

Chapter Four

On the nature and activity of God

Now we venture further into the dark and mysterious territory of faith, a cop-out for the nonbeliever, an adventure for the believer, when we try to speak about the nature and activity of God. It is a quest that can only be done in faith, not sight, for nowhere is God to be directly found or seen, nor is his purported activity. One can only deduce that there is a God –we here move away from polytheism as much less probable and speak only of one supreme being we call God– and that God is personal and acts. But already these are assumptions or analogies at best. Still, a person is, when an adult, *sui juris*, and possessed of a certain dignity and intelligence, and acts, and it would be most unlikely that a “supreme being” would be less than this, that is impersonal and incapable of acting. An impersonal God, a vague and diffuse power in the universe, should hardly be called God; this would be like the personification of natural forces which characterizes what we consider more primitive stages of religiosity.

For this author, it is difficult to consider as “candidates for God” the Hindu Brahma or the deist’s “clockmaker” or “clock-winder” who started it all but doesn’t interfere with the laws of nature. A personal God could not simply sit back and let things roll. Admittedly, this is something one can only have faith about, and still it is worthwhile to consider whether it is not a rational and logical position to explain all the evil and injustice in the world as something its maker simply has nothing to do with.

The concept of God would seem to be meaningless if it limited God to merely being the creator, who then just watches what unfolds without any personal involvement. It would then seem not to be personal, or if personal, quite deficient, cold and uninterested, a poor excuse for a person, one might say. And so if to save God from accusations of not being all-good in the face of the world’s evil, or not all-powerful, we must reduce the concept to an initial catalyst and nothing more, we should not be concerned further with discussing God, for it would seem to be quite irrelevant. We could have no relationship with God, prayer would not be that, but talking to ourselves or to an indifferent entity; for all practical purposes we could be atheists who simply deny being so, that is, we would not have any faith in such a God. Our position is that any concept of God worth discussing is of a personal God who in some way is like us and thinks and

feels and acts. “In some way,” for here we must be quite aware that we speak analogically, based on our human experience of ourselves and others in the world, and we are material beings who can be observed, while God must be conceived of as “spirit,” meaning fundamentally invisible but “palpable” in some way, like breath or the wind. This is certainly the biblical view.

So this chapter will posit that God is “spirit,” a word which comes from our breathing and what we breathe, very important things which we cannot see (perhaps only when our breath becomes vapor in the cold, and that involves the presence of an element extraneous to pure air, water, which is visible) but which we know exist. It is not too different with God, except that clearly God’s existence is accepted only through faith, but discerned only through its combination with the natural and material elements, in which faith perceives divine action in some way.

This chapter will discuss what this kind of faith can deduce about God’s nature and activity from observing what happens in us and in the world. And our conclusion will be that what we can or do deduce about it is based on “mere” interpretation, and that this interpretation seemingly cannot take place in a vacuum, but necessarily is based on our presuppositions. Our presuppositions are closely, inextricably, tied to our personal experiences, and these in turn do not arise except in the context of a culture and a history. And so we come back to that all-important concept of faith: we may believe that there is a God, and then what God is like and what he actually does or doesn’t do is likewise a function of our faith. God’s unseenness, invisibility, requires that anything we say about God be based on faith, and it is good that we be aware of this. Nothing regarding God is susceptible of proof. That might be the one unique aspect of God-talk.

The first thing the believer in God can observe, and with great wonder, is the natural world. It is enormous and intricate and extremely beautiful; only humans, it seems, can admire and be enraptured by natural wonders. Science has done nothing but make us wonder even more, as we get to catch glimpses of the secrets of nature and of the molecular and subatomic worlds as well as the vastness and antiquity of the universe. The sentiments we derive from these observations, from contemplating them, seem to be more refined, of a higher level than the mere fear and sense of danger that we posit led our first ancestors to believe in a supernatural, or at least preternatural, being we call God. They involve higher regions of the brain, more reflexive ones in the cerebral cortex, and thus are more characteristically human than the fright and flight

or fight response that other animals also have. It is a uniquely human capacity, one of the delightful offshoots of human evolution, a great counterweight to worry and anxiety for the future and all the suffering that comes with the human mind.

