

***On God, Goodness, and Evil:  
A Theological Dialogue***

Richard Oxenberg

**Part One: The Ethical**

**I. Meaning and Value**

*Joseph:* Simon, my friend, you are looking very grim today.

*Simon:* Joseph, I feel like I'm in hell.

*Joseph:* Oh, my goodness!

*Simon:* I've been reading accounts of the Holocaust – the gas chambers and crematoria, the medical experiments and mass butchery. I'm...I'm speechless. How can such atrocities have taken place?

*Joseph:* Yes, it's terrible to contemplate.

*Simon:* You consider yourself a man of faith, don't you?

*Joseph:* I try to be.

*Simon:* But how *can* you be? How can anyone be in the face of this? I don't see how there is any room left for God after the Holocaust.

*Joseph:* Ah, and I would say that the Holocaust has made the need for faith all the more apparent.

*Simon:* But how is faith possible anymore? What is there to have faith *in*? Has God's absence ever been more obvious?

*Joseph:* No, never. I entirely agree. But this itself is why we must regard the Holocaust as a kind of revelation.

*Simon:* A revelation?!

*Joseph:* Yes, a revelation of the absence of God – and of what it means for God to be absent. But where there is a revelation of God's absence there is also a revelation of God's presence, by way of contrast.

*Simon:* But surely you're not saying that the Holocaust has some sort of redeeming value in this way?

*Joseph:* No, no. I am merely speaking of its meaning.

*Simon:* But it seems to me that the Holocaust just makes everything meaningless! For there to be meaning there must be something to believe in, to hope for. But what the Holocaust 'reveals' is that there is nothing to believe in. There is no bottom to how awful things can get. To try and find meaning in all of this just seems like an affront.

*Joseph:* But an affront to *what*? Don't you see how self-defeating such a view is? If everything were meaningless then the Holocaust would have no more significance than a baseball game. To suggest *this* seems to me the greatest offense. What you seem really to be saying is that the Holocaust has driven you to despair. But such despair is not simple meaninglessness, on the contrary, it is a surrender to meaninglessness. But we must fight against this surrender.

*Simon:* Perhaps I need to get clearer on just what you mean by 'meaning'?

*Joseph:* Perhaps.

*Simon:* Because some would say that to suggest that the Holocaust has meaning is to suggest that it served some purpose, that it can be justified.

*Joseph:* But this is not at all what I'm saying!

*Simon:* So what do you mean by 'meaning'?

*Joseph:* Well, this has become a rather difficult question in the modern world, due largely, I think, to the success of empirical science.

*Simon:* Empirical science?

*Joseph:* Yes. The scientist seeks to understand things without regard to what is called 'subjective bias,' which is to say, without regard to the concerns of life. Now that's fine so long as all you want is to examine the purely external relations between things. But such an attitude can disclose nothing about the meanings of life. And yet, the success of the sciences has led many to suppose that life as a whole can be understood in this way. Thus the concept of meaning gets divorced from the concept of value, as if the meaning of things could be reduced to their material relations. But meaning will never be grasped in this way; things have meaning to us in relation to the value they have for us. This is true even at the simplest level. The cup you're drinking from, for instance, has meaning to you because it serves a function that you value. And the word 'cup,' far more than its color, far more than its shape and size, expresses this function.

*Simon:* But is function the same as value?

*Joseph:* Not the same – but the idea of function is dependent upon the idea of value. Something's function is always in relation to the value it serves. The value is the goal, the 'telos,' which the function fulfills.

*Simon:* But what of things that are not functional – a beautiful painting, a song, a spring day?

*Joseph:* Yes, these have an immediate value as opposed to an instrumental one – but still their meaning resides in their value. And I would say that the Holocaust, by its very horror, has meaning in just this sense as well. It lights up, by its very darkness, what we know to be of fundamental value.

## **II. Caring Beings**

*Simon:* But now we have just exchanged one difficult concept for another. How do you know what is of “fundamental value”? Where does “value” come from?

*Joseph:* Yes, this is the crux of the matter, and it's certainly not easy to discuss in all its nuance and depth. And yet the essence of it can be expressed rather simply, for value comes from our need to be well. Something is valued in relation to its ability to contribute to our wellness, our well-being. Of course, it's a very big question just what makes us well.

*Simon:* Wellness? That sounds very vague. If value derives from wellness wouldn't this make all value subjective and relative? As they say, one man's drink is another man's poison. If value is subjective then how can you call the Holocaust evil? The Nazis, anyway, felt *they* derived 'value' from it!

*Joseph:* We need to clean up our words to express this properly. People often use the term subjective to mean something like 'dependent on the will,' but wellness is not subjective in this sense. One does not get to decide what will make one well, and one can be mistaken about it. No, wellness is subjective in the sense that it pertains to the nature of subjectivity, that is, it is a state of the subject – but that is not to say it is subject to the will. And value, stemming from the need for such wellness, is also subjective in this sense – but not arbitrary.

*Simon:* But isn't this a very selfish understanding of value – value is what makes for my wellness? Isn't this a prescription for pure selfishness?

*Joseph:* First we need to get clear about what value is, and then we can try to discriminate between the value of selfishness as opposed to what is sometimes called 'selflessness' – but until we get clear on the meaning of value itself we can't really discuss the matter intelligently.

*Simon:* So you are saying that if there were no beings driven toward wellness there would be no such thing as value?

*Joseph:* How could there be? In order for there to be value there must be something valued and the one who values it. But the one who values will always do so because the thing valued matters in some way, and what matters to us fundamentally is our wellness.

*Simon:* So there could be no value without 'valuing beings' of some sort? Is that what you're saying?

*Joseph:* Yes, of course. Value is not something free-floating, nor is it an empty abstraction. It is rooted in the nature of what you've just called 'valuing beings.' It is derived from our impetus toward wellness. Just to give it a name, let's call this impetus 'caring.'

*Simon:* 'Caring'?

*Joseph:* Yes, because whenever we say we care about something we mean that we value it in some way; it makes a difference to our wellness. It is only because there are caring beings in the universe that there is anything like value.

*Simon:* And if there were no caring beings?

*Joseph:* There could be no such thing as value. Consider: Imagine a universe devoid of anyone who cares. What meaning could 'value' have in such a universe? It would matter to no one whether such a universe continued to exist or came to a sudden end. Even if there were living beings, living *non-caring* beings, it would make no difference. Such beings might be destroyed or preserved – who would care? What could it mean to say that such beings were harmed? What could it mean to say they were benefited? Insofar as they don't care themselves, insofar as *no one* cares, it is impossible to say whether what happens to them is good or bad. Such a universe would not merely be devoid of value, it would be devoid of the very *possibility* of value.

*Simon:* So it seems.

*Joseph:* But now insert into this universe a single caring being. Suddenly everything changes. Suddenly the universe aligns itself, from the point of view of this caring, in terms of good and bad, better and worse, more desirable and less. Suddenly things matter. Suddenly the universe has *meaning*. It can fulfill or fail to fulfill the caring of this caring being. With the entrance of caring in the universe comes the entrance of value. Something is valuable or not to the extent that it tends toward the fulfillment of the caring of a caring being. Caring is the ground of value.

*Simon:* And what exactly makes a being a 'caring' being in your view?

*Joseph:* A caring being is simply one who cares – one for whom things make a difference, one who is affected in a manner experienced as positive or negative, desirable or undesirable.

*Simon:* But not all things having value are caring beings, are they? We say that money has value, that food has value, that water has value – these are not caring beings?

*Joseph:* No, but they have value in relation to caring beings. I think Aristotle was among the first to distinguish between intrinsic and instrumental value. Something has instrumental value when its value is in service to the value of something else – like a car that has value because it serves my desire to travel, etc. But something has intrinsic value when it is valuable in itself. You can see how things that have instrumental value must derive their value from things that have intrinsic value.

*Simon:* How so?

*Joseph:* Because things of instrumental value have it only by reference to something else. Considered in themselves they have no value at all. The car has value only because someone wishes to drive it. The cup has value only because someone wishes to drink from it. If there were no one who wished to drink or drive these things would have no value. Of course, there can be long strings of things having only instrumental value. The table has value because it supports the cup which has value because it holds the tea which has value because...etc. But even an infinite string of such things would have no value at all unless it were ultimately in service to something of intrinsic value – something that has value in itself.

*Simon:* But what is it *about* a thing that makes it have value 'in itself'?

*Joseph:* Yes, that is the crucial question. Unless we can identify something of intrinsic value, all talk of value will be meaningless. So we must ask: what is essential to the idea of intrinsic value? Of course, you see that it would be a contradiction in terms to say that something of intrinsic value derived its value from elsewhere, for then its value would not be intrinsic.

*Simon:* Yes, I see that.

*Joseph:* So this means that in order for anything at all to have value there must be that which is a *ground* of value, that whose nature is of value inherently.

*Simon:* Are you talking about God?

*Joseph:* Well, let's not jump there just yet. I think we can say, from a formal point of view, that anything of intrinsic value must be such as to value itself, to be self-valuing.

*Simon:* Self-valuing?

*Joseph:* Consider the example I gave a moment ago. It's clear that nothing can be of value unless there is someone who values it – the very idea of value is relational. There must be the one who values and the thing that is valued.

*Simon:* Yes.

*Joseph:* But the one who values only does so insofar as he or she *cares* about the thing valued – to value is to care, isn't this true?

*Simon:* That seems right to me.

*Joseph:* And one who cares, we might say, experiences the 'positive' or 'negative' in relation to the thing cared about – if it fares well they are happy, if not, unhappy. They themselves are affected by what happens to what they care about. If it were otherwise we would say they did not care.

*Simon:* Yes.

*Joseph:* So, in a sense, one who cares always cares not only about the thing cared about, but about him- or herself as well. Caring is always self-relational, it always, so to speak, cares for itself.

*Simon:* Caring always cares for itself? I'm not sure I'm following you here.

*Joseph:* Maybe an example will help. Imagine a devoted mother who cares for her child. Now whatever happens to the child affects the mother – two people are affected by what happens to the child, not just the child; the child *and* the mother are affected.

*Simon:* Yes, I see that.

*Joseph:* Certainly the mother's caring is directed toward the child and the mother may never explicitly think about herself at all – but still the mother is affected. If the child is ill the mother suffers. If the child does well the mother is pleased. Though the mother's caring is directed toward the child it is also a self-relation of the mother to herself. The mother, we might say, and I admit this is an awkward way of putting it, but the mother, in caring for the child, always also cares for her own caring for the child. The caring is a self-relation.

*Simon:* Yes, I think I see what you mean. When I care about something, my caring about it affects *me*, my caring is a way in which I am related to myself.

*Joseph:* Precisely.

*Simon:* So, you are saying that there is something about the very nature of caring, and hence, value, that entails subjectivity – if we understand subjectivity to be a kind of self-relation.

*Joseph:* Yes, exactly. Only a subjective being can be a caring being. And that's why the scientist, who considers only objective reality, will never discover anything like value in the universe. But this is not to say it is not there!

*Simon:* So all value stems from this self-relational nature of subjective beings?

*Joseph:* Yes, but of course, it is not just their self-relational nature, it is the fact that the quality of this self-relation *matters* to them, they *care* about it. Self-relation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for value. There must be caring.

*Simon:* But now we seem to be in a definitional circle: a caring being is simply one who cares.

*Joseph:* Yes, but there is no escaping this circle, because we are not proposing a definition but pointing out a feature of reality. There is something about caring that is irreducible to anything else. It cannot be derived from something more primary. It's just a bare fact. We know of caring beings not through inferential reasoning but because we ourselves are instances of such caring beings. We never could have discovered caring from an investigation of the objective world – which, again, is why the sciences can tell us nothing about it. You and I and all people, and perhaps all sentient beings, are caring beings. But the important thing to grasp here is that all value has its ground in the caring of caring beings, and could not derive from elsewhere. Caring beings, thus, are beings of intrinsic value and, as such, are the ground of all instrumental value. In other words, any string of instrumental values, if it is to have value at all, must serve the caring of some caring being. So, the table has value because it supports the cup, the cup has value because it contains the tea, and the tea has value because I desire it, it satisfies my caring in some way. My caring gives value, and *meaning*, to the tea, the cup, and the table. All value and meaning arise from the caring of caring beings.

*Simon:* And caring beings are of intrinsic value because they care about themselves?

*Joseph:* Because their caring is a self-relation. Again, something can only be of value to the extent that it is of value *to* someone. But if absolutely everything were of value only because it were valuable to something *other* than itself, then nothing at all would be of value – for there would be no final term from which value were conferred. There must be something of value *to itself*, whose value is a self-relation. And this is caring. And, of course, we ourselves are such caring beings.

### **III. The Origin of Caring**

*Simon:* Okay, I think I understand you. You're saying that value is relative to each individual caring being?

*Joseph:* Oh, we must be very careful here. This word 'relative' can be treacherous. Ordinarily, when we say that value is relative we mean that it is arbitrary and variable, according to culture or personal whim; as if value were a mere cultural artifact or a matter of volition. But this is not what I'm saying. Caring is not a matter of the will. No one *decides* to be a caring being, and although some may wish not to be, when things have gone very badly for them, I don't really think anyone has the power to eradicate their caring (what we call escapism is the attempt to do so). No, caring is of the *nature* of caring beings. It is, to some degree, manipulable by the will, but only within limits. It is grounded in the fundamental nature of being itself, not the will of caring beings.

*Simon:* The fundamental nature of being itself?

*Joseph:* Yes, caring is of the very nature of *what-is*. Or, to express it in religious terms, it is a feature of the being of God.

*Simon:* God? Our caring comes from God? But wouldn't some say it is a product of evolution – that what you call 'caring' emerges because it has survival value?

*Joseph:* Well, this idea that something might *emerge* from evolution involves a misreading of evolutionary theory. Natural selection cannot cause anything to emerge, it can just sustain and shape those things that have *already* emerged. But things can only emerge because they are fundamental potentialities of being itself – evolution can shape the actual but does not determine the possible.

*Simon:* But doesn't evolutionary theory account for biological traits, such as what you call caring, on the grounds that they confer a survival advantage? To use the simplest of examples, the giraffe's long neck allows it to reach the higher leaves and thereby survive in times of food shortage. Mightn't what you call 'caring' arise for the same reason? Those who care about survival are more likely to act in a way that will further their survival. Might this not be the origin of caring?

*Joseph:* But aren't you putting the cart before the horse? True, the giraffe's long neck gives it a survival advantage but this is not to say that the long neck's survival advantage produces the long neck. The survival advantage is the *effect* of the long neck, not the cause. To mistake an effect for a cause is a basic error in logic. It seems to me that those who suppose that evolutionary theory can serve as a final explanation for biological traits make this mistake.

*Simon:* Then what is the cause?

*Joseph:* But this is just what we don't know. This is a great mystery. Evolutionary theory says 'random mutation' but this tells us little. In order for there to be random mutation there must already be that which mutates, and, however random the mutations, they will always be limited to what is possible for this mutating substratum. What gives rise to this substratum? What is its ultimate nature? What are its potentialities? These are the



questions we would need to answer in order to understand this. Evolutionary theory doesn't touch on these questions.

*Simon:* Are you taking the side of the creationists, then, in the creationism debate?

*Joseph:* No, not at all. The creationists attack evolutionary theory on its own territory, but that's not what I'm doing. I'm simply noting the boundaries of that territory. Evolutionary theory helps explain the way organic nature develops over time, and – although I think it would be hubristic for evolutionists to claim that they will never learn anything more about this process than what current theory shows – I think we can say in general that the evolutionists have had great success within their proper limits. But what evolutionary theory does not do, what it cannot do, is explain the ultimate nature of the organic itself. And this is especially to be noted with respect to what we have been calling 'caring,' for it is really impossible to imagine that caring might have emerged through mere mutation, mere changes in form, of that which has no fundamental potentiality for care. One can imagine a universe in which caring beings would simply not be possible, a universe without the potential to produce anything other than configurations of rock and dust. If this were the case no amount of evolution could change it. However much evolution may help to shape the way caring manifests itself under the conditions of nature, the origin of caring cannot be explained by evolution.

*Simon:* So you're saying that caring is of the very nature of the universe itself?

*Joseph:* It is a fundamental feature of being that cannot be explained away as a product of will, culture, or evolution; which is to say that value is also fundamental to being.

*Simon:* But philosophers sometimes make what they call a 'fact-value distinction.' Are you denying the legitimacy of this distinction?

*Joseph:* I'm saying that value – or at least the caring out of which values arise – is itself a 'fact.' It is fundamental to the nature of being, and we cannot understand the world, ourselves – or really anything – without coming to understand it.

#### **IV. Intrinsic Value**

*Simon:* But if each caring being is its own ground of value, as you say, then all value is relative, is it not?

*Joseph:* Well, as I say, we have to be careful – we have to say, relative to what. Those things of instrumental value to a caring being have value relative to that caring being, of course. But a caring being's value is not relative to anything other than itself. It is valuable to itself. But to speak of a being whose value is 'relative to itself' involves a very paradoxical use of the word relative – for by relative we ordinarily mean relative to something else. If something's value is relative to something else then we can modify the nature or even the fact of that value by modifying that something else. For instance, the

value of paper money is relative to a society's willingness to honor it. When that changes, the value of the money changes as well. But this is not the case with a caring being. There is nothing in the world that we can modify that will alter the value of a caring being. Even if everyone in the universe were to decide not to honor the value of some one caring being, that caring being would still have value; for its value is a self-relation, independent of anyone else. So long as that caring being remains in existence it has an intrinsic value that cannot be canceled by another. So in this sense – and this I think really gets to the gist of it – a caring being's value is absolute, not relative in the ordinary sense of the word at all.

*Simon:* So every caring being is an absolute value 'in itself,' you would say?

*Joseph:* That's one way of putting it.

*Simon:* Perhaps this might be better thought of as a pluralism than a relativism?

