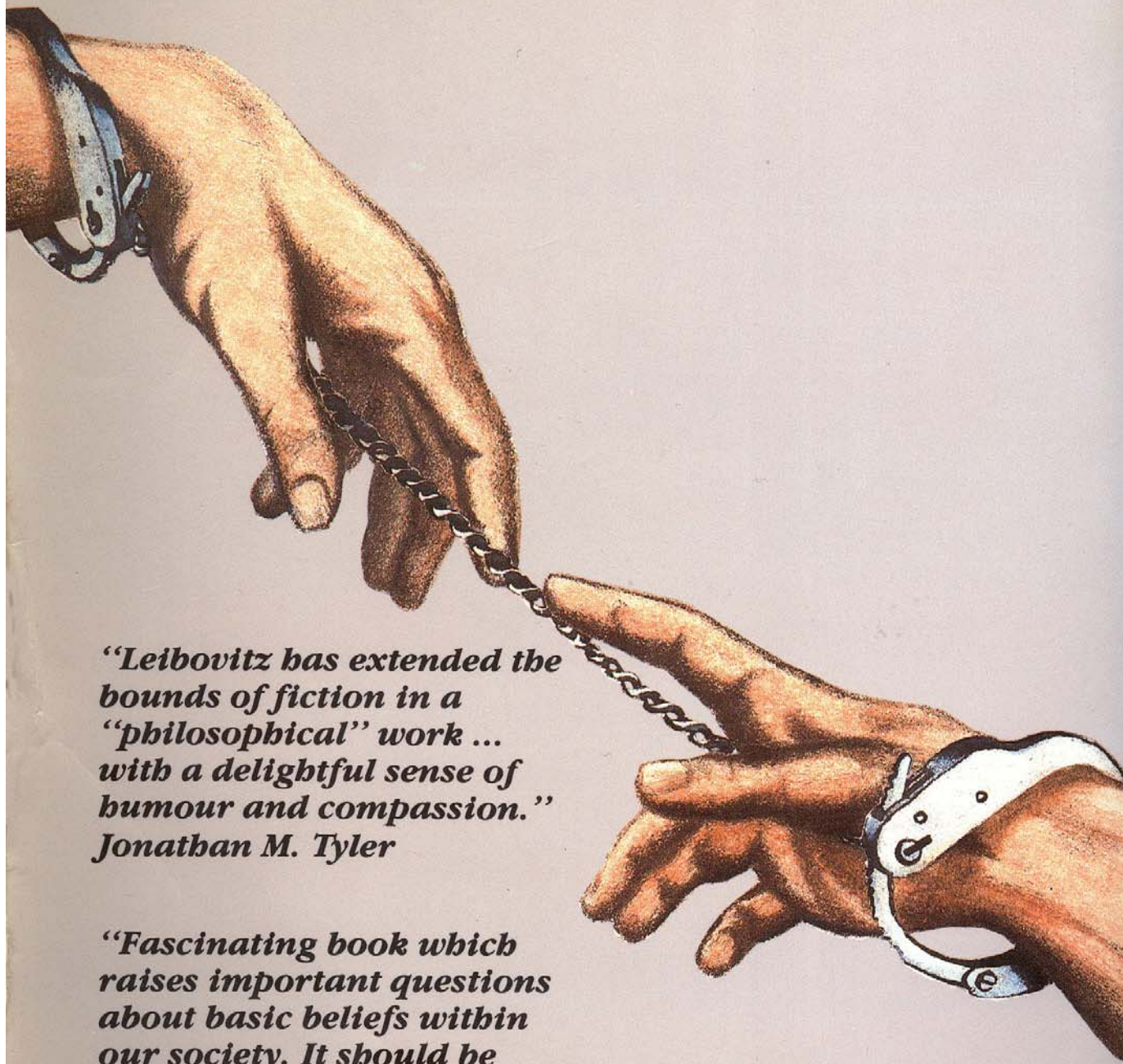
"My Lord," Jovial asked respectfully, "may I ask why you would break the cell walls? No doubt – if you so wished – we could leave the place without breaking a thing."

I was taken aback.

"Truly, Jovial," I said, "I was going to break the walls for the sake of the principle of ambiguity. I wanted our miraculous departure to be interpreted in a natural way."

"My Lord," he commented, "the unbeliever will always find rational explanations. Why not give one more sign to the believer?"

I added a few lines to the manuscript and we left for heaven.



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