The person who contemplates nature feels an uplifting of the soul, especially if he or she believes in God. Beauty has this effect on humans, whether it be music or visual things, and nature is most special here. It is vast, ancient, utterly not a human creation, but quite due to a power beyond ourselves, unless we believe it simply came into being, or always was, or was created by a clockmaker who then, like us, just sits back and watches. Or perhaps he doesn't even watch, and doesn't care, and then he would be a God who is less curious and appreciative than humans, and less caring, and so there is no point in further speaking about this kind of creator. No, the creator we speak about, as reflected in his creation, must be wonderful, way beyond anything we can imagine. If we admire the great artists or the great geniuses and inventors, by analogy we must super-admire God.

So God's nature, by deduction, is great, immense, powerful beyond our imagining. It would also seem that God would not have gone to all that "trouble" just to sit back and watch, although that is certainly a possibility. This would obviate the problem of theodicy; it would explain what happens in the world as no longer something God is involved in, but simply as the natural unfolding of natural and human events. But our task is to explore how God may act, and thus try to know more about his nature, by reflecting on our interpretation of what goes on in the world as somehow having to do with God's continuing involvement.

Here we enter the realm of human psychology. The concept of God we are dealing with is that of a person, very powerful but mysterious, hidden and unseen, who we view mostly as benign, since we view most of life as good, and this kind of God is considered to be ultimately responsible for it, and does not thwart its goodness, at least for the most part. When one is suffering greatly, or has experienced a great, unspeakably painful loss (such as a mother losing her infant daughter to a rapist), or a total destruction whether natural (a tsunami) or man-made (the Nazi holocaust) or in-between (a nuclear power plant explosion or meltdown following a natural catastrophe), the tendency may be to blame God, at least for not preventing it. Faith here may falter, and its tendency to think of God as all-good, which is what best empowers faith, may diminish. One may take a distance from God as being a mixed-bag; mostly good, but having his moments of irascibility or perhaps even perverse prankishness. But the human psychological

orientation when there is faith is to explain away these negative possibilities and think of God as much better than any human can be, even than humans who are extremely generous and self-sacrificing. A God whose awesome power as manifested in the universe is not matched by an equally admirable goodness would indeed be a mixed bag, and faith in a mixed bag is by definition a poor faith. The idea that God is not reliably good, or even has moments of wickedness, seriously damages faith. We are then back to the deist notion, that God is not fundamentally involved, but is a more or less guilty bystander.

Certainly this is a possibility: God's hidden, mysterious nature seems to be both awesomely creative and wonderfully manifested in nature, and also some of his destructive tendencies raise their ugly head all too often, if he caused natural calamities or just stood by to watch. Faith seeks to explain the latter away; it works best when its object is an all-good, all-powerful God. We are here more concerned with the human psychology of faith than with any direct reference to God's nature or activity. These are hidden from knowledge and view. The dynamics of faith, however, turns to a good and powerful God. Its essence is trust, or it is a poor faith. A poor faith may be all some, even many, can have or are willing to have, but if we seek to make an inquiry into God, we would do well to examine faith as expressed most eloquently in the great seekers of God and the great mystics.

It would seem that these are the "experts" on God, and perhaps it is they who can most adequately provide information on what might be God's nature and activity. Otherwise, we are left with the doubters, whose object of reflection is a poor God, a mixed bag, which seems to be something unbecoming the very concept of the deity. We certainly would not put our trust in a human being who was unpredictable, unreliable, given to fits of rage and destruction. Such a God would be a poor concept, more clearly a projection of our own human foibles, much as the Greeks gods were. We are seeking to understand God as the best concept of him we can have; by definition God is superlative, if he exists at all. In this I am approaching a position quite like that of Anselm of Canterbury's ontological argument for the existence of God: "God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived." It does seem to have a certain logical consistency and even necessity.

So we can conclude that any talk of God is necessarily based on faith, and that any faith worth its salt is strong and operative. It has to deal with any arguments or evidence that God is not all good or all powerful, even as it is aware that it is *interpreting* things so as to make them

compatible with faith. It is a “vicious circle,” consciously assumed and acknowledged. It is the alternative of faith to the position that there is no God, which explains everything without God, or the position that God is not all good or all powerful; the latter two positions have their own substantial logical problems. It requires some kind of “atheistic faith” to believe that the universe always was or came into being spontaneously or by itself, and just developed as wonderfully as it has on its own. And the position that God is a mixed bag comes close to simply shoving God to the side, like an erratic, unpleasant individual; this seems unbecoming to the creator of the universe, for this kind of God would have to be exactly that; otherwise, who or what is it that we are calling God, our own projection, or some monster that is less moral than even humans are? Such a God is not worth thinking about much or discussing; there would be nothing we could do about him (except maybe try to bribe him, but we know blackmailers are insatiable) and he would be of little help to us (again, he would only be willing to help us through bribes and lowly, groveling acts). We would do well to dismiss such a God, and many do.