*Joseph:* Yes, and we can see now what the distinction would be between these two. It is a pluralism because we recognize many centers of value. But it is not a relativism, because each of these centers has an absolute status.

## **V. The Ethical Relation**

*Simon:* But are your ideas of absolute and pluralistic value really compatible? You say that each caring being is of absolute value. But if I am of *absolute* value why doesn't this mean that I get to do anything I like – roll over anyone else in pursuit of my own good? Why should I, or anyone, be limited by another?

*Joseph:* Ah, yes, this brings us to the heart of the ethical question. But in a sense it is rather easily answered: To live ethically is to live in accordance with what has value. Others have value. Hence, to live ethically is to live with respect for the value of others.

*Simon:* But what of *my* value?

*Joseph:* Of course, you must respect your value as well.

*Simon:* And if there is conflict?

*Joseph:* If there is conflict we must seek a resolution respectful of the value of all.

*Simon:* But what if I choose not to seek such a resolution? Why should I? What will induce me to do so?

*Joseph:* We have to distinguish between why you *should* do so, from an ethical point of view, and what might motivate you to do so, practically speaking. As for the question of why you should, I've already answered it. You should respect others' value because to do

otherwise would be to disregard something of value, and this, I think, is just what we mean by *wrong*. This is the only possible answer to this question. What if I said, you should do so because God commands it? You might then ask: "But why should I obey God's command?" Now all I could say is that to do otherwise would be contrary to what has value. But now we've just traversed a circle.

*Simon:* Well, the more usual answer, I suppose, would be that to do otherwise would lead to God's punishment, or some other negative consequence.

*Joseph:* But clearly this is an inferior answer, ethically considered. If all we consider are consequences for ourselves, then we are no longer in the domain of ethics at all, but of pure self-interest. We are saying, in effect, that self-interest determines what is right. If we go this route then the idea of right becomes subject to whomever has power over us – maybe Hitler. No, right cannot be predicated on self-interest.

*Simon:* So I should respect the value of others because...?

*Joseph:* ...because they *have* value. Because to do otherwise is to disregard the truth of the other, and this is a truth of value.

*Simon:* And if I fail to do so...?

*Joseph:* Then you are wrong.

*Simon:* But *so what* if I'm wrong? If there are no actual consequences what does it matter?

*Joseph:* There are consequences for the person you are wronging! There is no getting around that. But as for yourself, you cannot consistently violate others while maintaining that your own value be respected.

*Simon:* Why not?

*Joseph:* Well, why should anyone else respect your value?

*Simon:* I'm not sure.

*Joseph:* So then would it be acceptable to you if someone raped you, or stole from you, or murdered you, or tortured you?

*Simon:* Of course not!

*Joseph:* Why not?

*Simon:* Well, because...because I don't *want* them to!

*Joseph:* Precisely, because it would be a violation of your caring. Do you see how that's the only reason there *could* be?

*Simon:* I'm not sure I see that.

*Joseph:* Any other reason would be of an instrumental sort. Whatever else you gave as a reason might be responded to: but why should anyone respect *that* reason? Ultimately, the only reason to respect any reason is because it is an imperative of caring.

*Simon:* Okay, so I do not care to be violated by others. I can't deny it. But that still doesn't say why I should respect others. Why not just care about myself?

*Joseph:* In a sense, you are in a place of choice. Remember, I said before that caring does not stem from the will – but now your will must become engaged. You must decide, that is, your will must decide, whether you are going to affirm the value of caring or not. If you choose not to, then you have no basis ever again to protest anyone's violating you – raping you, torturing you, etc. – if you choose to affirm the value of caring then you may not violate the caring of others, for this would be counter to your affirmation.

*Simon:* But what if I choose to affirm the value of caring only for myself?

*Joseph:* Caring doesn't exist only for yourself. That's a fact there is no getting around. Once you acknowledge that two plus two equals four you can't then say, but I only acknowledge this to be true on Thursdays. If it is true, it is true about the relation between two and two and four, regardless of the day. Likewise, in acknowledging that caring has value and ought to be respected you are acknowledging a truth about the nature of caring which is going to be true wherever caring is found. In other words, again, your decision to respect the value of caring does not *confer* value on caring, caring already has value intrinsically. All you can decide is whether you are going to acknowledge and respect this value or not. But once you acknowledge this value you acknowledge it wherever it occurs.

*Simon:* So let's say I choose not to acknowledge it.

*Joseph:* Well, first I would say you are in error. You are not seeing a truth, a fact about the nature of things. And I can probably make this truth plain to you by torturing you – that is, under extreme violence to your own caring you will almost certainly come to *see* the value of caring. The moment you protest your torture you acknowledge the extent to which you value your physical well-being.

*Simon:* Mine, but not necessarily others'.

*Joseph:* Right, and I'm not saying that you do, in fact, value the caring of others. I am merely saying that you must *acknowledge* the value of that caring to the extent that you recognize it to be of a similar nature to your own.

*Simon:* But what if I refuse to recognize that it is similar to my own?

*Joseph:* Then you're a solipsist. You're not, are you?

*Simon:* A solipsist?

*Joseph:* You don't really believe that you are the only caring being in the universe, do you?

*Simon:* No, of course not.

*Joseph:* Well then, enough about that.

*Simon:* So I must acknowledge the value of others...?

*Joseph:* ...to the extent that you acknowledge your own value, and recognize that others are similar to you in this respect.

*Simon:* This sounds something like the Golden Rule.

*Joseph:* It is very much like the Golden Rule. I'd say it is the basis for the Golden Rule.

*Simon:* I must treat others as I would like to be treated, in accordance with my recognition that they are of intrinsic value as I am.

*Joseph:* Exactly.

*Simon:* And if I refuse to do so?

*Joseph:* Well, of course, you can still refuse to do so. But from an ethical point of view we would say you are wrong – and we are now able to give a precise meaning to this word wrong – we mean that you are failing to respect the value of something you indeed recognize has value.

## **VI. The Outlaw**

*Simon:* I am still unclear as to *why* I should care about others, though – I mean, well, maybe this whole idea of 'should' confuses me. What determines what I 'should' do?

*Joseph:* We say that something 'should' be done when it is required by the telos of a value we affirm.

*Simon:* The 'telos'...?

*Joseph:* The end, the goal.

*Simon:* And 'a value we affirm' means...?

*Joseph:* ...one that we acknowledge as an authentic value, a value that deserves respect.

*Simon:* But – and I guess this is what is confusing me – if *my* values derive from *my* caring then the only 'shoulds' relevant to me would be one's stemming from my own caring. Why *should* I care about others?

*Joseph:* For the time being we are not really concerned with the question of whether you should *care* about them or not; i.e., whether your personal caring should be implicated in theirs, as the mother's is with her child's. From an ethical standpoint, the only question is whether you should *respect* their caring; that is, acknowledge it and refrain from violating it. This is a matter of your will, not your caring. The ethical *should* is directed at your will.

*Simon:* But where is it directed *from*? Whence does it originate? You said that an ethical 'should' expresses the telos of a value we affirm, and that all values arise from caring. But this ethical 'should,' directed at my will, does not arise from *my* caring.

*Joseph:* No it doesn't. It arises from the caring of the other. It is the *other's* caring that speaks to your will and confronts it with a should. You can fail to respect this should – which is to say, you can fail to affirm the value of the caring being who issues it, but you cannot do so honestly, for to the extent that you are not a solipsist you do, in fact, acknowledge the existence of other caring beings, and to the extent that you affirm the value of your own caring, you implicitly recognize the value of the caring of others.

*Simon:* So the ethical 'should' is issued by the other?

*Joseph:* Precisely. It is an implication of the other's caring.

*Simon:* And if I fail to acknowledge it?

*Joseph:* You implicitly deny the value of caring as such, and thereby, deny the value of your own caring.

*Simon:* But suppose I do? Suppose I deny *both* the other's value and my own?

*Joseph:* Well, then, to the extent that we take you at your word, that is, agree with you that you have no value (and of course we don't), then we could simply destroy you. You would be a menace to us and of no intrinsic value yourself – like a disease. We could destroy you without compunction.

*Simon:* But wouldn't you be violating me?

*Joseph:* Not if there were nothing to violate. Not if we agreed with you that you have no value.

*Simon:* Okay, well, then, suppose I insist on my value but simply, willfully, refuse to respect the value of others. What then?

*Joseph:* Then you are simply – what shall we call it? – an outlaw. On some level you recognize the ethical 'should'; i.e., the 'law' (unless you really want us to believe that you are a solipsist – in which case I suppose we should treat you as deranged) but you refuse to abide by it. So you are an outlaw.

*Simon:* And?

*Joseph:* And now we must find a way of bringing you into accord with justice.

*Simon:* By force?

*Joseph:* Perhaps.

*Simon:* But by what right do you do so?

*Joseph:* Right? And by what right does an outlaw speak of right?

*Simon:* So, you're saying that if I refuse to respect the value of others then I lose all my rights?

*Joseph:* Not quite. But you do see how, if we lived according to *your* rule, the rule of the outlaw, this would follow.

*Simon:* Can you elaborate?

*Joseph:* Yes. *Your* rule, the outlaw's rule, does not respect the value of others. And if we lived according to *your* rule then we would certainly not be obliged to honor your value, you being other to us. It is only to the extent that we do not live according to your rule that we have any moral obligation to you at all. In a sense, then, as an outlaw, you no longer have any rightful say as to how you should be treated by us, since you yourself reject the rule that would demand our respecting you. For surely you can't insist upon a value that you yourself refuse to acknowledge.

*Simon:* So once I become an outlaw I have no more rights?

*Joseph:* Well, not quite – because I would say that you haven't so much lost your rights as your right to insist upon them. You are still a caring being. As such you are still of intrinsic value. If we are to be moral we must treat you with more respect than you treat others. By *your* rule we could treat you in any way we like or, at least, with as much disregard as you've treated others. But we reject your rule. We must still acknowledge

your intrinsic value. Your *being* still has rights, in a sense, but your *will* no longer does, because it is perverse. Your will has no rights just as long as it refuses to live in accordance with justice. Thus, we have the right to override your will until it does. This is the moral basis of all legal systems, in which coercion is used to force people to behave justly.

*Simon:* You have begun to use the word 'justice' – can you define it?

*Joseph:* Traditionally, justice has meant 'giving to each his due.' On the basis of what we've discussed we can flesh this out a bit more. We can now say what 'due' means. It means, treating each in accordance with the intrinsic value native to each.

*Simon:* And the outlaw? The outlaw can make no claim upon justice?

*Joseph:* The outlaw stands in violation of justice. To fail to constrain the outlaw would be to permit the outlaw's continued violation of others. Thus we have a moral responsibility to constrain the outlaw, and the outlaw, so to speak, has no right to complain – because the outlaw lives in disacknowledgement of right itself. Still, the outlaw remains a being of intrinsic value. We must, therefore, treat the outlaw with mercy. This means two things: First, we must not do more harm to the outlaw than is required to neutralize the outlaw's danger. Secondly, we must provide the outlaw with the opportunity to come back into alignment with justice, and be willing to accept her when she does.



## **Part Two: The Spiritual**

### **VII. Gap**

*Simon:* Ok, I think I understand your view. I cannot consistently approve of the violation of others while insisting that *I* not be violated, and I cannot honestly accept my own violation given my caring nature. So this means, I guess, that I can't be both honest and unethical – at least not without recognizing that I am wrong.

*Joseph:* You can't be honest, unethical, and *aware*. That's right. And that's why ethical violation is almost always accompanied by self-deceit and evasion. Your experience of the value of your own caring is, in effect, your window into the value of others. Through yourself you can see what is true about others as well. This is the basis of the Golden Rule.

*Simon:* Yes, fine – But doesn't this just make the human situation all the more tragic? Our caring, which *ought* to be respectful of others, is often, *actually*, only concerned for itself. That seems to be its very nature. It is easy to be indifferent to the caring of others. Just look at the Holocaust, slavery, rape – and countless other examples! I don't see how this helps the case for God. Quite the contrary. This makes the idea of God even less plausible. If God exists why would our caring be so selfish, so cruel, so twisted?

*Joseph:* Well, it is just here that the story of faith begins. The Bible, of course, is very aware of the discrepancy between what we are and what we ought to be. We might almost say that this is its basic theme. The whole of religion is an attempt to close the gap between what we are and what we ought to be.

*Simon:* But why should there be such a gap? What accounts for this gap? If God created us, and created us to be good in the ethical sense you discuss, why are things so fouled up?

*Joseph:* In Christian theology this is attributed to what is called 'the fall.'

*Simon:* Oh, yes, I know about that. Now you're talking about the Garden of Eden. But come – you don't really expect me to believe that all the evils of the world result from someone eating a piece of fruit they shouldn't have?

*Joseph:* I think we need to read the story symbolically.

*Simon:* Ok, but what is it symbolic of?

*Joseph:* Well, now we're heading into some rather deep waters, Simon. Of course, I can only give you my understanding.

*Simon:* Of course. Still, I'd be curious to hear it.

### **VIII. The Caring of God**

*Joseph:* Let us begin, then, with a question we raised and laid aside earlier: what is the origin of caring? Clearly human beings are caring beings. Clearly we are not the origin of ourselves. Clearly, as well, caring as such cannot be attributed to some evolutionary process. Nothing essentially non-caring can develop into something that cares. It follows that caring must be fundamental to being itself. It is this fundamental caring that I call God.

*Simon:* You are equating caring with God? But is this Christianity?

*Joseph:* Well, the apostle John writes, "God is love." Love is a mode of caring. Of course there is a lot more to say than this, caring is itself a mystery, but let's try to take it one step at a time.

*Simon:* And yet it is hard to imagine how caring could be 'fundamental to being.' Caring – at least as we know it – is always in response to some kind of desire. We are hungry so we care about food. We are thirsty so we care about drink. What would a caring 'fundamental to being' care about?

*Joseph:* Theoretically, it would be fulfilled in itself, at peace. It would always be satisfied in its desire since, as the basis of everything, it would always already contain whatever might be desired.

*Simon:* Theoretically?

*Joseph:* Considered in itself, apart from what in Christianity we call 'the creation.' But I don't think we can really consider God apart from the creation. The creation disrupts this peace.

*Simon:* Disrupts it? So God is not at peace?

*Joseph:* Does the image of Christ on the Cross appear to you to be an image of a being at peace?

*Simon:* Well, no, but...but isn't Christ the 'prince of peace'?

*Joseph:* Yes, and here it gets complex, and involves categories that strain our understanding. I would put it this way: God is at peace in God's self and in anguish for us; the peace and the anguish exist together, but they are not on the same plane. The peace is the answer to the anguish. We overcome our anguish by tapping into God's peace. In a sense, the whole of religion is contained in this idea.

*Simon:* Joseph, you are losing me. I thought you were going to interpret the Garden of Eden story.

*Joseph:* Yes, I've jumped ahead a bit. So let's get back to that – the Garden of Eden.

## **IX. Eden**

*Joseph:* Let us say that the Garden of Eden represents the creation as fully governed by, bathed in, God's eternal peace. Adam and Eve, we are told, are "naked and unashamed." Nakedness is a symbol of honesty – openness to self and other – and vulnerability. That they are unashamed of their honesty and vulnerability means they are in full acceptance of themselves and each other.

*Simon:* But doesn't nakedness also suggest sexuality?

*Joseph:* Yes, and they are sexually fulfilled through each other. Sexuality itself might be seen as but one expression of our drive to unite with one another, to be fulfilled through one another. It also suggests vulnerability, because our need of the other is also our vulnerability *to* the other. God creates Eve, remember, after noting that "it is not good for the man to be alone." This is the first biblical mention of anything "not good" in the creation. Human beings realize their good – find the satisfaction of their caring – through healthy and open relationship with one another. Without this they are in distress. That Adam and Eve are "naked and unashamed" implies their acceptance of themselves and their openness to one another. Such mutual acceptance and openness, deeply realized, is love.

*Simon:* And love, you say, is God?

*Joseph:* It is caring in its fullest realization. It is, so to speak, caring in its wholeness. And this is the nature of God, considered in God's self. So Eden is an image of the creation in full accord with God.

*Simon:* But this state of love doesn't last, does it? Something disrupts it.

*Joseph:* Yes, there is a serpent in their midst. The serpent tempts Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in order to become like God in her own person.

*Simon:* So what does this serpent represent? Why should there be this disruptive serpent in Eden?

*Joseph:* We need to think this through carefully. I think Adam and Eve in Eden are like children who have not yet come into their full humanity. Remember that before God creates Eve he has Adam look for a partner among the other animals, as if it is not entirely clear that Adam is anything more than an animal himself. In this context we

might see the talking serpent – the animal who speaks – to represent a stage in human development; the emergence of rationality.

*Simon:* By rationality you mean critical thinking?

*Joseph:* Not just critical thinking. Self-awareness, the awareness of the world as other than oneself, of the distinction between I and not-I, and the capacity for self-determination. These are the traits that mark the human as human.

*Simon:* So you're saying that the serpent represents *rationality*? This is a very unusual interpretation, Joseph.

*Joseph:* Not just rationality. Rationality conjoined with animality – with animal instincts, animal desires, animal needs. Eve's dialogue with the serpent represents the temptation to which this conjunction of rationality and animality leads.

*Simon:* The serpent tempts Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. So what does this tree represent?

*Joseph:* Let's recall the dialogue with the serpent. The serpent tells Eve that in eating from the tree she will come to know good and evil as God does. How does God know good and evil? God knows good and evil from God's own nature. What is in conformity with God's nature is good, what is discordant with it is evil. God is universal love. So what is good for God is good for all, what is evil for God is evil for all. But now Eve is tempted to become *like* God in her own person; to measure good and evil from *herself*, from her own desires, her own will. We might say that this is the origin of narcissistic egoism. The egoist evaluates the world entirely from the standpoint of his own interests and desires. What is good for *me* is good. What is bad for *me* is evil.

