PARODY AND MANIFEST DEMONIC:
TREES AND WATER

Program Four
I was speaking about the structure of imagery of the Bible, and was saying that the imagery tends to split into two opposed categories. One I'm calling the apocalyptic or the ideal, the one that's associated with the garden of Eden, with the Promised Land, with Jerusalem and the Temple, with Jesus' spiritual kingdom. The other I am calling the demonic: it's what is associated with the heathen kingdoms of tyranny—Egypt and Babylon, and, in the New Testament, Rome.

Now that means that the whole of Biblical imagery tends to fall into these two sharply opposed categories, and that there is no image in the Bible which does not have both an apocalyptic and a demonic context: or at any rate, which may not have both. There is no image in the Bible which is necessarily always demonic or always ideal. In other words, there is no natural image. A serpent, for example, is usually a sinister image in the Bible because of its role in the garden of Eden story, but it's a quite genuine symbol of wisdom in most of the religions and mythologies of the world, and is used that way by Jesus as well—'Be ye wise as serpents'. Therefore, whether an image belongs to one category or the other depends on the context: but that context is never very difficult to determine.

I was dealing with the various levels of imagery, and we'd started with the paradisal. I said that the great symbol for that was the oasis, which has, in particular, two images—the tree of life and the water of life, which we traced through the Bible. If you look at the Book of Psalms, for example, the very first Psalm applies the same image to the private and individual life. The righteous man, we are told, shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water. The same images recur through the New Testament as well. As we tried to show, they contain the entire action of the Bible, being the first things that man loses at the opening of the narrative and the last things that he regains at the end of it.

It follows therefore, that these paradisal images would also have to have their demonic counterparts. The complication here is that there are two kinds of demonic imagery in the Bible. In the first place, there is the odd paradox of a fact that the only kingdoms that are consistently successful and prosperous are the evil kingdoms. It is Egypt and Assyria and Babylon and Tyre which have the kind of power and prosperity that Israel itself desperately longed to have, and would have regarded as a mark of divine favor if it had had it. So the prosperity of the heathen kingdoms forms a category of imagery that we can call the parody demonic, which has all the qualities of the real thing except permanence. There is also the manifest or the you-just-wait demonic, which is what all this prosperity and success will eventually and inevitably turn into sooner or later.
We saw that the water of life was associated with four rivers, two of which were the Euphrates and the Tigris of Mesopotamia. The third is usually identified with the Nile in Egypt, and the fourth possibly, as Josephus suggests, with India (the Ganges or the Indus). Clearly, their parody demonic images would be the Nile, the Euphrates and the Tigris as they came to be in history. They are the rivers that gave prosperity and success and fertility to Egypt, to Babylonia and to Assyria. Nineveh is on the Tigris and Babylon is on the Euphrates. To that, you could add the commerce and shipping in the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, which increased the success and prosperity of the Mesopotamian kingdoms and also of Phoenicia. Phoenicia occupied the northwest part of Israelite territory, and in contrast to the Israelites, who never consistently held a port on the Mediterranean, they were great seafarers and traders. And so these rivers of history are the water of life for these heathen kingdoms. They sustained their prosperity and their commercial prestige and their fertility, which is an important recurring image of a slightly different category.

But we could reverse the axiom and say that there is nothing really essential in the folklore or mythology of any civilization whatever that cannot be found in some form in the Bible. If we do reverse the axiom in that way, we'll find a great many images in the Bible which are parody images of very widespread myths. One of these is the 'world tree'.

The 'world tree' is sometimes the same thing as the tree of life, and as such, it belongs to mythologies far older than the Bible. As it develops in mythology, it comes to be a form of what is called the axis mundi, the vertical aspect of existence. Its roots form the lower world below this one, and its fruits and branches are in an upper world above this one. The surface of this world has usually been, in mythology, a middle earth, with an upper world in the sky and a lower world underground. The axis mundi or world tree extends all through these three worlds, and in more sophisticated developments, the planets are the fruits hanging from its branches. You'll find it practically everywhere you look, from Norse mythology, where it is called Yggdrasil, to nursery tales like Jack and the Beanstalk.