Instead, our inquiry has to do with the best God has to offer as a concept. The best analogy is that of a parent, a mother or a father. A parent engenders the child and care for him or her. The child quickly learns to recognize and trust the parent, especially the mother, at first. As the child grows, he may experience the parent’s discipline, and it is painful, but if we posit very good parents, this necessary discipline will be seen as salutary, administered for the well-being of the child. Without it, the child will grow up spoiled, crooked, like a tree without the counterbalance (stake) pulling in the opposite direction when it needs it. This going against the grain, what the Latins called *agire contra* (to act against our bad tendencies), is the only way to straighten what is crooked.

Thus the best image of God we can have is that of the best parent whom we can trust, and who we do not always understand, but who, unlike human parents, not only always has our best interests at heart, but is able to fulfill them. Even when events and misfortunes bewilder us, the person of faith will believe that God has at least permitted them ultimately for our own good. The alternative is to believe God caused them in order to harm us (God would then not be “all-good”) or couldn’t stop them (and thus is not “all-powerful”). We have said that either or both possibilities are unbecoming a good, strong concept of the deity.

Some have been quite ready to believe that God is all-good, but are at a loss as far as explaining how God can stand by in the face of tremendous suffering and in justice; certainly a

good parent would even risk his or her life to prevent harm to her child. What possible lessons, what possible instructive discipline, was worth the Nazi holocaust? Isn't that the medicine which kills you, or the operation which was a success although unfortunately the patient died? Thinkers like Elie Wiesel, who experienced and survived the Holocaust, cannot process it, and even refuse to accept any explanations or divine answers for it. It in effect causes a "computer shutdown" which leaves one speechless. And yet this is the same feeling Jews had during what has been called the first pogrom, the persecution of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who seemingly set out to wipe out Judaism and set up an "abomination which left one speechless" in the very temple of Israel's God.

What Judaism did, or what pious Jews did in the face of that great suffering, was not to deny the existence or omnipotence of God, but to postpone the time when it would be manifest. The fact that there were many Jews who died for their faith and did not experience intra-worldly recompense (and punishment in this life for the wicked) simply led to rethinking traditional notions of divine justice and reward and punishment: those who died would be raised, and the just rewarded and the evil punished, forever, in the next world. It is even possible to interpret that passage in the Book of Daniel 12:1-3 as referring only to the very good and the very wicked; the mediocre may cease to exist at all in the afterlife.

This is a good illustration of faith; by its nature it persists and explains "away" everything. I use the expression "explains away" not to belittle it or ridicule it, but to emphasize how there is seemingly nothing that can disprove it to the believer. That is how faith and religion have endured, for surely it has been practiced by many who have suffered more than us. Just look at the Jews. And yet, some lose their faith, perhaps in some way Elie Wiesel among them. The "medicine" of divine discipline," if that is what we can in some way call the Holocaust (it stretches the theological and theodical imagination, to be sure), seems to have been lethal to the faith of many.¹ The Jewish tradition looked at their many persecutions as "divine visits," using a word (visit) which in the Bible means both God's salvation and also the times when he "comes down" to call his people to account for their misdeeds. Thus was the Jews' expulsion from Spain described, with all the suffering that being uprooted and dispossessed meant. But God would

¹ Theodical is the adjective which refers to theodicy, the explanation of how God can be both all-good and all-powerful in the face of human suffering and evil in the world.

seemingly have gone too far with the Holocaust; a spiritual and mental computer breakdown can only with great difficulty be considered part of a divine plan of discipline meant for salvation.

And yet there we have Job, many centuries before, experiencing in some way his own individual holocaust, except that he got to live in order to tell his story, and for us also to get a happy ending, to help our faith. Job loses everything, but is restored in the end, like many Jews who survived the Holocaust and became prosperous afterwards. But what about those who never recovered? Is God like the animal kingdom, where many, let's say, wildebeests get to cross the river, but too bad for the few who get eaten by the crocodiles? Can God do no better than be mostly good, but letting many fall into the cracks? That is a serious question, and perhaps the best we can do is what Elie Wiesel writes in his *Memoirs*:

The questions I once asked myself about God's silence remain open. If they have an answer, I do not know it. More than that, I refuse to know it. But I maintain that the death of six million human beings poses a question to which no answer will ever be forthcoming.²