*Simon:* So in eating from the tree she becomes egoistic?

*Joseph:* She and Adam now come to see their own individual desires and interests as supreme. They lose sight of the fact that they are part of a greater whole that extends beyond them. They lose sight of God, of God's truth, of God's *universal* standard of good and evil. Their love circles in on itself. They shift from a reality governed by the universal love of God to a reality governed by their own private self-love. That's the fall.

*Simon:* And then they become ashamed of their nakedness.

*Joseph:* Yes, because, of course, they continue to be contingent beings, vulnerable and dependent. But now they no longer feel themselves continuous with the whole that they depend upon, that completes them. So they feel bereft, abandoned to themselves, with no real ground to stand on. And this sense of abandonment and vulnerability feels threatening, so they must hide the truth of themselves from themselves, and from each other. They become ashamed of their vulnerability, their weakness, their 'nakedness.'

*Simon:* But doesn't God warn them that if they eat from this tree they will die? They don't die, do they?

*Joseph:* They are cut off from the Tree of Life. Just as the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil represents the standards pertaining to God's universal love, so the Tree of Life represents God's power of life, God's eternal life. When Adam and Eve become self-enclosed they no longer feel themselves rooted in God's life. They experience their own finite lives as all they have. But, of course, this finite life is limited in extent and destined to end. So now they feel themselves subject to inevitable death.

*Simon:* And this self-enclosure, you're saying, is original sin?

*Joseph:* It is the *origin* of sin. It is the state out of which all sin proceeds.

*Simon:* How so?

*Joseph:* Adam and Eve now feel themselves entirely rooted in themselves, they lose their experience of rootedness in God. This makes them feel radically vulnerable. In response, they try to make of *themselves* little 'gods,' to make themselves supreme in their own willfulness. But, of course, we cannot each be supreme. A world of willful beings each vying for supremacy is a world at war. The philosopher Hobbes called it "the war of all against all." In such a world love is shattered; our need for one another cannot be fulfilled.

*Simon:* But isn't this just a function of what you have called *caring*? I feel *my* pain, not yours. I feel *my* hunger, not yours. So I am naturally more concerned with myself than with you.

*Joseph:* Yes.

*Simon:* But then this is not our fault! It's just the way we are!

*Joseph:* It is not our fault, but, from the biblical standpoint, it is our situation – our fallen situation.

*Simon:* But then who is to blame for it?

*Joseph:* I am not sure the category of blame is the best way to think about it. This is where we have to recall that we are dealing with myth. Adam and Eve represent humanity. Before the fall they have not yet come into their full humanity. They haven't yet woken up to themselves, their capacity for self-awareness and self-determination is still unformed. They live in accord with God and nature, but it is an unconscious, strictly instinctual, accord. They haven't yet come into their own as free, self-determined, entities.

*Simon:* But are you saying that they only come into their ‘full humanity’ by eating the forbidden fruit? By sin?

*Joseph:* I’m saying that they eat the forbidden fruit in response to their development as self-determining beings. As I see it, the dialogue between Eve and the serpent represents a moment in the emergence of human self-awareness. The talking serpent – the “cleverest” animal in the garden – represents a moment in human development; the human emergence into freedom and self-consciousness.

*Simon:* But the serpent tempts Eve to do what is wrong, to eat the forbidden fruit.

*Joseph:* Yes, this emergence into freedom and self-consciousness is, at the same time, a temptation. It tempts us to center all value in ourselves; to see the whole world as revolving around us, to define ‘good’ and ‘evil’ strictly in terms of our own private desires and interests. Eve, and then Adam, succumb to this temptation. This is what is represented by their eating from the tree. The story is an origin myth. It is a myth about the origin of human evil.

*Simon:* But was there any possibility that Adam and Eve – that *we*, humanity – might have avoided succumbing to this temptation? You say that this represents a stage in human development. Was there any way we could have avoided this stage?

*Joseph:* I don’t think so. Just as a child has to pass through adolescence before it can become an adult, so we – humanity – have to pass through this stage.

*Simon:* So then, again, it’s not our fault?

*Joseph:* It is our situation. It is the human situation. The aim of the story is not to blame us, but to reveal the nature of our situation to us. We are estranged from God, from the garden of God’s love, due to our self-enclosure, which is both a product of, and a cause of, our pursuit of individual supremacy. The aim of the Bible as a whole is to show us the nature of our situation and to point the way out of it. And, of course, it is this situation, at its extreme, that leads to Nazism and the Holocaust.

## **X. Evil**

*Simon:* That’s an interesting interpretation, Joseph, but unusual. Isn’t the serpent traditionally identified with Satan?

*Joseph:* Yes, but if we want to get to the bottom of this we have to ask ourselves: what makes Satan Satan?

*Simon:* What do you mean?

*Joseph:* Satan, of course, is a personification of evil. But what makes evil evil? What is it *about* Satan that makes Satan evil?

*Simon:* He...he wants to destroy others, doesn't he? He has a desire to hurt and destroy.

*Joseph:* Yes, but why? Where does that desire come from? What underlies this desire to hurt and destroy?

*Simon:* I don't know. It sends chills down my spine just to think about it.

*Joseph:* Yes, but if we are really going to come to grips with the Nazis we *must* think about it, mustn't we?

*Simon:* I don't know where it comes from. It's unfathomable to me. Do you have an answer?

*Joseph:* All I can give you is my speculation. I don't claim to understand it all.

*Simon:* Still, I'd like to hear what you think.

*Joseph:* Let us suppose that caring has a fundamental drive, a basic desire, to achieve a certain wholeness. Let us suppose that this is a function of its fundamental nature, such that it feels fulfilled, satisfied, in its wholeness, and anxious, disturbed, frustrated, when severed from the whole.

*Simon:* Okay. This sounds a little abstract. I'm not sure just what you mean by 'wholeness.'

*Joseph:* It's hard to express, but I think we come closest to feeling whole when we feel fully loved. But that puts it a bit too simply. The emphasis here is not just on love but on *we*. In other words, it must be *we* who are fully loved. Or, to put it another way, we must be fully loved in being who we fully are.

*Simon:* But what are we 'fully'?

*Joseph:* Again, this is not easy to say – and all I can give you is my take on it. But I would say that we become fully ourselves as we achieve communion with the whole of being. We have a drive for such communion.

*Simon:* The whole of being? Again, this sounds very abstract, and maybe a little grandiose – you're saying that this is our fundamental drive?

*Joseph:* It becomes less abstract when we think of the many subordinate drives this drive gives rise to – the drive for creativity, for knowledge, for self-expression – the drive to fully actualize our potentialities. This, I would say, is the basic life urge.

*Simon:* But wouldn't biologists say that our basic life urge is for survival? We are driven by a basic urge for self-preservation.

*Joseph:* Yes, but I am suggesting that our drive for self-preservation is but an element within a far greater drive, a drive for wholeness. No one wants *mere* survival. We want love, we want knowledge, we want creative expression, we want the fulfillment of our potentialities. This is all part of our drive for wholeness.

*Simon:* But what does this have to do with Satan?

*Joseph:* The Satanic urge is the urge to achieve such wholeness by *subsuming* the world into oneself. It is the attempt to achieve wholeness through the expansion of the domain of the ego. The Satanic drive is not so much for the destruction of others as for supremacy over them. The Satanic person wants command over his world, which entails command over others. The Satanic person glories in his power over others; his ability to subordinate them to his will. He seeks to make the world bow to *his* determinations of 'good' and 'evil,' and thereby puts himself in the place of God. And this is the temptation the serpent presents to Adam and Eve.

*Simon:* But you say that the serpent represents an element *within* Adam and Eve.

*Joseph:* The serpent is a symbol of this 'satanic' urge; and, yes, this urge is within Adam and Eve themselves, within *us*. In Judaism, it is called the "yetzer ha ra," the evil inclination. I see it as a function of the individualization of consciousness together with the power of self-determination. We are tempted to use our power of self-determination to try to become supreme in our individualized selves; to have everyone and everything else revolve around us; to realize our desire for wholeness by subsuming the whole within ourselves. So, yes, the serpent *is* identified with Satan, with the satanic urge.

*Simon:* But it's impossible to subsume the whole within ourselves, isn't it? - if by 'whole' you mean the 'whole of being.' The whole is infinite and we are finite.

*Joseph:* Exactly, it's impossible. This is the origin of *greed*. The Greeks had a word for this satanic drive. They called it '*pleonexia*.' It means the endless desire for more and better. The person driven by *pleonexia* can never be satisfied.

*Simon:* But if it never leads to satisfaction why would anyone pursue it?

*Joseph:* Underlying *pleonexia* is a restlessness, a radical anxiety. The Christian philosopher Kierkegaard speaks of it as despair; a despair rooted in our sense of isolation, littleness, inability to satisfy our fundamental drive for wholeness. But such despair is unacceptable to the psyche, so it hides it from itself. We hide ourselves from ourselves. This is represented in the Eden myth as our flight from our 'nakedness.' And now we try to prove to ourselves, in this self-deceitful way, that we can indeed become what we really cannot become. With each success we feel a little thrill that we are making



progress. With each failure, of course, we feel deflated and threatened. But on some level – a level we try not to see – we know the pursuit is hopeless.

*Simon:* But doesn't Eve take the fruit because she wants to be like God? Isn't it a good thing to be like God?

*Joseph:* It depends on what we mean by 'like God.' There is a great irony here, Simon. Though the serpent tells Eve she will become like God, what she really becomes is like Satan. God is universal love. Satan is self-love seeking universal dominion.

*Simon:* So the serpent is lying to her.

*Joseph:* Or maybe not. Maybe that's how he thinks wholeness is achieved.

*Simon:* Through universal dominion?

*Joseph:* Yes.

*Simon:* But – wait a minute – what do you mean by 'he'? I thought you said the serpent is a symbol representing something within Adam and Eve.

*Joseph:* Exactly, maybe that's what Adam and Eve think wholeness is. Maybe they don't know any better. You see, I'm saying that this pursuit of supremacy *does* seem to many to be the ultimate pursuit, to yield ultimate satisfaction if successful. It *does* seem to be that which would fulfill us. It's not 'Adam and Eve' who are tempted. It's *we* who are tempted. This temptation is not something that happened at the beginning of human history. It happens again and again.

*Simon:* But, then, what would it *really* be like to become like God?

*Joseph:* We get that story at the other end of the Bible. That's the story of Christ.

*Simon:* So, then, you see Hitler as someone who has succumbed to the satanic temptation.

*Joseph:* Oh, yes.

*Simon:* And this is why you call the Holocaust a revelation?

*Joseph:* It is a revelation of evil, a revelation of the horror to which the unbridled pursuit of supremacy leads. But a revelation of evil is also a revelation of good, by way of contrast.

## XI. The War of All Against All

*Simon:* So the Garden of Eden story, on your reading, represents a stage in human development. We have become self-aware and self-determining beings, but this leads us – tempts us – to try to center the world in ourselves. And this gives rise to the pursuit of supremacy, which leads to ‘the war of all against all.’

*Joseph:* Exactly, but there is something more that we should not forget. This pursuit of supremacy is *troubled*, because at its base is the desire for wholeness. But supremacy – to whatever extent we can achieve it, and we can never achieve it fully – is not wholeness. It *symbolizes* wholeness to us. We take it as a *token* of wholeness. And this is why the satanic drive can never be satisfied. It functions at a *symbolic* level.

*Simon:* Symbolic?

*Joseph:* Yes, this is what lies behind *pleonexia* – the drive for more and better. We want *more* than others, *better* than others. *Pleonexia* is not simply the desire for this or that; it is the desire for *more and better* of ‘this or that’ than what *others* have. We measure our status in being by our status relative to others. And there are two ways to raise our relative status: We can acquire more for ourselves, or we can *deprive* others of what they have. This is where evil becomes maliciously destructive. We feel a little thrill if we can put someone else down, if we can feel ourselves superior.

*Simon:* So this would account for the ‘master race’ ideology of the Nazis.

*Joseph:* Oh, yes. And, of course, there is a little bit of ‘nazi’ in all of us, isn’t there? We feel envious of others, not just because we don’t have what they have, but because they *do* have it. Our envy can be resolved, then, not just by getting something for ourselves, but by taking away what *they* have. This is how the drive for supremacy becomes a drive to hurt and destroy. The Germans have a word for the delight we take in the misfortune of others: *schadenfreude*.

*Simon:* It’s horrible.

*Joseph:* It’s deeply sad. And it’s upside-down, because what we really want, what really satisfies, is communion with others. But this is the tragedy of human sin. It destroys the possibility of such communion and, finally, abandons us to ourselves. The Bible expresses this in the very next story after Eden, the story of Cain and Abel.

## XII. Cain and Abel

*Simon:* Abel is Cain’s younger brother, am I right?

*Joseph:* Yes, Cain is the first child of Adam and Eve, Abel the second. And Cain kills his younger brother Abel. I don’t think it’s an accident that the Bible places this story right

after the story of the ejection from Eden. This is what the fall leads to – a world of murderous rivalries, where the human family is at war with itself.

*Simon:* But doesn't Cain murder Abel because Abel's gift receives favor from God and Cain's doesn't?

*Joseph:* Yes, that's how the Bible presents it. We're not told any of the details of this; why Abel's gift is more acceptable than Cain's. We might speculate that Abel's gift was offered more earnestly, more wholeheartedly, than Cain's – and there is some suggestion of this in the story itself. God says to Cain that his troubles result from the fact that sin is lurking at his door. We only learn the nature of this sin, though, through what follows, through Cain's murder of Abel. But here is the question: Why should the favor God shows Abel cause Cain to want to kill him?

*Simon:* Well, that's obvious, isn't it? Cain is envious.

*Joseph:* Yes, clearly, but why? What *is* envy? Once more the Bible presents us with something extraordinary. Notice that the competition between Cain and Abel is not for material goods. Cain doesn't murder Abel in order to gain anything materially. Since Darwin we are accustomed to think that human competition is based in the struggle for material survival, but the Bible sees something else. It is not material things Cain and Abel are competing for, but *favor*. It is favor, apparently, that is in short supply.

*Simon:* Favor?

*Joseph:* Yes, it is the favor God shows Abel that Cain can't abide. Exactly how God has demonstrated this favor we're not told, but it's not important. Perhaps Abel has had some success that both interpreted as the favor of God. But what enrages Cain is that it is Abel who is favored and not he. But why? Why should this cause him such rage, that is the question. What is 'favor'?

*Simon:* Favor is . . . well to feel favored is to feel that one is especially appreciated.

*Joseph:* Or we might say, especially loved. What is in short supply in Cain and Abel's world is love itself. The Eden story points to the origin of the human pursuit of supremacy, and now we see the consequence of this pursuit. Love is in short supply.

*Simon:* But how does murdering Abel help?

*Joseph:* It doesn't help at all! It only makes matters worse. But it is rooted in Cain's desire to eliminate the testimony to his weakness, his inadequacy; to somehow prove to himself that he is 'more and better' than Abel. Cain is a tragic figure, even more than Abel. And Cain, again, is *us*.

*Simon:* But we are not all murderers!

*Joseph:* We often have murder in our hearts, Simon. Or, let us say more modestly, in a corner of our hearts. This is the terrible, dirty, secret. Jesus says that the one who so much as says ‘raca’ to a brother is guilty enough for hell. *Raca*, apparently, was a term of derision in Aramaic, translated as ‘you fool’ in some English renditions of the Bible. When one first reads this passage it seems exaggerated in the extreme. Derisiveness toward others is a common human behavior. And yet as one comes to understand what Jesus is saying one realizes the truth of it. We all have Cain inside of us. The desire to put someone down, the snide derisive laugh at another’s expense, the superior air we adopt with ‘inferiors,’ the mockery of another’s weakness, the secret delight we take in negatively assessing another’s efforts, the gossip through which we conspire with a friend to slander a mutual acquaintance, the little lift we feel at another’s misfortune, especially if it is another with whom we have entered into a psychological competition, which is often the case with those we are closest to – all of this is the sin of Cain. Through it we do very real damage to one another, and on a more or less regular basis. Occasionally it flares up into something utterly monstrous, like the Holocaust. But it is there corroding human relations, corroding the very joy of life, all but continually. It is no accident that the Bible represents such murder as the first concrete act of human history.

*Simon:* Not a pretty picture of human beings.

*Joseph:* It is a tragic picture.

### **XIII. The Tower of Sin**

*Simon:* But, again, Joseph, I don’t see how this helps make the case for God. If this murderousness is rooted in human nature, doesn’t this make the existence of a good God even *less* plausible? Why couldn’t God have created us to be good?

*Joseph:* Maybe the very thing that allows us to be good also presents us with the potential to be evil. Maybe goodness requires that we confront and overcome this potential.

*Simon:* Is this what the Bible says?

*Joseph:* Let’s continue to follow the biblical narrative for a bit and see where it leads us. Generation begets generation, and things go from bad to worse. We get this obscure little ditty sung by a character named Lamach about how he has killed a man for slighting him. Cain, at least, seemed to feel some remorse at the murder of his brother, but a few generations later Lamach is positively celebrating his murderousness. Finally, in the Noah story God is represented as in such distress over the violence and chaos of the human situation that he decides to end it, put human beings out of their misery.

*Simon:* But he saves Noah.

*Joseph:* Yes, it seems God can’t quite abandon his project altogether.

*Simon:* And yet even after Noah things go wrong.

*Joseph:* Right. We now get the story of the Tower of Babel. And this is the story, I think, that bears closest relation to the Holocaust.

*Simon:* The Holocaust? You see the Tower of Babel story as related to the Holocaust?