So we're not surprised to find that when the prophets start denouncing the apparent prosperity of Egypt or Assyria or Babylon, they will use an image of this kind in a parody context. If you look, for example, at Ezekiel 31: this is an oracle against Egypt which
applies to Egypt the same image that is applied to Assyria. The story of Assyria was a particularly dramatic one for the Old Testament writers. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was the greatest city of the ancient world, and according to the book of Jonah, it was a three-day's journey to cross it from its western suburb to its eastern one. And yet, quite suddenly, Nineveh just vanished. It disappeared under the sands, where it remained until the middle of the nineteenth century. Almost immediately after it was destroyed, it was impossible for anybody else even to find the site of the world's greatest city. So the suddenness with which heathen power could vanish almost overnight was naturally a favorite theme of prophecy.

Ezekiel says, in 31:3: 'Behold, the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon with fair branches and with a shadowing shroud, and of an high stature; and his top was among the thick boughs... Therefore his height was exalted above all the trees of the field, and his boughs were multiplied, and his branches became long because of the multitude of waters when he shot forth'. Now, here is a parody description of a world tree, identified with the Assyrian power, which is nourished by the water of life fertilizing its roots. And in verse 8: 'The cedars in the garden of God could not hide him: the fir trees were not like his boughs, and the chestnut trees were not like his branches; nor any tree in the garden of God was like unto him in his beauty. I have made him fair by the multitude of his branches: so that all the trees of Eden, that were in the garden of God, envied him'. But, of course, the Assyrian kingdom falls with a great crash. In verse 16, there's a significant comment: 'I made the nations to shake at the sound of his fall, when I cast him down to hell with them that descend into the pit: and all the trees of Eden... shall be comforted in the nether parts of the earth'. The great Assyrian tree has fallen to the level of the vanished garden of Eden before the beginning of history.

There is probably a fairly specific allusion there to Assyrian mythology, because you find the world tree on Assyrian monuments. In the much later Book of Daniel there's a very similar tree associated with Nebuchadnezzar and the power of Babylon. The language used about that tree is even more explicitly a description of a world tree, an axis mundi. In Daniel 4:20: 'The tree that thou sawest, which grew, and was strong, whose height reached unto the heaven, and the sight thereof to all the earth: Whose leaves were fair and the fruit thereof much, and in it was meat for all; under which the beasts of the field dwelt... It is thou, O King, that art grown and become strong: for thy greatness is grown, and reacheth unto heaven, and thy dominion to the end of the earth'. The world tree is here explicitly said to reach to heaven and to be visible from all over the world.
That is the image, then, of temporary prosperity, and it is contrasted with the manifest demonic, which is the more direct parody of the ideal image. What we get, then, as the main units of the manifest demonic, are the tree of death, and the water of death.

Now as I said earlier, the most obvious and dramatic image of the water of death is the Dead Sea, because it is quite literally dead water in which nothing lives—too much salt in it. And traditionally, though not explicitly, the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire from heaven and sunk under the Dead Sea. Similarly, the Red Sea is also an image of the water of death, largely for political reasons. At the time of the Exodus, the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, but the Egyptian army was drowned in it, so that symbolically and metaphorically Egypt is sunk under the Red Sea, as Sodom and Gomorrah are under the Dead Sea.

Ezekiel directs an oracle against Tyre, the great commercial city of Phoenicia, and says that eventually Tyre will turn into a rock. The words 'Tyre' and 'rock' are very close together in Hebrew—they make a pun—and the rock will be, again, sunk under the sea. So the image of the kingdom sunk under water, which is what happened of course to the whole of the earth in the time of Noah's flood, is an image of the demonic water of death.