And yet, faith will accept not knowing and not understanding, though certainly great lessons are to be learned from such an event, about humans and wars and politics and religion and scapegoats and all the darkest areas of the human soul when it becomes diabolical; the problem is at what price, and who footed the bill. Oftentimes the most talented and successful are those who suffer most, and this may be the case with the Jews, as it is with great artists. Faith has a great model and object in a particular Jew called Jesus. His fate was among the most ironic, an innocent man victim of great hatred and injustice; his end could not be a more glaring example of ignominious failure. And yet his followers claimed he had risen from the dead and was victorious, jumping the gun, so to speak, on that general resurrection of the very good and the very wicked that that last chapter of the Book of Daniel referred to above spoke about. This are extreme examples of what faith does regarding the nature and activity of God. It is most tested, and can most reveal its power and what it is when it is at its best, what it can be capable of, in extreme circumstances.

And so any discussion of how God acts in the world, and of what his nature is, depends on faith and on the ways faith interprets events. Theology has been defined as just that: faith seeking understanding. Everything is "explained away." The primary purpose, perhaps only

² *All Rivers Run to the Sea. Memoirs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996),

purpose, of the “explanations” is to inspire people to believe in God and in his goodness and power, as a uniquely empowering attitude and way to live. And in fact we can see quite different attitudes and reactions to the Holocaust even by those who had to endure it and died in it. I am thinking of Anne Frank, who wrote that she still believed that people were good, and of Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Catholicism who became a Carmelite nun and who with her sister Rose was rounded up and taken to Auschwitz, where they died; Edith had her own peculiar view of the Holocaust as another of God’s “visits.”

Certainly we are back where we started: what led to the Holocaust, like all horrible human atrocities, should have never happened: anti-Semitism, scapegoating, war, abusive post-war restitutions, racism, exaggerated nationalism as a reaction to humiliation, ignorance, apathy, selfishness, etc. But the Holocaust happened with or without there being a God. Some might argue that “God,” more specifically, belief in God and the way it played out, especially in Catholicism though not just, contributed to the Holocaust. But others would argue the opposite: a correct belief in God would have prevented the Holocaust. In any case, once it happened, an attitude of faith served the same purpose it does regarding any other catastrophe: to empower, comfort, perhaps inspire to go on.

Let me give a couple of examples from the Judeo-Christian tradition (which is the one I know best) regarding how God’s nature and activity are viewed and the consequences this has for faith and life and, also and more specifically, the issue of prayer and its relation to the will and activity of the deity.

The Judeo-Christian tradition began in the ancient Near East with semi-nomads who developed a personal relationship with a deity who made a pact with them, much like a feudal lord made a sworn agreement with his serfs. The deity was a portable, traveling one, as opposed to one associated with a fixed place and a concrete representation such as a statue. Slowly but surely, the patriarch to whom the deity had revealed itself involved his whole tribe, and then several tribes with common ancestry or other links grouped together and eventually their various deities, all of the same sort, were identified as one God, who was now making his identity known.

The tribes came together as the people or nation of Israel, attributing to themselves a common ancestor, Jacob, the father of twelve sons from whom the tribes descended, and whose name was changed to Israel after a great struggle with a certain being, who declared Jacob the

winner and changed his name to Israel, understood to mean a fighter who prevails. In time, Israel came to take over the land of Canaan, in a period in which it suffered “barbarian invasions,” Israel being one among several. The tribes counted among their main traditions a portentous liberation from slavery in Egypt, and their God Yahweh’s miraculous deeds were recounted, first in oral poetic form, later in writing.

Israel established itself in Canaan and became a sedentary people, with a fixed temple and everything involved in city life, but it held fast to the notion of an imageless deity. In conquering the land, and especially Jerusalem, it adopted important features of the indigenous priesthood, which we can call Zadokite. Notions of ritual purity were assumed and developed, as we have explained above. Ethics were largely ancient and tribal, but were refined by the prophets, especially in the eighth century B.C.E, and Israel developed an impressive moral code. The notion of covenant, of a pact along the lines of the ancient suzerainty treaties (in which a conquering king makes his subjects swear fealty with terrible consequences in case of breach), was extended from the patriarch to the king and eventually to the whole people. Israel would explain its welfare in terms of how it fulfilled or broke this covenant. This took place especially when it was conquered in the sixth century B.C.E.