*Joseph:* It seems to me to mark a new stage of human sinfulness. Up until now all we've seen is individual sinfulness; individual human beings competing with one another as individuals. But in the story of the Tower of Babel we see something new: an entire society cooperating in a massive group effort to achieve supremacy, represented as the effort to reach into heaven. And this, I think, is what we see in Nazism. The 'tower' metaphor is to be especially noted. How does one build a tower? One builds it by laying one brick atop another. Each brick is lifted up by lying atop the bricks below it, and in this way the entire structure, made up of bricks that, by themselves, couldn't get very far off the ground, is able to rise up into something massive, into something that seems godlike.

*Simon:* Are you likening the bricks to people?

*Joseph:* Yes, this is how I interpret it. In the Cain and Abel story we see how people seek to prop themselves up by putting others down. Now, in the Tower of Babel, this becomes the basis for society itself. Each is able to feel supported, both materially and spiritually, because he stands, so to speak, on the backs of those below him. At the very top we have leaders who are able to fancy themselves godlike because of the massive structure they have below them, but of course, they too are only bricks like everyone else in the structure, only able, in their own persons, to rise a bit above the ground. Still, they are able to imagine themselves like gods because of the massive, oppressive, structure of support on which they stand.

*Simon:* But why do the other 'bricks' go along with this?

*Joseph:* Each is fixed in its place. On the one hand, the structure of bricks above them weighs them down and doesn't allow them free movement. On the other, the structure of bricks below them provides them with the illusion that they themselves have a secure basis, so that they are not inclined to challenge the structure, so that they come to associate themselves with the glory of the tower itself.

*Simon:* But what of those on the bottom?

*Joseph:* Exactly, what of those on the bottom: the poor, the persecuted, the slaves, the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." They are necessary, of course, for the tower itself. They are those on the backs of whom the entire society is erected. Of course, they are also just bricks, no greater and no lesser than the bricks on top. But their destitution makes possible the elevation of the others. What we have in the Tower of Babel is an image of totalitarianism; from the biblical perspective, a massive, societal, tower of sin.

And such structures permit human sin to reach a new pitch. Perhaps we see the very epitome of this in Nazism and the Holocaust.

#### **XIV. The Thousand-Year Reich**

*Simon:* The Nazi state, you're saying, was a kind of 'Tower of Babel.'

*Joseph:* Reflect on the imagery of the 'thousand-year Reich.' What is the good of a thousand-year Reich to a human being who can only hope to live a hundred years at most? And yet there is something about the very idea that exhilarates, that excites, that takes one's breath away.

*Simon:* It evokes awe; it is thrilling to feel yourself part of such an grand enterprise.

*Joseph:* Yes, awesome is a good word here, it is a word we often use in relation to an encounter with God. In awe we experience both our littleness and the transcendence of our littleness through an encounter with that which is great.

*Simon:* By 'great' you mean great in power?

*Joseph:* Power in a particular sense. The ultimate power, of course, is the power over existence itself – to achieve such power is to overcome mortality, to overcome our sense of insufficiency. It is such immortality that is invoked by the symbol of the 'thousand years.' The idea of the thousand-year Reich is the idea of a kingdom in which all human weakness, all vulnerability, all frailty, is eliminated. This was the dream of the Nazis. The ideology of the 'master race' was its articulation. Why, asked Hitler, has this master race failed to achieve its promise – a promise, by the way, that was never spelled out in any detail because it was entirely symbolic. It was the promise of 'glory,' of 'greatness,' of 'mastery,' of power itself – superhuman power, godlike power. But what is godlike power? Thomas Aquinas writes that power by itself cannot serve as an ultimate human goal because power is merely a means to another end, the good of power has strictly to do with the use to which it can be put.

*Simon:* And yet people do seem to pursue power as an end in itself.

*Joseph:* Of course, and the meaning of this lies in just what we have been saying. Power, worldly power, is but a symbol for another kind of power that we crave, the power to be God, to be the basis of our own existence, or, to turn this phrase around, the power to overcome the dread of *not* being the basis of our existence. So the worldly power sought is not sought so much for what can be done with it but for its symbolic value; it symbolizes the *super-worldly* power we crave.

*Simon:* But why would this lead the Nazis to commit such atrocities?

*Joseph:* Once one sees that the pursuit of super-worldly power is at the core of Nazism everything falls into place. First of all, there is a certain paradox they must resolve: If the master race is indeed capable of such super-worldly power why have they failed to achieve it? The answer: because they have been contaminated and undermined by the weak, the shiftless, the cloying, the inferior. So if the master race is to achieve its power these must be eliminated. Remember that it wasn't only the Jews who were targeted by the Nazis. The Gypsies, the homosexuals, the mentally feeble were all targets as well. Human weakness itself was the target. Lurking behind this, of course, is a suppressed dread of their *own* weakness.

*Simon:* But why the Jews in particular?

*Joseph:* Well, two thousand years of anti-Semitism prepared the way for this. But perhaps there was something more as well. For two-thousand years of European history, ever since the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem, the Jews have played the remarkable role of universal party-poopers.

*Simon:* Party-poopers?

*Joseph:* They refused to join the Tower, whatever that Tower might be; whether that of hegemonic Christianity, or of one or another version of European nationalism. They insisted on their separateness, on the very meekness of their separateness; which is to say, on their right, their duty, to worship God as they understood God; to subordinate themselves to God alone.

*Simon:* And you, a Christian, applaud this? You don't think the Jews should have joined – what did you call it? – 'hegemonic Christianity'?

*Joseph:* I don't think Christ came to found a religious institution, but to reveal the nature of God. Institutional Christianity – like every religion – is flawed. There was no moral imperative for Jews to abandon their Judaism to join this flawed religion.

*Simon:* And you think this refusal of the Jews to become 'joiners' is one of the reasons Hitler targeted them?

*Joseph:* Hitler says as much in *Mein Kampf*. And in this respect Hitler was absolutely right. The Jews *were* the mortal enemies of the Nazi state; not politically, but in their very essence. The Jews had the remarkable trait of being proud, even stubbornly proud, of their humility. The Jews, moreso I would say than the Christians whose marriage to power in the early centuries of Christianity had a corrupting influence, represented the piety that eschews worldly tyranny. I am not saying that every individual Jew had this characteristic, of course, but that the Jewish status in the world had this characteristic. Hitler had every reason to hate the Jews. The Jews were the antithesis of the Nazis. They were the anti-Tower. The psychology behind this hatred is not that difficult to understand. Nazism was a flight from human vulnerability and the Jews were a testimony to human vulnerability, not only because they themselves were vulnerable, but

because they all but insisted upon vulnerability as a form of piety. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler tells the story of how he became an anti-Semite. At first, he says, he admired the Jews for their logical skills, their ability to win a rational argument. But then, he writes, he came to see this rationalism itself as a kind of cravenness. The one who is truly master of himself does not need to *prove* his rightness to himself or others, he simply embodies it and asserts it. He is self-justifying and has no need to justify himself to others. So this need on the part of the Jews to prove themselves to others was, according to Hitler, a sign of their basic inferiority, a spiritual inferiority which – coupled with a long cultivated cunning that developed as compensation for such inferiority – had the effect of undermining the self-assurance, the self-mastery, of the Aryans. And this is why they had to be eliminated. There has been much speculation as to what lay behind Hitler's maniacal anti-Semitism – was his mother harmed by a Jewish doctor? – did he himself have Jewish blood in him that he came to despise? – but Hitler tells us himself why he was an anti-Semite, and I think we can take him at his word.

*Simon:* But you see the Jewish respect for reason and logic as a kind of humility?

*Joseph:* Of course. It is an appeal to universal principles rather than an appeal to self-will. As such, it is respectful of the separateness and dignity of the other. One tries to get the other to see the same truth that one sees oneself, one does not merely try to impose one's will on the other. That Hitler interprets this as *weakness* tells us everything we need to know about Hitler and Nazism.

*Simon:* But why should his hatred of the Jews have become so ferocious?

*Joseph:* Who did the Nazis really hate? The Jews? No, they hated themselves. They hated their own weakness, their human weakness, their “nakedness.” All of this hatred gets directed at the Jews, who are seen as embodying this weakness and, thereby, undermining the Aryan's native strength. The Nazis projected the dread and shame they felt at their own human vulnerability upon the Jews. There is no hatred so intense and so cruel as the hatred of self. And this is also the reason this hatred rose to such a sadistic level. The sadist gets a thrill from the power he wields over the weakness of the other. He enjoys it for its *own* sake, or rather, for the sake of what it reveals: that he is the master of such weakness, has command over it, and, thus, is not subject to it. The sadist projects his own weakness upon the other and then tortures and torments the other in order to prove to himself that he is its master. This sense of cruel mastery is the thrill of sadism. The monstrous innovation of the Nazis was to make such sadism the basis for an entire social and political order, a monstrous Tower of Babel.

*Simon:* And yet many of the Nazi leaders were anything but ‘masters’ in the lives they led before Nazism. Many historians have noted that the bulk of them had been failures and misfits in their own lives before their rise to power as Nazis.

*Joseph:* Full of envy and resentment, yes. Of course, that's no surprise. The whole enterprise of Nazism involves a great cover-up; a cover-up of human finitude, of human insufficiency and vulnerability. It is no surprise that those who have been pushed around,



those who have felt themselves ‘losers,’ would be most attracted to this. As horrific as Nazism was we will make a great mistake if we fail to recognize that it grows from something all too common. The spirit behind the derisive laugh, the taunt at another’s weakness, the little lift one feels at showing another up as ‘a fool’ – to give the example Jesus himself gives – that is the soil that produced the Holocaust.

## **XV. The Ethical and the Spiritual**

*Simon:* So our ethical failings are rooted in a spiritual failing?

*Joseph:* It results from our failure to know the love of God as our basis. This leads to an inner panic over our sense of baselessness, and this panic leads to all sorts of strategies of denial and self-deception that play themselves out in unethical ways. In an effort to establish ourselves as our own basis we necessarily violate others, for we seek control of the world that we must share with them, and seek to turn them into instruments of our will. That’s one side of it. But, as we see in Nazism, the problem goes even deeper than this. In our efforts to convince ourselves of our own prowess we delight in trampling upon the weakness of others; it allows us to believe that we have mastery over weakness itself. This is sadism. And then, should the other defeat us in some way, the dread of our own vulnerability erupts into a rage. Then we get the envious fury we see in Cain. Or, in the masochistic variation of this complex, we surrender ourselves to the masterful other so as to unburden ourselves of our weakness. This is how the tower of sadism gets built. One surrenders oneself to the sadistic leader and becomes sadism’s ally and instrument. And, because underlying all of this is a profound sense of shame at our own weakness, all of this is accompanied by self-deceit and denial. Oh, the psychology behind it is quite labyrinthine! But from the religious perspective, we would say that all this evil is rooted in something simple, at least simple to understand: our dread at not having a secure basis, our inability to rest contentedly in the love of God.

*Simon:* But here is where I continue to have a problem. I can recognize in myself the dread of which you speak. At its core, I suppose, it is the dread of death. And it’s true that this is not something I like to dwell on. I can also see, as you say, that this dread may well be at the root of much that is ugly in human beings. But what I do not see, what I am unable to see, is this God whose love would take this dread away. Everything you’re saying makes sense to me right up to this point. If indeed there is such a God, why do we not know it, why do we not experience it? That is the question that needs to be answered.

*Joseph:* Some of us do experience it, Simon – or at least we feel we experience it. But I think you’re right that very few of us experience it fully or continuously, and many don’t experience it very much at all.

*Simon:* And why not?

*Joseph:* Because we are too busy experiencing ourselves.

*Simon:* Experiencing ourselves?

*Joseph:* It is like trying to see the stars when the sun is out. The sun, of course, is just one small star, but, because of its proximity to us, when it is in the sky it is the only star we can see. We are each very, very small, Simon, we each occupy just a tiny speck within the whole of being. But, like the sun, we light up the whole world around us. Our individual concerns, our individual cares, these are what are closest to us, this is what we see most of the time. It is hard for us to see beyond ourselves.

*Simon:* Then how can we come to experience this God you speak of?

*Joseph:* Let's continue following the biblical narrative, for this is the very purpose of the Bible: To help us to see God – or our situatedness within God – more fully.

*Simon:* Ok, I'm listening.

## **XVI. The Nations**

*Joseph:* It is after the incident of the Tower of Babel that the Bible depicts God as taking an active role in the redemption of humankind.

*Simon:* But doesn't God confuse the tongues of human beings so that they can no longer cooperate with one another? How is that supposed to help?

*Joseph:* What we have here is a mythological account of how the separate nations came to exist. God confuses the languages of human beings at the Tower of Babel so as to prevent them from being able to cooperate in their totalitarian enterprise, an enterprise whose abominable nature we see in Nazism, as we've been saying. As we know from the remainder of the Bible, this alienation of nation from nation is not anything God wants. And yet, in the context of human sinfulness, it allows for checks and balances. No nation can become absolute because it is opposed by other nations. Each nation, looking out upon the others, is forced to acknowledge its own boundaries and limitations. The confusion of languages is a way God humbles human beings.

*Simon:* But you say that God does not ultimately *want* such alienation?

*Joseph:* No, the whole of humankind is a single family. What is ultimately desired is harmony in this family. But the sinfulness of human beings has destroyed the possibility for such harmony. So what God must do is restore the possibility of this harmony. The separation of human beings into opposing nations is a stopgap measure.

## **XVII. Revelation**

*Simon:* But now I am becoming confused again. Is the Bible myth, is it history, is it revelation? An anthropologist would certainly deny that the world's disparate languages came about due to a supernatural intervention at the time of the Tower of Babel. And you yourself speak of this story as myth. But if it is myth how can you keep talking about it as if it is true?

*Joseph:* These are important questions, Simon, questions we must come to grips with if we are to understand the nature of biblical truth. As for your question about whether the Bible is myth, history, or revelation, I would say it is all three. The biblical authors weave mythical, legendary, and historical elements together in order to convey their revelatory experience of God.

*Simon:* But did the incidents recorded in the Bible actually happen or not?

*Joseph:* Some of them actually happened. For instance, it is doubtless that there was a King David. Some of them never happened; I don't believe there was a literal Garden of Eden. And some of them are legendary expansions of incidents that may well have had some basis in fact; for instance, the story of the flood may well have been based on the memory of a devastating flood that took place in the region.

*Simon:* But if some of it is myth and some of it is legend, in what sense is it true?

*Joseph:* The truth lies in the revelatory character of the interpretations the biblical authors provide for the incidents they narrate.

*Simon:* Interpretations?

*Joseph:* Yes, what is important in the Bible, and what is true in the Bible, is not the factuality of the incidents it narrates but the *meaning* it gives to them. Recall that we discussed the meaning of meaning at the beginning of our conversation. Things have meaning in respect to their relevance for our caring. The Bible gives us an interpretation of the *meaning* of human existence.

*Simon:* But is it just an interpretation or is it truth?

*Joseph:* The truth is *in* the interpretation. Let's take the Noah story as an example. We find a similar account of a worldwide flood in the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh. We don't know what its basis in fact is. But in Gilgamesh the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the story as we find it in the Bible are absent, or, at best, obscure. What seems to have happened is that the biblical authors took this well-known flood legend and interpreted it in accordance with their own understanding of God.

*Simon:* But, again, if it is just a matter of interpretation in what sense is it truth?

*Joseph:* Again, Simon, it is the interpretation itself that is truth. For the person of faith, the interpretation reveals the truth of the human situation in relation to God. This revelatory interpretation is conveyed through mythical, legendary, and historical material.

*Simon:* But when you speak of God taking an active role in the redemption of humankind how am I to understand this? Is there indeed such a supernatural entity who acts within human history, or is the Bible's account of this just an interpretive veneer laid atop events in which no such entity actually played any role? If there is such an entity why does he not make his presence more directly known to us? If there is no such entity, then what meaning can we place in the biblical stories that depict him as playing such a role? Is *God* really responsible for the fact that there are many languages, or was this just a natural development? If it is just a natural development, what are we to make of the biblical claim that God caused it for a certain purpose?

*Joseph:* Ah, yes, I see the problem. These are good questions. And at this point, Simon, I find myself having to appeal to mystery. You know, the philosopher Kant does a magnificent job showing that reality as we experience it is hopelessly self-contradictory. What actually lies behind the veil of human experience is beyond our capacity to know. What we can say about the Bible is that it provides an interpretation of the human situation in relation to God, who is the basis of our existence. It does so through the use of mythological, legendary, and historical material, with a more or less continual reference to the supernatural and supra-historical context in which the natural and historical play themselves out. This context is itself signified and illustrated through the depiction of supernatural events, for instance, the parting of the Red Sea, etc. Personally, I doubt whether such events actually occurred in the way they are depicted. The supernaturalism of the Bible is itself part of its interpretive message; it is the Bible's way of saying that the ultimate meaning of finite life is not to be found in the finite world itself; that there is a reality that transcends the bounds of the finite, and that it is to this transcendent reality that we must look for our ultimate good. The way we truly make contact with this reality, however, is not through the observation of miraculous events, but inwardly, through piety and faith. So I believe that the narrative the Bible presents of a God who acts as a supernatural agent in history is not likely to be a factual one. The message behind the Tower of Babel story is that, because of human sinfulness, human unity will tend to become totalitarian. Given this, the division of human beings into separate nations is something of a blessing. But did God actually cause this division in the manner presented in the Bible? Was there an historical Tower of Babel? I doubt it. But I believe that behind these biblical narratives is a truth whose essential meaning is conveyed through them. And it is in this truth that we are to put our faith.

*Simon:* And this truth is?

*Joseph:* That the lostness of human life is redeemed through communion with the God of love, whose reality is revealed, sometimes more and sometimes less obscurely, in these narratives.

**XVIII. Abraham**

*Simon:* All right. I am not sure I am entirely convinced or even that I entirely understand what you're saying. How can one place one's faith in a truth that one cannot really know, and that is conveyed through stories that are subject to innumerable, different, interpretations? But perhaps we can save those questions for later. I am curious to know how you interpret God's redemptive activity in history, as the Bible narrates it.