Now, remember that metaphorical thinking is not logical thinking. What you are dealing with when you are thinking in metaphors is not a world of solid blocks or obstacles, not a world of nouns that can be kicked around by verbs: it's a world of metaphors, and metaphorical imagery is a world of forces and energies which often modulate into one another. And so that the tree of life in the garden of Eden before the Fall may be thought of as a tree in a garden, or it may be thought of as all the trees in the garden, or it may be thought of as the body of the unfallen Adam himself. And that imagery of the divine man, or the man with the divine destiny who is metaphorically identical with the tree of life, runs all through the Bible, and accounts for a very central metaphorical expression. That is the Hebrew word 'Messiah', of which the Greek equivalent is 'Christ'. And what that word means is 'the anointed one', the person who has been confirmed as a royal figure by an anointing ceremony which symbolically and metaphorically identifies him with the tree of life. That is, assuming that something like olive oil or a vegetable oil or a tree oil of some kind would be used in the anointing ceremony, because I doubt that they would use petroleum in such an instance.

The identification of the Messiah with the tree of life remains fairly constant throughout the New Testament. I say New Testament, because in the Old Testament the word 'Messiah' simply means a legitimate ruler, whose right to rule has been confirmed
by some anointing ceremony, whether real or assumed. King Saul, who was rejected, is still called the Lord's anointed, the Messiah, and once, a person outside the Israelite community altogether, King Cyrus of Persia, was called the Lord's anointed by Isaiah. But by the time of Jesus, with the Maccabean victory still fresh in the Jewish mind, there was a good deal of speculation about a figure called the Messiah, and that figure is of the type that theologians call eschatological: that is, a figure concerned with the ending of history and the evolution of man out of time into some other kind of existence entirely.

Thus came the question, who is the Messiah? And that, of course, is still the question that divides Judaism and Christianity. But what I'm concerned with at the moment is not that, but the metaphorical identification with a tree of life.

In the story of the Exodus, the water of death has two aspects. It is in the first place the water that drowns the Egyptians, and in the second place the water from which the Israelites escape, becoming a nation by doing so. Similarly, the flood of Noah is an event in which everybody gets drowned except the family of Noah, which escapes by floating on top of the flood with the ark. That is carried over into the Christian symbolism of baptism, where again the same ambiguous imagery occurs: symbolically and metaphorically, the person who is baptized dies in one world and is reborn in another.

If we apply such a principle to the imagery of trees, the tree of death would be represented by such a thing as the barren fig tree that would later crucify Jesus at the time of the Passion. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is clearly a sinister tree as far as the results of eating it are concerned. And this tree of knowledge quite clearly has something to do with the discovery of sex as we know it. That is, as soon as they ate of the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve knew that they were naked. This inspired a feeling of shame, which meant that the present, rather frustrating experience we know as sexuality came into the world when man fell into a lower state of being. And so, if Adam before his fall was metaphorically a tree of life, then after his fall, he would metaphorically be a tree of death, or of moral or sexual knowledge.

We find as one of the laws written in the Book of Deuteronomy, for example, in Deuteronomy 21:22: 'And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God). And again, the symbol of the tree of death, which is under the curse of God, like the barren fig tree cursed by Jesus, is here associated with a hanged criminal.
Now, what is true of the word 'sea', which is both a symbol of death and a symbol of renewed life, depending upon whether one is looking at it from the Egyptian or the Israelite point of view, is true also of the cross, which is a tree of death insofar as it expresses the human reaction to God, and a tree of life for members of Christianity. So we're not surprised to find, perhaps, that Paul quotes this law of Deuteronomy and applies it to the Crucifixion. In Galatians, 3:13: 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree'. This is all part of symbolism that is consistent in the New Testament of the Messiah or Christ figure as simultaneously a figure of triumph and transcendence and also a victim, a scapegoat figure.