This conquest took Israel to Babylon, where the current version of a most ancient and glorious civilization held sway. Little Israel, the former simple semi-nomads, was in danger of being assimilated by the great culture with its towering ziggurats (to which the famous story of the Tower of Babel refers). But this peculiar people held on to their old notion of the personal deity who had revealed himself to its fathers so long ago, and seen them through so many hardships, especially the paradigmatic liberation from Egypt. Great religious geniuses, some of whom, like Ezekiel, have been considered schizophrenic (by Karl Jaspers), told the people a great story, or various versions of a great tale, and gave them an understanding of themselves and of their past and a blueprint for the future, and with it, amazing hope and strength. This is normally the function of myth, but I dare say there is no myth like the Jewish one.

Israel, whose thinkers were primarily represented at the time (and for a long time to come) by the “Priestly” and the “Deuteronomic” schools (broadly speaking), came to understand its history up to the Babylonian Exile as its “primary” or fundamental story, from creation to exile; that is, a story of failure. Israel had been chosen by God as his special people and had been freed from slavery in Egypt and given a land flowing with milk and honey. Either through ritual

contamination and impurity (thus the Priestly School) or through breach of the covenant (the Deuteronomic School), Israel had been cast out of this holy land and thrown into exile, which could be considered not just as going back to square one, but as something actually worse (see Deuteronomy 28:68).

The two schools with their subgroups and eventually all or most of the exiles came together and agreed that Israel was a people who had to maintain its identity and not confuse itself with the other, “pagan,” nations. Severe precautions came into effect to distinguish Israel, who can now be called “Jews,” as by far the most important tribe to experience this exile and what was learned there was the tribe of Judah; “Jew” originally means a member of this tribe. The great hallmarks of Judaism were the keeping of the Sabbath (mentioned in the first chapter of the Bible), circumcision (attributed to the great father of all, Abraham, in Genesis 17) and the unique kosher diet (to which much of the Book of Leviticus, the central book of the Torah) is devoted). These, along with what eventually were numbered as the 613 commandments of the Torah (Israel’s fundamental teaching or “doctrine”), became the people’s blueprint for life and for success, for the ‘prolongation of its days’. And in fact even today we see that Jews tend to live a long time, when they are not killed.

But the success and hope taught and preached by Israel’s leaders was not immediately at hand. The middle eastern imagination painted a glorious picture of how things would change once Israel got its act together, but reality was quite different. Certain prophets, like Isaiah and Ezekiel and others, painted a wonderful picture of renewal, of a new earth and heaven. Eventually this came to be seen as the “messianic age,” the final age when salvation would finally arrive, which was really like a return to paradise in the Garden of Eden, where there was no violence and no death and God took afternoon strolls with his people (see Leviticus 26:12). We often live for our dreams, and the right kind of dreaming can lead to great things. The wrong kind, to failure, but the wise learn from failure, too.

The time of Jesus was one of great expectation. Some five or six centuries had passed since the Babylonian Exile and Israel had been continually under foreign control if not oppression; certainly, being a colony of a pagan empire was no one’s idea of success or salvation, unless one were a corrupt priest, like some of the Sadducees were (these were the religious heirs of the Zadokites). Prophecy, which had been dormant, began anew. One such prophet we know as John the Baptist; the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus actually devotes

more space in his history to him than to Jesus. Josephus, who hated revolutionaries, did not conceal the fact that what Herod Antipas feared was a revolt that could be sparked by John, should he want to; this is what resulted in his execution (compare the better known account of the dance in the Gospel of Mark 6:17-29).

John proclaimed the imminent coming of God to judge, finally; this was in line with the final book of the prophets, that of Malachi. Conversion, doing penance, that is, changing one's evil ways and getting right with God, was urgent, for God came like a fuller refining with fire (Malachi 3:2). Historically, it seems Jesus heeded this call, and was baptized. He had a profound experience of God as his very own father and began proclaiming that God's coming rule was at hand. This, however, was not viewed as a purely fearsome thing; God was love, and cared especially for the weak (this was a commonplace of the ancient prophets) and the stray, the "lost sheep" (already in Ezekiel 34:15-16). Thus God's "kingdom" was like a banquet, where all who *wanted* to come were welcome. Jesus also healed, doing the works expected of the Messiah, and was even reputed to have fed a multitude, who then wanted to make him king. It is most likely that Jesus was executed by the Roman power (with the connivance of corrupt Jewish priests) because of his influence over the people, who could revolt (as had been feared in the case of John the Baptist).