*Joseph:* Your questions about faith are important, Simon, and to the extent that I can answer them I certainly want to. So let's make sure we don't forget them. But perhaps it will be easier to answer them once we have finished our discussion of the narrative itself.

*Simon:* I'll go along with that.

*Joseph:* Good.

*Simon:* Go on.

*Joseph:* What God now sets out to do is establish one nation from among the many whose loyalty will be, not to itself, not to its totalitarian expansion, but to God. This nation, in turn, is to become a 'light' unto the other nations, through which, eventually, all the nations will achieve harmony under the true God.

*Simon:* We still seem a long way from such harmony!

*Joseph:* Indeed we are.

*Simon:* Go on.

*Joseph:* So God appears to Abraham and promises that if he will submit to God, he will make of his progeny a great nation, through his son, Isaac.

*Simon:* Through his son Isaac! But then God asks Abraham to *kill* Isaac!

*Joseph:* Yes.

*Simon:* So what's the point of that?

*Joseph:* The nation that is to be established through Isaac – whose birth, remember, is itself a miracle – is not to live for itself but for God. Or, to put it better, it is to live for itself *in* living for God, it is to find in God its ultimate purpose and good. In asking Abraham to sacrifice his 'beloved' son Isaac – and the Bible makes a point of highlighting Abraham's love for Isaac here – God is testing to see that Abraham and Isaac's ultimate allegiance is to God, and not to their own finite interests.

*Simon:* God is *testing* him? But . . . but doesn't this seem *barbarous* to you? Abraham is asked to transgress against his love for his own son! What kind of a test is that? How is this anything other than sheer cruelty?

*Joseph:* He is not asked to transgress against his love. He is asked to trust it to God.

*Simon:* But he is asked to *kill* Isaac!

*Joseph:* Yes, Simon, and I agree that from a certain point of view this seems monstrous. But one of the aims of the Bible is to challenge our ordinary point of view. For Abraham, who *knows* God, the power of death is not the final reality, it does not have the final word. God transcends death. This is something we must believe. If we cannot believe that God transcends death then whoever has the power to kill us will also have the power to command us. If death is the ultimate power then Hitler wins, because Hitler can wield the power of death. This story is not about Abraham giving his son over to death but over to God, who transcends death. It is about Abraham's faith that death does not have the final word. This is the faith that is necessary if the God-ordained nation that is to be established through Abraham and Isaac is to realize its calling. That is the meaning of this story.

*Simon:* But isn't Abraham violating Isaac's *caring*? Isaac wants to live, right? Isn't Abraham's agreement to kill Isaac a violation of Isaac?

*Joseph:* Abraham and Isaac trust themselves to God. They trust that God's love will see them through, even through death.

*Simon:* But what if they're wrong? What if there is no God? What if God is not good? What if Abraham is hallucinating?

*Joseph:* Abraham knows he's not wrong.

*Simon:* He knows it?

*Joseph:* That's what we have to assume. Abraham is presented to us in the Bible as an example of fulfilled faith. He does not see God as those still struggling for faith do – as a remote possibility that may or may not be true. He *knows* God. And because he knows God, he knows that Isaac will be safe. And, of course, this is something we are to learn from him. We are to learn to trust in God as Abraham does.

*Simon:* So if we hear some strange voice telling us to kill our children we should do it?!

*Joseph:* Abraham does not hear a strange voice, Simon, he hears God.

*Simon:* But . . .

*Joseph:* Look at it this way. If you took your child to a doctor whose expertise and goodness you trusted, and that doctor were to tell you that your child needed surgery, you'd allow it wouldn't you?

*Simon:* Yes, I suppose – if it were really necessary.

*Joseph:* You'd allow it even if the surgeon had to take a scalpel and cut your child open?

*Simon:* If it were absolutely necessary, if I trusted the surgeon – yes, I'd have to allow it. For my child's own good I'd have to allow it.

*Joseph:* Exactly. Abraham hears God. Abraham *knows* that God is good. Abraham knows that following God's commands will be good.

*Simon:* But how can *anyone* know that?

*Joseph:* Yes, of course, that's a big question. Again, it's the question of faith. I do want to address it, but let's hold off on it for now. What we can say is that Abraham represents the person of fulfilled faith. Abraham *knows* God – and that's why death for Abraham is not what it is for you and me.

*Simon:* I've heard some interpretations that suggest that Abraham secretly suspects that God will relent in the end and withdraw the command to sacrifice Isaac. That's why he consents to it.

*Joseph:* That's not how I see it. Abraham suspects nothing. He trusts God. That, to me, is the clear meaning of the story. Abraham trusts that no matter what happens all will be well. But to suggest that Abraham goes along only because he suspects that God will relent in the end is to miss the point. God does not have to relent in the face of death because God is greater than death. Abraham knows a reality greater than death and it is to this reality he has given his entire allegiance, because he knows it to be good and the *source* of all goodness. And it is to this reality that the Hebrew nation – the nation that is to spring from Abraham through Isaac – is to give its allegiance. And it is through knowing this reality that the entire world is to find healing. This is God's plan for the redemption of the world: Human beings are to place their ultimate trust in the universal love that transcends them as private individuals. This is the resolution of their self-enclosure.

## **XIX. Israel**

*Simon:* And yet things don't go easily for this new nation, do they? Aren't they enslaved by the Egyptians for 400 years before they really achieve nationhood?

*Joseph:* Yes, and just to make sure that the reader is aware that all this is part of God's plan, the Bible narrates an episode in which God foretells of this enslavement to Abraham.

*Simon:* Oh, wonderful! And what is the purpose of this? This God does not make things easy, does he?

*Joseph:* Ease is not the human condition. By this time, remember, the Bible has narrated one story after another of envy, rivalry, and exploitation: Cain kills Abel, Sarah expels Hagar, Jacob cheats Esau, and so on. All of this culminates in the story of Pharaoh's enslavement of the Israelites. Through their enslavement, the Hebrew nation is to taste the bitterness of human sin in such a way as never to forget it.

*Simon:* This seems a hard way to make a point.

*Joseph:* It is, but then it's no harder than the reality of sinful existence itself. Remember that the Hebrews are also prone to sin. Indeed, they become slaves only after the children of Jacob, Abraham's grandson, sell their own brother Joseph into slavery, out of envy.

*Simon:* Envy again.

*Joseph:* Yes. And this sale of their brother, through a convoluted sequence of events, leads to their *own* descendants becoming slaves. This is the tragedy of human sinfulness: today's victims were yesterdays victimizers, and vice-versa. The Hebrews are as subject to this as anyone else. They are not chosen because they are supremely good. They are chosen because their very oppression makes them apt candidates for the struggle with God.

*Simon:* The *struggle* with God?

*Joseph:* To live in accordance with God is a struggle. The very thing that makes possible our goodness also gives us the potential to be evil. So to live in accordance with God's goodness is a struggle; we must struggle against our inclination to evil. This struggle is foreshadowed by the incident that gives the Hebrew nation its name, *Israel*. According to the Bible, Israel means: He who struggles with God and prevails. Jacob's name is changed to Israel on the night before he reunites with his estranged brother Esau. Once again, in the story of Jacob and Esau, we have an account of brother fighting against brother.

*Simon:* That seems to be a basic theme. Jacob and Esau are Abraham's grandchildren, right? They are Isaac's sons. You say Jacob is *renamed* Israel?

*Joseph:* On the night he is given his new name Jacob is camped out in the wilderness. He is fleeing from his uncle, whom he has antagonized. Now his camp is trapped between the antagonistic forces of his uncle and the antagonistic forces of his brother. He can't advance or retreat. Antagonism surrounds him on all sides.



*Simon:* But it's all in the family.

*Joseph:* Exactly.

*Simon:* What caused his estrangement from Esau?

*Joseph:* He cheated Esau out of his birthright as a young man, and now he's afraid that when Esau sees him he'll kill him.

*Simon:* And it is in this context that he receives his new name?

*Joseph:* The Bible tells us simply that an angel appears to Jacob and wrestles with him all night long. When the dawn breaks the angel retreats and renames him *Israel*, meaning, "he who struggles with God and man, and prevails."

*Simon:* But how does Jacob prevail?

*Joseph:* The next morning he prostrates himself before his brother in what I believe we are to understand as a sincere act of contrition and repentance. Esau is moved, for Esau also longs for reunion with his estranged brother. He embraces Jacob, and Jacob tells him that seeing Esau's forgiving face is like seeing the face of God. This is an important point, Simon. The face of God is not a face that you *literally* see, visibly. What Jacob experiences upon reconciling with his brother is the *spirit* of God, God's love. So Jacob prevails by humbling himself, by acknowledging his wrong, by seeking forgiveness, which finally allows him to reconcile with his brother and 'see' the face of God. It is the fact that they have signed on for this struggle to see God – this struggle with the demons of their own nature that obscure the face of God – that makes "the children of Israel" the chosen nation.

## **XX. Enslavement**

*Simon:* But Jacob's children don't learn Jacob's lesson, do they? They sell their own brother into slavery out of envy.

*Joseph:* Yet another Cain and Abel story, yes. They sell their brother Joseph to Ishmaelites, who then sell him to Egyptians.

*Simon:* And who are the Ishmaelites?

*Joseph:* They are the descendants of Isaac's step-brother, Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar.

*Simon:* And Hagar was?

*Joseph:* Abraham's Egyptian slave. When Abraham's wife, Sarah, could not conceive, she allowed Abraham to have a child with Hagar. That child was Ishmael. When Sarah and Abraham finally have Isaac, though, Sarah insists that Hagar and Ishmael be evicted from the household.

*Simon:* Not very nice of her.

*Joseph:* There is some suggestion that Sarah is retaliating against Hagar for Hagar's contemptuous attitude toward Sarah during the years of her barrenness.

*Simon:* Oh, my . . . a lot of pain all around.

*Joseph:* Pain that begets pain. A vicious cycle. Indeed.

*Simon:* So the Ishmaelites are rejected cousins of Jacob's children?

*Joseph:* Cousins of the children of Israel, yes. It's all one big unhappy family, as you note. And that, of course, is the Bible's point.

*Simon:* So Jacob's children, out of spite and envy, sell their own brother, Joseph, to descendents of Ishmael, who, in turn, sell him to Egyptians. And what happens next?

*Joseph:* Through a convoluted turn of events Joseph rises to prominence in Egypt, and his brothers, suffering from a famine in their own land, are forced to turn to him for food. The victimizers are now at the mercy of their own victim. But all of them are brothers.

*Simon:* I suppose one might understand if Joseph doesn't reach out to help them with an open heart.

*Joseph:* To me this is one of the most poignant passages in the whole of the Bible. Joseph is torn between his love for his brothers and his fury at them. What should he do? On the one hand, he wants to reunite with them. On the other, he wants revenge. Finally, his love wins out. This is *his* struggle with God. He invites his family to emigrate to Egypt and share in his good-fortune. For some time, we're told, the Hebrews prosper. But their very prosperity eventually causes the Egyptians to turn on them.

*Simon:* Envy again?

*Joseph:* Envy, no doubt, and distrust. The Bible tells us that the Egyptians are afraid the Hebrews will join with Egypt's enemies and attack them. So the enslavement of the Hebrews is a pre-emptive strike based on what seems a general state of suspiciousness, a suspiciousness no doubt justified in a world where brother sells out brother in the ordinary course of affairs. So the Egyptians enslave the descendents of those who enslaved their own brother because they are afraid that, given the chance, these descendents will enslave them!

*Simon:* So we are all victims of our victimizations!

*Joseph:* As Jesus says, we are all slaves of sin.

## **XXI. Liberation**

*Simon:* So would you say that the enslavement of the Hebrews is also a symbol – a symbol of the general human enslavement to sin?

*Joseph:* It is an instance of it *and* a symbol of it; an instance that serves as a symbol. And this may help explain what I mean when I say that the interpretation is the revelation. The Hebrews were neither the first nor the last people to be enslaved by another. But as far as I know, they were the first to *interpret* such exploitation as sin. The revelatory character of scripture is not in its record of this or that event, but in its interpretation of the *meaning* of these events. When we say that scripture is inspired what we mean – or what I think we should mean – is that the *interpretation* is inspired, is truth. Whether or not the individual events actually occurred as recorded is of secondary importance, and I think we can more or less count on the fact that many of them have been modified and shaped to help them better achieve their revelatory intent.

*Simon:* But then what does the story of the liberation of the Hebrews mean? What does it mean to say that God intervenes with “a mighty hand,” with “signs and wonders”? Can we or can we not count on such intervention in our lives? By your reading all of this is symbolic. But symbolic of what? If God does not actually intervene to make things better what are we to place our hope in?

*Joseph:* But remember that even if we take the Bible literally we cannot infer from it that God will intervene to end the injustices we encounter. As the Bible presents it, the Hebrews were slaves for 400 years before God intervened. This means that many an individual life, many a generation of individual lives, were consumed in slavery without God’s intervention. Even a literal reading of the Bible would not allow us to count on the sort of intervention you’re talking about.

*Simon:* But then what does it mean to say that God liberated the Hebrew slaves? What lesson can we draw from this if God is not really going to do such a thing?

*Joseph:* It is not easy to put this into words, Simon, but I’ll do my best.

*Simon:* Okay.

*Joseph:* The story as a whole is trying to reveal to us the normative structure of reality. God’s condemnation of Pharaoh is the way the Bible indicates that Pharaoh, and the attitude of pride and arrogance represented by Pharaoh, are wrong; and not just wrong in a moralistic sense, but out of sync with what is ultimately true and good. Pharaoh stands opposed to the true nature of reality, and such a stance will eventually bring destruction.

So the story stands as a warning to despots. Along with this, it is a story intended to provide hope and solace for the oppressed. It tells us that the structure of the creation is such that evil will finally be unmasked and defeated. Martin Luther King expressed this when he said “the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” This is something we must have faith in. Finally, the story has a particular meaning for the Jewish nation. It is saying that they owe their freedom to God. Thus, they, in particular, bear a special responsibility to live in accordance with God.

*Simon:* But if the story isn’t in fact true, if the events recorded didn’t in fact happen, then what meaning can all this have? If the oppressors *can* in fact continue to oppress, if the oppressed *will* in fact remain oppressed, where is the warning, where is the hope? If the Jews weren’t *really* liberated by God, where is the responsibility?

*Joseph:* Yes, and here is where it becomes hard to express. The warning, the hope, even the call to responsibility, are meaningful at the *spiritual* level.

*Simon:* At the spiritual level?

*Joseph:* That place in our souls – which we are not always in direct touch with – that is concerned with the ultimate meaning of life.

*Simon:* I’m not sure I’m following you, Joseph.

*Joseph:* Let me put it this way: We live our lives in the context of – how shall I put it? – a hermeneutic of life.

*Simon:* Hermeneutic?

*Joseph:* An *interpretation* of life that tells us what is good and what is bad, what is damaging and what is wholesome, what responsibilities we bear to others and what to ourselves. This hermeneutic of life does not exist strictly, or even primarily, at a cognitive level. It is imprinted in our guts, so to speak. It determines the way we react to circumstances. This story – and the Bible as a whole – is intended to foster in us a certain hermeneutic of life, in which we will see oppression and exploitation as wrong, oppressed people as worthy of care and regard, and ourselves as under obligation to concern ourselves with more than just self-interest.

*Simon:* But if this ‘hermeneutic of life’ isn’t actually true – if God can’t really be expected to liberate the oppressed “with a mighty hand” – aren’t we just deceiving ourselves? Isn’t it just wishful thinking, pie in the sky?

*Joseph:* It is pie in the soul.

*Simon:* Pie in the *soul*?

*Joseph:* This hermeneutic of life is its own good. It is a good of the soul.

*Simon:* What do you mean?

*Joseph:* Deeply realized, it is its own good. To see the world in terms of God's love, in terms of the standards of good and evil, right and wrong, arising from that love, is a good in itself. It is a good of the soul. It is a way of being in touch with the love of God. It restores our access – to put it in mythological terms – to the Tree of Life. And this good of the soul, if deepened and extended to all, *will* eventually end slavery and oppression and injustice. That is the way God liberates the oppressed.

## **XXII. Signs and Wonders**

*Simon:* But what are we to make of all the talk about 'signs and wonders'? Isn't the Bible just offering false hope? Where were those 'signs and wonders,' where was God's 'mighty hand,' in Auschwitz?

*Joseph:* Where was God's mighty hand during the four hundred years of slavery *before* the Israelites were liberated?

*Simon:* Well, yes, exactly. Where?

*Joseph:* But you see, Simon, we are not to see ourselves as confined within the limits of our finite lives. We are to understand our lives as, ultimately, extensive with God's life. This is what it means to eat from the Tree of Life. This is what it means to "love God with all your heart, mind, and soul." Love is a unitive power. To love God is to join with God. And this, I believe, is the true meaning of the 'signs and wonders.' They are intended to reveal that the finite world we occupy is rooted in something greater; that the finite limits that bind us are not ultimate. They reveal that we are not finally bound to the vicissitudes of the finite. Our lives have an eternal basis. To *know* this, to experience it deeply, is its own good.

*Simon:* Are you talking about believing in life after death?

*Joseph:* No, I'm talking about the state of our soul *now*. We can live, *now*, as if death is the ultimate term of our life, or as if God is our ultimate term. To see death as our ultimate term encloses us within ourselves, and subjects the meaning of our lives to the vicissitudes of the finite. To see God as our ultimate term opens us to communion with the whole of being, and liberates us from these vicissitudes.

*Simon:* But if we can't really count on God to *save* us from evil or from death, what are we trusting in God to *do*?

*Joseph:* The trust itself, deeply realized, *is* the salvation.

*Simon:* The trust *is* the salvation?

*Joseph:* That is the experience of those who have made some headway in faith.

*Simon:* But doesn't this mean that God is not really a supernatural reality, that God is just a psychological experience? A feeling of love, or trustfulness – a 'hermeneutic of life'?