As we'll see later, there are many Old Testament prototypes (as Christianity interpreted them) of the Jesus of the Gospels. One of them is King Solomon, the king who built the Temple and was traditionally the teacher of wisdom. Solomon, however, was only one of David's many sons. David had another son called Absalom, who rebelled against his father. His manner of death is described in II Samuel 18:9: 'And Absalom met the servants of David. And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away. And a certain man saw it and told Joab, and said, Behold, I saw Absalom hanged in an oak'. And so David's general, Joab, came up to him and thrust darts into his side and killed him while he was hanging on the tree. Well, Absalom's curious helplessness in what seems a relatively easy situation to get out of perhaps indicates a certain ritual element in his death. Traditionally, he was hung from the tree by his beautiful golden hair, reminding one of certain cults connected with the oak tree and the mistletoe, where a human sacrifice would be initiated by cutting the mistletoe, the golden emblem from the branches of an oak. **But however that may be, the symbolism of Absalom hanging on a tree and having darts thrust into his side is something as essential to the story of Jesus as the aspect of the 'King of kings and Lord of lords'.**

Well, then we find that Israel goes through the three stages that I mentioned earlier, the pastoral stage, the agricultural stage, and the urban stage. These are all images of a nature which is transformed by human effort and energy into something with a human shape and a human meaning. What man really wants is what his work shows that he wants, whenever he gets a chance to work, and doesn't have to waste his life making war or feeding a parasitic class. When he gets a chance to work, he is transforming the animal world into a world of flocks and herds; the vegetable world into a world of crops, of harvest and of vintage; and the
world of stones and minerals into a world of cities and buildings and highways.

Let us take for example the pastoral world. The Bible invariably uses the sheep as the typical apocalyptic or ideal animal. I suggested in one of my books that the reason for that is that sheep societies are perhaps more like human societies than those of any other animal: because the sheep is gregarious, stupid, and easily stampeded. It is consequently the appropriate animal to describe in pastoral metaphors—words like 'pastor' and 'flock' still survive in language about the church. But as far as pure metaphor is concerned, there's no earthly reason bulls and cows should not be as appropriate images as sheep.

Similarly, the bull was a favorite fertility image in neighboring countries, and for that reason is regarded with some suspicion as an appropriate emblem for the faithful and obedient Christian. In the Old Testament, for example, there is a story in the Exodus that while Moses was absent conversing with God on Mt. Sinai, his brother Aaron, the high priest, led the tribes of Israel into idolatry by making a golden calf as an idol. 'Calf' there means bull. That is a type of the later split in the kingdom between the ten tribes of Northern Israel and the tribe of Judah, when the king of Northern Israel, Jeroboam, set up local shrines with the emblem of a golden calf, again meaning a bull, as indicating departure from the line of religious orthodoxy. And in New Testament times, the great rival of Christianity through the Roman Empire was the religion of Mithraism, where the chief event of the year was a celebration of the birthday of the sun on December 25. Mithraism went everywhere with the Roman Empire: a Nazi bomb falling in London exposed a Mithraic temple during the war, and if you go to Rome, one place that you should definitely not miss is the church of San Clemente, where there is a series of four or five churches of different periods, and a Mithraic temple lying at the very bottom of the whole structure. The great emblem of Mithraism was the bull, and its great rite was the sacrifice of the bull, which was a repetition of an original creation myth, and forms again an exact parallel of the Christian sacrifice of a lamb.

Here we have to consider the importance and influence in the Bible of what one might call negative ritual: the fact that the Israelites are so frequently forbidden to do things quite obviously because their neighbors did them. For example, we are told many times in the Mosaic code: Thou shalt not seethe (i.e., boil) a kid (i.e., a baby goat) in his mother's milk. That is the basis for the Jewish kosher rule about not mixing milk and meat dishes. But boiling a kid in his mother's milk is not something that would occur to anybody off the top of his head: so it looks as though it must have been a fertility rite on the part of the neighboring Canaanites, from whom the Israelites were required to separate themselves.
who is, according to the Book of Revelation, slain from the foundation of the world. It is this affinity of the bull with heathen kingdoms that knocks it out as a normal image of a pastoral world; and in effect, one can almost class it as a parody demonic image.