Jesus' "Passion," the first thing that was preached and written about him, became paradigmatic for the Christian faith and for all Christians. Jesus was eminently just, a do-gooder, an embracer and healer, although as a prophet he stepped on the toes of the powerful. And yet, instead of success, he met with great opposition and then a most cruel fate. His followers did not understand it and fled. But the account of what Jesus endured, and of how he endured it, was enough to move many hearts. But more important was the fact that some of his followers began proclaiming that Jesus had "risen from the dead," jumping the gun on what Daniel had predicted. Here was an amazing story of utter defeat followed by incredible victory, told by "witnesses" willing to die for their testimony. Christianity spread like wildfire. It seemed to distill what was best in Judaism, an ancient and most venerable religion, into the story of one Jew, and Israel's centuries-old suffering, and hope, into the tale of a real man, whose earthly end was known to all, but whose victory and "lordship" after death had to be taken on faith, but a faith nourished by "signs and portents" parallel to those narrated about Israel's victory over Egypt. The early

Christians were filled with great “enthusiasm,” which means being filled with “God.” This empowered them to overcome many hardships easily and to the point of death.

Some final words about prayer. The believer turns to God in prayer. God is thought of as being able and willing to free and heal, to save, to grant health or employment, etc. The believer disregards any thought that God is unwilling or unable to help; he or she simply believes that the time has not yet come for that, or more often, that one must pray to God for him to grant the favor. This of course raises the question why God should have to be begged to do something good, even urgent and clearly beneficial, especially on behalf of an innocent sufferer or other needy individual. And it is a good question.

My explanation, following to some extent St. Augustine, is that prayer is more for us than for God. It is a mystery why God acts or does not act, and when. It is quite possible to believe that God is like the deist’s deity, just sitting back and watching things take their course. But the believer explains prayer and supplication –that is, the bending over in obsequiousness, of the worshipper, who is like a slave (something the “bold spirits” deplore)– as trying with all his or her might to please God or to put oneself at God’s disposal. The psalm speaks of a slave or a handmaiden intently watching the master and waiting for some sign from him. Thus believers do with God.

Whether prayer in fact has an effect on God beyond the proven positive effects it has on those who pray is a mystery; the answer is unknown. Slaves are not supposed to know everything. But in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the believer is not just a slave, he or she is also a friend, as Abraham was called, and Moses. Jesus told his disciples that they were now friends, and no longer slaves who don’t know what their master wants (Gospel of John 15:14-15). Confident prayer is praised and said to be able to accomplish all things; in fact, doing the “impossible” is one of God’s attributes. This is the faith; Jesus exercised it in his passion and on the cross, and is here a model for the Christian believer.³ In this Jesus also followed the model set forth in the Book of Psalms (which also provided commonplaces for knowledge of what transpired in his passion). He is the embodiment of the many who prayed to God in their suffering and plight, when they were sick or unjustly persecuted, as found in many psalms.

³ See Letter to the Hebrews 12:2. Several New Testament passages speak literally of the faith of Jesus or of Christ: Romans 3:22; Galatians 2:16; 3:22; Ephesians 3:12; Book of Revelation 14:12.

Perhaps most famous is Jesus' cry, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?," which he said on the cross.

Like so many things in the Bible, it has at least a double-meaning. On its surface, it is an anguished complaint that God has forsaken the righteous man suffering unjustly. A bit deeper, it is the first line of Psalm 22, the psalm of a man being tortured by his adversaries (the Dead Sea discoveries now allow us to properly translate verse 17 as mentioning the piercing of the man's hands and feet, as in crucifixion, something the Essenes were quite acquainted with). Read to the end, the psalmist is filled with hope and praise for his God, whom he can quite frankly (and quite Jewishly) reproach that he has abandoned him, only to manifest that finally he has great trust in what God will eventually do for him.

We don't even know if prayer has an "effect" on God, just as we do not know how God "intervenes" in the world. We know how prayer affects us, and we can feel that it is simply we talking to ourselves. Yet we think that God can be "moved" by prayer, that in our reaching out to him or pleading with him (I am here speaking of petitionary prayer; there are others kinds, such as praise, thanksgiving, etc.), a change can occur in our situation, a change beyond that which occurs in ourselves because of our prayer. How this change takes place—in extreme cases, we speak of miracle, as in an unexplained sudden cure, or the avoidance of some calamity expected to be a *faith accompli*—we do not know. We simply assume that God is in charge and somehow, when and if he wants, "answers" our prayer.⁴