*Joseph:* But this 'psychological experience,' as you put it, of trusting God, of loving God, of understanding the world in terms of God's love, *is*, precisely, the way we rest in the supernatural reality of God. How else are you going to experience anything except through your psyche, as a 'psychological experience'? God is indeed a supernatural reality. It is this supernatural reality that we touch upon through the psychological, or better, *spiritual*, experience of faith, in all its dimensions. In the final analysis it is the experience of this supernatural reality, realized in faith, to which the 'signs and wonders' of scripture point.

### **XXIII. Law**

*Simon:* So the Hebrew slaves are liberated from their enslavement with 'signs and wonders,' and these signs and wonders indicate the supernatural reality of God, in which they are to place their trust.

*Joseph:* Yes. But, again, they are to place their trust in the God *indicated* by these signs and wonders, not in the signs and wonders themselves. If they place their trust in the signs and wonders themselves they will be sorely disappointed, since, as we've discussed, these signs and wonders cannot be counted on – and the Bible itself makes this clear.

*Simon:* Yes, I see that, but I continue to have trouble with it. You seem to be saying that God cannot really be counted on to help us in times of distress, to protect us from our oppressors, to heal our maladies. God, as you present it, is something like a state of the soul – perhaps a benign state of the soul – but not a supernatural power that we can call on to shield us from the evils of life.

*Joseph:* I think I am saying something more subtle, Simon. *Faith* is a state of the soul. Through it we touch upon the supernatural reality of God, whose ultimate nature is a mystery.

*Simon:* But we can't *count* on this mystery to make life better, to protect us from evil!

*Joseph:* We *can* count on God, but not in the way you suggest. The world has its own innate integrity that God does not interfere with. The material world, for instance, proceeds according to its own immanent logic. The sciences are still in the process of trying to understand this logic. They've made much progress but, to my mind, they have far to go. Might there at times be what we call 'miracles' that override this logic to effect a divine purpose? Perhaps, but, if so, it is a mystery beyond our understanding. We can't

count on such miracles. This is not what we are to place our faith in. As for human beings, they have freedom to act as they will. God does not override human freedom.

*Simon:* Then what *can* we count on God to do?

*Joseph:* We can count on God to lead us toward a sanctified life, a life of wholeness.

*Simon:* But then God can't really be counted upon to intervene in the *world*.

*Joseph:* God's intervention is *through* us. What God reveals to the Israelites after liberating them from Egypt with 'signs and wonders' is the *law* through which a sanctified life is lived. It is this law – not the signs and wonders – that is the true liberator.

*Simon:* The law?

*Joseph:* Yes, the law presents the norms through which we live a life of wholeness, a life liberated from evil.

*Simon:* But doesn't Jesus later reject the law?

*Joseph:* No, Jesus protests against the legalistic distortion of the law, the belief that obedience to the letter of the law is an end in itself.

*Simon:* And yet, for instance, the dietary restrictions given in the law at Sinai are no longer observed in Christianity.

*Joseph:* Oh, yes. What we must recall is that the law given in Torah is many faceted. Some of it refers broadly to the human relation to God. The principle law in this respect is: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy strength." When I say that one is to trust oneself to God I am merely paraphrasing this command. This is the supreme commandment given at Sinai. Not only does Jesus not reject this command but he declares it to be the way to eternal life. Beyond these spiritual laws there are the ethical laws, such as the prohibitions against murder and theft, etc. Again, Jesus does not reject these but extends them. He says, for instance, that those who give themselves over to rage are murderers in their hearts. Beyond these, there are the ritualistic laws concerning how the newly established nation of Israel is to conduct its worship of God. It is these laws that cease to be operative for those who enter into communion with God through the new covenant offered by Christ.

*Simon:* And Israel is given these laws because it is to be an especially holy nation?

*Joseph:* God's aim, as we see it clearly in scripture, is the redemption of humankind as a whole. In the end there are no people who are to be more 'holy' than any other. The ideal for all human beings is to achieve the intimacy with God we see in Christ. As the narrative of scripture unfolds, however, the nation of Israel – a name that means,

remember, ‘one who struggles with God’ – is seen as having a particular role to play in the advancement of this goal. Through their own struggles with God, and through the record they produce of these struggles, they provide a model for the general human struggle with God. Whatever else we may think about the revelatory character of Scripture we might note that its claims about the influence that the liberated Israelites will have on the rest of humankind has proven to be an historical fact.

*Simon:* And what is the character of this law the Jews are given at Sinai?

*Joseph:* The law has both an ethical and a spiritual dimension. *Ethically*, the law prescribes the behavior through which we show respect for the caring of others. The law speaks from beyond anyone’s private self-interest. It speaks in the name of the good of all. This is just what makes it holy, an articulation of God’s universal love. *Spiritually*, through prescribing respect for the caring of others, the law lifts us beyond our own self-enclosure. It thereby puts us in touch with God’s love.

*Simon:* So you would say that, in the law, the ethical good and the spiritual good coincide?

*Joseph:* Yes, and this goodness is the very meaning of Christ. In Christ, the law is written on the heart, as love.

#### **XXIV. Jews and Christians**

*Simon:* So, then, with the advent of Christ, have the Jews fulfilled their role as the ‘chosen’ people? Has the baton been passed to Christianity? Is there no further part for the Jews to play?

*Joseph:* Is all of humankind redeemed?

*Simon:* No.

*Joseph:* Then I would say their role remains.

*Simon:* But hasn’t their role been superseded by Christianity?

*Joseph:* Since the inception of Christianity Jews and Christians have been playing out a Cain and Abel story of their own, and the ‘supersessionist’ theology of Christianity has been part of this. It is terrible to reflect upon the evils that have arisen from this conflict – by people presumably dedicated to the love of God and neighbor! No, Christ did not come to establish ‘Christianity’ as an end in itself, but to bring people closer to God. Religious institutions are, at best, means to that end. Certainly the Jews continue to play a role in God’s redemptive project, perhaps in their very rejection of institutional Christianity.



*Simon:* In their rejection of it?

*Joseph:* Yes, Christianity as a religious institution is imperfect, as its persecution of the Jews makes eminently clear. By standing outside of Christianity the Jews are able to view it with a critical eye and provide a counter to it; a counter that may well be of service to Christianity itself, to help bring it into closer alignment with Christ.

*Simon:* But in its failure to acknowledge Christ you would say that Judaism is also imperfect, wouldn't you?

*Joseph:* All religion is imperfect. And maybe that's why we need different religions. It is like the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel. The different religions check and balance each other. They each contain different insights, emphases, and approaches – and different flaws. In faith, we look forward to a time when they will all achieve harmony under the true God. Until then, perhaps we must regard their continued conflict as part of the dialectical process through which God is struggling to reconcile humanity to God.

*Simon:* So the Jews continue to play their part in the redemptive purpose of God by living in accordance with the law revealed to them at Sinai?

*Joseph:* Yes, at Sinai the Israelites enter into a covenant with God. They agree to dedicate themselves as a nation to God. This dedication finds its concrete expression through observance of the law.

*Simon:* And in your view this has a meaning that goes beyond the Jewish nation as such? It has a meaning for the whole of humankind?

*Joseph:* Yes. The Jews are to be a 'priestly nation,' that is, a nation that mediates God to the other nations.

*Simon:* And if I understand you, your belief is that the Jews can already be seen to have succeeded in this, at least to some degree.

*Joseph:* For sure! Just count up the number of Bibles that have been produced and read over the course of history and you can virtually quantify their influence. Of the many prophecies we find in Hebrew Scripture, the claim that the Jewish nation would serve as a medium through which the other nations will come to know the God of Sinai is one we can confirm for ourselves.

*Simon:* And yet, as you point out, this influence has largely taken place through Christianity.

*Joseph:* Yes, that's the irony. In their alienation from Christianity the Jews tend to lose sight of the way their own claim to be 'the chosen people' has been confirmed by history.

*Simon:* So are the Jews *wrong* to reject Christianity?

*Joseph:* There is no simple answer to this question, Simon. We tend to imagine that the Jews at the time of Jesus were faced with the choice of either accepting Jesus' claims or rejecting them. Historically, though, the matter is far more complex. The vast majority of Jews never heard of Jesus during his lifetime. Jews learned of Christianity and its claims only many years after Jesus' death, after Christianity had achieved some prominence and power in the world. The Christianity they then encountered was a religion that seemed strange to them, dominated by former pagans who took an arrogant stance toward Jews and Judaism, and who demanded that the Jews abandon their heritage and modes of worship. The Jewish rejection of this is perfectly understandable, even admirable. It is rooted in their love of God as God has been revealed to them.

*Simon:* So the Christians misunderstand the Jews and the Jews misunderstand the Christians!

*Joseph:* That's part of it. And beyond this, we all – Jews and Christians - misunderstand ourselves.

## **XXV. A Children's Story**

*Simon:* But. . . I don't know, Joseph – if this God you speak of really exists why is it all so sloppy? Why is there such misunderstanding and confusion and error? Why doesn't God communicate clearly so that at least those who really want to live Godly lives will know how to do it? Why does he leave us wondering whether Jews have it right, or Christians have it right, or Muslims have it right – with everyone at everyone else's throat? The whole thing is like a comedy of errors!

*Joseph:* A tragedy of errors.

*Simon:* Yes, so why? Why doesn't God make things more clear?

*Joseph:* Because the biblical story I am narrating for you is a children's story.

*Simon:* A children's story???

*Joseph:* Suppose you wanted to explain Einstein's theory of relativity to a six-year-old. You couldn't expect the child to understand it in all its mathematical complexity and nuance. So you would try to express it in very simple terms that would point the child in the direction of the truth. You would hope that, as the child matures, she would come to understand that truth in more and more sophisticated ways. The reality of God, and the relationship of human beings to that reality, is much more complex than the theory of relativity. We don't begin to have the concepts and categories with which to express it as it really is. So the Bible offers us what amounts to a children's story to try to convey what is essential for us to know in terms that we can apprehend. There is a truth the Bible seeks to unveil. It is a truth about love and its importance. It is a truth about our alienation

from love. It is a truth about our connection to one another and our connection with the transcendent basis of our existence. The Bible represents this transcendent basis as if it is just like another person, with whom we can have a simple person-to-person relationship. But the reality of God is beyond this, and the way we can know God is not the way we know another person. Augustine says that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. This suggests that in order to know God we have to first know ourselves. Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” This suggests that the impure in heart will not see God, or will not see God clearly. You ask: Why is our relationship with God so sloppy? The answer is: Because *we* are so sloppy. That through which we can know God is sloppy. We get to know God only through a process of self-reformation, self-transformation. We must *grow* into a knowledge of God. Until then, religion will be full of misunderstanding, confusion, and error. That’s just the way it is.

*Simon:* So then how is anyone to know the way forward? How is a Jew to know whether or not to become a Christian? How is anyone to know anything?

*Joseph:* We must be guided by the light we have, while all the time seeking to make that light fuller and brighter, and while humbly acknowledging that we don’t yet have the whole truth.

*Simon:* And this is why you say it is understandable for the Jews to reject Christianity – even though you yourself believe in Christ?

*Joseph:* They follow the light they have. That’s all any of us can do.

*Simon:* And yet you think they are wrong to reject Christ.

*Joseph:* I think we are all wrong in many ways, Simon.

*Simon:* And yet you think they are wrong, specifically, in their rejection of Christ.

*Joseph:* Oh, many Christians are wrong in their *acceptance* of Christ. Christ is a vehicle through which we approach more closely the reality of God, just as the Bible as a whole is a vehicle. But we can misread the Bible and we can misconstrue the meaning of Christ. Yes, I think that, understood rightly, the revelation that occurs through Christ can help us see and approach God more fully. But understood wrongly it can obscure our vision and impede our approach. The Jews have their own vehicles for seeing and approaching God. For a large host of reasons – many legitimate, as I say – the vehicle of Christ does not serve them now. Given the way Christianity presented Christ to the Jews this is more than understandable.

*Simon:* But you think there may come a day when this will change – when the Jews will see God in Christ?

*Joseph:* St. Paul writes that one day God will be “all in all.” On that day we will see God in Christ, we will see God in Moses, we will see God in Mohammed, we will see God in

Krishna, we will see God in Buddha, we will see God in every grain of sand on every beach. And then we will see, as well, that *all* these ways of seeing God have their limitations. Until then, we must struggle to see God as best we can. *I* see God in Christ. Will the Jews as a people one day come to see God in Christ? Perhaps. But perhaps *both* Judaism and Christianity will have to mature before that can happen.

## **XXVI. Divine Wrath**

*Simon:* Okay, there is another question that has been plaguing me for some time.

*Joseph:* Ask away.

*Simon:* You say that the law is an articulation of the structure of love; that the reality of God is a reality of universal love.

*Joseph:* Yes.

*Simon:* You say that the Bible is a vehicle for helping us see this.

*Joseph:* Yes.

*Simon:* But...excuse me...is this really what we find in the Bible? Don't we see there a God of wrath and judgment far more often than a God of love? God evicts Adam and Eve from Eden with a rash of curses, he drowns almost all the inhabitants of the earth in the time of Noah, he confuses human language at the tower of Babel, he inflicts gruesome diseases upon the Egyptians, he has half the Israelites slaughter the other half at the foot of Mt. Sinai, he threatens the Israelites – his own people – with calamity after calamity through the prophets, and on and on. Does this seem to you to express infinite love? It seems to me more an expression of infinite fury, even hatred. The God of the Bible seems to me far more often a God of violence than of love.

*Joseph:* There is truth to what you say.

*Simon:* So how do you make sense of it? How do you reconcile this with your idea of God as universal love?

*Joseph:* Well, we might appeal to Nietzsche here.

*Simon:* You mean Friedrich Nietzsche, the famous atheist? Wasn't he the philosopher who declared "God is dead"? You're going to appeal to him?

*Joseph:* There is much insight in Nietzsche's writings. Nietzsche's claim is that at the core of Judaism and Christianity is not a spirit of love at all, but of seething hatred rooted in bitter resentment. He saw the originators of Judaism and Christianity as oppressed people, slaves, whose basic feeling was one of outrage at their mistreatment. He called

this 'slave resentment.' Since the weakness of the slaves prevented them from expressing their rage directly, they projected it upon God and vented it that way.

*Simon:* But you're not saying you agree with this?

*Joseph:* Oh, I think there is some truth to it. I think the Bible does indeed voice the outrage of the oppressed. But I would draw quite a different conclusion from this than Nietzsche does.

*Simon:* Which is?

*Joseph:* I would say that this spirit of rage is itself an expression of love.

*Simon:* Rage is an expression of love? You're going to have to explain that one to me.

*Joseph:* You know the expression 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'?

*Simon:* Yes.

*Joseph:* Perhaps we might generalize this to: 'Hell hath no fury like the longing for love scorned.' This business of love is not a trivial matter, Simon, and it is not a superficial one. The need for love is at the core of human caring. Its frustration gives rise to all the negativities of human feeling: rage, hatred, depression, anxiety, despair, ennui. These feelings are then vented, at times, through horrific violence. Still, at the root of it all is love.

*Simon:* But are you saying that *God* has such negative feelings; that God reacts like a spurned lover?

*Joseph:* There are passages of the Bible in which God is represented in just that way. Still, we must remember that the Bible is not God, but revelation. Revelation is a complex phenomenon that depends for its purity on the human beings who receive it. The Bible is a record of the human encounter with God: the breaking through of God's truth into human consciousness. In the Bible that truth often breaks through as a condemnation – which is also a revelation – of the depravity and destitution of the human spirit. This revelatory condemnation takes the form of a threat and a promise. The threat is that if human beings continue in their failure of love the truth of love will itself destroy them, as the truth of gravity will destroy a man who disregards its nature and hurls himself off a cliff. The promise is that if humans will come to abide by love they will find healing for themselves and the world. We see this basic message repeated and illustrated again and again in the Bible.

*Simon:* But do you agree with Nietzsche that the wrath of God as depicted in the Bible is a product of 'slave resentment'?

*Joseph:* I think Nietzsche sees half the truth. Certainly the oppressed feel bitterness, resentment, rage, even hatred at those who oppress them. And from a certain point of view such feelings are not only understandable but legitimate. An outraged victim of the Nazis would certainly deserve our sympathy and support. And I do agree that the biblical image of God is often colored by such moods. But what is remarkable about the Bible, and what makes the Bible revelatory, is that it shows us the *meaning* of these moods and thereby takes us beyond them. Bitterness, resentment, hatred, and violence are the inevitable result of a world bereft of justice and love. This is the human situation. What we in Christianity call its 'fallenness.' Brother takes up arms against brother. The perpetrators of violence today were its victims yesterday, as the victims today will be the perpetrators tomorrow. The Bible illustrates this in a thousand different ways. The children of Jacob sell their brother into slavery only to have their own descendents fall into slavery as a result. The Hebrew slaves are liberated from their oppressors only to fall prey to the same idolatries that led to their oppression. In a world devoid of love everyone is victim and victimizer. This is the tragedy of the human situation as the Bible reveals it. The prophets are seized with outrage in the face of all this and take this outrage to be the very outrage of God.

*Simon:* But do you agree with them? *Is* it the outrage of God?