All this is mostly, perhaps wholly, our *interpretation* of what happens. A nonbeliever would have a different interpretation of the same phenomena. It is a faith-based interpretation that sees the "finger of God" in certain events more than in others, when the usually hidden deity manifests himself in great power and majesty; this has been the view of many in history. What exactly has occurred is unknown. I liken many changes in status, in one's situation—especially regarding things one has been worrying about, fears about the future; these changes in circumstances are easier to explain—to the sensation of a "new creation," of being able to see the

⁴ Jesus, of course, famously insisted on persevering prayer, making the *a fortiori* argument (from the lesser to the greater) known to Jews as *qal wahomer* (from the light to the heavy) that if even bad, reluctant men give in to the inopportune of someone asking for food in the middle of the night, how much more will God not provide what his children ask him for. But interestingly, we have two versions of this saying. In Matthew 7:7-11, the conclusion is that God, the good Father, will give good things to those who ask him, while in Luke 11:9-13, "good things" is substituted by "the Holy Spirit," in line with Lucan theology and themes. It seems that the version in Matthew of this "Q saying" (Q is our oldest list of Jesus sayings, which many judge to be as close as we can get to what he actually said) is more original.

world and one's condition and situation in it as wholly renewed. It is as if what we thought we knew and understood about things turned out to be very partial, like the blind man feeling the tusks or the trunk of the elephant, or his leg, and somehow realizing in the end, when the whole size of the beast is known, that an elephant is not like he thought at all. This is how we can feel after enduring a painful situation and a dark night of the soul for a long time, seeing no way out, and often suddenly experiencing that it is a whole new ball game, or a very different world (at least personally speaking) than the one imagined.

At times like these, one can have the feeling that God is like the master of sceneries, something like a scenic artist in movies: we get to see only what he designs and puts up, and this can change without our knowing how. This view is quite similar to that of the philosopher George Berkeley, an Anglican bishop. He believed that it was pointless to speak of matter; all that the human mind could perceive was the product of its ideas; all we can know are our experiences, and these are directly ("immediately, that is, without mediation) caused by God. It is as if what is "going on" in the world, or what we perceive is happening, is like what we see when we go to the optometrist and he shows us scenes to look at and changes them at will by sliding or moving the frames. We know that perception does depend on many conditions of the perceiver; witness accounts can widely differ. This view would carry this to a different level, where there is the "mysterious" "action" of God. Consider the view of life of a very depressed person, say the late Robin Williams. What he felt he saw was very different from what an outsider would think: he had money, fame and the love and adulation of fans, a good family who cared deeply for him. Yet he perceived only darkness, and acted accordingly, committing suicide.

Here we may consider prayer as affecting only us and our perception, and as part of our "holding on" (persevering) until a good result happens, a "good result" of some sort. It may be that the doctors were mistaken in their diagnosis, or in some other way, and that you were ok after all. Or that the job which was nowhere in sight as you grew older and more desperate suddenly appeared. Or something unexpected and unexplained occurred, which leads even nonbelievers or persons of very weak faith to declare there has been a "divine intervention." If anything, Berkeley's views stress how *subjective* (as opposed to objective) our minds are. Here too is to be found the essential character of faith, and it cannot rationally or scientifically explain everything.

A related subject, which will be further treated in chapter six on faith and prayer, is that of our disposition and preparation and their effect on procuring the change we want in ourselves and in the world. There is a mysterious effect that faith and prayer and cleansing ourselves of negative things –and by this I mean resentment, evil and impure thoughts and actions, and renouncing them– has. Clearly we can see that our physical condition is related to our mental and spiritual state. Stress, anger and hostility have a negative effect on our bodies; we are all aware of psychosomatic conditions or reactions. Guilt is a great burden on ourselves, and not all or even most of it, perhaps, is artificial or the effect of antiquated views. Most religions forbid certain actions (Buddhism, for example, more than frowns on masturbation), and most people, even the most recalcitrant womanizer, experience guilt, say, when committing adultery. It is said that adulterers have a great risk of dying while having sex with their lover. I remember reading in Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* that one must have a ‘pure body’ free of sin as a preparation for a “miracle” to take place. Magicians, and I mean it in the sense not of illusionists, but of those who practise rituals and recite incantations in a “magical” effort to influence reality according to their will, are aware of the effect of words and deeds on others and even on things. It is said that plants react positively when we speak to them; how can that be, they have no ears? Perhaps a positive energy is released, something mysterious, which has an effect on animate objects of the simplest kind.

Being in harmony has a mysterious effect. A smile can do wonders, and many people speak of someone’s good “aura,” even glow, or a smile that can “light up a room.” The soul has powers way beyond what we can analyze or conceive. If it is said that we use only ten percent of our brain, imagine what the potentialities of the soul, whatever it might be, are. Many people, setting aside skepticism and analytical thinking, proceed by hunches and deep intuitions. Perhaps a lot of it, or most or even all of it, can be explained by precedent experiences, or even by ancestral archetypes, as Jung thought. It remains that our effect on others, on ourselves and on reality, can be quite unsuspected. Perhaps it has to do with the hidden unconscious, secretly unleashing its great force, like a volcano. Whatever it is, whether it is “paranormal” or something we conceive of as spiritual or theological, being “in alignment,” “in tune” or “at one” (and this is where “atonement” comes from), has effects beyond what can be explained.⁵ And so we can

⁵ In the Gospels and in the Bible, healing and forgiveness, and “salvation,” are synonymous. Note particularly Isaiah 6:10, where “turning ” to God (“conversion,” after repentance) results in healing. The Gospel of Mark’s quotation of

think that whether it is that we are influencing God, or just the universe, in some way, prayer achieves results, even if we are mostly or wholly aware of these only as regards ourselves.

So perhaps some mysterious, synergistic power unleashed by prayer or by our thoughts or mere good desires achieves something in the world, which might be a change in God or a change in that “Berkeleyan scenery” mentioned above, something beyond merely how we perceive the world, but an actual change “in the world” which may not be as we perceive it at any one moment, or which at least does not remain that way. Perhaps God changes the slide we see, or our prayer causes this to happen with God merely looking on or doing who knows what: we don’t even know if the verb “do,” or any other verb, can be applied to him. We do know that by praying we dispose ourselves, or “extend” ourselves (as if we were reaching out) towards the desired result, and in this way at least may be influence God and/or the universe to favor us.

That aligning ourselves, by unity of purpose or nature (e.g., being “holy” and “pure” as God is thought to be) with God, we can well believe that we unleash unseen forces, mysterious but potentially powerful. It is said that experiments have shown that blessing ordinary water, or reciting a prayer (perhaps of whatever kind) over it produces changes which can be observed in the laboratory. This is a step above talking to plants, which at least are alive, in degree of strangeness, but then, many thinkers have considered rocks and “mere matter” to be alive in some way, or to have “magical” or special properties, beyond what is only subjective in the persons relating to them. This awareness that we cannot encapsulate everything and all knowledge within predetermined rational or logical or “scientific” or “verifiable” bounds within our comfort zone is part of the context of the option of faith, when it muses about the “nature and activity of God.”

That the hidden deity will perhaps never manifest himself or his power clearly (except, again perhaps, after we die and meet him), is meant, for the believer, for the purpose of keeping out faith intact, faith which is opposed to sight, faith which is not a second-class knowledge or a

this passage in Mark 4:12 renders the line “lest they turn and I heal them” as “lest they turn and I forgive them,” which is also how the Targum (the translation of the Hebrew original into Aramaic in order to explain it in the synagogue) renders it. Note, in Mark’s double-story (or two stories intertwined or “dovetailed”) of the raising of Jairus’ daughter and the healing of the woman with the continuous menstrual blood flow (menorrhagia), how “healing,” being revived or raised from the dead, and “salvation” are interchanged: Mark 5:23, 28-29, 34. English translations often obscure this by rendering the verb “to save” with the verb “to heal.” We can add “deliver” or “free” (from “dire straits”) as other biblical verbs which are tantamount to “salvation.” Paul’s confidence in God’s ability to do this is based on God’s ability to raise the dead in 2 Corinthians 1:9-10 (in a passage which will be further mentioned in this work). In Romans 4:17, Paul puts God’s ability to raise the dead alongside of his ability to create from nothing. We will discuss the concept of “salvation” in chapter six on faith and prayer.

plan B for what was not attainable but would have been better (proof), but the highest human response to the God who has chosen to remain mostly hidden, dwelling in dense darkness. Ultimately, only God knows why, and we can't effectively question him. We can only have faith that there is a plan, ultimately as hidden as God, but like him, revealed bit by bit, just enough to keep us going, like the manna, which only lasted one day, or two at the most, or the one step that John Henry Newman saw before him when he wrote "Lead, Kindly Light" (the actual title is "The Pillar of Cloud").⁶

⁶ The Israelites in the desert were led by God manifested in a protecting pillar of cloud by day and by fire at night. The cloud connotes the hidden darkness of God, the fire his purifications. Solomon referred to this dark cloud when he said that the Lord had chosen to dwell in dense darkness (quoted at the end of the last chapter).