*Joseph:* Perhaps we can begin to sort this out by distinguishing between the immanence and transcendence of God. As immanent, God participates in the brokenness of the human situation and, we might even say, in the pain and outrage generated by that brokenness. So Nietzsche is right in seeing in this outrage 'slave resentment,' but he is wrong in failing to see that this resentment is itself revelatory of truth. It is this revelatory outrage that we hear in the voice of the prophets. It is, at one and the same time, the outrage of the slave *and* the outrage of God on behalf of the slave. But such outrage is never the final word, and this is what clearly distinguishes it from mere resentment. After the expression of outrage we invariably hear the pleas of God for repentance. God's aim is not to vent outrage but to transform and heal the outrageous situation. Thus in Ezekiel God says to the apostate Israelites: "Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies . . . Therefore, repent and live." Behind the outrage is love. And we see this especially in the life of Christ. Jesus also expresses outrage at times, especially at the religious authorities who fail in their responsibility to minister God's love to the people. But on the Cross he looks down at all who have crucified him and says, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." In this moment he reveals that love is God's final word. To the extent that we do not hear this voice of love in some passages of the Bible I would say that, taken in and of themselves, those passages are deficient. And yet we are not to take them in and of themselves but to read them in the context of the whole. Read from the perspective of Christ's consummate love one can see the entire Bible moving toward it – as if one were watching a motion picture of an overcast day on which the clouds are gradually dispersing. At first one sees little but darkness and dreariness. But as the clouds grow thinner one is able to sense the luminance shining behind them. Finally, in Christ's love, we see the sun blazing through.

*Simon:* You're not saying that God's feelings mature over time?

*Joseph:* I am saying that the human perception of God changes as we approach God, and that it is this human perception of God that is recorded in the Bible. The further we are from God the more terrifying God appears. As we come closer we come to realize that this terror itself was the result of our distance from God.

## **XXVII. The New Covenant**

*Simon:* And now, again, I wonder *why* we are so distant from God. In your interpretation of the Eden story you seem to suggest that this distance is a function of the very structure of human self-consciousness. We are, by our very nature, closed up in ourselves. I experience *my* pain, not yours, *my* joys, not yours. So how do we overcome this? In what way *can* we overcome this? What is the Bible's answer?

*Joseph:* Here is where we must discuss the meaning of Christ. Christ is the revelation of this overcoming; the revelation of the possibility of a human being fully imbued with the universal love of God.

*Simon:* The word 'Christ' is the Greek for 'Messiah,' am I right?

*Joseph:* That's right.

*Simon:* But wasn't the Messiah supposed to be a great holy King who would inaugurate a reign of peace and righteousness on earth? This doesn't seem to have happened, does it? The twentieth century alone was one of the bloodiest in human history. There has been no end to turmoil, wars, and violence since Jesus. In what possible sense, then, can you call him the Messiah?

*Joseph:* Yes, but look at it this way: Even a perfect King could not establish a perfect Kingdom where the subjects remain corrupt. First the heart must be mended. The true Messiah, thus, does not write the law into a political constitution but upon the heart; and when this occurs it ceases to be law and becomes love. Love is the fulfillment of law, it is that to which the law points – and this is what Jesus means when he says "I come not to destroy the law but to fulfill it." It is not enough to change our political systems, *we ourselves* must be changed. Jesus' very person is a revelation of transformed humanity; humanity in perfect alignment with the love of God. That's what makes him the Christ.

*Simon:* But human beings have *not* been transformed.

*Joseph:* It's a work in progress, Simon. This is why Christianity speaks of a second coming of Christ. The second coming is the fulfillment of the messianic project begun with the first.

*Simon:* But when will this second coming take place?

*Joseph:* In my understanding, it takes place for each one of us, as we each approach the likeness of Christ.

*Simon:* So it is not going to be an actual return of Jesus?

*Joseph:* It is going to be the birth of Christ in each of our hearts. That's how I understand it.

*Simon:* But what of the world as a whole? Isn't the Messiah supposed to perfect this?

*Joseph:* The closer humanity comes to the likeness of Christ, the more the world will be transformed. You know, there is a Jewish teaching that says that the Messiah will arrive only when the Torah, God's truth, is perfectly observed. The irony, of course, is that if everyone were perfectly observing Torah there would be no need for the Messiah. But implicit in this teaching is the notion that such perfect observance *is* the presence of the Messiah, the messianic spirit. The second coming of Christ is the fulfillment of Christ's messianic mission. This fulfillment takes place when – as – Christ is born within each of our hearts.

*Simon:* Okay. And what exactly does this 'birth of Christ' mean? Do we return to what Adam and Eve were before they ate the forbidden fruit, before the fall?

*Joseph:* Oh, I wouldn't put it that way. Adam and Eve before the fall had not yet come into their full humanity. In the Hebrew Bible God says "Behold, I put before you life and death; therefore choose life." But such could never have been said to Adam and Eve before the fall, because before the fall they knew nothing of death. Thus, though they might have enjoyed life in God they could never have *chosen* it; and, in a sense, they could never have become spiritual adults; relating to God in freedom.

*Simon:* So you're saying that the fall was necessary for our spiritual maturity?

*Joseph:* I am saying that what is called 'the fall' represents a stage in human development. And, yes, I think it is a stage we need to pass through to arrive at what is revealed in Christ.

*Simon:* So we actually *needed* to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?

*Joseph:* Let us remember we are dealing with myth. Adam and Eve represent humanity in its emergence. With the emergence of human self-consciousness and freedom human beings are tempted to center all value in themselves. This is represented in the Eden myth by the eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Instead of living by God's law, by the law of universal love, human beings live by their own law, the law of self-love. That's the 'fall.' This cuts them off from their experience of God, and from wholesome communion with one another.



*Simon:* But you don't actually believe there was such a 'fall' historically; that once human beings lived according to the law of universal love and then 'fell' into a life of self-love?

*Joseph:* No, I see the idea of the fall as revelatory: What human beings are fallen from is not what they *once* were, but what they *should* be: the image of God.

*Simon:* But it's not our fault. It's just how human self-consciousness is.

*Joseph:* It's not our fault, but it is our responsibility. We are called to transform our limited self-consciousness into divine-consciousness, our self-love into divine-love. This is the meaning of the Bible as a whole. It is expressed in its central commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."

*Simon:* Isn't this what Jesus calls "the greatest commandment"?

*Joseph:* Yes, and he couples it with the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. To love God wholly *is* to love your neighbor as yourself, for God's very being is universal love. To become such a person of love is to achieve the messianic consciousness revealed in Christ.

*Simon:* And to do this we must somehow 'spit out' the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

*Joseph:* Oh, I would rather say we must *digest* it.

*Simon:* Digest it?

*Joseph.* Yes. Let us imagine three stages of human consciousness. The first stage is that of simplistic innocence, represented by Adam and Eve before the fall. They are "naked and unashamed," living in accord with God, but not yet aware of their own capacity for independence, self-reflection, and self-definition; not yet really differentiated from nature and the other animals. The next stage is represented by the fall. We become aware of our separateness, our independence, our power of self-determination. This tempts us to center all values around ourselves, which severs us from our relationship with God and pollutes our dealings with one another. This is the 'original sin,' where 'sin' here means rupture with God. As we've said, this 'original sin' gives rise to every other sin, to the "war of all against all." But finally, in the third stage, having become aware of the catastrophe to which such self-centeredness leads, we actively, knowingly, self-reflectively, *choose* to rise to the likeness of Christ, to make universal love our standard of good and evil, rather than our own private, finite, interests and will.

*Simon:* And this, you say, is a *digestion* of the fruit?

*Joseph:* If we understand the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil to bestow the power to judge between good and evil, a power inherent to the moral nature of God, then in eating from this tree Adam and Eve are indeed ingesting something of God, just as the serpent says. They become able to choose for themselves what they see as good, and spurn what they see as bad. But at first, this makes them morally and spiritually sick, for they haven't the capacity to properly digest this fruit; that is, they haven't the capacity to integrate it with their animal nature. So this God-like capacity to choose between good and evil makes them willful, prideful, and self-centered, as they accord absolute value to their own private desires and interests in disregard of everything and everyone else. Thus, ironically, their very God-likeness cuts them off from God and each other. This is the fall. But finally, they – *we* – do digest the fruit. When we do we are able to become true partners of God, valuing the world, each other, and ourselves, as God does. God is no longer experienced as a force entirely outside of us, telling us what to do. Our will and God's will are now aligned. We have digested the fruit of God's knowledge of good and evil, and have come to understand and value the world as God does. This is Christ.

*Simon:* So is Christ also a symbol, like Adam and Eve?

*Joseph:* I don't think 'symbol' is quite the right word. 'Christ' refers to the consummation of human consciousness, or spirit, as revealed in the person of Jesus. It refers to the state of perfect alignment with God. This is the 'new covenant.'

*Simon:* A covenant is a contract.

*Joseph:* A contractual partnership, yes. When the Israelites arrive at Mt. Sinai after their liberation from slavery they agree to live by the rule of God's law. This is the original covenant. But the Hebrew prophets tell us that this is not to be the final covenant between God and human beings. The prophet Jeremiah writes of a 'new covenant,' in which the law of God will no longer be written on tablets of stone, but on the hearts of human beings. And at that point, as I say, it is no longer law; it has become love. Love is the fulfillment of the law, that to which the law points. Christ is the revelation of this new covenant. Christ is a person whose human spirit is fully imbued with the divine spirit, with divine love.

*Simon:* But isn't Christ supposed to be the *incarnation* of God?

*Joseph:* Yes, this *is* the incarnation. To be incarnated is to be made flesh. God is spirit. The spirit of God is love. God's spirit of love becomes flesh, becomes incarnate, in Christ.

*Simon:* But you're saying that this is what we *all* are to become? We *all* are to become incarnations of God?

*Joseph:* That's what it means to be the "image of God." We are to become incarnate images of God. The apostle Paul says that, in the end, God will be "all in all." That's not to say that we will cease to be human. Remember that the Christian doctrine is that Christ

is fully human and fully divine. Christ is a partnership of the human and the divine, and this partnership makes us *more* human, not less. It makes us what we *should* be, the 'image of God.' And yes, we are *all* to become this. That's how I read it.

## XXVIII. Salvation

*Simon:* But how do you relate all this to the idea that Christ came to save humanity from the punishment due to sin, from hell? Doesn't Jesus pay the penalty for human sin so that we don't have to pay it ourselves? That's what I've always heard.

*Joseph:* That's one way to put it. But, as always, we have to penetrate beneath the symbol system.

*Simon:* Ah, the symbol system again! Why doesn't God express himself more directly?

*Joseph:* Again, Simon, the relationship between human beings and God is – as the philosophers say – *sui generis*, that is to say, it is unique, one of a kind, there is nothing quite like it. In order to express it in accessible terms religious writers employ all sorts of models from the sphere of human affairs – just as Jesus used parables. The Bible is full of such models. The relationship is depicted as that between a groom and his bride, as that between two parties to a contract, as that between a sovereign and his subjects, as that between a father and son, as that between a lover and his beloved, as that between a judge and an accused, and on and on. None of these models perfectly reflect the relationship as it is in itself; they are all attempts to express it by analogy to something within common human experience.

*Simon:* So Jesus doesn't *really* 'pay the penalty' for our sins?

*Joseph:* The traditional interpretation of the Cross as a 'payment for sin' is predicated upon what might be called the 'crime and punishment' model of sin; based upon the notion that sin is a kind of crime committed against God for which God exacts a punishment. This idea is taken from the realm of human jurisprudence and is only with difficulty transferred to the spiritual realm. We see the difficulty the moment we reflect upon it. First of all, a crime requires a victim – but who is the victim of human sin? Presumably God is the victim – and yet it is odd to imagine that a human being could victimize God in any meaningful sense. But not only is God the victim in this model, but he is the judge, jury, and executioner all in one. And yet, again, it is odd that the victim should also be the judge and executioner of punishment; for if the victim had the power to be judge and executioner then presumably he would have had the power to avoid victimization. Beyond this, the crime and punishment are hopelessly out of proportion – the crime being a single act of disobedience on the part of our first parents and the punishment being eternal suffering for all human beings; numbering in the billions, all but two of whom did not willfully commit the crime themselves. True justice requires that a punishment fit the crime, but here there seems to be no correlation between the two. Further, the idea that Jesus, as God incarnate, suffers the punishment in man's stead

creates further difficulties. First, from the standpoint of human justice no person can be punished for another – punishment is not transferable in this manner, and we would regard it as a travesty if a man convicted of murder were to offer up a friend, an innocent who is fond of him, to be executed in his place. And this becomes even more problematic when we consider that, in the Christian view, it is God himself who suffers the punishment – in other words, God, who is the original victim of the crime, is now, so to speak, victimized yet again by suffering the punishment for the very crime of which he is the victim, and all so as to allow himself, as judge, to let the actual criminal off scott-free! And this, we are told, is all done in order to satisfy the demands of justice. And yet it should be apparent that we have long since strayed from anything remotely resembling human justice here.

*Simon:* And yet you can't deny that this is the way the Cross has been understood through the centuries.

*Joseph:* Yes and no. I think there has always been an awareness that Christ's death and resurrection constitute a mystery that juridical language only imperfectly captures.

*Simon:* But how account for the fact that this mystery has for so long been represented in these terms if, as you say, they are so inadequate?

*Joseph:* These terms are an inheritance from the Jewish system of sacred law. It is Judaism which first represented the relationship between God and man in terms of a legally binding covenant, or contract, which both Jew and God were obliged to honor. This covenant required the observance of ritual and ethical statutes, and, when violated, demanded reparations in the form of various sacrifices.

*Simon:* And you're saying that this Jewish way of thinking of the human relation to God is inadequate?

*Joseph:* Oh no, I think it is quite adequate within the context of Judaism itself. The Jewish statutes, though burdensome, can nevertheless be fulfilled – there is no cataclysmic 'original sin' that can no longer be undone because it is a universal event. Further, transgression of the statutes have proportional penalties, penalties which the transgressor is always able to pay – and having paid the proper penalty – made the required sacrifice, for instance – the covenantal relation is mended; an individual transgressor has made an individual atonement and reestablished a healthy relation with the community and with God. All of this works quite nicely within its own context. Of course, even in Judaism the juridical model must still be understood as a *model* – but it is a model that *works*, conceptually and practically.

*Simon:* And yet this model becomes problematic in Christianity?

*Joseph:* Very much so – as we have seen. Jesus himself said that you cannot pour new wine into an old wineskin, for the wineskin will burst and the wine will be lost. We must see that the juridical wineskin is no longer suitable for the Christian wine. And this, I

think, has created many problems for Christianity and its understanding of God. Viewed with a juridical eye, the Christian God appears irrational and arbitrary; the idea of justice, though still touted, seems bent out of shape. A revelation that verbally proclaims 'love' is presented in terms that do not even appear minimally just – and all this is to be accepted on 'faith'; where faith itself is represented as unquestioning, unthinking, acquiescence. Of course, this is one of the reasons the Jews find Christianity strange, a reversion to paganism.

*Simon:* Paganism?

*Joseph:* To the Jews this seems a reversion to a God of pure, arbitrary, might *before* the giving of law, *before* the enactment of an ethical covenant. What many Christians do not understand is that in Judaism the covenant binds God as well as man. God, in a sense, binds himself to the law. Thus, the law is a revelation of God's ethical and rational nature; God's respect for right *above* might. Such a God can be depended upon to respect the dignity of human beings regardless of their power differential – and there is great solace in this thought. A God whose 'justice' is as strange as appears in juridical Christianity is a horror to the Jews. Who is this God who must torture his own son in order to forgive human transgression? The Jews shudder to think of it.

*Simon:* And you say this accounts for the Jewish resistance to Christianity over the centuries?

*Joseph:* I think it certainly accounts for some of it. The Jews look at juridical Christianity and see a burst wineskin with leaking wine, and they say to themselves: "Why should we accept this strange religion with its strange notions – with its justice that is not just and its love that is not loving? Here, in Judaism, we have a fine old wineskin with some fine old wine. And this old wine is good for life and this old wineskin is good for holding this wine – and why should we give them up?"

*Simon:* But still, you see great truth in the Christian revelation.

*Joseph:* Oh, yes. But the Christian revelation's truth lies precisely in its driving us *beyond* the juridical model. This is something that Paul, the first interpreter of the Cross, seems both to see and not see. He knows that there is something in the Cross of Christ that drives us beyond the 'law' – but he is never able to say quite how and why. And this is not surprising, since he is speaking of matters for which he does not have an adequate vocabulary. He is, after all, a Pharisee himself, well schooled in the juridical model. Paul is certainly the recipient of a great revelation, and he is a man of great heart, but – as anyone who has ever had a deep insight knows – there is a gap between being able to see a truth and being able to say it. Paul struggles to find the words to say that with Christ the 'law,' the juridical relation to God, has been transcended – and he expresses this by saying that the penalty demanded by the law has been paid so that we need no longer fear it. For Paul, long schooled in juridical thinking, this is an exclamation of great joy. Christ has freed us from guilt and fear! But conceptually it is inadequate, for it keeps us within the very juridical categories that are to be overcome. When a criminal pays a penalty he is

not thereby 'freed' from the law, he is still bound by law – and yet Paul wants to say that Christ has in some sense freed us from law itself.

*Simon:* But what could free us from law?

*Joseph:* Love frees us from law, by spontaneously fulfilling the law's demands! It is not law *per se* that we must be freed from, but the experience of law as an oppressive imposition from without. It is *love* that frees us from this; not because it pays law's penalty, but because it spontaneously seeks what the law requires. The one who loves is, thus, united with the law, he has the law 'written on the heart,' as the prophets say, and thus is no longer 'under' the law. The law is no longer a burden imposed from without. This is the new situation that Christ reveals, and it is this to which he calls us. Such is 'salvation.' This has nothing at all to do with paying a penalty for a crime. It has to do with an inner transformation, a spiritual maturation, of the person.

*Simon:* So 'sin' should not be viewed as a kind of crime?

*Joseph:* Sin is separation from God, from the love of God, from our basis in God's love. We experience ourselves as closed up in ourselves, abandoned to ourselves. This is the *state* of sin, which gives rise to the many *acts* of sin – crimes, if you will – through which we violate one another and alienate one another and, thus, further close ourselves upon ourselves. But what is needed in response to this is not punishment, but healing. That is the real meaning of 'salvation,' a word derived from 'salve,' meaning a healing balm. Christ is this salvation.

*Simon:* So we are healed by worshipping Christ.

*Joseph:* We are healed by *becoming* like Christ.

*Simon:* And how exactly do we do *that*?

*Joseph:* Christ must blossom in our hearts.

*Simon:* Yes, yes, fine. But *how*?

## **XXIX. Incarnation**

*Joseph:* Let's go back to the Garden of Eden story for a moment.

*Simon:* Okay.

*Joseph:* We've talked about the meaning of 'original sin;' that it is due to the self-enclosure of our consciousness. But if we are to understand how we become Christ-like we need to say something more about this. We need to say *what* it is that is self-enclosed.

*Simon:* What it is? But you just said it is our consciousness.

*Joseph:* Yes, but what *is* this consciousness that is self-enclosed? Where has it come from? What is its nature?

*Simon:* Does the Bible have anything to say about this?

*Joseph:* It gives us an image of it. It shows us God breathing his spirit into Adam, to give him life.

*Simon:* So our consciousness is the breath of God, the spirit of God?

*Joseph:* Yes, it is the spirit of God within us that is self-enclosed. In this respect the fall is an apt metaphor. But it is not so much the human being who has fallen, as God who falls in breathing his spirit *into* man.

*Simon:* I've never heard it put that way before! You're saying that *God* has fallen?

*Joseph:* Of course, we are dealing in mysteries, expressed in symbols and metaphors that we hope will point us in the right direction. As I said before, the incarnation is *revealed* in Christ, but doesn't first occur with Christ. In some sense, the entire world is the incarnation of God – the spirit of God made flesh, incorporated in materiality. This idea really isn't so far removed from traditional theology. Traditionally, this gets called the *immanence* of God.

*Simon:* But you're saying that *God* is fallen?

*Joseph:* The spirit of God within us is fallen from its association with the whole of God. It is in exile. This exile is what gets symbolized by the ejection of Adam and Eve from Eden: exile from God, from the eternal life of God, the 'Tree of Life.'

*Simon:* But you're saying it is *God* who is exiled? Exiled from himself?

*Joseph:* In a sense, yes. This is not easy to put into words, or even to understand with any great precision. The categories of same and other don't quite work here. We see this confusion in the doctrine that Christ is both fully man and fully God. How can he be fully both, unless each can be the other? Conceptually, though, we do have analogies. We can say, for instance, that a lion is fully a lion and fully a mammal. There's no confusion there.

*Simon:* But a lion can be fully a mammal only because all lions are mammals.

*Joseph:* Yes.

*Simon:* And so now you're saying that all human beings are God?

*Joseph:* We are not *all* of what God is, just as a lion is not all of what mammals are. But we are ‘of’ the spirit of God. That’s how I understand it. That’s why God is so concerned with us. That’s why God can’t stop being concerned with us. Our alienation from God is, in some sense, God’s alienation from himself. That’s why Jesus says, in the gospel of Matthew, that what you do to the least of your brothers, you do to Me. That’s why he says that the command to love God and the command to love neighbor are substantially the same. That’s why John writes that anyone who says he loves God but doesn’t love his brothers and sisters can’t be speaking the truth. God is already ‘within’ us, incarnate within us. And it is *because* God is already within us that our self-enclosure, our self-enclosed self-love, *can* be opened up, can become a love of God and neighbor – can become ‘Christ-like.’

### **XXX. The God Within**

*Simon:* So you’re saying – if I’m understanding you correctly – that the human enterprise is something of a grand adventure to actualize the God within.

*Joseph:* That’s one way of putting it.

*Simon:* And this ‘God within’ is revealed in the person of Christ?

*Joseph:* It is revealed in all the religions on earth in various ways – but quite prominently and explicitly in the person of Christ.

*Simon:* And yet Christianity has been guilty of some pretty horrendous things, don’t you think? – witch hunts, burning of heretics, inquisitions, etc. How do you account for that?

*Joseph:* Oh, well, Christianity is not Christ. Christianity is – even at its best – just a collection of flawed human beings struggling to actualize Christ.

*Simon:* But why is the struggle so difficult? Why does it take such horrendous forms?

*Joseph:* Why must a baby crawl before it can stand? Why must it stand before it can walk?

*Simon:* It’s a developmental process?

*Joseph:* Yes, and a difficult and complex one – because our free will plays a part in it. We are struggling to actualize the God within. But that itself is one of the reasons we sin, one of the reasons sin becomes so horrific – one of the reasons for the Holocaust.

*Simon:* The Holocaust was due to our trying to actualize the God within?!



*Joseph:* Yes! What do you think Hitler wanted? – He wanted to be God! He wanted immortality, eternity, endless power – he wanted to overcome his human limitations. This is what Eve wants when she reaches out for the forbidden fruit.

*Simon:* But Hitler was not Christ-like!

*Joseph:* No, of course not. He tried to *become* God in his own finite person, in his own self-enclosure. But that is not the way. Here we have the meaning of the whole Bible in a nutshell. The self-enclosure of human self-consciousness is experienced as a kind of destitution, it closes us off from our native home in God. In compensation, we seek to become God in our own person. This causes us to abuse one another – as we see in the stories of Cain and Abel, Lamech, Noah, the tower of Babel, Sarah and Hagar, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, and, of course, Pharaoh and the Israelite slaves. Hitler is just another – most horrific – instance of this. The entirety of the Bible is an attempt to wake us up to the *perversity* of this, and to show us another way.

*Simon:* And Christ is this other way?

*Joseph:* Yes, he reveals it and he *is* it. Or, we might say, he reveals it *by* being it. He is what we are called to become. He is the blossoming of the God within. And this blossoming is the blossoming of love; a love we both abide in and share with others. That is the ‘Kingdom of God.’

*Simon:* And yet it seems easier for most people to follow the way of self-enclosure than the way of love.

*Joseph:* Oh yes, it’s easier for a baby to crawl than to walk. Still, walking is its destiny. We human beings – we are still just learning to walk. And we fall frequently.

*Simon:* So we must have patience?

*Joseph:* We must have patience, we must have forgiveness, we must have apology, we must have charity, we must have understanding, we must have faith and hope. This is the way we learn to walk, to walk with God.

### **XXXI. The Cross**

*Simon:* So all this talk of Jesus dying for our sins – you’re saying it’s a mistake, a misunderstanding of the true message?

*Joseph:* I’m saying that it works, and has spiritual utility, within a certain metaphorical framework – the ‘crime and punishment’ framework. Within that framework it expresses, among other things, the forgiveness and love of God while, at the same time, serving as something of a warning. But I think this crime and punishment framework has worn itself

out. It doesn't really work for us anymore. And there is a truer, more profound, framework, lurking beneath this one.

*Simon:* And this more profound framework is?

*Joseph:* Christ is a revelation of God-with-us. In the Gospel of Matthew, the name Jesus, which literally means "God saves," is associated with the name Emmanuel. Emmanuel is the name the prophet Isaiah gives to the Messiah. It literally means "God-with-us." God *saves* us through being *with* us. This is the way our self-enclosure is opened, opened to the love of God.

*Simon:* But what has this to do with the Cross?

*Joseph:* Christ on the Cross is a revelation of God-with-us even in the extremity of our suffering, even in the extremity of death and despair, even in the extremity of sin – even in our separation from God. On the Cross Jesus cries out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" This, of course, is a cry of utter despair. It is the cry of human self-enclosure. It is the cry of our separation from God and each other, our separation from love. And this self-enclosure causes us to do terrible things to ourselves and one another. But the whole of the biblical message is that God *hasn't* forsaken us, God doesn't forsake us. Even in the extremities of death and despair God is there, with us, within us, suffering with us, if we would but see it. And *if* we would but see it we would overcome our sense of forsakenness, of self-enclosure. And that would be the beginning of redemption, of salvation, of resurrection. It is not that Jesus 'pays' the penalty for our sin, it is that he *shares* it with us, and in so doing he reveals that we are not alone. God is *with* us, even in our sin, even in our alienation. God's eternal love is with us. To know this is great joy. But we must see it, we must take hold of it. Otherwise we remain on the Cross.

*Simon:* And by 'the Cross' you mean. . . ?

*Joseph:* The anguish of human finitude and isolation, and all that stems from it. The Holocaust, the Inquisition, the genocides, enslavements, murders, and rapes – the horror-show of human history. In this sense, the Cross represents the death that befalls us due to sin itself. Jesus is crucified by human sin. But *Christ* on the Cross is the love of God *suffering* this horror-show *with us*, struggling to lift us out of it, promising us that death, destruction, horror, is not the final word. So the Cross is – *at one and the same time* – the Cross of human misery *and* the Cross of God's salvation.

*Simon:* Both?

*Joseph:* Yes, for it reveals that the reality of this misery – horrible as it is – is not the final word. God is with us, within us – even in the extremity of our darkness. This is the strange, profound, sad, joyous, frightening, awesome, *beauty* of the Cross. The Cross reveals – *at one and the same time* – the horror of human sin and God's answer to human sin.

*Simon:* And the answer is that God is with us?

*Joseph:* The universal love that *is* God – is with us. Always. Even when we can't see it, even when all seems hopeless. *Still*, God is with us. And we will overcome the horror-show of human history – and of our own individual lives – just to the extent that *we* can learn to be with God. That's the whole message of the Bible.

*Simon:* But is not the Cross a symbol of repentance?

*Joseph:* Oh, yes! The Greek word translated 'repentance' in the New Testament is *metanoia*, which might more literally be rendered, 'transformation of heart and mind.' By submitting to the Cross with Christ we are to be transformed. Finally, we are to allow our prideful self-will, our defensive self-clinging, which are responses to our self-enclosure, to *die* on the Cross with Christ. And we *can* allow them to die just to the extent that we see that *their* death is not *our* death; that our lives are sustained by something beyond ourselves. And as we give up the inner fortifications that keep us enclosed, we become open more and more to the infinite openness that is God; as Paul puts it, we die to the flesh to be reborn in the Spirit. This is the message – the call – of the Cross.

*Simon:* So the Cross is both an image of the consequences of sin *and* an image of the overcoming of sin?

*Joseph:* Yes, that's the profundity of it. The Cross reveals the death to which sin leads – the horror-show of human existence – but it reveals, at the same time, that death is not the final word. For we are of God, and God is life, not death. When we let go of our self-enclosure, when we open ourselves to the love of God, we transcend the death of sin. And that, of course, is revealed in the resurrection of Christ.

### **XXXII. The Life of Faith**

*Simon:* Joseph I . . . I am moved by what you say. I'm not sure I can really embrace it or even believe it, but I am . . . I am moved by it.

*Joseph:* Ah, well, you know – there is a passage in the gospels in which a man asks Jesus for healing and Jesus says to him that healing comes to those who believe. He responds: "Lord, I believe, help me in my unbelief!" I think that nicely expresses the situation of the person of faith, Simon. We all stand between belief and unbelief. We are all just learning to walk. We see – as Paul says – "through a glass darkly." And sometimes that darkness is very thick.

*Simon:* But why? Why is it so hard to see? Why is it so *dark*?

*Joseph:* As we've said, Simon, God – our relationship with God – is not anything we really understand. Even the word 'God' is really just a placeholder for something we can't really envision. We get hints, intuitions, moments of clarity, moments of

breakthrough. Even what it means to ‘understand’ is something we don’t fully understand. We tend to think of understanding as strictly cognitive, intellectual. But true understanding is more than intellectual, it is visceral, it involves *feeling*. We don’t even understand our own understanding! We human beings look at the other animals on earth and imagine that our consciousness is quite advanced. And in a certain sense it is; from the standpoint of earthly consciousness it is. But if you look at the big picture, I think, you would see that we are like ants trying to climb Mt. Everest. Maybe we have advanced an inch or two beyond ground level. Maybe the other animals have advanced only half an inch. But there are miles and miles to go. We are just at the beginning of our journey.

*Simon:* Then how can you know that any of this is true?

*Joseph:* I don’t *know*. We don’t know. We live by faith. We *must* live by faith.

*Simon:* But what if our faith is wrong?

*Joseph:* Then God will help us grow toward what is right.

*Simon:* But how do you *know* God will help? How do you know there *is* a God to help?

*Joseph:* That’s my faith.

*Simon:* I’m sorry, Joseph, but isn’t this circular reasoning?

*Joseph:* Listen, Simon, faith isn’t just a stab in the dark. It’s an inner experience. My faith that God will help me is *already* the help of God. It is already an experience of God-with-me. It’s not always there. Sometimes, not infrequently, I find myself stumbling in the dark, trying to find the light, trying to *remember* the light. But sometimes it is quite pronounced. And when it is it seems as real to me – more real – than anything else I know. And I feel called – I don’t know how else to put it – I feel called to pursue this faith. Something in me drives me toward it. Something in me tells me I must keep struggling to progress. Might I be wrong? Might I be deluded? Yes, of course. Might my understanding be limited, incomplete? I think that is all but certain. But still I am called forward. You find yourself in the dark and see a light up ahead. You struggle to get to that light. The way is full of twists and turns, and sometimes you lose sight of the light altogether, but, in general, as you advance the light seems to brighten; you seem to see more clearly, more fully. And it is a wonderful light, a glorious light. So you keep trying to make your way to it. That is the life of faith.

*Simon:* It sounds wonderful as you describe it, but. . . I’m not sure I can live this life of faith.

*Joseph:* Oh, I think you’ve already begun it. You wouldn’t be engaged in this dialogue, Simon, if you hadn’t already begun it.

### XXXIII. The Renewal of Light

*Simon:* And so all of this is why you call the Holocaust a revelation.

*Joseph:* It is a revelation – a horrific revelation – of evil. But, as I say, where there is a revelation of evil there is also a revelation of good, by way of contrast.

*Simon:* But evil doesn't reveal the *presence* of good. All it reveals is the absence of good.

*Joseph:* The presence of good is revealed in the very fact that we see the evil *as* evil. If we didn't have the good present within us, we wouldn't see evil as evil.

*Simon:* But it takes a lot of faith to believe that this good 'within us' will prevail in this world of hardship and cruelty. I'm not sure I can muster such faith.

*Joseph:* Oh, who can say whether, or when, or how, the good will prevail in the world? We work toward it, we hope for it, but that's all we can do. And perhaps the world is such that the good can never be perfectly realized within it.

*Simon:* Never? Then what hope is there?

*Joseph:* The hope is within you.

*Simon:* But if I am about to die in a Nazi concentration camp, where is the hope?

*Joseph:* The hope is *within* you. Listen, Simon – it is not just the victims of the Nazis who face death. We all face death. This world – beautiful and awful as it is – is not, cannot be, our true *home*. We are here for a time, and then we depart. But we have a home – this is what faith teaches us – we have a home, but we must reform ourselves – *re-form* ourselves – to know it.

*Simon:* Our home is God?

*Joseph:* Yes.

*Simon:* And so at death we return 'home'?

*Joseph:* The one who knows God is already home, in life.

*Simon:* But you said we *can't* be home in this world.

*Joseph:* We are not home in this world, we are home in God. But God is not someplace else. God is here and now. The world we are in is in God.

*Simon:* That's not so easy to see, Joseph, given all the evils of this world.

*Joseph:* You're right, Simon, God is not so easy to see – because God is that *from which* one sees. And to see the world from this vantage point, from the vantage point of God's love, requires an inner transformation. And this transformation is not easy, and for very few of us is it complete in this lifetime.

*Simon:* I scarcely know where I'd begin.

*Joseph:* But you have already begun, Simon. Your recoil at the horror of the Holocaust is already an expression of the love that is God. God's love is already within you. Of course, it must be cultivated, it must be deepened and broadened, its full implications must be seen and lived. This cultivation of God's love is the work to which faith calls us. And this, finally, is the answer to the Holocaust. This, finally, is how Hitler is defeated. He is defeated in the mind and heart. He is defeated in spirit. God does not promise what Satan promised. God does not promise us worldly dominion. God does not promise to make life easy, or even secure. For these things one must go elsewhere. But God promises a wholeness of heart; a wholeness of heart to the one who will allow her heart to be made whole. And this wholeness of heart is, finally, the only thing that defeats Hitler, and the endless parade of Hitlers. It is a paradox. It is not what human pride wants. We want a Knight in shining armor to slay the dragons that terrify us, amid great clamor and tumult. We want a great hero of immense worldly power who we can cheer and celebrate, who may even let us kick the dragon ourselves once or twice for good measure. We want to be glorified in our victories and avenged in our humiliations. We don't want this strange, naked man bleeding on a cross; *forgiving* those who have crucified him. His weakness is an offense to our pride. And yet it is Christ, the *spirit* of Christ, that defeats Hitler, that defeats the *essence* of Hitler. He does not defeat him in the physical. But that is not Hitler's true abode. He defeats him in meaning and value. Christ's love exposes the nothingness at Hitler's core. And this love calls to you, my friend, it calls to you with infinite tenderness, it calls to the depths of whatever darkness you are in – it calls to you to lift your eyes from the despair of that darkness to the hope of this love. For that, finally, is the answer to the Holocaust, and to the many, many Holocausts of human life.

*Simon:* I am not sure I can manage such love, Joseph.

*Joseph:* Oh, but none of us can manage it at first. At first we must simply turn toward it.

*Simon:* And still...

*Joseph:* Still?

*Simon:* I am not sure I can even do that. I am not sure I can believe such love possible.

*Joseph:* Ah, I understand. Yes, it is not so easy when we feel immersed in darkness, for we must find this possibility within ourselves, Simon. There is nowhere else we can find

it. And perhaps, after all, we should not wish to get off this Cross too quickly. Perhaps we must look at this darkness long and hard; to its very depths. It is, after all, *our* darkness. But finally we must follow Christ *through* the darkness, into the light. We must not drown in our despair. We must welcome the renewal of light. We owe it to ourselves to do this. We owe it to those we love. We owe it to the world that needs us. We must allow ourselves to be saved.

*Simon:* Must we?

*Joseph:* That is the only way out of hell.